

# SF COMMENTARY 87

April 2014

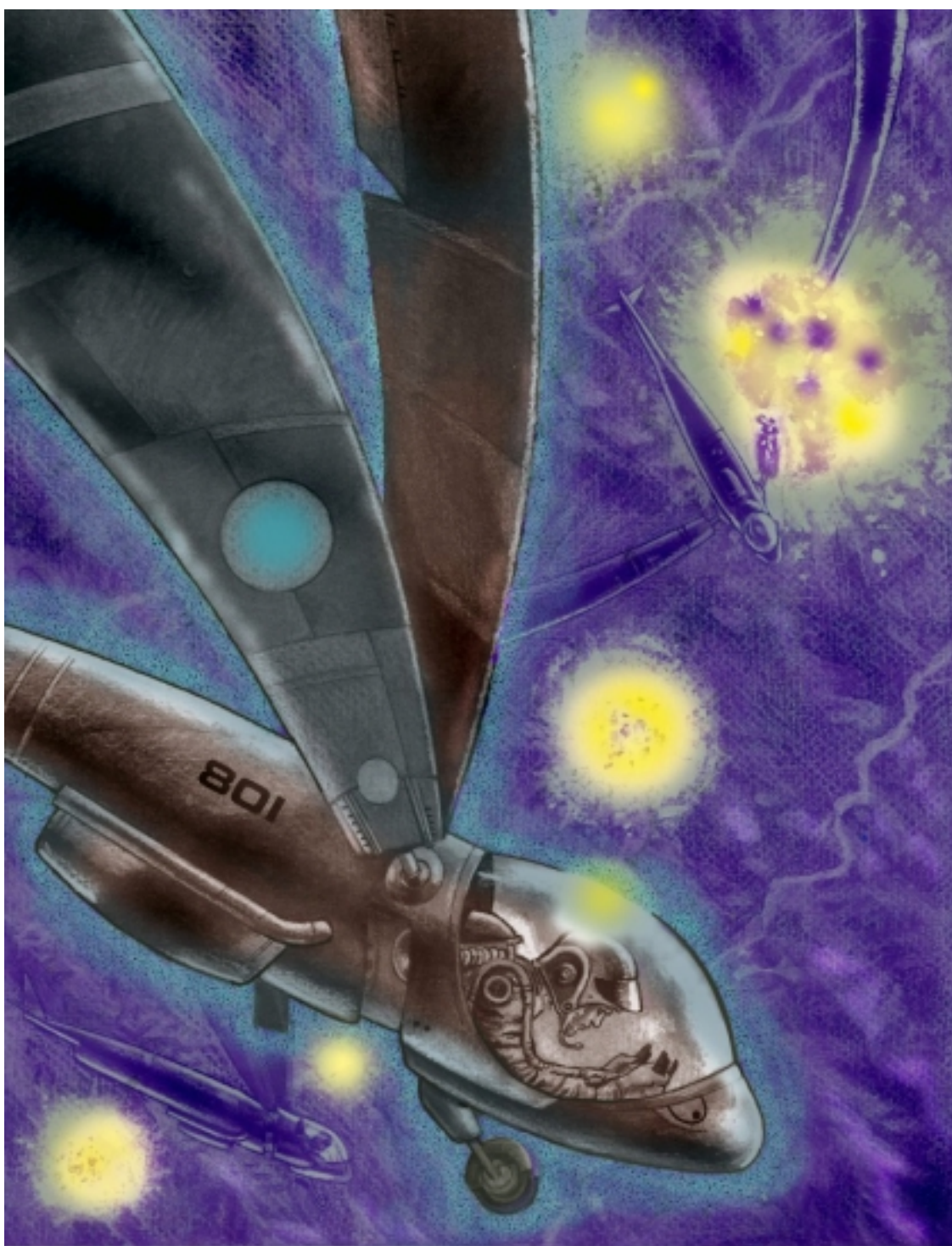
80 pages

## MICHAEL BISHOP FEATURE:

MICHAEL BISHOP  
PAUL DI FILIPPO

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# I must be talking to my friends

## Moving along after 27 years

If there are two images I'll remember from 2013, one is of the back of Peter Ryan's head as he disappeared down the steep ladder-stairs from the Bio Box (the old cinema projection box) at the Melbourne Science Fiction Club carrying yet another box of fanzines. The top of his head bore the scars of carrying other boxes down those stairs. Each time he went down he risked scraping the top of his head on an overhanging beam above the staircase.

The other image is of me pushing the box of fanzines into Peter's hands, him righting himself on the stair, and him turning around still carrying the box — before descending the staircase. He said a week later that the memory of the turn on the stairs still gave him nightmares.

When I fronted up to the Melbourne Science Fiction Club on 5 December to help a bit with box packing and carrying, I rediscovered my acute sense of vertigo. It was all I could do to clamber up those stairs to the Bio Box, then clamber down them just as awkwardly. There was

no way I could carry a box on the stairs and not feel like tipping over. Thank ghod Peter Ryan was there on the same day.

That was the second of three days in which I helped pack and carry boxes. My main fear was of putting out the base of my back. Nothing like that happened. Thanks to the daily exercises that my chiropractor has suggested to me over the years, I had no trouble carrying the boxes. I felt much better than I had when Elaine and I were stacking and carrying boxes when we moved house nine years ago.

Why were I and quite a few other MSFC members taking part in such an unlikely activity as filling and carrying boxes? Because of a very strange situation that had arisen at the beginning of October (see the *Age* cutting, next page). The Uniting Church of Victoria (formed in the sixties from the united Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists) faced a situation in which a secondary school it ran had gone bust to the tune



A combined fifty-year history of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club leadership and inspiration: Mervyn Binns (1950s–1980s) and James 'Jocko' Allen (1980s until now). (Photo: Helena Binns.)



of \$56 million. Nobody seems to be very forthcoming about the size of the debt, who incurred it, or why it is irrecoverable. What an old Churches of Christ bloke like me would never have guessed is that the central organisation owns all the congregations that call themselves Uniting Churches. (Each Church of Christ congregation controls its own property.) The properties to be sold included St David's Uniting Church, West Brunswick, the home of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club.

In 1985, after Space Age Books failed, the Club had

to vacate the building in Swanston Street Melbourne, where they had the upstairs rooms. James 'Jocko' Allen, of the then rather small club, and his parents attended church at St David's Uniting Church. They heard that an old lady, Emma Munro, had willed to the church a large amount of money, on condition that the congregation set up a library within its buildings. Jocko's brilliant idea was to ask for a home for the Melbourne Science Fiction Club's library, provided we could also have space for other club facilities. That was 27 years ago. The people

**Property selloff College collapse prompts move**

# Uniting Church in bid to raise \$56m

**Exclusive**  
**Barney Zwartz**  
Religion Editor

The hammer is about to fall on 56 Uniting Church properties in Victoria as the church tries to raise \$56 million to pay debts incurred in the calamitous collapse of Acacia College last year.

The church has yet to announce which churches will close because ministers and congregations are still being told, but state secretary Mark Lawrence said the sales would affect at least 14 church complexes. Some services run by the UnitingCare network will be relocated.

Among the churches being sold are Brunswick West, Glenroy, Strathmore, Hawthorn West and Doncaster East, and the properties include tennis courts, vacant land and former manses, Fairfax Media has been told.

Acacia College, a low-fee school for 520 students in Mernda in Melbourne's north, closed last December leaving the church with debts of \$36 million, despite the church spending millions of dollars bailing out the developer, who has since died.

The state synod voted in May to raise \$56 million to clear that debt, pay down other debts and restore fund reserves.

On Wednesday there was shock and fury as the affected churches learnt of the decision, amid speculation that church officials had targeted parishes without ministers or with elderly ministers to cut payout costs.

Malcolm McIlvena, the secretary at St David's Uniting Church

## To be sold



Hawthorn West



Doncaster East



Glenroy



Brunswick West

St David's also owned two units it used rent-free for people who had to come for Melbourne for hospital treatment.

Mr McIlvena was married in the church 50 years ago, and his wife was christened there, he said.

Presbytery officials were due to meet the church's council on Thursday. "We will ask who do we appeal to, but I know the answer - nobody. Legally it's their property, by act of Parliament in 1977."

Congregation member Matt Vigus, son of the minister, Andrew Vigus, said, "I just feel really cheated. We are paying for incompetence to pay off some dodgy deals. Dad will be forced into retirement - he's been a minister for 30 years."

State moderator Dan Wootton on Wednesday posted a letter on the church website to be read to all congregations on Sunday, apologising to those affected. "We are a pilgrim people always on the way," he wrote.

Dr Lawrence said every Uniting Church property was evaluated on the basis of its contribution to mission, locally and regionally, the impact on mission if it were sold, and its potential price. Presbyteries and church institutions were consulted.

"It has been a heartfelt process, in the knowledge that every one of the properties on the divestment list, would involve pain and grief for members of the church community." He said the sales involved less than 1 per cent of the church's properties - it has more than 600 congregations in Victoria and Tasmania and runs 32 welfare agencies - and no services would be cut.

in Brunswick West, said: "They've told us we are out after 105 years. We were not consulted at all."

He said the weekly congregation was down to about 20 - in the 1930s the Sunday School alone had 200 members - but the church hall was in use every night for tai chi, children's drama and the like, and



Only the shelves and some sore backs remain to suggest that once there stood here a mighty library. (Photo: Richard Morden.)



The library in boxes on the stage of St David's Hall. (Photo: Richard Morden.)



(Left above): The climb to the Bio Box. Imagine lugging boxes of zines up and down these stairs. Also, the filing cabinets had to be lowered down these stairs.

(Left below) View from the Bio Box as the stage begins to fill with packed boxes of books.

(Above) The formidable Bio Box crammed with archives from years of fandom.

**Just a selection of the photos from *Ethel the Aardvark* 169 showing various stages of the move from St David's. (Photos and captions: Richard Morden.)**

at St David's have never complained about our presence (indeed, had welcomed us and other clubs and societies to use the church hall on various days of the week), or about the changes we had had to make to fit in the library. One of these was storing the fanzine collection (based upon the Bill Wright Collection, donated twenty years ago) in the Bio Box, which had to be outfitted with filing cabinets and new shelves.

In the middle of 2013, a new committee took over the running of the Club, expecting to have an easy year. Instead, the committee, led by Natalie MacLachlan, found itself heavily laden with the worst crisis in the club's recent history. The astonishing thing is that Natalie and the committee have met the situation with courage and every appearance of outer calm. They asked members of the club to turn up on particular days to pack

the library and have it ready for removal on 7 December. I was one of the many people who turned up at various times to finish the job.

The seemingly insoluble question was: how could anybody remove the filing cabinets from the Bio Box? How, indeed, did they get up there? I could not attend on the night when committee member Ternecio Monclova brought along a special removalist's device that enabled him to lower the emptied filing cabinets slowly down the stairs. I hope somebody has taken a photo of this feat.

If you want a full report on 'Leaving a Church', including some wonderful photos of the emptied library and clubrooms, I suggest you send your membership fee (\$45) to the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, PO Box 110, Moonee Vale VIC 3055. There might remain no



physical copies of the *Ethel the Aardvark* 169 (December 2013–January 2014), but the editors, Richard Morden and Peter Ryan, could probably tell you how to download the PDF from the MSFC site.

On 7 December volunteers were supposed to turn up at 7 a.m. to begin moving all the boxes to the driveway outside, from where the removalists would stack them in their van. There was no way I would get there by 7 a.m., if only because the trip by public transport takes nearly two hours from Greensborough. When I did get there at 10 a.m., the first truckload was nowhere near loaded. I joined the crew of fans who were stacking boxes for the removalists. We were very fast and enthusiastic. The blokes from the moving van were not. They gave every impression of having been sent out to shovel coals in hell. They finished the first load about 11.30 and set off. Natalie phoned the crew waiting at the storage depot. The cargo lift (elevator) wasn't working. Our storage room was supposed to be three storeys up. I waited until I was no longer needed, then set off home.

Later I heard the rest of the story. The lift continued not to work, so the staff at the depot gave us a large room on the ground floor. All the Club's umpteen boxes, except for the kitchen items, are now in storage.

A few days later the Uniting Church staged its auction of church properties. It sold the most valuable real estate first, raised its \$56 million ... then stopped the auction. Quite a few church properties were left unsold, including that of St David's. The people at St David's no longer have to leave. One of the many questions is: should the MSFC return? Or can we find a much more suitable facility somewhere else, one that might enable the library

to spread out and for us to hold events on any day of the week? All this is being handled by the committee. We members of the Melbourne SF Club thank them.

The last night at the Club had that festive air of the great events I've attended there, such as the annual Minicons and investiture ceremony of the Lifetime Members (of which I am one). Many people I haven't seen for years turned up. Alison Barton organised the vast array of the kind of foodstuffs that fans like to eat. The indefatigable Eva Stein ran the last drinks stall in the kitchen. Murray MacLachlan set up his sound system, slipped into his white suit, and MCed events. Natalie gave an elegant speech. No weeping and gnashing of teeth — Natalie decreed 'Don't panic!'

Anybody who wants to donate the cost of brand new quarters is welcome to do so, but in the likely event of this not happening, remember that the Club will be running down its financial reserves in order (a) to pay for the move to the storage facility; (b) the move back to wherever; and (c) the cost of new shelves and other facilities. All donations, small or large, will be used well. Keep an eye on developments at

[melbsfclub@yahoo.com.au](mailto:melbsfclub@yahoo.com.au).

**Postscript: During January we received the news that the Club has found a new home for meetings: St Augustine's Anglican Church Hall, 100 Sydney Road, Coburg. Melway reference: 29 H3. Moreland Railway Station is close. On the No 19 tram, it's stop 29 or 30. No news yet as to a venue suitable for setting up the library.**

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## Babel

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During my recent random reading of incoming fanzines, I was hit by two phrases in Claire Brialey's latest editorial ('Everything is connected', *Banana Wings* 53, December 2013). She describes Fishlifter Central, the fictional headquarters of the mighty *Banana Wings* empire, as



'down in that basement we haven't got'. After describing the fictional 'war room' in which she and Mark Plummer concoct their evil brews, she admits that 'Well, no, there isn't really a war room'.

And there is no library as large as Jorge Luis Borges' Library of Babel at 5 Howard Street, Greensborough. It only seems so. I fondle the books on the shelves, taking out one after another and thinking, 'I must read this right now.' I leaf through the fanzines, enjoying articles and letters and feeling guilt at all those letters of comment I haven't written. I try unsuccessfully to find issues of my own fanzines to scan articles for desperate emailing friends. The choice is infinite, like the choice of books in Babel.

The *SF Commentary* 'war room' is like a TARDIS, but smaller on the outside than a call box and much roomier on the inside. It is, indeed, the top of my desk, covered in projects that might come into existence, fanzines and music magazines as yet unread, and huge files of unpublished manuscripts destined for both *SF Commentary* and *Treasure*. And that's only the paper copies. Inside the computer lie infinite files of text and photos for future issues of *SFC* and *Treasure* and my ANZAPA projects.

Much of the treasure consists of articles ripped out of newspapers — for instance, the article I scanned from the *Age* on 10 October 2013 announcing the big selloff of Uniting Church properties.

I also found a cutting from the *Herald Sun*, which I never buy but usually flip through while drinking coffee when shopping in the Greensborough Shopping Plaza. It is the 17 November survey, ‘voted by *Herald Sun* readers and Triple M listeners’, of the **best Australian songs**. I was astonished that seven of the top 10 songs are written not by Australians (Mark Seymour of Hunters and Collectors, and Harry Vanda and George Young of AC/DC) but by New Zealanders (Neil and Tim Finn of Crowded House and Split Enz):

- 1 ‘Don’t Dream It’s Over’ (Crowded House)
- 2 ‘Four Seasons in One Day’ (Crowded House)
- 3 ‘I Got You’ (Split Enz)
- 4 ‘Six Months in a Leaky Boat’ (Split Enz)
- 5 ‘I See Red’ (Split Enz)
- 6 ‘Throw Your Arms Around Me’ (Hunters & Collectors)
- 7 ‘Fraction Too Much Friction’ (Tim Finn)
- 8 ‘It’s a Long Way to the Top’ (AC/DC)
- 9 ‘History Never Repeats’ (Split Enz)
- 10 ‘Holy Grail’ (Hunters & Collectors)
- 11 ‘Before Too Long’ (Paul Kelly)
- 12 ‘Eagle Rock’ (Daddy Cool)
- 13 ‘How to Make Gravy’ (Paul Kelly)
- 14 ‘To Her Door’ (Paul Kelly)
- 15 ‘I Touch Myself’ (Divinyls)
- 16 ‘Somebody That I Used to Know’ (Gotye and Kimbra)
- 17 ‘You’re the Voice’ (John Farnham)
- 18 ‘Most People I Know Think That I’m Crazy’ (Billy Thorpe)
- 19 ‘Horror Movie’ (Skyhooks)
- 20 ‘Solid Rock’ (Goanna)
- 21 ‘The Horses’ (Darryl Braithwaite)
- 22 ‘Jesse’s Girl’ (Rick Springfield)
- 23 ‘From St Kilda to Kings Cross’ (Paul Kelly)
- 24 ‘Tom’ (Natalie Imbruglia)
- 25 ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ (Kylie Minogue)
- 26 ‘The Boys Light Up’ (Australian Crawl)
- 27 ‘Where the Wild Roses Grow’ (Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue)
- 28 ‘Say Goodbye’ (Hunters & Collectors)
- 29 ‘Women in Uniform’ (Skyhooks)
- 30 ‘Who Can It Be Now?’ (Men at Work)
- 31 ‘Ego Is Not a Dirty Word’ (Skyhooks)
- 32 ‘Reckless’ (Australian Crawl)
- 33 ‘The Ship Song’ (Nick Cave & Bad Seeds)
- 34 ‘Jailbreak’ (AC/DC)
- 35 ‘Sweet Disposition’ (The Tender Trap)
- 36 ‘High Voltage’ (AC/DC)
- 37 ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’ (Paul Kelly)
- 38 ‘Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap’ (AC/DC)
- 39 ‘Shine’ (Vanessa Amorosi)
- 40 ‘Prisoner of Society/Second Solution’ (The Living End)

You can tell a lot about the age of any group of voters who produce a list of popular music favourites. Usually

the voters of such lists are so young that I recognise almost none of their choices. However, I would judge that the *Herald Sun*/Triple M voters are only a bit younger than I am. True, they’ve chosen nothing from the 1960s, but that’s because most Australian hit songs from the sixties, except those by the Easybeats and the Masters Apprentices, were imported songs. Even so, it’s staggering that the **Easybeats’ ‘Friday on My Mind’** (1966) is not high on the list, since it’s still performed by quite a few British performers.

Also astonishing is that **Russell Morris’s ‘The Real Thing’** (1969) is not high on the list. It was a huge hit, and its singer remained popular enough to make a successful comeback CD, *Sharkmouth*, in 2013.

I take it that the NZ entries are included here because they were recorded in Australia, and first became hits here.

The oddest absence is that of songs by **Cold Chisel**. Cold Chisel continued to sell 100,000 albums per year long after they split up, and Jimmy Barnes, their lead singer, has had huge success since. Surely the Chisels’ **‘Khe Sanh’** should have been close to top of the list?

Also amazing is that none of **Midnight Oil’s** many singles has made the list.

Having said that, it’s good to see that **Daddy Cool’s** rock and roll dance hit **‘Eagle Rock’**, from the early 1970s, is still well remembered, as is **Billy Thorpe’s ‘Most People I Know Think That I’m Crazy’** from the same period.

Why did **Men at Work’s ‘Down Under’** not come in at 2 or 3? ‘Down Under’ became the theme tune of Australia’s victory in the America’s Cup yachting race, generating a feeling of nationalist triumph that Bob Hawke managed to activate for his Labor administration. But that was the 1980s. It doesn’t seem long ago to me.

My own favourite Australian song from this actual Top 40 list is **Paul Kelly’s ‘To My Door’**. It features on the recent CD/DVD/Blu-ray package called *Goin’ Your Way*, the recording of the last concert of Paul Kelly and **Neil Finn** during their 2013 tour of Australia (see the accompanying photo from the booklet). Neil Finn, of Crowded House and Split Enz, is the nearest thing the world has had to the Beatles song-writing phenomenon. His lyrics are brilliant, but it’s the tunes to the choruses that have kept the songs alive. Paul Kelly’s songs are craggier, a bit less melodic than Neil’s, but more precise in their imagery. He also has written songs that will bring any Australian audience to its feet, because Paul Kelly tells their story as well as his own. Paul has only to sing one first line, ‘They got married early, never had no money’, and everybody is there for Paul’s epic song ‘To Her Door’. It tells the story of a marriage breakup, personal breakdown, personal redemption of the bloke, and his desperate trip from Brisbane to Melbourne in the hope he might see his kids and maybe even be reunited with his ex-wife. The story is sketched in tiny, painful details that make me blub every time I hear it. ‘He came in on a Sunday,’ starts the last verse, ‘every muscle aching/Walking in slow motion like he’d just been hit/Did they have a future? Would he know his children?/Could he make a picture and get it all to fit?/He was shaking in his seat, riding through the streets/In a Silver Top to her door.’ What suspense!





Neil Finn (L.) and Paul Kelly (r.), from *Goin' Your Way*, the record of their last duo concert of the 2013 tour, at the Sydney Opera House.

What hope! What possible tragedy! It's all there, in one song. And that killer detail in the last line — Melbourne's main taxi cab company is Silver Top.

Paul Kelly's **'How to Make Gravy'** is his second-best song, with its tale of a bloke desperately phoning home from prison at Christmas, hoping everybody is eating well and that nobody has yet run off with his girlfriend. It has no chorus, no repeated lines, yet the audience sings every word with Paul when he presents it on *Goin' Your Way*.

So what are my favourite Australian songs that do *not* appear on the *Herald Sun's* Top 40? My Nos 2 and 3 were both recorded in Britain in the late sixties, and were never as popular as the singles recorded in Australia by the same groups: **'Because I Love You'** by the **Masters Apprentices** and **'Come In You'll Get Pneumonia'** by the **Easybeats**. These songs jostle for their places with the **Bee Gees'** **'Spicks and Specks'** (now the title of the ABC's popular music TV series). It came out in 1967, and hit Number 1 in Australia just as the Bee Gees left for Britain, recorded 'New York Mining Disaster 1941' for Robert

Stigwood, and never looked backwards. I've always counted the Bee Gees as Australian, although they were born in Britain, migrated here when very young, endured many years of failed records here, but finally succeeded with 'Spicks and Specks' before leaving for Britain.

Also great is **Brian Cadd's 'Ginger Man'** (1969). It's a very American-sounding song, but its combination of piano, Cadd's sandy voice, and memorable tune make it one of the great pop songs of all time.

What of those New Zealanders sailing away there at the top of the Top 40? Their songs are magnificent, of course. My two favourites are **Tim Finn's 'Fraction Too Much Friction'** and **Split Enz's 'Six Weeks in a Leaky Boat'**. **Crowded House** is the one great pop group who burst out in the eighties and just keep on producing magnificent songs from then until now. **'Four Seasons in One Day'** and **'Don't Dream It's Over'** are their best songs, I suppose, but there are few duds in their Greatest Hits collection.

## Falling off the edge of the world

A large part of my newspaper cuttings are the Obituaries sections in the *Age*. I catch up with the stories of people who, like Peter Darling and Graham Stone, have accomplished much more in their lives than we knew about

when they were alive. It's hard to realise that these people are no longer in the world.

## Al Knight

The first line of the *Age* obituary (25 June 2013) for **Al Knight** (11 October 1924–22 April 2013), written by Ian Britain and Sue Ebury (two well-known figures from Australian publishing), reads: ‘That’s “bloody silly”, Al Knight would characteristically have retorted if you’d told him he was a towering figure in Australian publishing’ but ‘he remained a pillar of integrity and good sense in a ruthless, sometimes crazed profession’. The small publishing company Hyland House, which he and Anne Godden established after they left Thomas Nelson Australia, was the main inspiration for Norstrilia Press, which Carey Handfield, Rob Gerrand, and I established in 1975. True, Advent:Publishers and Arkham House in America were the distant inspirations for what we wanted to do, but Al and Anne, along with Henry Rosenbloom when he was a printer before becoming a publisher, took the trouble to show us how things should be done. Hyland House was one of the first Australian publishers (apart from Horwitz in Sydney) to publish any Australian science fiction books: in particular, two novels by Lee Harding (including the Australian Children’s Book Award winner *Displaced Person*) and two fine anthologies. After Norstrilia Press acquired an IBM composer in 1978, by today’s standards a very primitive typesetting machine, Al and Anne gave us quite a few books to typeset. More than anybody else, I can thank them for almost the only period of prosperity (1978–80) I’ve enjoyed during my forty years of freelance editing, indexing, and typesetting.

## Jack Pitt

Over the years since I stopped teaching at Ararat Technical School (during 1969 and 1970) I’ve often wondered ‘Whatever happened to **Jack Pitt**?’ My first year of teaching, 1969, was also Jack Pitt’s first year as a secondary school principal. My main difficulty was that I was a hopeless teacher. Jack’s difficulties included the fact that his school had not yet been built, so his only facilities were a portable classroom as the ‘administration centre’, a wing of Ararat High School for regular classes, with nothing else but access to the metalwork and woodwork facilities. He faced a group of teachers who were either newbies, like me, or older trade teachers. They had been tradesmen for over 10 years before becoming trained as teachers. They knew how the world worked, how technical teaching worked, and they had no intention of being bossed around by some smart-arse from the city with new ideas. I left teaching after 1970, but I had heard that Jack’s school finally moved into the brand new buildings during 1971. Soon he gained promotion to the principalship of an inner suburban school. Then I heard nothing more.

When I last met Jack in 1970, I would have judged him in his fifties, with a drinking problem, inclined to exasperation as well as high levels of energetic leadership — in other words, a candidate for early death by an heart attack. In fact, he was only 45 years old. But still I did not ever see his name in the Deaths columns. (The ‘Deaths’ column is the most vital function of newspapers.) This



Al Knight.

did not happen until October this year, in his eighty-seventh year!

His obituary, published on 2 December, tells an astonishing story. Alan Hutchison, another first-year teacher at Ararat, had been told by Jack that he had been an actor in Britain in his youth before he moved back to Australia to take up teaching. Jack had obviously decided there were very few students who might have artistic or theatrical talent, because he did not try to foster that



The *Age* reprinted this photo of Jack Pitt — the same photo as appeared in the annual magazine of Ararat Technical School in 1970, the last year I was there.



Doris Lessing.

aspect of education at Ararat Tech. After he returned to Melbourne, however, he was able to develop all his interests. As a result, in December 1977, Jack was appointed founding principal of the Victorian College of the Arts' technical school, which became the VCA Secondary School, one of the most famous schools in Australia.

Why should I mention him in the pages of *SF Commentary*? Because in June 1969, when I had no money in my bank account, Jack first of all offered me the use of the school duplicator to print an issue of *SF Commentary* (which Steve Campbell and I printed in six hours one night), then lent me the money to buy my first duplicator. Not that Jack had any interest in science fiction, but he knew a fellow loony when he saw one. I just wish I could have caught up with him during recent years to thank him and show him that his investment had paid off.

## Doris Lessing

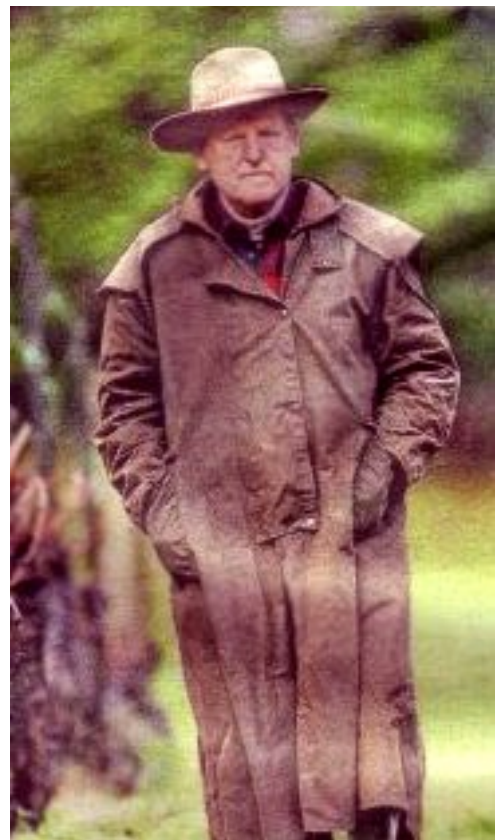
**Doris Lessing** (22 October 1919–17 November 2013) is the only Literature Nobel Prize winner, as far as I can recall, who not only admitted that some of her novels were science fiction, but stoutly defended them as such. I must admit that I found the 'Canopus in Argo' tetralogy unreadable, and eventually sold my copies, but I loved two novels of hers that I read during the early 1970s, novels that seemed much more wondrous, because much better written, than her official SF entries. They were *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. I'm told that *The Four-Gated City* is her other great SF/fantasy novel.

**Merv Binns**, who ran Space Age Books between 1971 and 1985, and the Melbourne SF Club from the mid 1950s until the 1980s, continues to publish his *Out of the Bin* every few months for a few friends. In the November 2013 issue he remembers: 'As I was closing up Space Age Books one evening, I received a call from Doris Lessing's publisher in Melbourne asking if I would like to take her to dinner. Space Age may well have been last on the list, as it was late in the day. I didn't hesitate to answer "with pleasure" and I asked our friend and Miles Franklin Award winner George Turner to join me. I also invited

my shop assistant, English teacher, and Doris Lessing fan Maureen Walsh to come along. It turned out to be one of my limited record of brilliant ideas, as George and Doris shared similar interests and got along very well. When Ms Lessing died recently, the news of her passing reminded me of that dinner at Florentino restaurant.'

## Keith Dunstan

I'm going to steal from Merv Binns again for this brief tribute to Melbourne newspaper columnist **Keith Dunstan** (1925–2013), who survived so long into useful retirement that many of thought he was eternal. From *Out of the Bin*, September issue: 'Many people helped publicise Space Age Books, and one of those was journalist Keith Dunstan. He sometimes mentioned Space Age Books and SF conventions he attended in his column in the *Sun New Pictorial*. He was quite a character, and Space Age and Melbourne SF sincerely appreciated his interest in us.' Keith Dunstan established the 'A Place in the Sun' column of chit-chat many years ago, but then moved to the rival *Age* newspaper during the ten years before he retired. The odd result is that the only affectionate piece about him appeared in the *Age*, 12 September 2013, whereas the *Herald Sun* (the current incarnation of the *Sun*, now owned by Mr Orrible Murdoch) could barely raise a couple of paragraphs to honour him a week later. In the *Age*, **Laurence Mooney** details Keith Dunstan's extraordinary achievements, including a series of books he wrote telling stories about Melbourne's delights and peculiarities with all the gusto of a Barry Humphries.



Keith Dunstan. (Photo: The Age.)



Dunstan's autobiography was called *No Brains At All* (a quote from his report card at the school he attended). Not only did he attend the 1966, 1968, and 1969 Melbourne SF conventions at the old clubrooms at Somerset Place, but he wrote about them in his column. A few years later he began the Anti Football League, designed more to make fun of the religious aspects of Australian Rules football than to offend any particular club or footballer. The highlight of each year's events was the burning of a football in the middle of the MCG on the day before the Grand Final. Mooney reminds us that Dunstan was crowned King of Moomba in 1992, and received an Order of Australia medal in 2002.



## Peter O'Toole

I can't finish riffling among my newspaper cuttings without mentioning the recent death of **Peter O'Toole**. I've seen his signature film *Lawrence of Arabia* more often than any film other than *2001: A Space Odyssey* (wouldn't O'Toole have been wonderful as the voice of HAL?), but the two films that SF people have been mentioning most often are *The Stunt Man* (which I've seen only once, and can't track down on DVD), in which O'Toole seems to

play God, basing his performance upon the directing style of *Lawrence's* David Lean; and *Dean Spanley*, perhaps my favourite movie of the last ten years, in which O'Toole plays a very old man who once lost his beloved dog and rediscovers him in a fantastic way. In the *Age's* memoir of O'Toole, Australian film maker Paul Cox, who directed him in his least known film, *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien*, says: 'We used to sit and sing old church songs together. He was an altar boy like I was. He was tops. He was an original, extremely intelligent and had a strange sentimental streak.' And he had that voice!

# The fanzine lounge of Babel

The most visible features of the rubble heap of my desk (my Library of Babel) are the two computers, two monitors, and one scanner. My main work computer is this last of the Gateways that runs Windows 98. That was the last Windows that would support Ventura 4.1, the program I use to produce nearly all the pages of my fanzines. This computer is not connected to the internet, so I don't have to worry about viruses, trojans or other monsters from the cloud. The other computer runs on Windows XP, and I inherited it from Elaine when she upgraded to a Windows 7 machine. It is connected to the internet, but the anti-virus software I'm running seems to slow it down greatly. Each computer has its own monitor. The scanner does a great job on the Gateway, but I'm not sure if its software will operate on XP.

Also visible: a heap of music magazines, mainly *Gramophone*, *Mojo*, and *Uncut*, that I haven't yet read. I always read the Australian *Rhythms* magazine as soon as it arrives in the mail. These magazines contain dangerous knowledge. They suggest the names of CDs I must track down and hear, so I make lists that I give to Dave Clarke at Readings, and he is always able to find them.

## Flag 10

Because I keep talking about Bill Burns's fanzine-host site <http://efanzines.com>, I probably give the impression that I no longer receive paper fanzines. Not so. Fortunately, there are still fanzines available only in paper form, most famously *Banana Wings* from Claire

and Mark and Robert Lichtman's *Trap Door*. (He posts the e-version of each issue only a year after he has sent out the paper copies.) And this year there has been Andy Hooper's *Flag*.

On my Babel desktop it is difficult to find anything I want when I want it. It took me two hours to find all the recent issues of *Flag*, the very frequent paper-only fanzine that **Andy Hooper** has been publishing this year (11032 30th Avenue NE, Seattle WA 98125; email to [fanmailaph@aol.com](mailto:fanmailaph@aol.com)). In particular, I was looking for the issue that had handed me massive egoboo, but I found much else.

I remembered that in *Flag* 10 (31 October 2013) Andy Hooper gathers all his letter writers as if they were sitting around a convention fan room discussing the previous issues of *Flag*. The convention he chooses is Corflu Titanium, 2005, the San Francisco Corflu that I actually attended during my Bring Bruce Bayside fan fund trip. I receive a mention because I had sent a letter of comment to Andy explaining why I had not written a proper letter of comment. The hyper-fannish article that Andy attempts is very hard to write, and Andy does it superbly. I felt a special kind of glow when reading his article because some of the letter writers mentioned in *Flag* 10 were actually at that convention in 2005, in particular Robert Lichtman and Mark Plummer. However, I can't remember ever meeting Lloyd Penney (one of *Flag's* correspondents), and Steve Jeffery can't have been there, because he doesn't attend non-British conventions.

However, in 2005 Andy Hooper himself did not speak



more than a word or two to me, either in Seattle during the week before Corflu, or during the convention. I like to think I can chat with anybody who will take the trouble to chat with me, so this did seem odd. I had long conversations with Andy's *Chunga!* co-editors Randy Byers and carl juarez. carl has a fine baritone voice, actually sang a Warren Zevon song to me at the Seattle party put on for me by Janice Murray and Alan Rosenthal, and the next afternoon Randy took me off to sample beers.

## Flag 7

In searching for *Flag* 10, I found an even more brilliant issue of *Flag* — No 7, 13 July 2013, the best fanzine of 2013. This is the issue in which Andy invented the letter-column-as-convention-fanzine-room-party. In this case, he was trying to recreate the mood of the fan room at the Orlando worldcon in 1992, the convention that Roger Weddall attended as DUFF winner only a few months before he died. Andy mentions 'the much-missed Roger Weddall rocking in a pair of leather pants without a trace of irony'. Elsewhere, Andy writes: 'I nodded, staring as Jeanne Mealy and Roger Weddall did something unwholesome with an inflatable plastic dinosaur on the balcony.' That sounds just right.

The startling aspect of this bravura piece of writing by Andy Hooper is that the only equivalent piece of fan writing I know of is a column that Roger himself wrote for ANZAPA in the late 1980s using the same fictional device for writing his mailing comments. In that article, Roger discussed our contributions with him as if we were all taking part in the greatest fan party of all time. (Wherever Roger turned up was the occasion for a great fannish party. Life's been a bit dull around Melbourne since 1992.)

Andy also praised *Treasure* 1 and *SF Commentary* 85 in his fanzine review column. Thanks very much.

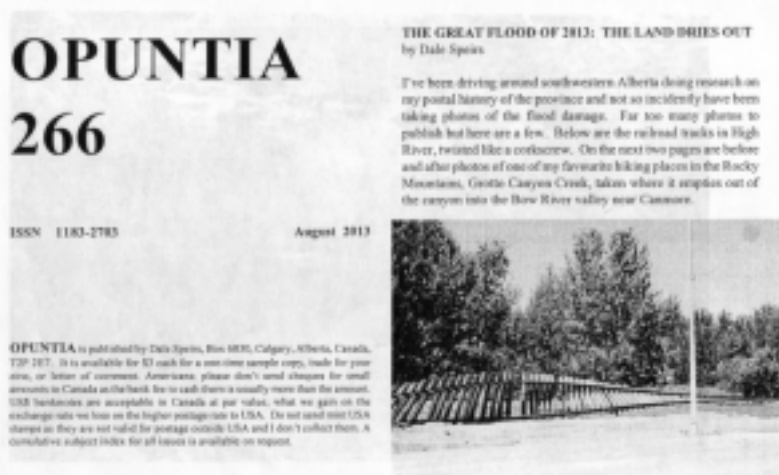
## Opuntia

Apart from *Flag*, the other print-fanzine highlights of the year have been the many issues of *Opuntia* I've received from Dale Speirs. Each month a new issue arrives. Each month I resolve to write a long letter of comment. The next issue arrives and I still don't write that letter of comment.

Dale knows about many things. He is retired, so he can research the many subjects in which he is interested, taking photos and digging up interesting facts. He writes in a lively, amused, yet fact-based style: wry essays that would be standouts in any top professional magazine. He also publishes a letter column, fanzine reviews, FAPA mailing comments, and a bit of personal stuff, but the mainstays of *Opuntia* are his feature articles. The highlight of three issues during 2013 were his reports and photos about 'The Great Flood of 2013'. Calgary was hit badly by huge floods a few months ago. In *Opuntia* 266, for instance, Dale features photos of the railroad tracks in High River, twisted like a corkscrew, another destroyed bridge, as well as Grotto Creek in full flood. I doubt if Dale wants to extend his mailing list, because the cost of postage keeps rising sharply, but you could ask him to send you a copy (Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta T2P 2E7, Canada). Since he has no email address, sit down, type a letter, put it in an envelope, apply a stamp, and lick the envelope so it stays shut. If you remember how to do all this, you'll probably hear from Dale.

— Bruce Gillespie, 31 December 2013

(IMBTTMFis continued on Page 30)



'Michael Bishop is one of the new and still rare breed of science fiction writer attempting to produce art without rejecting the pulp vigour that is science fiction's continuing strengths', wrote Alexei and Cory Panshin in 1975. Forty years later, his talent remains rare and singular — and often undervalued. Since his spectacular first publication, the short story 'Pinon Fall' (October 1970), Michael Bishop has continued to publish a wide range of well-written, often poetic, novels and stories. He was also published poetry, and edited a wide range of anthologies.

# Michael Bishop

## Unaimed prayers:

### The Silurian Tales of Steven Utley: An essay-review

***The 400-Million-Year Itch: Silurian Tales 1*  
by Steven Utley (Greenwood, Western Australia:  
Ticonderoga Publications, 2013; 286 pages)**

***Invisible Kingdoms: Silurian Tales 2*  
by Steven Utley (Greenwood, Western Australia:  
Ticonderoga Publications, 2013; 288 pages)**

'Hope, she believed, was an unaimed prayer.'  
— Steven Utley

The 'she' in the foregoing epigraph stands for a female character surnamed Wheeler in a story in Volume 1 of

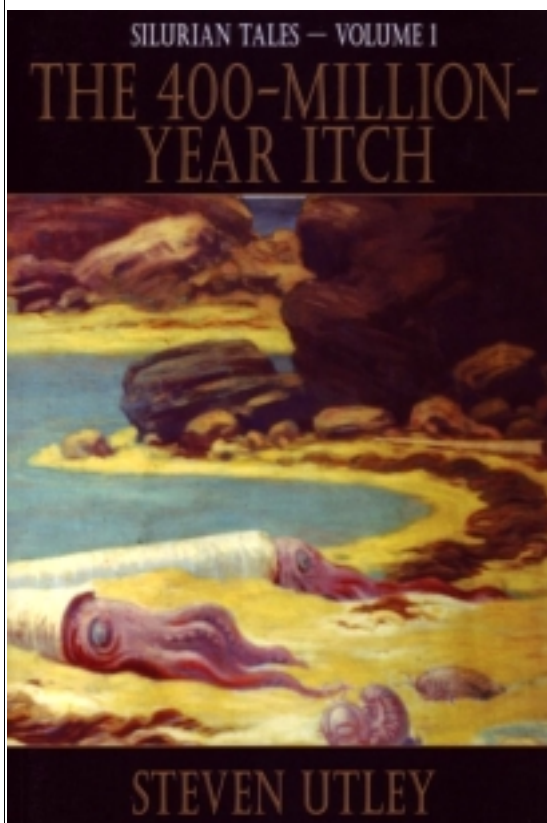
Steven Utley's *Silurian Tales*, *The 400-Million-Year Itch*: 'Cloud by van Gogh'. Wheeler, a soil and insect specialist labouring in a weird but physically visitable facsimile of the Silurian period, aspires to paint a cloud just as she sees it and thereby to make, as Vincent van Gogh did (or would, some four hundred million years later), 'you know, art'.

In the next story, 'Half a Loaf', we learn Wheeler's given name, Helen, an ironic one, because no one — certainly not Wheeler herself — regards her as a beauty. But in this stark Silurian environment, all the scientists refer to one another, as do the Navy service people supporting their research, primarily by surnames. And, in 'Cloud by van Gogh', Wheeler deflects her tent-mate (Carol) Bearden's lament of sleeplessness by confessing to 'only minimal sympathy for the problems of anybody who's as slim, graceful, blonde, and sought-after' as Ms Bearden.

But snagging a man occupies Wheeler far less than does painting a cloud with utter faithfulness. When Gabbert, the overbearing male leader of the astronomy team, rebukes her many baulked efforts to render a cloud perfectly as 'beyond pathetic', indeed as 'Sisyphean', she declares that she has no choice: 'Gotta keep rolling that rock up the hill' — the tall slope of her aesthetic aspirations — and 'believing that one of these times it won't roll back down'.

This focus on a mid-level female scientist's hopes for her archaic hobby is not the standard emphasis of a science-fiction tale. But it typifies Utley's approach in nearly all 36 stories in the two unorthodox prayer books constituting his *Silurian Tales*: *The 400-Million-Year Itch* and *Invisible Kingdoms*. In fact, I would wager that this method — lighting the hopes of his *dramatis personae* against the backdrop of an austere geological period — sprang from a hope that the author himself could neither ignore nor repress, that of reflecting our world, as *he* perceived it, through the lenses of his own dark but humane imagination.

Each story in these volumes, whatever its level of ambition, embodies just the sort of *unaimed* prayer that





Helen Wheeler lifts when she strives to paint a cloud — to capture its essence in flake white on her masonite board. She knows that, on a fundamental level, succeeding in this hope will make her happy.

Incidentally, in Volume 1's title story, 'The 400-Million-Year Itch', a drunken, overweight science-fiction writer visiting the Silurian to see what kinds of salable tales it might suggest to him says to another character, 'All stories, all kinds of stories, are about people trying to be happy. A few of them pull it off.' Moreover, 'The 400-Million-Year Itch' leads with an epigram by George Eliot, *a.k.a.* Mary Ann Evans, to wit: 'One gets a bad habit of being unhappy.'

I can't pinpoint the date — October of 2012? — but, near the end of his life, Steven assured me by phone that every Silurian Tale pivots on its characters' efforts to attain personal happiness. (Forgive me, but, the rules of critical objectivity aside, I just can't keep calling him 'Utley' here.) He told me this in his singular, half-incredulous voice, a voice tinged with an edge of fog, a voice I had no clue I would hear only one more time before, on 12 January 2013, a peculiarly virulent cancer put period to our friendship of over four decades.

Once, after a 'grisly' week early in January of 2012, Steven recounted in his blog <http://impatientape.livejournal.com> that 'on the plus side', his Silurian tale 'The End in Eden' had sold to *Analog* and that a critic had posted 'a terrific review' of his reprinted collection *Ghost Seas*. At once truthful and self-mocking, Steven observed, 'It takes so little to make me happy.' In a previous entry (7 November 2011), he had written, 'I have no idea what I'll be working on tomorrow, but as long as I'm working on something, I shan't complain.'

That *shan't* delights me. What other contemporary science-fiction writer would deploy this archaic verb without irony or self-consciousness? It derives from Steven's eclectic erudition, his fondness not only for Leigh Brackett but also for Jane Austen, and it discloses a lot about his wide-open, receptive personality, even if, like a flower-loving Emily Dickinson-esque woman in a famous James Thurber cartoon, he did tend to 'get fed up occasionally'.

Anyway, my thesis for this essay stems from my awareness that Steven found his *raison d'être* and thus his happiness in writing. And the writing of his Silurian stories may have given him the most fulfilling tastes of accomplishment and acclaim he ever experienced. He never received a Hugo or Nebula for them, but several titles in the series wound up in best-of-the-year or best-of-the-best volumes. Editors Ellen Datlow at SciFi.com, Gardner Dozois and Sheila Williams at *Asimov's*, and Gordon Van Gelder at *Fantasy & Science Fiction* looked with favour on Steven's submission of new Silurian stories, and these two volumes may at last secure for him recognition as a writer of truly estimable stature.

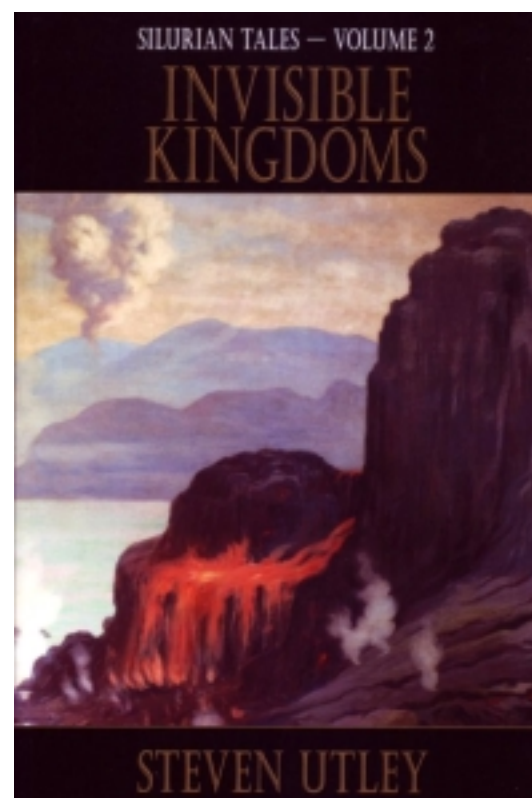
Granted, even within the field where he made his reputation as an insightful, if mordant, story writer, Steven often covered the pain of his relative obscurity with barbed or self-effacing witticisms. His 'About the Author' notice in *The 400-Million-Year Itch* describes him as leading, in small-town Tennessee, 'a quiet life, surrounded as I am by my books, my cats, and my danger-

ously inbred neighbors'. And his own third-person bio-note in *Invisible Kingdoms* reads, 'Steven Utley is an internationally unknown short-story writer and minor Minor Poet.'

Steven was funny that way, but 'Silurian Darkness', Barry Malzberg's admiring but oddly focused introduction to Volume 2, claims that his disinclination to write novels and his manic depression, or bipolarity, 'wrecked his career'. Barry concedes that Steven produced a vital body of work, but argues that it is 'characterized by nothing so much as a reflexive and bewildered dismay' and 'an anger which can be seen at the center of all these stories'. I don't dispute the dismay or the anger (which any sensitive person must feel in the face of human folly and the implacable absurd), but Barry projects too much of his own disillusionment into Steven, who strove against his depression and his atheism to find humane consolations for both. In person, he rarely seemed dismayed or angry; more often, he self-disclosed as bemused but compassionate.

And — often, if not always — these tales point to and uplift hope. Given that Steven shaped from the grim materials of the Paleozoic Era a forbidding stage for many human conflicts and interactions, these stories reveal his *own* hope. In them he evinces for nearly all his characters — women and men, scientists, Navy personnel, artists, drudges, clerics, nonbelievers, peons, celebs — a degree of empathy that dramatically evokes their essential humanity. Don't mistake me. I do *not* mean to paint Steven as a latter-day Saint Francis of Assisi (even if he did love cats as much as, or more than, he did some people), but to redeem him from his incomplete portrait in 'Silurian Darkness' as an angry man robed in bitterness and bewilderment.

Despite his tendency to tweak those whom he thought fools, poltroons, or outright jerks, Steven usually did so with hyperbole and humour. He also *felt* for people, even



those who appalled him. He admired the philosophy of Carl Sagan, who once said, according to a blog post of Steven's (13 September 2011)

Every one of us is precious in the cosmic perspective. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.

Steven's own sardonic gloss on this Sagacious epigram reads: 'Not that I don't reserve the right to go on believing that some among our current crop of right-wingers are crazy enough to bark at their own excrement.'

The understanding that Steven shows Helen Wheeler in 'Cloud by Van Gogh', Chaplain Madiel in 'Half a Loaf' and 'Chaos and the Gods'; the bargeman Bud Walton in 'The Desplado'; the lovers Mike French and Carol Bearden in 'Chain of Life'; and even the creationist interloper Jim Farlough (a man who in real life would have provoked Steven to discreet eye-rolling) in 'Babel', 'The World Within the World', 'Diluvium', and 'Side-step', a fine mini-sequence of Silurian tales — well, this empathy disproves any assessment of his work as evidence solely of his anger or of his career as a sad affliction. Instead, along with art, music, and fiction of all kinds; comics; camp TV and movies; and other human beings (not necessarily in that or any other order), his work was his treasure and writing, something like his salvation.

Let me digress. Steven and I tried several times to collaborate. I still have the e-file of one such crippled effort, ready to revise when the time is right. Or not. As things turned out, we jointly edited a reprint anthology, *Passing for Human* (PS Publishing, 2006), and later finished and sold a short story, 'The City Quiet as Death' (Tor.com, 2009). Both projects gratified us in the energetic give-and-take of their doing and in the fact that they achieved publication.

In the case of 'The City Quiet as Death', Steven gave me an evocative opening on a fictional Caribbean island and a vivid, indeed startling, ending, and asked if I could bring these parts together with an appropriate middle. He did not trust himself to write this middle because it required an intense colloquy between his doubting protagonist and a young barrio priest. Steven claimed that he did not feel qualified to spoon-feed words into the mouth of a priest. He regarded me — as a Bishop, perhaps? — better suited to offer the clerical point of view.

However, when in his Silurian tales 'Half a Loaf' and 'Chaos and the Gods', I read the dialogue and thoughts of Chaplain Madiel, a man self-confessedly 'raised on the Bible and Bullfinch', and also the dialogue and thoughts of creationist Jim Farlough in the sequence about his and his two associates' mission to the Silurian period, I scratched my head. Why hadn't Steven trusted himself to ghost-write for our priest when he had ventriloquised Chaplain Madiel and his three creationists with such authority? I honestly don't know. Maybe, because writing is so often an insular activity, he simply wanted the companionship of collaborating.

In short, reading *The 400-Million-Year Itch* and *Invisible Kingdoms* — even though I had read many of these tales beforehand in e-files — surprised me. The contrasts, resonances, and parallels set up among the stories make nearly all of them seem more astute in their observations, more acute in their plotting, and richer in their achievement.

They create a world, an alternate reality, an analogue of the multiple universes that the physicist Cutsinger posits in these volumes as a likely but unverifiable effect of the wave-function collapse that allows twenty-first-century human beings to 'time-travel'. In fact, Cutsinger takes pains to explain that these persons do *not* time-travel (from a Navy-run jump station near Corpus Christi, Texas, to the Silurian period, and back again), but are instead hurled to and from a *simulacrum* of that time, usually with excruciating pain and sometimes, albeit rarely, with death or transfer to an inescapable sidestep universe as two potential horrific results.

I've just argued that the Silurian Tales create for us a realistic spatial and temporal context, a *world*. In aesthetic fact, they do. And this world quickly acquires the palpable verisimilitude of Frank Herbert's *Dune* or Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia*. The chief difference is that Steven did not work out the geography or the names — if you set aside the fragrant moniker *Stinktown* for a major base camp — of his 'imaginary world'. He did not have to. He researched to master its geography and nomenclature and then skilfully appropriated them. (In his blog, Steven happily admits making 'indispensable' use of John McPhee's trilogy, *Annals of the Former World*.) Is this a lesser achievement than either Herbert's or Aldiss's? Is it a kind of cheating?

I regard these questions as nonsensical. Steven wrote fantasy and horror as well as science fiction, but I believe that he loved SF for the hard-nosed, empirical approach of its most rigorous practitioners, even as he loved his 'Main Man', Ray Bradbury, rarely a rigorous empiricist, for refusing to make crucial human interactions in his tales secondary to *Analog*-style 'nuts and bolts'. In fact, I would argue that Steven's Silurian stories are more akin to Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* than to *Dune* or the *Helliconia* trilogy, for they kneel to the *Chronicles* even as they implicitly rebuke Bradbury for his scientific errors and his less than fully adult handling of interpersonal relations.

Sceptics of this opinion may legitimately point out that the space-time anomaly permitting Steven's characters to travel to a mock-up of the Silurian beggars empirical experience and most scientific standards, and that the multiple-universe theory advanced by Cutsinger sounds like mumbo-jumbo. (It does have proponents among real theoretical physicists.) But these tales all self-identify as fictions — generally, we distinguish 'tales' from 'stories' by declaring that tales are '*imaginatively recounted*' — and if one grants Steven these two conceits, he does his damndest to play fair with them in all thirty-six tales. The Silurian 'past' that he creates in relation to the near-future world from which his characters hail remains consistent, too, albeit revitalised from story to story by new discoveries, fresh emphases, and changes in everything from characters, points of view, tale-specific motifs, Paleozoic settings, and salient

themes.

As Gardner Dozois notes in his helpful introduction to Volume 1, 'Utley doesn't cheat.' He settles on this 'age of mud and slime' as his characters' chief destination, a period devoid of dinosaurs, sabre-tooth tigers, or wily hominids as pat sources of conflict or adventure. And yet, Gardner marvels, his 'protagonists don't discover aliens, or find an ancient crashed spaceship, or encounter other time-travelers with whom they become embroiled in a time war'. Moreover, as a direct consequence, they 'are free to interact in the most subtle and movingly human of ways with little else to distract the reader from them'. In many respects, this strategy of Steven's seems an obvious one, but not many science-fiction writers have had the guts to deploy it for character stories as unflinching as these.

The first paragraph in the first Silurian tale, 'All of Creation', proves Gardner's assertion, for it focuses on its narrator's family rather than on the space-time gateway to this faux-prehistoric world or on the multiple-universe theory that provides dizzying plot twists for several stories to come. The tale dates from 2008, fairly late in the composition of the series. Here is its first paragraph:

My mother's mission, late in life, has been to keep her children in touch with each other and with all our many relatives. She lived as a military wife, following my father around the world at the Pentagon's whim, herding offspring the whole while. (Vol. 1, p. 17)

Like Bruce McAllister's recent novel *The Village Sang to the Sea*, 'All of Creation' has an obvious autobiographical aspect. *Not* autobiographical, however, is narrator Eric's discovery, along with his cousin Trey, a marine biologist in Corpus Christi, of a plethora of 'big ugly water bugs', all dead, on the beach of a nearby island. These 'bugs' turn out to be specimens of an extinct marine arthropod from the Paleozoic era, trilobites. Their presence, at first a profound enigma, foretells the irruption of a space-time zone, some 200 yards in length, upon which Steven bases all the tales in these two unusual collections. Trilobites abounded in the Silurian. They abound in these stories. The word is properly pronounced *TRILL-o-bytes*, although I mentally sounded it *TRILL-o-bytes*, until I realised that the spelling *trillobite* does not represent an erratum in the text, but instead Steven's orthography of choice for speakers, often either Navy personnel or creationists, ignorant of the term's correct pronunciation.

This realisation, several stories beyond 'All of Creation', shook me, but did not sabotage my certainty that Eric, the narrator, shares too many of Steven's passions and quirks — paleontology, dinosaurs, devotion to family — not to act as his fictional proxy; and so 'All of Creation' comes first in the series, even though Eric never reappears. It also introduces Jim Farlough, a foe of all evolutionary theory, who does show up in later stories, particularly Volume 2. Further, it takes place over a single day, Eric's natal day, and ends with Eric saying 'Happy Birthday to me' and affirming that 'all of creation' is 'vast and magnificent and full of wonderful things'.

One strange feature of the tales is the frequency with which the word *world* appears in their titles. Volume 1's second story, 'The Woman under the World', is a nape-freezing seven-pager about Phyllis Lewis, who fails to pass through the space-time tunnel between the Holocene and the Silurian because of a technical misalignment that lets her irradiated echo, or ghost, enter this anomalous conduit. Within it, the glowing woman persists in a 'timeless interval' that she cannot escape. Admirers of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* will experience a frisson akin to that triggered by Jon Osterman's radiation accident in the chapter 'Watchmaker'. But, here, Steven works on a more intimate scale, albeit one that rakes our emotions just as brutally as does the spectacular calamity that befalls the future Dr Manhattan in *Watchmen*.

The eighth tale in *The 400-Million-Year Itch*, 'The Wind over the World', one of its more substantial offerings, presents another jump-station mishap in terms that reduce it to an engineering problem — 'spatial drift and temporal spread' — for almost everyone but Bonnie Leveritt, a young scientist in training who goes through the anomaly ahead of an unprepossessing man named Ed Morris.

Morris lets Leveritt go first, gives her a reassuring wink as she departs, and then fails to arrive in the Silurian when he ought. His echo, or spectre, haunts Leveritt, not in the traditional horror-story sense, but morally and emotionally, so that the story achieves a (Henry) Jamesian philosophical weight. Its title derives from this remark to Leveritt by Michael Diehl, a character assigned to meet Morris:

Never mind what religion says about souls. Souls're just puffs of air. The only thing [that] makes a man's death meaningful is remembrance. Without remembrance, he's just a wind that blew over the world and never left a trace. (Vol. 1, p. 105)

This idea haunted Steven as much as it does Leveritt, and it reappears throughout these volumes, in variations, as a theme. Moreover, 'The Wind over the World' became the second of the Silurian Tales to appear in one of Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthologies, the *Fourteenth Annual Collection* (St. Martin's, 1997).

Two stories with *world* in their titles occur in *Invisible Kingdoms*: 'The Real World', its second offering, and 'The World Without', its fifteenth piece, in which the agoraphobic physicist Cutsinger, relegated to a nursing home, tries to convince a doctor that he doesn't belong there, that he was once 'tops in kew em', or quantum mechanics, 'the leading expert in time travel', not a drooling nobody fit for geriatric warehousing. This life is not his; it occurs in a *copy* of his rightful universe, which endured a wave-function collapse and dumped him in this noxious split-off. Call 'The World Without' one of the least pleasant of these stories — a couple of others rival it — but confess, too, that Steven may have viewed Cutsinger, as he did Eric in 'All of Creation', as a stand-in for himself. Here, however, he envisions his talented but ill-appreciated surrogate toward the end of his days.

Hence, I prefer to look at 'The Real World' more closely than I have 'The World Without'. If one can point



to certain tales of Flannery O'Connor's as her 'masterpieces' ('A Good Man Is Hard to Find', 'Good Country People', 'Everything That Rises Must Converge', etc.), then why not do the same with Steven's? And I would cite as many as seventeen Silurian tales as among his major efforts.

Situating 'The Real World' at the top of my list, I would add 'All of Creation', 'Beyond the Sea', 'Promised Land' (with its resonant final line, 'Is anyone ever really happy?'), 'The Age of Mud and Slime', 'The Wind over the World' (earlier touched on), 'Cloud by van Gogh' (ditto), 'Chaos and the Gods', the moving love story 'Chain of Life', the farcically satirical 'The End in Eden', 'The Despoblado', 'Sidestep' (never before published), 'Slug Hell', 'There and Then', 'Silv'ry Moon', and the title stories of both collections. On a different day, I could make good cases for appending 'Walking in Circles' (which, fittingly, ends where it begins), 'The Tortoise Grows Elate' (a first-person tale featuring a narrator with an unforgettable voice), 'Variant' (a succinct piece of SF horror), and 'A Paleozoic Palimpsest' (a Borgesian story with a poignant human dimension) to my first list. If my approbation now begins to seem indiscriminate, let me add that even stories I haven't mentioned have praiseworthy attributes, especially in the context of the overarching series.

For now, though, I return to 'The Real World'. Here, Steven introduces us to Ivan Kelly, one half of the first two-man team of 'time-travellers' to visit an anomalous mock-up of the Silurian. Kelly worked as a pedologist, or soil scientist, in this realm, and for those unfamiliar with or dismissive of his specialty, he 'calmly explain[ed] ... that the origin and evolution of soil ranked among the major events in the history of life on Earth', for it led to the emergence of life onto land during the Paleozoic.

As 'The Real World' opens, however, Kelly sits in an airliner on his way to Los Angeles, long after his historic contributions to Silurian research. At the invitation of his brother Don, a successful screenwriter, he has chosen to visit Don and his niece Michelle, just out of high school, whom the childless Ivan loves inordinately. Moreover, he knows in his heart that he 'always shall'. Once in Don's home, he discusses with Michelle the three books he's currently reading: Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, the *People's Almanac*, and a title on quantum mechanics. (Not incidentally, the physicist Cutsinger appears in this tale in flashbacks.)

Ivan admits that advanced physics may be 'just a lot of philosophical wanking set to math', but the topic interests him. 'Somewhere between physics and philosophy,' he tells his niece, 'is the intersection of our real world. Out of our subjective perception of an objective reality of energy and matter comes our interpretation of being and meaning.' Whoa. Good-naturedly rather than snarkily, Michelle replies, 'Whatever you say, Uncle Ivan.' And Ivan backs off the heavy stuff to talk a little about how he and Don achieved success in wholly different fields. Michelle's dad and Uncle Ivan both liked literature, but disagreed on which parts of a book afforded the most interest and pleasure. Ivan expands on this point:

'I'd read *The Big Sleep* or *The Time Machine* and pass 'em on to Don, and then we'd discuss 'em. ... Don was interested in the characters, the story. Who killed so and so. I loved Raymond Chandler's, Ross Macdonald's descriptions of the southern California landscape ... My feeling was that setting is as vital as plot and characterization. A good detective-story writer had to be a good travelogue writer, or else his characters and action were just hanging in space. Don argued that a good story could be set anywhere ... If the plot was good, it would work anywhere.' (Vol. 2, p. 37)

Obviously, Steven identifies more fully with Ivan than with Don, at least on this matter, but it's a schizophrenic identification because the Kelly brothers, who resemble each other, embody and dramatise different aspects of Steven's personality. The settings of these stories mean as much to Steven as do his characters, and the interactions of his characters against the prehistoric backdrop acquire a dynamic patina that heightens and augments their significance, both for the characters and for the reader. In effect, Steven serves as both playwright and puppet master. Most of his dialogue rings true, even when Cutsinger resorts to expository backfill; and he gives his people distinctive voices and crucial things to do, all in as challenging a *setting* as he could devise, without importing stegosaurs and pterodactyls — once, at least, the reader gets past the fact that the Silurian 'looks like a cross between a gravel pit and a stagnant pond'.

However, 'The Real World', despite its flashbacks, takes place mostly in the real world to which Ivan Kelly has returned after his Silurian sojourn, to wit, Los Angeles and the Hollywood hills. Never mind that Ivan cannot be sure if he has returned to the precise world he left or to a one-off, or a quadrillion-off, replica of that world, in which, at least, his brother and his niece seem unchanged ... except that Michelle has grown from a cute monkey-faced girl to an exemplary near-woman. Whom, he reiterates to himself, he will love '[w]hether it's really you or not'.

And then, because brother Don has an unavoidable invitation Ivan plunges from the comforts of this domestic scene into the absurd quasi-reality of a Hollywood party, complete with 'gorgeous chattering people ... intent upon displaying themselves'. I haven't read a more acutely shown and more guiltily relished party scene since my last look at *The Great Gatsby*. Here, Steven's discomfort and cynicism stand out, but so do his humour, his humane regard for his protagonist, and his refusal to treat the busty starlets and wannabe moguls as absolute caricatures of themselves. Sure, they don't know beans about pedology (the study of soil, not 'the nature and development of children'), but who among even us smart non-Hollywood types does?

Eventually, after Don goes off to 'schmooze with' someone else, Ivan meets John Rubis, a rotund mogul sort, who asks Ivan his 'claim to celebrity'. Ivan, in a devil-may-care mood, announces that he was 'one of the first people to travel through time'. Rubis assumes he has come west to hype his life story for a movie producer and asks him his angle, especially since 'Trillobites [note the

spelling] never did catch on with the public'. Rubis believes that only dinosaurs can lift a time-travel tale to profitability. Playfully, Ivan tries to pitch a more complex idea to this friendly bottom feeder, the notion that a traveller between multiple Earths returns to what may or may not be 'his own present-day Earth'. This character then seeks to determine if it is or isn't on the basis of its specific details. Do they gibe with his memory of the Earth he left or do they not?

Rubis interrupts Ivan to say he gets it and predictably concludes, 'But I still think it needs dinosaurs.'

After the party (whose flamboyant essence I have not even begun to gloss here), Don drives Ivan home in his luxury automobile. Their talk touches on the party, but also on what it means to do authentic, that is to say, meaningful, work. Tellingly, Steven gives Don as a younger man a job that Steven himself held when he lived in Texas in the 1970s to the early 1980s, that of writing resolutions for the state legislature. Don relates to Ivan his specific take on this exasperating time:

'... I was the anonymous flunky who unlimbered the "whereases" and the "be-it-resolveds". Every now and then, I wrote about forgotten black heroes of the Texas Revolution, forgotten women aviators of World War Two — something, anyway, that meant something. But, of course, in these resolutions, everything was equally important ... people's fiftieth wedding anniversaries, high-school football teams, rattlesnake roundups. Finally, I was assigned to write a resolution designating, I kid you not, Texas Bottled Water Day.' (Vol. 2, p. 58)

Don objected to this assignment and his boss took the first available opportunity to fire him. Don tells Ivan that in the midst of this often galling drudgery, he 'lived for those few brief moments when the work really meant something'. As he drives his fancy car, his face evanescently reflects 'some memory of happiness'.

Even with its acidulously satirical scenes, 'The Real World' manifests as the real deal. Some of the satire may come a tad too easily ... but not much, so hot does Steven's self-critical intelligence burn. And the ending, although not even close to the standard wrap-up of a death or a wedding, has a stunning aptness and so a gasp-provoking impact. In a just world, an Earth catawampus to the Earth we live on, 'The Real World' would have elicited huzzas, won awards, spawned imitators, and turned up in *The Year's Best Short Stories*, not solely in SF anthologies.

Frankly, I cannot adequately detail the pleasure that this many-faceted Uteyarn — Steven's own wry coinage — delivers, but to know it for yourself, you need only read it. And then read it again. You will then have the sense that pellucid prose, not hackneyed boilerplate or angry vituperation, has revealed that happiness stems not from a smoothly cornering automobile, say, but from real, i.e., meaningful, accomplishment. This news may not strike us as world-shattering, but in this story, in this setting, it feels mighty like a hard-won epiphany.

In his last telephone call to us, a call to disclose his illness (and, I understand, he made several such calls), Steven

alleged in that bemused, fog-touched voice of his that he was okay with what was happening — the diagnosis and the prognosis alike — and that he was ready. I didn't read this as surrender to a terminal ailment or even as an admission that he had one, but simply as a courtesy call, his way of telling Jeri and me that we had a right to know that he might not be able to stay in touch as often as he liked ... until, that is, he got better.

But Steven never said anything about getting better. I conjured those words, put them into Steven's mouth, and then assumed that he had implied them, even if he had not spoken them. The news of his death on 12 January 2013 stunned me, for I had denied its possibility — mentally, if not aloud — during his last call, and I dropped into denial again after getting word of his final coma and his mortal release from it. I stayed in quasi-denial for at least three months.

On some basic level, I did not emerge from that state until a hardcover copy of *Invisible Kingdoms* arrived at our post office one morning. I carried it home and sat down to look it over. After examining the cover painting, the epigraphs from George Santayana and the Talmud, the contents page, and perusing Barry Malzberg's introduction, 'Silurian Darkness', I turned, almost by chance, to the dedication page:

for

Michael and Jeri Bishop

That did it. I wanted to telephone Steven. I wanted to thank him. I wanted to hear his self-effacing voice again. A blubbing gasp dragged me straight out of denial into a grief as biting as vinegar.

I resolved to read *The 400-Million-Year Itch* again, to read *Invisible Kingdoms* as soon as possible, and to take notes. It wouldn't be enough, it isn't enough, but I could not in any way ignore or defer this charge. And so, for better or worse, this knockabout essay stands as my eulogy to the person and my salute to his work, the writing of hard, hopeful, idiosyncratic stories.

Steven was not at all religious, but he had a quirky sense of the sacred and fed his spirit in a host of unorthodox ways, including courtesy to others and writing as well as he could. He got better as he got older, and his Silurian stories, singly and together, testify to a talent nearly fulfilled and a legacy extended. That we have lost him at the height of his yet increasing powers stings like ... well, what? How about a swarm of prehistoric sea scorpions?

The personal hurt persists, but so, too, does my respect for the quietly courageous life that Steven forged and the good, if difficult, work that he did in spite of his trials and setbacks. If he finally rests, he deserves to. But I regret that I cannot tell him that face to face. I would say, 'Wheeler in "Cloud by van Gogh" never captures in paint that essence of cloud she struggles to catch, but you, by noting her aspiration and grit, succeed for her in these tales.' Or maybe I'd just put on a spookily moody Billie Holliday ballad and lift with him a toast to the sunset.

Two addenda:

First, Russell B. Farr and Ticonderoga Publications of Australia deserve praise for championing Steven's work, not only by publishing his initial gathering of short stories, *Ghost Seas*, but also for seeing both volumes of his *Silurian Tales* into print. By so doing, they have preserved a worthy segment of Steven's exceptional canon.

Second, in fairness to Barry N. Malzberg, I must quote the last brief paragraph of 'Silurian Darkness', because his introduction — and I may have led the reader to suppose otherwise — clearly notes and duly lauds Steven's abilities. In fact, earlier in his piece he concedes to Steven 'wit, style, cunning, terrifying knowledge of the Saurian Period and the kind of savagery intrinsic to the good writer'. Further, when he agreed to write his introduction, he had no notion that Steven would die before Volume 2 appeared or that his words would thus 'take on a funerary aspect', with 'some inferred necessity to sum a career which at that time seemed far from complete'.

Barry does his best to fulfil these requirements, and he reaches not unreasonable conclusions about his subject's underlying attitudes toward his writing life. I don't agree with the conclusions, but I do *not* think them foolish or unkindly arrived at. Please, then, read Barry's affecting words:

I wrote James Sallis about a decade ago 'I can see my own career as nothing so much as a 35 year affliction.' Without undue projection I hope and with all the charity I can summon I suspect that Utley felt similarly. I will never know. I cannot claim to know. I never heard his voice, you see. (Vol. 2, p. 16)

## Contents of Steven Utley's *Silurian Tales* along with their places and dates of original publication

***The 400-Million-Year Itch: Silurian Tales, Vol. 1*  
by Steven Utley (Greenwood, Western Australia:  
Ticonderoga Publications, 2013)**

'Introduction' by Gardner Dozois

- 1 'All of Creation' (ss), *Cosmos Magazine Online* (Jan. 2008)
- 2 'The Woman under the World' (ss), *Asimov's* (Jul. 2008)
- 3 'Walking in Circles' (ss), *Asimov's* (Jan. 2002)
- 4 'Beyond the Sea' (ss), *Revolution SF* website (Aug. 2002)
- 5 'The Gift Horse' (ss), previously unpublished
- 6 'Promised Land' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Jul. 2005)
- 7 'The Age of Mud and Slime' (ss), *Asimov's* (Mar. 1996)
- 8 'The Wind over the World' (nv), *Asimov's* (Oct.–Nov. 1996)
- 9 'The Tortoise Grows Elate' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (May–Apr. 2010)

- 10 'Cloud by Van Gogh' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Dec. 2000)
- 11 'Half a Loaf' (ss), *Asimov's* (Jan. 2001)
- 12 'Chaos and the Gods' (ss), *Revolution SF* website (Aug. 2003)
- 13 'Foodstuff' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Feb. 2002)
- 14 'Chain of Life' (nv), *Asimov's* (Oct.–Nov. 2000)
- 15 'Exile' (ss), *Asimov's* (Jan. 2003)
- 16 'The End in Eden' (ss), *Analog* (Oct. 2012) — latest published
- 17 'Lost Places of the Earth' (ss), *We Think, Therefore We Are*, edited by Peter Crowther, intro. by Paul McAuley (Daw Books, 2009)
- 18 'A Silurian Tale' (ss), *Asimov's* (May 1996)
- 19 'The 400-Million-Year Itch' (nv), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Apr. 2008).

***Invisible Kingdoms: Silurian Tales, Vol. 2*  
by Steven Utley (Greenwood, Western Australia:  
Ticonderoga Publications, 2013)**

'Silurian Darkness' by Barry Malzberg

- 1 'Invisible Kingdoms' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Feb. 2004)
- 2 'The Real World' (nv), *Sci Fiction* website (30 Aug. 2000)
- 3 'Babel' (ss), *Analog* (Mar. 2004)
- 4 'Another Continuum Heard From' (ss), *Revolution SF* website (Apr. 2004)
- 5 'Variant' (ss), *Postscripts 15* (PS Publishing, 2008)
- 6 'The World within the World' (ss), *Asimov's* (Jul. 2008)
- 7 'The Despoblado' (nv), *Sci Fiction* website (22 Nov. 2000)
- 8 'The Wave-Function Collapse' (ss), *Asimov's* (Mar. 2005)
- 9 'Treading the Maze' (ss), *Asimov's* (Feb. 2002)
- 10 'Diluvium' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (May 2006)
- 11 'Sidestep' (nv), previously unpublished
- 12 'Slug Hell' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Sep. 2008)
- 13 'There and Then' (nv), *Asimov's* (Nov. 1993) — earliest published
- 14 'Silv'ry Moon' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Oct.–Nov. 2005)
- 15 'The World Without' (ss), *Asimov's* (Jul. 2001)
- 16 'Five Miles from Pavement' (ss), *Sci Fiction* website (21 Mar. 2001)\*
- 17 'A Paleozoic Palimpsest' (ss), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Oct.–Nov. 2004)

\* The contents page of *Invisible Kingdoms* omits this story, which nonetheless starts on page 253 and concludes on page 266.

— Michael Bishop, October–November 2013  
Pine Mountain, Georgia



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# Michael Bishop

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## The Mockingmouse

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I asked [a biologist specializing in behavioral ecology] whether there could be mouse versions of the mockingbird — mockingmice — which mimic the songs of other animals ... After a pause, she said, ‘Maybe a mockingmouse, yes, that seems possible. But who knows?’

— Rob Dunn, ‘Singing Mice’, *Smithsonian* (May 2011), p. 22

In a California pine stand  
amid the needles and the bark mulch,  
a band of deermouse tenors,  
*Peromyscus* Pavorottis,  
piped their seductive night songs.  
There I knelt with my hand-  
held recorder to do the experiments  
I’d planned: a bacchanalia

of midnight eavesdropping  
on the ultrasonic love songs  
of a hidden rodent sex club—  
melodies strained like aural honey  
through the DNA strands of these  
petite Casanovas. I wanted their gland-  
driven serenades siphoned from the air  
and canned, saved for decipherment

so that every behavioral ecologist  
across our mouse-miked land might  
one day fathom the mysteries  
of *Peromyscus* mating cries and maybe  
understand the dumbstruck longings  
of the *human* heart. Sound-starved and  
libidinous for answers, I returned  
to our Monterey County lab to listen

to the lovelorn arias of tiny  
beasts not unlike me, in the grander  
cosmic scheme. Through my headphones,  
at speeds so slow they lowered  
the pitch of these rutting squeaks  
to the register of the late Johnny  
Cash at his most rum-belly and macho,  
I heard your singular solo, a four-note

theme in a wooing *basso profundo*  
that made you sound not like a mouse  
but a petulant humpback Romeo.  
I strained to comprehend, to lend  
to your succinct but sea-dunked carols  
a meaning that would pour Christmas on  
my soul and Revelation on the world.  
And the Spirit leapt upon me. Something

in your digitalized decrivals opened  
the doors of my ears and I had my Pentecost,  
if not my tuneful yuletide. You'd crooned,  
*'Have you no shame. You are no man.  
Go to the damned. Leave me alone.'*  
Thus mocked, I shut down shop and drove  
cross-continent home to play Carolina  
bluegrass on my plangent tongue-tied banjo.

— Michael Bishop



Paul Di Filippo sold his first story in 1977 and since then has seen some 35 books appear with his byline. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his partner of nearly 40 years, Deborah Newton; a calico cat named Penny Century; and a chocolate-coloured cocker spaniel named, with stunning unoriginality, Brownie.

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# Paul Di Filippo

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## Michael Bishop's fantasies

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First published as 'Michael Bishop', in Richard Bleiler (ed.), *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Contemporary Fantasy and Horror, Volume 1*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (Thomson/Gale), 2003, pp. 79–88.

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#### Fantasy publications

##### Novels

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*Unicorn Mountain* (New York, Arbor House, 1988; London, Grafton, 1989)  
*Count Geiger's Blues: A Comedy* (New York, Tor, 1992)  
*Brittle Innings* (New York, Bantam, 1994).

##### Short stories

*Blooded on Arachne* (Sauk City, Wisconsin, Arkham House, 1982)  
*One Winter in Eden* (Sauk City, Wisconsin, Arkham House, 1984)  
*Close Encounters with the Deity: Stories* (Atlanta, Georgia, Peachtree, 1986)  
*The Quickening* (Eugene, Oregon, Pulphouse, 1991)  
*At the City Limits of Fate* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Edgewood Press, 1996)  
*Blue Kansas Sky* (Urbana, Illinois, Golden Gryphon Press, 2000)  
*Brighten to Incandescence* (Urbana, Illinois, Golden Gryphon Press, 2003).

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*And Strange at Ecbatan the Trees: A Novel* (New York, Harper, 1976; as *Beneath the Shattered Moons*, New York, DAW, 1977)

*Stolen Faces* (New York, Harper, and London, Gollancz, 1977)

*A Little Knowledge* (Nucleus) (New York, Berkley, 1977)  
*Catacomb Years* (Nucleus) (New York, Berkley, 1979)  
*Transfigurations* (New York, Berkley, 1979; London, Gollancz, 1980)  
*Under Heaven's Bridge* (Nucleus), with Ian Watson (London, Gollancz, 1981; New York, Ace, 1982)  
*No Enemy But Time: A Novel* (New York, Pocket Books, and London, Gollancz, 1982)  
*Ancient of Days* (New York, Arbor House, 1985; London, Paladin, 1987)  
*The Secret Ascension, or, Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas* (New York, Tor, 1987; as *Philip K. Dick Is Dead*, London, Grafton, 1988)  
*Apartheid, Superstrings, and Mordecai Thubana* (novella) (Eugene, Oregon, Axolotl Press, 1989)

##### Short Stories

*Beneath the Shattered Moons*; and, *The White Otters of Childhood* (London, Sphere, 1978)

#### Other publications

##### Novels

*Would It Kill You to Smile?*, as by Philip Lawson (Michael Bishop and Paul Di Filippo) (Marietta, Georgia, Longstreet Press, 1998)  
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Utley) (London, PS Publishing, 2009)

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*Michael Bishop: A Preliminary Bibliography* by David Nee (Berkeley, California, Other Change of Hobbit, 1983)

### Manuscript collection

The Hargrett Collection, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.

### Essays

*A Reverie for Mister Ray* (London, PS Publishing, 2005)

Since his first short-story sale in 1970 ('Piñon Fall' in *Galaxy* magazine), Michael Bishop has revealed a questing spiritual intelligence uniquely concerned with moral conundrums. While his works are often full of both the widescreen spectacles associated with science fiction and the subtle frissons typical of more earthbound fantasy, his focus remains on the engagement of characters with ethical quandaries any reader might encounter in his or her daily life. Whether to succour a dying relative at some personal expense; how to earn an honest living while being true to one's muse; how best to establish essential communication among strangers forced to rely on each other for survival: these issues and others equally vital form the core of Bishop's concerns. And his prescription for success most often involves not derring-do or super-human efforts, but simply the maintenance of an honest, open heart and a charitable, brave soul.

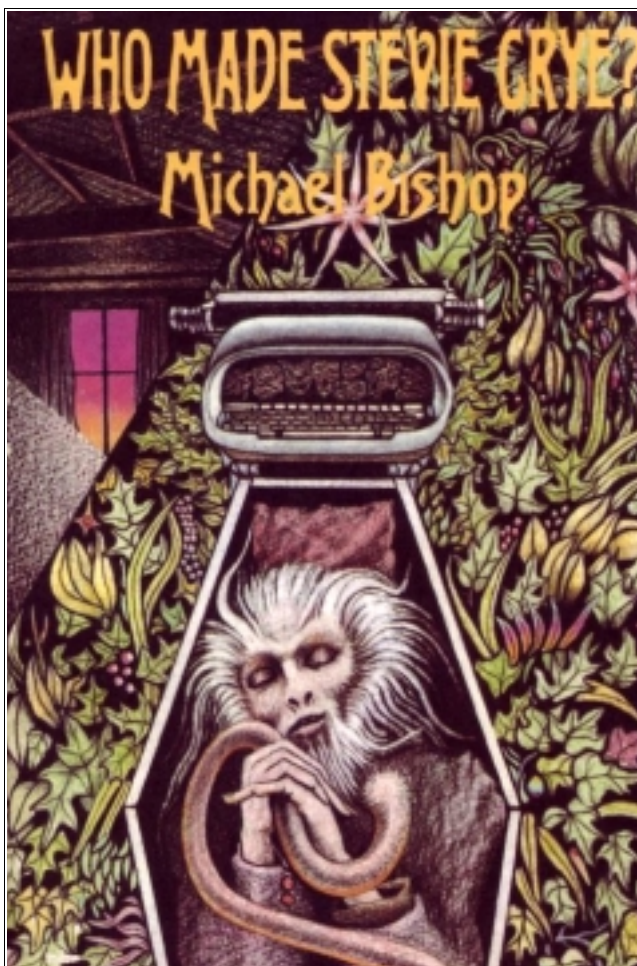
While only occasionally delving into explicitly religious themes, Bishop's personal Christian faith — wide enough to embrace references to Buddhism, Sufism, and other creeds — shines through in every tale. A talent capable of being decanted into many different moulds, genre and otherwise, Bishop's skills and vision translate from one medium to another without diminishment or concealment. Never content merely to repeat his past triumphs, he has steadfastly ventured into new territory with every book. This refusal to succumb to market pressures that demand from the contemporary fantasist a never-ending stream of wordy sequels set in a cod-Tolkien universe has perhaps resulted in a lower profile among fantasy readers than he might otherwise have achieved. But to the connoisseur, Bishop's fantasy novels and shorter pieces — which constitute about a third of his output — are cherished as examples of the best that modern fantasy has produced, ranking with the work of such peers as Jonathan Carroll, Terry Bisson, James Morrow, and Graham Joyce, authors with whom he shares a certain homegrown magical-realist touch.

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on 11 November 1945, to Maxine Matison Bishop and Lee Otis Bishop, the author experienced a peripetetic childhood due to his father's military service. (For the majority of her working life, Bishop's mother was a civilian employee of the federal government.) After a stint in Japan, his parents divorced, and Bishop lived with his mother in Kansas and, later, Oklahoma. Maxine's subsequent marriage to Charles Willis during the mid fifties left Bishop with a decision

regarding his last name, and he chose to retain the one he was most familiar with. In 1962 he spent his senior year of high school abroad in Spain — a pivotal experience — under the supervision of his biological father, who had been stationed there. Upon return to the United States, Bishop found his parents now living in Georgia and took the opportunity afforded by this new residence to attend the University of Georgia, matriculating with his MA in 1968. Having enrolled in the ROTC program as an undergraduate, Bishop entered the USAF and spent his four years enlistment teaching at the Air Force Academy Preparatory School. In 1969 he married Jeri Ellis Whitaker. They have two children, Christopher James and Stephanie, and two grandchildren by the latter. Upon moving to Pine Mountain, Georgia, in the early 1970s, Bishop held a number of jobs before devoting his energies to full-time writing. Since 1996 he has been Writer-in-Residence at La Grange College, Georgia.

Bishop's first eight novels from 1975 to 1982 established him as one of the leading science fiction writers of his generation. With an emphasis on the anthropological sciences, such books as *A Funeral for the Eyes of Fire* and *Transfigurations* probed the psychological workings of both humans and aliens and the many ambivalent ways they interfaced. Bishop's three linked novels (the closest he's ever come to a prolonged series) about a near-future Atlanta — *A Little Knowledge*, *Catacomb Years*, and *Under Heaven's Bridge* — revealed him to possess a flair for close-up socio-technological extrapolation, the sine qua non of science fiction writers. (As one small example, his nomination of high-tech rollerskates as a mode of urban transport exactly captured trends that later manifested outside his pages.) However, a distinct fondness for surreal effects and absurdist conceits — seen most clearly in his many short stories to be discussed later — seemed to foreshadow a wider ambition extending outside SF's borders.

Thus the appearance in 1984 of a full-fledged Gothic horror novel from Bishop came as little surprise. *Who Made Stevie Crye?* concerns one disturbing week in the life of Stevenson Crye, a young widow striving to support her two children, Ted and Marella, by freelance journalism. Bolstered by her friendship with a local doctor, Elsa Kensington, Stevie Crye seems on the verge of succeeding at her makeshift life in the wake of her husband's



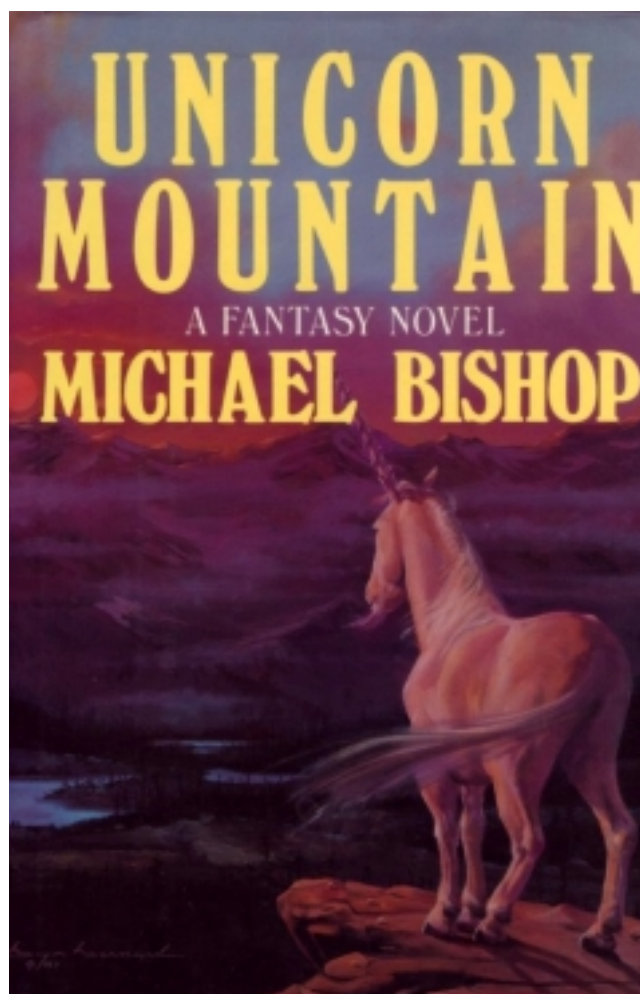
cancer-ridden demise. She has hopes for assembling her newspaper columns into a book, and her children are doing reasonably well without their father. True, Stevie's own unresolved issues with their dead Dad remain troubling. But for the most part, she meets life's daily demands capably and efficiently. Then her typewriter, upon which she relies for her very bread-and-butter, breaks. This simple catastrophe opens up the door to a malignant world.

Looking to effect a cheap repair, Stevie brings her machine into the shop of one Seaton Benecke, a youngish man with an unattractive air of occult nerdy obsessiveness. Seaton's uncanny tampering with her typewriter indeed restores it to functionality, but with a twist. The machine is now sentient, its autonomous workings hosting some kind of evil spirit. Back home, this demon begins to channel Stevie's deepest fears and neuroses onto the typewritten page, forcing her to confront issues she had been trying to repress. When the continuing attentions of would-be warlock Seaton and his dire monkey-familiar 'Crets are factored into the mix, Stevie finds her life unravelling. Eventually, the assistance of an African-American fortune teller, Sister Celestial, manages to tip the scales in Stevie's favor, and she drives off both Seaton and her own fears, recovering to live out 'the many, many happy days remaining to her in this life, all of which were of her own composition ...'

This surface synopsis seems to render Bishop's book into a simple Stephen King-style thriller, albeit much better written, and if only matters of plot and the array of fairly standard tropes were considered, such would

indeed be the case. But an added layer of metafictional complexity is added by the operations of the typewriter itself. The disturbing narratives the machine composes are slyly inserted into the main story itself without obvious bracketing, thus disconcerting the reader about the levels of reality involved. Soon, this unease and confusion extends to Stevie herself, who can no longer readily distinguish between dreams and waking. By the time Sister Celestial arrives with a script of events yet unborn that she has channelled into her typewriter — a script that makes explicit references to the very chapters headings we the readers are encountering — we are in a labyrinth where the role of creator and creation are hopelessly tangled. And the fact that the novel closes with the phrase 'T\*H\*E E\*N\*D' set in the distinctive font used by Stevie's typewriter offers the possibility that everything we have read is the mocking output of the malign machine. In this interpretation, the question posed by the novel's title has a very obvious yet repellant answer: Stevie has been sucked into the universe of her former servant machine, a tormenting Ellisonian deity which now mocks her with an ironic fairytale conclusion.

Bishop's next full-length fantasy outing, 1988's *Unicorn Mountain*, also features a woman struggling on her own, one betrayed by her mate much in the manner Stevie discovered herself to have been. (The average husband does not come off very well in Bishop's cosmic scheme.) But the venue has changed, from the deep South to the mountains of Colorado. (As expressed in his fiction,



Bishop's wary affection for the Georgia neighbourhood where he has long been resident makes him one of the genre's more intriguing regionalists.)

Manager of the Topsy Q ranch she won in divorce proceedings, Libby Quarrels must nonetheless contend with frequent intrusions from her ex, Gary. The latest such visit serves to link her fate with one of Gary's cousins, a gay man dying of AIDS in Atlanta. Bo Gavin is soon brought from Atlanta to spend his last days on the Topsy Q, much to the initial annoyance of Libby's hired hand, Sam Coldpony, a Native-American who is having his own family problems with his estranged daughter, Paisley. The dynamics among the protagonists meander through a complicated map of disgust and affection, bravery and cowardice, remorse and affirmation.

Complicating and eventually organising the whole human soap opera is the presence of living unicorns. Dubbed 'kar'tajans' after a Sanskrit word meaning 'lord of the desert', the unicorns prove to be crossing back and forth from a parallel world, a world whose lineaments are also apprehended through a hexed television at the ranch. The unicorns, however, are suffering from a disease remarkably similar to human AIDS, and only the intervention of Libby and her circle of concerned friends can save them.

Unicorn Mountain suffers in retrospect from the earnestness of its admittedly brave and venturesome topicality, and its somewhat politically correct assortment of characters. If, as Samuel Delany maintains, his own novel *Flight from Nevèryon* was the first genre work to deal with AIDS, then Bishop certainly was not far behind. But the novel's protracted arguments and discussions about gayness and disease now seem quaint and overly demure (although one aspect of Bishop's speculations — nationally televised advertisements for condoms — still remains fresh). Moreover, Bishop's fondness for the well-turned, clever phrase — a habit that serves him well in descriptive passages — betrays him here in the arena of dialogue. Much of the banter among Libby and her friends is overly arch, fey words that would never be actually spoken, especially during heated emotional moments. Consider Bo's awkward and offputting death-bed phone conversation with his mother, for instance.

The best thing about this overlong book are the unicorns. Their inviolable magic — 'they suffer ... not only to lift up their own kind but those of us lucky enough to witness their suffering' — remains an irreducible nugget of fantasy gold at the heart of this book.

With 1992's *Count Geiger Blues*, Bishop exhibited a return to top-notch form, producing his most assured novel-length fantasy to this date. This book is light on its feet and fast-paced, both funny and touching, embodying in captivating incidents and persons important questions about the yin-yang balance between high and low cultures.

The city of Salonika in the southern state of Oconee, bisected by the very mappable Chattahoochee River, is one of those enchanted never-neverlands that inexplicably touch our mortal realm, allowing the mundane to consort with the fantastic. Like John Crowley's *Blackberry Jambs* or James Blaylock's *California*, Salonika is a mix of the outrageous and the familiar. The metropolis

boasts Gaudi-style architecture, but also conventional newspapers, opera houses, professional sports teams and a company that is one of the top producers of superhero comic books in the USA. It is this last firm which will set the dominant motif of this novel, for Bishop is intent on examining the archetypal fantasies of revenge, altruism, elitism, and unnatural abilities that propel most caped avengers. And his choice of mortal-turned-reluctant-hero is the most unlikely one imaginable.

Xavier Thaxton is the fine-arts critic for the *Salonika Urbanite*. He disdains all pop culture as trash, filling his life only with the canonical works of Western art. His high-toned girlfriend, Bari Carlisle, is a fashion designer who consorts with celebrities galore. Only the presence of his nephew, Mick, whom Xavier is reluctantly hosting while Mick's parents are out of the country, strikes an odd note in his existence, for prickly Mick is a punkish teen who adores everything Xavier hates. Nonetheless, an uneasy equilibrium between man and boy allows Xavier to continue in his worn groove of aestheticism. But Xavier's sedate, genteel life is about to be upset.

Bathing once by accident in a radioactive pool curses him with 'Philistine Syndrome', whereby he is literally sickened unto death by exposure to Beethovens, Picassos, and the rest of his adored objets d'art. Only subsequent intake of bad TV and schlock novels can restore his health. Manfully, Xavier makes his comically tragic adjustments to even this horror, learning much about himself and the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture in the process. But then, halfway through the book, a second bath in the fateful spring turns him into a full-fledged superhero. How will Xavier employ his new powers? Unfortunately, he can think of little to do other than convince greasy-spoon joints to offer haute cuisine. A roundup of a stadium full of criminals and the exposure of a murderer represent the apex of his career. But when a final selfless act of sacrifice triggers a quick decline of his powers and health, Xavier makes his ultimate peace with the two halves of his personality.

Bishop here maintains a sprightly tone that assures enjoyable reading. His language has been streamlined into short chapters consonant with his themes, and his cast of characters, while coloured comic-book-bright, are fully fleshed as well. Like a cross between television's *Frasier* and the film *Mystery Men* (1999), this novel stands as an important predecessor to later comics-based novels by Michael Chabon and Tom De Haven. And in wringing significance from seemingly superficial pop-culture phenomena, it ranks with Stephen Dobyns's *The Wrestler's Cruel Study* (1993).

In his ultimate fantasy outing as of this writing, Bishop hits a home run. With echoes of Eudora Welty, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner, as well as the cinematic drolleries of the Coen Brothers, 1994's *Brittle Innings* is a leisurely paced summer idyll not bereft of suspense, infused with the alternating languorous and frenetic rhythms of baseball, the sport which informs its every sentence.

A promising high school ballplayer in rural Oklahoma during the early years of World War II, seventeen-year-old Danny Boles is recruited by team-owner Jordan





McKissic — Mister JayMac — for McKissic's Georgia farm team, the Highbridge Hellbenders. After making his way east, not without traumatic difficulties that literally render him speechless, Danny arrives in the town of Highbridge to plunge into a milieu unlike anything his sheltered life has previously prepared him for. In the McKissic lodging house (whose lines evoke a 'fairy-tale castle'), Danny is introduced to an assorted passel of idiosyncratic players, wives, nieces, crew, and townspeople. Surely the most dramatic figure is Jumbo Henry Clerval, an enormous ugly shambling grotesque who can wallop a baseball with a tremendous force that makes him the most valuable member of the Hellbenders.

Assigned to room with Henry, Danny quickly finds himself intrigued by the enigma of Jumbo. He discovers the strange man to be a pacifist loner possessed of a quick wit and a large if stilted vocabulary. Throughout the single season of ballplaying that the book spans, Danny and Henry become friends. Learning Henry's secret origin — the man is the one-and-only immortal monster created by Dr Victor Frankenstein — Danny becomes complicit in his patchwork friend's quest to refine his artificial soul and survive with some nobility among those who disdain him.

Meanwhile, the lovingly detailed series of dusty games that culminates in a pennant battle, each contest individualised into a pithy Iliad, is laid out before us, with Danny's triumphs and failures shaping him into maturity. He falls in love with Phoebe Pharram, JayMac's niece; he encounters the prevalent racism of the era; he learns of the fate of his long-absent father; and he navigates the

webwork of emotions among his team mates with some skill. But right upon the verge of individual success, Danny finds his future wrenched onto a cataclysmic track, one that embroils Jumbo Henry Clerval as well.

Bishop's sure hand amasses a wealth of period details here — without any dreaded infodumps — that succeed in recreating a vanished decade down to the stitching on the very baseballs. Narrated in the first person by Danny, this book unfalteringly captures the young man's unique voice, a mix of naivete and hard-earned wisdom. The embedded memoirs of Jumbo Clerval offer an enthralling mini-epic of the monster's post-Shelley career. And a delicious ambiguity is maintained: is Clerval truly what he claims to be, or simply a deluded giant born of woman like everyone else, who has fabricated this interesting history to ennoble himself?

But even given the verity of Clerval's past, we need to ask if this volume is even strictly a fantasy. Or should it be adjudged among Bishop's SF excursions? After all, Shelley's inspirational novel is rightly revered as the grandmother of modern science fiction, by critics such as Brian Aldiss and others. It would seem that the inclusion of the titular monster here would make *Brittle Innings* automatically part of the SF canon. Yet just as Bishop's *The Secret Ascension* is commonly considered pure science fiction, despite its opening with the ghost of Philip K. Dick, since its whole tone is rigorously speculative, so too does the atmosphere and treatment in *Brittle Innings* determine its reception and placement in Bishop's oeuvre. Told as an extended flashback from Danny's 1991 perspective, the tale is drenched in a luminous nostalgia for what amounts to a Golden Age (despite the period's acknowledged defects), a 'once upon a time' venue where mythic beings — not only Jumbo, but the other players as well — still walked the earth. This evocation of a legendary prelapsarian past is one of fantasy's prime functions, placing this novel squarely in the fantasy camp.

These four books, then, constitute a broad and heterogeneous claim staked by Bishop and testifying to his mastery of the fantasy mode at novel length.

(Readers who sample Bishop's mystery novels will be rewarded, but not by any overtly unreal elements. However, the ventriloquist's dummy in *Would It Kill You to Smile?* is tangential to the long tradition of possessed puppets, and resonant parallels to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* [1900] inform *Muskrat Courage*.)

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Acknowledged as one of the genre's finest and most meticulous short-story writers, Bishop boasts six collections to date that function as treasure troves of both science fiction and fantasy. (A seventh lives up to its title, *Emphatically Not SF, Almost*, by hosting only mainstream tales.)

The first book, *Blooded on Arachne*, concentrates on the kind of baroque SF narratives that launched his career, such as 'The White Otters of Childhood' and 'Cathadonian Odyssey'. But Bishop's debut piece, 'Piñon Fall', generates a pleasant confusion as to the identity of its winged visitor to a desert town. Is the



# ONE WINTER IN EDEN

Michael Bishop



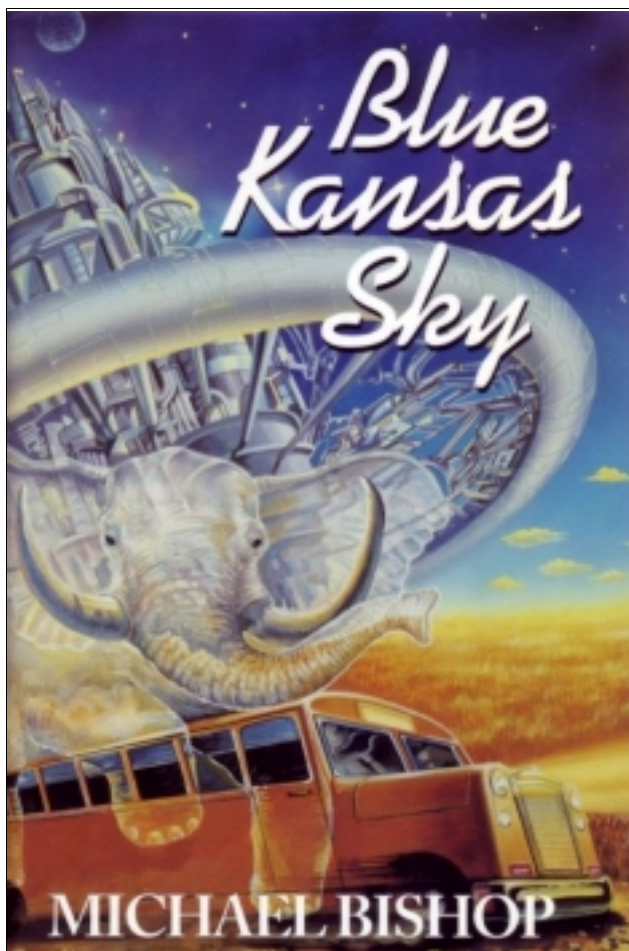
creature an ET, or perhaps a celestial angel or earth spirit of our globe? In any case, the transformative powers of the creature and its peers clearly exceed all natural laws. 'On the Street of the Serpents', with its mix of autobiography and a kind of mental time travel, evokes the psychodramas of J. G. Ballard rather than the Chronic Argonaut of H. G. Wells. Finally, the Philip K. Dick homage, 'Rogue Tomato', postulating a sentient tomato with the mass of a planet, clearly crosses the line from speculation to fabulation.

*One Winter in Eden*, where in a perceptive introduction Thomas Disch labels Bishop a 'Southern Gothic' artist, features a greater proportion of fantasy. The title story concerns a long-suffering school teacher who just happens to be a dragon in disguise. Here we see for the first time at length Bishop's close observation of children and matters of pedagogy. The 'grither' is a malevolent Seussian creature conjured unwisely in 'Seasons of Belief', a story that might have flowed from the pen of Harlan Ellison or Robert Bloch. 'Collaborating' shares a kinship with Robert Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky* (1963) and Brian Aldiss's *Brothers of the Head* (1977), serving up a touching autobiography of a two-headed man. Even when Bishop is working in ostensibly mimetic fashion, as in 'The Yukio Mishima Cultural Association of Kudzu Valley, Georgia' (and its sequel, 'At the City Limits of Fate'), his innate quirky perception of existences torques events and characters ninety degrees from consensus reality. Surely a story that imagines a hick-town book discussion group that fixates on the work of the titular Japanese right-wing novelist to the point of following

their hero into mass suicide is not something John Updike, say, would conceive of. But the pivotal, invaluable item here is 'The Quickening', which earned Bishop a Nebula Award. The world's inhabitants are shaken up by a mysterious deific power as in a snow globe, and relocated randomly around the planet. Civilisation as we know it is effectively undone, and out of the bloody ruins a new sociocultural gestalt arises. In only 30 pages, this compressed saga does more than many a post-apocalyptic novel, and is worthy of a Borges or Barthelme.

*Close Encounters with the Deity*, with its running emphasis on theological mysteries, begins to reveal a discernible shift in manner and approach from previous volumes. Gone are the early quasi-space operas, and a decidedly more surreal and literary bent is evident. A story such as 'A Spy in the Domain of Arnheim', set in a Kafkaesque cosmos that operates on the counterintuitive principles discerned in Magritte's paintings, or one such as 'Storming the Bijou, Mon Amour', which plants its hapless protagonists in an absurdist world of Hollywood construction, would have been beyond the scope of the younger Bishop. 'The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis', which postulates a new alien Messiah in the form of a giant mantis and which is on its surface akin to prior such interstellar excursions, exhibits a level of formalistic innovation lacking in earlier works. Even a relatively throwaway story such as 'Scrimptalon's Test', in which the traditional 'deal with the devil' is subverted by mak-





ing the mortal bargainer a sentient machine, shows Bishop's desire to bust wide apart the confines of genre conventions. And the open-ended enigmas of 'Alien Graffiti' hold more interest than neatly wrapped older stories.

Kafka re-emerges as an intermittent influence on the fully mature Bishop found in the stories collected in *At the City Limits of Fate*. The hectoring pedantic narrator of '000-00-0000' possesses that mad bureaucratic tone evoked so well by *The Trial* (1925). 'Snapshots from the Butterfly Plague' crafts Hitchcockian unease from the unnatural behaviour of butterflies. And the divine dystopia of 'God's Hour', wherein God himself runs the top-ranked TV show in a brave new world, is unsurpassed for its portrait in only a few pages of a well-meaning hell devoid of free will. But Bishop has not lost his lighter touch, as exhibited in 'In the Memory Room', where a dutiful embalmer takes direction from fussy ghosts. Nor does he neglect the miracles buried in the quotidian, as we can see in 'Allegra's Hand', which tracks the sad life of a schoolchild suffering from a strange affliction.

*Blue Kansas Sky* — a collection of four novellas and a keen-witted introduction by James Morrow that places Bishop squarely in the tradition of 'moral fiction' formulated by the novelist John Gardner — brings us only one outright fantasy, the title story. (The other three pieces are finely wrought hardcore science fiction, proving Bishop can still work well in the mode wherein he made

his debut.) Set in the 1950s, this saga of the youth and maturation of one Sonny Peacock, under the tutelage of his roisterous uncle Rory and his widowed mother Jenniel, in the small town of Van Luna, Kansas, proves to be a kind of prairie *Great Expectations* (1861). Richly imagined and verisimilitudinous, thanks to Bishop's familiarity with the region, this story, like Mark Helprin's *Refiner's Fire* (1977), qualifies as fantasy mainly by its tall-tale, larger-than-life atmosphere, with Rory Peacock acting as a kind of Pecos Bill figure. (Although there is one twister-riding scene that crosses into pure magical realism.)

Bishop's newest collection, *Brighten to Incandescence*, is perhaps his most heterogeneous to date, representing a nice spectrum of his talents. An accomplished pastiche of R. A. Lafferty ('Of Crystalline Labyrinths and the New Creation') consorts with two ghost stories almost M. R. Jamesian in nature ('A Tapestry of Little Murders' and 'The Tigers of Hysteria Feed Only on Themselves'). Humour and satire are not absent, as witnessed by the talking-animal fable of 'O Happy Day' and the spectacle of chihuahua-racing as a sport in 'Chihuahua Flats'. A demonic romance reminiscent of the work of Dan Simmons is presented in 'Thirteen Lies About Hummingbirds'. Shades of *Brittle Innings* recur in a literal manner, as the ghost of Mary Shelley makes an appearance in 'The Unexpected Visit of a Reanimated Englishwoman'. And an alternate life of Jesus is imagined in 'Sequel on Skorprios'.

Finally, in discussing his shorter works, it would be a shame not to mention Bishop's flair as a poet. His latest collection, *Time Pieces*, boasts one work, 'In the Lilliputian Asylum', that surely merits recognition as a perfect embodiment of the fantastic within the poetic. Narrated by a resident of Lilliput forsaken by the salvific Gulliver, this long ballad is both evocative of a strange world and humanly affecting as well.

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Whether dealing with tormented children right in his own hometown, or archetypal movie-viewers trapped in a universe that has dwindled to a single silver screen; with single mothers trying to conquer their fears, or unicorns dying of the plague; with a man seeking love in all the wrong places, or a dying Saviour on the cross, Michael Bishop exhibits an identical level of compassion and empathy, poured into handsomely wrought vessels of narrative.

In *Brittle Innings*, a dead ballplayer who has expired while giving his all in a game is eulogised thusly: 'He wasn't no showboat. He had this easy stillness that spoke straight through everybody else's jive and moonshine.' Such a capsule description applies admirably to both Michael Bishop the writer and his quietly magnificent fantasies.

— Paul Di Filippo, 2003

# Lists! lists!

Jennifer Bryce

## The three best of everything for 2013

Last year I sent Bruce an annotated list of *everything* I had read, viewed or listened to (as a paying member of an audience) in 2012. Such things can be rather tedious. This year I've gone to almost the opposite extreme and have tried to pick out the best three books, films, stage-shows/theatre, and concerts. It has been extremely difficult to make this selection and on another occasion the list might be different. Here we go.

### The three 'best' books I read

**Patrick White: *Happy Valley***

This first novel of Patrick White was republished recently as a Text Classic. It was written when White was living in England but has a strong Australian flavour as the action is contained in a valley up on the Monaro High Plains, in a small country town where everyone knows what is going on. I was entranced, even though the reading is sometimes heavy going; we jump from one character's point of view to another's and (typical of White) are carried off into their rather obscure thought processes. I love the way that White writes rather cruelly of middle-aged women. All the characters in this novel are very strong and you remember them some time after reading it. He knows so well what goes on in upper middle class drawing rooms; referring to Sidney Furlow's 'curriculum' at finishing school we are told, 'Miss Cortine prepared her girls for life with a course of tea-pouring and polite adultery' (p. 99). Mr Belper's wife was 'a plaintive yawn' (p. 125).

At the very opening, a hawk is hovering over happy valley — a clever device. The reader is an observer, like the hawk.

**Toni Jordan: *Nine Days***

I bought this book with a Christmas gift voucher as I knew that Toni Jordan is an award-winning local writer. Indeed, she writes well. The structure is simple and brilliant: nine significant days of family members spread over a period from pre World War II to the present. Each chapter focuses on a family member and we jump from generation to generation — no need for chronology, the holding point is a house in Rowena Parade Richmond, inhabited by some member of the family throughout the story. It seems that the catalyst for this novel was a photograph of a woman desperately trying to kiss goodbye her sweetheart on a crowded World War II troop

train. At the end of the story we understand the significance of this.

The first chronological jump confused me for a few moments — being taken from Kip, a boy in working class Richmond in 1939, to Stanzi, an overweight psychotherapist — but I ultimately got it and from then on the novel sings. I do admire the neat structure and I love opportunities to interpret and get inside the recent past of Melbourne.

**Zelda Fitzgerald: *Save Me the Waltz***

This is the only novel written by Zelda, Scott Fitzgerald's wife. I was drawn to it after reading Therese Anne Fowler's: *A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald*, which is a kind of fictionalised biography. This novel seems to be largely autobiographical, but ventures into what might have happened, or what Zelda would prefer to have happened. The marriage becomes strained when the couple are living in Paris, but it is brought together by the Zelda character's dancing, which, in the novel, the husband, tolerates. According to the biography, Scott did not allow Zelda to join a professional ballet troupe.

In the novel the husband is an artist, not a writer. At the end of the novel the family is happily together in the town where the Zelda character (with the rather extraordinary name of Alabama) grew up.

The novel was written when Zelda was separated from Scott and spending a lot of time in mental hospitals. They would never be reunited. Scott would die young and she would suffer a horrific death trapped in a fire when she was incarcerated in a mental hospital in the late 1940s.

A lot of the writing is overblown. Every sentence seems to be full of metaphors. But some are good. I liked an early description of Alabama's father: 'Judge Beggs lay on his stern iron bed' (p. 16). A woman in a bar: 'her long legs struck forcefully forward as if she pressed on the accelerator of the universe' (p. 100) and in the same bar, Miss Douglas 'was so much the essence of black chic that she was nothing but a dark aroma'.

There is a lot of description of the hard slog that is the training of a ballet dancer. Behind the scenes we see and smell the filth and witness the poverty of many of the young French dancers at the time. We can share the pain of Alabama's constant and determined practice. Zelda Fitzgerald had been there, but sadly, she would not be allowed the opportunity to achieve the accolades that Alabama does and she would not have the contented reunion with her family that she seems to have craved.



## The three 'best' films I saw

### *Samsara*

This film was directed by Ron Fricke, who I think had a hand in the *Qatsi* trilogy, viewed last year. It has no dialogue — it's open for you, the viewer, to interpret, as you are taken with utterly superb cinematography through all kinds of experiences filmed in 25 countries. The film took four years to make.

'Samsara' is apparently Sanskrit for 'the ever-turning wheel of life' — and my take on the movie was that it confronted me with the intense beauty and the utter horror that makes up our world. We saw kids searching rubbish dumps — we saw the immense piles of waste discarded by our material lifestyle. There was much made of automation — factory workers, military marching North Korean style, the precision of Thai dancing, traffic on a complex looping freeway. We were shown an unbelievable number of men praying in a mosque — I felt that there must be a million there, all in white, all kneeling when directed. We then went to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and looked over the shoulders of devoted men. (I noted that with Christianity we were shown the beauty of buildings, but not the people.) And then the horrific mechanical slaughter of white chickens — thousands of them. These experiences were juxtaposed with the beauty of places like Petra.

Some scenes were so confronting I had to force myself to watch them, while others were intensely beautiful; the world, I guess.

### *Amour*

One reason I was attracted to this film is that it stars two of my favourite actors from the sixties: Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva. Now they play a couple in their eighties, living in a comfortable apartment in Paris. They are retired music teachers — must have been very successful to have an apartment like that. No matter. The wife suffers a stroke and, in keeping with her wishes, her husband cares for her at home. We, the audience, are confined to the home from the moment she is brought back there from hospital in a wheel chair, just like Trintignant, the husband, who is cloistered there as her carer. He goes out once to attend a friend's funeral. My interpretation is that while he is out, the wife tries to commit suicide by throwing herself out a window, but fails. A couple of reviews I've read don't mention this — maybe I read too much into it — but why was she slumped on the floor near an open window when he returned? Her condition worsens — a second stroke — and she is completely helpless. Professional carers are needed. All she can do is to call out in a haunting animal-like way. The husband has the courage to suffocate her with a pillow. It is clearly an act of love.

### *Blue Jasmine*

This Woody Allen movie revolves around Cate Blanchett, and she is magnificent. She plays a deluded woman who seems to survive on alcohol and prescription drugs. Deluded because she came from a poor childhood —

she was adopted — and, presumably thanks to her good looks, became a Manhattan socialite. She seems to believe that this has earned her a place in a world where you always travel first class and have servants to pick up after you. When that life falls through and she bitterly dubs in her cheating husband (cheating in money and relationships) to the FBI, she is utterly bereft and finds it almost impossible to cope with moving into her sister's (by adoption) working class place in San Francisco. But it is all she has. She didn't finish college, so she seems to have nothing with which to rebuild her life. So she reinvents herself again as an interior decorator and almost manages to become engaged to an eligible young man with political aspirations. But, rather implausibly, as the couple contemplate diamond rings in a jewellery shop window, the sister's former partner turns up, angry because Jasmine's former husband cheated him out of the takings from a huge lottery win. All is exposed. The engagement is off. And Jasmine is thrown back to her hopeless, bereft state, while her less-demanding sister frolics with her own new true-love.

Jasmine is blue — depressed irretrievably throughout, unable to recognise or find her genuine self. Most of Woody Allen's films have a tune that he obviously loves, shimmering in the background. In this case it is *Blue Moon* and the excuse for it is that it was playing when Jasmine's Manhattan husband proposed. Woody Allen himself doesn't seem to appear in this film (unless it is very unobtrusively in a crowd scene) but there is a bespectacled dentist who takes a shine to Jasmine in a clumsy Woody Allenish way.

## The three 'best' concerts I attended

### **Barry Humphries, Meow Meow and the Australian Chamber Orchestra: *Music of Berlin***

Barry Humphries has been passionate about the music of the Weimar Republic ever since finding some sheet music in Melbourne when he was a schoolboy. We are reminded that Melbourne had the biggest population of Jewish refugees from Nazism outside Israel. The concert was a perfect bringing together of tremendous talent: Barry Humphries, Meow Meow, the perfect cabaret singer, the musicianship of Richard Tognetti and the Australian Chamber Orchestra, including great piano playing from Ben Martin.

The only composers I'd heard of were Hindemith (the evening started with the ACO playing *Kammermusik* Number 1), Kurt Weill, Krenek, and possibly Grosz. The others, including Eisler, Hollander, Schiffler, Jezek, and Spollansky were new to me — this largely because of the Nazi suppression of their work — they were forced into obscurity, some escaping to hackwork in Hollywood. Underlying the bold eroticism of the music seemed to be a cynicism and sense of impending doom — heightened, I suppose, because we know what happened.

Humphries makes us far more aware of Melbourne's importance as a centre for this migration of Jewish culture. He alluded to people I'd just accepted as a part of Melbourne when I was a child; for example, Hans and



Alice Meyer — I attended their ballroom dancing class. It made me wonder whether Barry Humphries got some of his ideas from close observation of Hans Meyer. I can now see similarities — his stance, the way he smoked, his monocle ...

#### **Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM): Shostakovich Quartets**

What a treat. The Brodsky Quartet had a short residency at the Australian National Academy of Music, and in this concert ANAM students performed Shostakovich quartets as an outcome of the quartet's tutelage. Quartet number seven was played by three students and guest Michelle Wood. The pining, sensual fifth quartet was played entirely by the Brodsky, and number twelve was played by three students and led by the first violinist of the Brodsky (Daniel Rowland).

The most obvious thing one notices is that the Brodsky Quartet favour standing to perform, and all three quartets were played with the violinists and violists standing and the 'cellist seated on a platform. The standing certainly made one feel as though the players were living the music, and that it gave them greater freedom to play expressively.

It was an evening of superb music-making, each quartet contrasting in subtle ways. The twelfth (which I don't recall having ever heard before) had elements that reminded me of Bartok's string quartets, although the program notes (written by Cassidy) say that it is Shostakovich's most Beethovenian.

#### **Melbourne Symphony Orchestra: Simone Young Conducts Mahler 5**

Why do concerts have to have titles these days? The Mahler was only half the program for this concert. What had led me to fork out at least \$80 for a ticket was a work by Brett Dean, *The Last Days of Socrates*. It is a poignant and compelling work that, by ingenious means, melds together the world of Ancient Greece and our contemporary world. It is sung in English (and although the words were provided, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Chorus enunciated them so well it wasn't necessary to read them) and 'modern' instruments (guitar, piano accordion) are combined with the traditional symphony orchestra.

Things like terracotta pots in the percussion section may have helped the melding of cultures, but I think the effect was conveyed, more likely, through the haunting harmonies and sound effects ('off stage' strings and voices at times, clapping, slapping, plucking, squeaking). I thought it a masterful tribute to the philosopher on whose thought so much of our present Western world still relies.

The second half of the program was Mahler's 5th, and it was good to hear a concert performance of this work. Simone Young is energetic, and the fast movements were full of vitality, and the well-known Adagietto, hushed and magical. I couldn't help noticing a slight lack of blending in the woodwind.

## **The three 'best' plays/ stage shows I attended**

#### **Opera: *Nixon in China***

It is fascinating to see recent history performed through the medium of opera. People of my age can remember the mystery of China during the Cultural Revolution. This feeling seemed to be captured at the beginning of *Nixon in China* with a scene performed in front of a red curtain.

The opera depicts Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. (Whitlam had actually gone there a couple of years earlier but in those days Australia was such a backwater that this isn't acknowledged.) Nixon comes over as nervous, which he surely was, and Mao as a confident host. The defiant Madam Mao sings a wonderful soprano aria. We see Mrs Nixon going about the protocol of meeting 'the people' — factory workers and farmers, walking around in the cold with a set smile. I wasn't quite sure what was happening in the last act. It had an almost spiritual, elegiac feeling, the couples lounging around on their beds, maybe contemplating the significance of the meeting?

I wonder what Henry Kissinger thinks of this opera? He is now the only surviving person from that trip. No one mentions (or at least I haven't seen mention) that the music is very reminiscent of Phillip Glass, I would even dare to say derivative. But it is very appropriate for this time and the underpinning anxiety of the undertaking. This opera conveys, possibly more accurately than any history book, the mystery and fear that the West had about what was going on in this unfamiliar culture — rather like today contemplating life on Mars.

#### **Phillip Glass/ Robert Wilson: *Einstein on the Beach***

They say that this is 'narrative-free' opera. My lasting impression is not of the singing — although it was good. I take away a memory of slick, perfectly executed dance sequences and equally, the amazing stamina of an Einstein-looking violinist sitting on a pedestal playing an endless Phillip Glass counterpoint (well, of course it did ultimately end). I wasn't waiting for it to end. I was just amazed at his persistence and perfection.

So, on one level the memory is of an absolutely polished performance — everything, the instrumental music, the singing, the dancing, the acting, the scenery. Lucinda Childs should get more acclaim for the choreography.

It isn't a narrative of Einstein's life, but I still wish I'd swatted up a bit more about him before attending the performance. I had read somewhere that one should go in with a clear mind. Mine was too clear. I felt I was missing things: particular sequences of numbers recited, symbols in the scenery. You'd realise that there had been, for example, a lighted disc hovering over the stage — moving slowly. There were more obvious things — a court scene, trains, clocks, formulae. (I bet there wasn't a skateboard in the 1992 production.)

One thing that didn't work for me was the audience being able to come and go as it pleased. Sure, the

performance lasts four hours. I sat there the whole time because I was entranced — I didn't want to miss a thing! I can see that to have a couple of intervals would interrupt the flow irretrievably. But it was awful to have people climbing over you all the time. The disruption started about 40 minutes into the show and continued until about 20 minutes before the end. A conventional theatre is not the right venue. Ideally, some sort of cabaret set-up — but of course you can't fit in enough people. It must be terribly expensive to stage, therefore you need a large audience. I'm not sure of the answer. Give everyone a cut lunch?

I'm so glad to have been there and to have experienced this amazing production. I came out with a sense of Einstein that I hope I don't ever lose.

**Shakespeare: *Much Ado About Nothing*, The Old Vic, London**

A main excitement: this was my first visit to The Old Vic in London, so I sat there, looking at the auditorium and thinking of all the famous actors who had strutted the

boards. And it looks as though the theatre hasn't changed much in, say, one hundred years. Added to this was the excitement of seeing Vanessa Redgrave and James Earl Jones as Beatrice and Benedick.

Partly because James Earl Jones is black, I presume, a decision was made to have Benedick and Hero as American GIs dropping into England on their return from the Second World War, rather than sixteenth-century soldiers returning from Spain. (The Americans are all black.) A talking point is the age of Beatrice and Benedick — to my surprise I learned that James Earl Jones is 82 and Redgrave is 76. I would have put them both in their late sixties. Anyway, they played the parts with tremendous vivacity and energy. Everything was 1940s — there was jitterbugging and a great jive session at the closing curtain. The village children were girl and boy scouts assisting the village bobby.

I am usually a bit of a purist when it comes to Shakespeare — don't mess with it by placing it in another century. But this was a treat!

— Jennifer Bryce, January 2014

## Mark Plummer

Oh, no! Not a blog!

### MARK PLUMMER

**59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England**

I had it in mind that I wanted to write to you about *SF Commentary* 85, and so was allowing this idea to gestate in an unhurried and relaxed manner appropriate to a fanzine of *SFC*'s stature and — no offence intended — frequency. A slow-cooked casserole of a letter rather than a hastily assembled sausage in a bun was the effect for which I was aiming.

Plenty of time to find that Proustian trigger, I thought. Last time it had been an early-hours-of-the-morning Led Zeppelin DVD and a glass of scotch. This time? A small flock of parakeets alighting on the bird-feeders? The first line of the seventeenth paragraph of the latest Ted Chiang story? ('I am Jijingi, and my father is Orga of the Shangev clan.' — hmm, perhaps not so much.) A photo gallery in *The Guardian* of the world's ten best car parks?

(Ooh, I thought, I bet they have the Marina City Towers in Chicago. And they do, although the standout is Hoenheim-Nord in Strasbourg, 'a tram/car transport interchange that makes palpable the abstract forces of transport logistics. Its genius is that it does so much with the basic elements of car parking — asphalt, paint, lights, and tones of black, grey and white. With the simple, but unusual, idea of putting the parking bays on a slight curve, and applying bold swaths of light and dark, it creates what (almost) could be called land art. There is some three-dimensional construction as well, when the

flat patterns fold themselves into a zig-zagging portico that is mostly for the benefit of the trams.' I'm still not sure I understand how it works, but how can you not love something that makes palpable the abstract forces of transport logistics?)

Sometimes, though, originality is overrated. I needn't seek a new trigger. I could rather go for the tried and trusted, one of the known knowns. I could even cut the chase and simply go for the scotch again. I'd certainly be prepared to experiment along those lines — in the interests of science, obviously. At the moment I have a dozen miniatures of single malts lined up at the bottom of the CD storage, a (fiftieth) birthday gift from Claire along with a book of *101 Whiskies to Try Before You Die* — because, Claire tells me, I'm now of an age when I need to think about such things. So the raw materials are to hand.

I could even work my way through various whisky/music DVD combos, I thought, searching for the magic trigger. Last time it had been Johnnie Walker Black Label and Led Zeppelin. Perhaps Talisker and The Rolling Stones. Oban and Patti Smyth. Lagavulin and Warren Zevon.

(Although thinking about it, and given his troubles with alcoholism, perhaps pairing Zevon with anything along those lines is a little tactless. Just the other day I was watching the VH1 (Inside) Out DVD, *Keep Me in Your Heart*, about the recording of Zevon's last album. At one point the man says 'We buy books because we believe we're buying the time to read them', marginally reworking Arthur Schopenhauer from Parerga and Paralipomena: 'Buying books would be a good thing if one

could also buy the time to read them in: but as a rule the purchase of books is mistaken for the appropriation of their contents.' I confess I did think about you, Bruce, at least a bit.)

All this slow-cooked rumination has come to nought, though, because of the manifestation of *SF Commentary* 86 on efanzines. Experience has taught me to be careful about saying certain things to you so I need to make clear that *in this respect alone* that was something of a disappointment. Now I really have to just get on with it.

Because I am still thinking about No 85. I saw something in *Opuntia* the other day in which Dale Speirs suggested that your various best-of-year lists could be ... I was going to say 'relegated' but let's go for a more neutral term and say 'repositioned' as blog posts. Have you no soul, Dale Speirs? Surely the Gillespie List is one of the spiritual hearts of any Gillespie fanzine, alongside Bruce talking to his friends (two hearts: very science fictional) and arguably it's a key facet of the conversation.

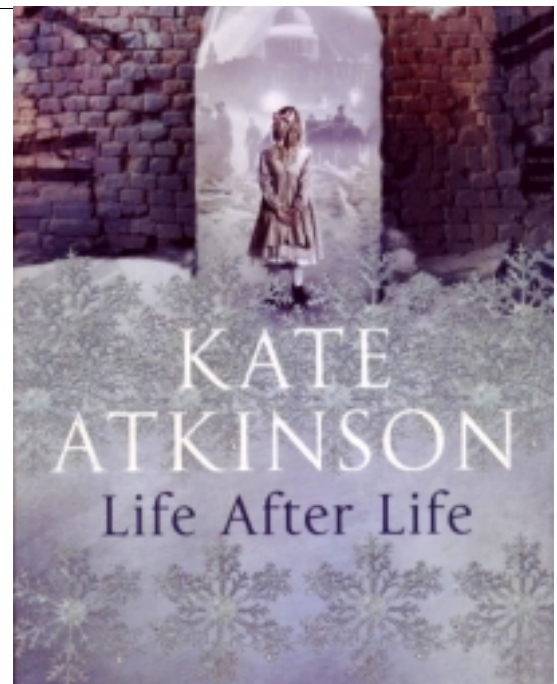
I can't remember whether at any point in the last two decades I've asked, or if you've told us, how you compile your lists. In *The Drink Tank* 363 Chris Garcia said 'Sometime around the start of the New Year, I go to Denny's. I go to Denny's a lot, but at that time, I start thinking about what I'm going to nominate for the Hugo, and I start writing the article that you're currently reading.' Somehow I don't quite see that model for you. I can't imagine you sitting in Urban Grooves with a notebook, a large coffee, and a slice of cake. Well, I can, easily — Bruce Gillespie! Urban Groover! — but I think the compilation of the Gillespie lists calls for something different.

Here's how I see it going. Sometime shortly after the start of the New Year, perhaps even on 2 January, you gather up your notes from around the house where they've been tucked under coffee cups, inside record sleeves, under the cat. You make yourself a coffee, you retire to your study, and you close the door. Elaine knows that You Must Not Be Disturbed, except to pass you an hourly coffee refill and the occasional therapeutic cat to be stroked as an aid to cogitation. You do not emerge until The Lists have been compiled.

I mentioned notes, and I'm sure you have them, but I sense your approach is instinctive. I don't see you as a Mike Meara type, with spreadsheets and formulae to calculate how he casts his FAAn Award ballot. Rather the notes supporting an intuitive sense of where things fall. You just *know* that a particular story is the seventh best of the year, not the sixth or eighth, without falling back on science to reinforce the belief.

I wonder, do you find the lower places more problematic? Years ago I was on an Arthur C. Clarke Award jury back in the days when as well as picking a winner we also announced places. We fairly quickly decided on the winner, and even the second, but ended up having a lengthy debate about which book to put third. A manifestation of Sayre's law, perhaps, that 'In any dispute the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the issues at stake.'

I'm rather glad I did a Clarke Award stint when I did; I think now I wouldn't have the confidence to make such judgments. I can, just about corral a list of my favourite



books of the year or something like that, and might even be prepared to put one title forward as a favourite, but ranking them in the way you do is largely beyond me.

Still, turning to your lists, it strikes me that when you list your favourite books you often include books I like and many books I haven't read, but rarely books I have read and don't like, which makes me wonder whether you're a valuable book barometer for me and I should seek out more of your favourites. Among your 2012 books I've read only *Some Kind of Fairy Tale* by Graham Joyce and *Among Others* by Jo Walton, but think quite highly of both. And looking at the list again I see *Human Croquet* by Kate Atkinson, which I haven't read, although on the strength of your enthusiasm in ANZAPA I recently bought *Life After Life* and crikey, that's good. I can't claim definitively I would have missed it without your positive notice — John Clute wrote about it in his *Strange Horizons* column and three of that journal's reviewers highlighted it in their best-of-the-year feature — but I think you were the primary spur, supplemented by a window when it was reasonably cheap as an ebook.

Digressing slightly — because it's not as if *that* is a mini-theme of this letter — I've rather surprised myself lately by the way that book price has again become a factor for me, much as it was 25 or 30 years ago. That's not to say that we've been rolling in cash, able to purchase gold-plated limited editions, but I suppose for a while now we could by and large buy the books that we wanted in whatever edition they happened to be in. But now, as we increasingly buy e-copies, I find that I baulk at the idea of spending any significant sum and am far more likely to be swayed by a low cover price. Something to do with intangibility of ebooks, I imagine, plus Amazon's views on 'ownership' as relates to e-texts.

Oddly, then, I sense I'm a little more up to date than I usually am. I read fifteen 2013 novels or collections last year, nine of those in e-copies. There were notably good collections from Nina Allen and Lisa Tuttle, both published by PS, while top novel honours go to Chris Priest's *The Adjacent* and *Life after Life* (although the latter, while being a 2013 book, was a 2014 read for me), with Graham

Joyce's *The Year of the Ladybird* just below. The Joyce and Priest were published on the same day, alongside Iain Banks's final novel *The Quarry*. Something of a bumper day for authors I like, although tempered by the depressing knowledge that one had died of cancer while another was having treatment for the same illness.

The Joyce in particular has all sorts of resonances for me around the summer of 1976. I was 12 years old, and was with my parents on a family holiday somewhere in southern England. I didn't read much fiction at that age, and my surrogate for the typical pre-internet enduring fannish quest for sources of the mother literature was seeking out shops that sold wargames figurines. Armed only with an address and perhaps a vague and really-not-at-all-to-scale map of the region I would drag my parents and brother through all manner of unfashionable shopping districts in search of especially unfashionable shops stuffed with model kits, specialist books, and boxes and boxes of 25 and 15 mm tin/lead soldiers. In 1976 I remember finding one of these places in a quintessentially English seaside town — Weymouth, I think — and buying a Napoleonic French howitzer and crew plus some greatcoated fusiliers. And, god, there really were ladybirds *everywhere* that year, although it's only relatively recently that I learned that it was a broadly recognised phenomenon, a product of the particularly long hot summer, and not just a strong personal memory of something to which everybody else was oblivious.

(I just got briefly excited by seeing that a new Joyce book, *The Ghost in the Electric Blue Suit*, is in the pipeline for this summer. Moreover it seems to be a revisitation of *The Summer of '76* in which 'David, a college student, takes a summer job at a run-down family resort in a dying English resort town ...' and, hang on. Oh, it's a US retitling of *The Year of the Ladybird*, presumably because the terms lacks a US resonance.)

But that's 2013 books, and I'm sure *SFC* will carry your view on your 2013 reading in due course. Unless you follow Dale's suggestion and put it on a blog. No, don't tell me; I think I can guess how that's going to go.

Although of course one never does know, does one? I mean, here's Bruce Gillespie writing about *television*. And indeed why not? There was a conversation on one of the fannish elists a year or two back when one fan, well known for his disdain of the medium, made a characteristically dismissive comment. This provoked another fan to an equally characteristic dismissal of the dismissal, arguing that we're truly in a televisual golden age and citing several recent examples to back up his contention. (Vagueness here is at least in part because I can't recall which list it was and whether it's one from which I'm not supposed to quote.)

I think I'm pretty much in the Golden Age Now camp. I only have two overlaps with your list; and as with the books it's simply that I don't know the others. I assume you're aware that season 3 of *Sherlock* has now been and gone, at least in the UK, to generally favourable notices, although there's been some commentary around the way that show is increasingly pandering to its hard-core fan base. I like it, although not as much as some, especially the repurposing and updating of elements from the

Holmes/Watson canon. Sometimes that jars. I wasn't even aware that having mobile phones engraved was a thing, but apparently it is, rather alarmingly suggesting I'm more at home with the tropes of nineteenth century London than the here and now.

We've also been able to watch both seasons of *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*. I was about to assert that it hasn't made it over here, but I thought I'd better check and now I know it has been shown on a subscription channel I've never heard of. Our viewing was thanks to downloads supplied by a well-known Adeladie fan.

I like *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* a lot, but I do wonder: is that because of the Australian connection? Would I watch a similar period detective show set in 1920s London? I honestly don't know, although I suspect the Australian setting was rather the trigger to watching the show in the first place.

At the moment, though, we're most doing the Scandinavians around here. Like you, we watch relatively little broadcast TV, with most of our viewing being DVD box sets. Occasionally, though, we watch something near-live, usually recording a broadcast for watching later, and the recent must-see has been the second season of the Danish/Swedish co-production *The Bridge*. Season 1 starts with a dead body, found on the Øresund Bridge between the two countries, exactly across the border. The resulting investigation is also a Danish/Swedish co-production. An involved plot with plenty of red herrings and dead ends plays out across ten episodes to a conclusion. Season 2 also starts with the eponymous bridge and does more of the same only probably more so. The show has aired on BBC4, a freeview station, in what's increasing seen as their Saturday night subtitle slot. They also broadcast two episodes back to back, a sound decision, I think, especially with the conclusion of Season 2, which managed several endings in its last two hours and ultimately left me wondering how on earth they were going to do the already promised Season 3. Really, it's the most compulsive show I've seen in years. I can't speak for the remakes, the American version that kept the title or the Anglo-French version *The Tunnel*, but strongly recommend this one.

Other shows we've particularly enjoyed recently include the Danish political drama *Borgen* (rather like a small scale, domesticated version of *The West Wing*); *Breaking Bad* (to which we've come late, and are only now on the second season); and the prohibition-era *Boardwalk Empire*. And, to demonstrate that we're not entirely dismissing the home-grown product, we rather like *Scott and Bailey*, a two-hander cop show set in Manchester. It's perhaps a more traditional kind of show — two temperamentally different detectives working together — but I think it manages to feel contemporary.

Crikey, Bruce, here we are talking about *television*. Whatever next? Perhaps you will take Dale's advice and put your lists on a blog, although I rather hope you don't and that you and *SFC* keep on keeping on.

And talking of keeping on, time to go and makes palpable the abstract forces of transport logistics. Or perhaps make another cup of coffee. One or the other.  
(16 February 2014)



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# Bruce Gillespie

## And now the lists (and a little bit of commentary)

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### In reply to Mark Plummer

Mark, your letter is one of the true highlights of the last couple of months. The other highlight was receiving not only an article from Michael Bishop, but also a poem from him.

And now, a letter of comment from you, when (a) I do not have enough time to loc *Banana Wings* in return and (b) I had thought you had hardly enough time to blow your nose, let alone write letters of comment.

Glad to hear that you celebrated your fiftieth birthday, although this was not celebrated on any e-list I see.

The short answer to your major question is: I keep notes throughout the year. Books are recorded on the same quarto sheets of paper on which I have been recording them since January 1962 (although I've been listing books in my diary since 1959 or 1960), usually one page per month, but these days one sheet per two or three months. It's easy to type up the entries at the end of the year, then arrange them in a Word file in order. For most of my life I've been ordering the items by hand, which means I always miss out on an item or two.

I've been recording film lists since 1968 or 1969, in my daily diary entries. That makes it easy to tot up the lists at the end of the year.

I started on music lists fairly late. I've been listing CDs Bought only since 1996, and CDs Listened To only in the last few years. Until then I had to reconstruct what I had been listening to from the CDs Bought list, which meant I missed many items in a particular year.

I forget when I began Short Story lists. For a long time I did lists of SF Short Stories, which was okay while I was reading all the magazines and as many of the anthologies as possible. But somewhere in the mid 70s I stopped reading the magazines, and found it impossible to track down more than a few of the original fiction anthologies. So I started to list all the short stories read in a year, then went through my books lists and reconstructed short stories lists back into the early sixties. That was fun. Now at the end of each year I find that I cannot remember which title of a particular short story goes with a particular story. Two years ago I reread all the four-star stories at the end of the year, but in January 2014 I don't have time to re-read 2013's candidates.

I had so much contempt for TV that for many years I did not even list TV shows seen in my daily diary. Last year I did at least note when I finished a series of any particular show on DVD. It's my recollection that *Sherlock* Series 1 and *The Doctor Blake Mysteries* (very much local Victorian) were the best of last year. If you can find the *Doctor Blake* episodes easily, download them. I think they are much better scripts than most of the *Miss Fishers*, the second series of which was disappointing. My great

discovery last year was *New Tricks*. I am now well into Series 8, and still finding the scripts as well written as in the early seasons.

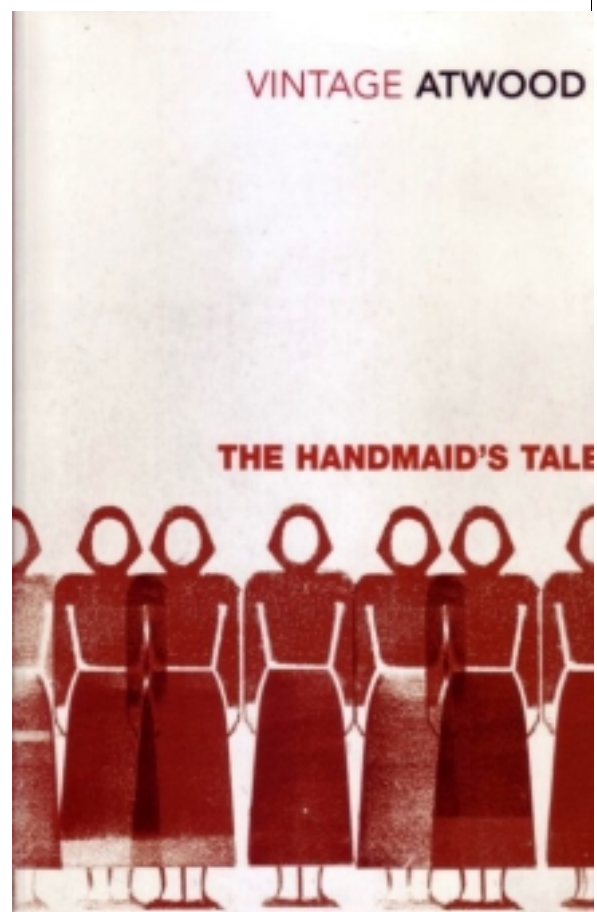
After having no paying work for two months, suddenly I need to finish an index a week for four weeks. So I have sent out none of the paper copies of *SFC* 86, and won't have time to do so for another two weeks. Meanwhile, *SFC* 87 is burning a hole in the hard disk, because it is close to finished, and No 88 is pretty much filled as well. And I have well over 80 pages of stuff for the next *Treasure*. If only I could afford to retire to produce them.

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### Favourite novels read for the first time in 2013

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I've written reviews of nearly all the books I read during 2013, so I won't say much here. I read *The Handmaid's Tale* because the Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF discussion group) held a meeting when all the Arthur C. Clarke



Award winners were reviewed, and I picked this one, the very first winner. It is a perfect dystopian novel, in which the nature of the catastrophe is told from the viewpoint of a person who is an extreme victim of sudden social changes. Although the main character has a limited viewpoint of events, she is able to show us why what happened happened, and finds a way to escape. Atwood's narrative is precise, elegant, and heartfelt.

I'm hoping to review all the books I read during 2013 in *SF Commentary* 88 — but I suspect I've already crowded myself out of my own fanzine.

An oddity of the list below is the novel that does not appear here. According to my own rules, I cannot include Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* because I read it when it first appeared. But I could not remember anything about it. I re-read it so that I could read the same author's *Home*, the sequel to *Gilead*. If I had read *Gilead* for the first time in 2013, it would have been equal No 1 with *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although Robinson's main characters speak out of a rather narrow mid-Western Christian experience, I found myself captivated by validity of the author's overall worldview. *Home* merely tells the same story from the viewpoint of other characters.

- 1 *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) Margaret Atwood (Vintage; 324 pp.)
- 2 *Lavinia* (2008) Ursula K. Le Guin (Harcourt; 279 pp.)
- 3 *The Gallery* (1947) John Horne Burns (New York Review Books; 342 pp.)
- 4 *Bitter Wash Road* (2013) Garry Disher (Text; 325 pp.)
- 5 *Bilgewater* (1976) Jane Gardam (Abacus; 200 pp.)
- 6 *Life After Life* (2013) Kate Atkinson (Doubleday; 377 pp.)
- 7 *The Regeneration Trilogy* (1996) Pat Barker (Viking; 592 pp.)
- 8 *Old Filth* (2004) Jane Gardam (Chatto & Windus; 260 pp.)
- 9 *The Adjacent* (2013) Christopher Priest (Gollancz; 419 pp.)
- 10 *Home* (2008) Marilynne Robinson (Virago; 325 pp.)

## Favourite books read for the first time in 2013

- 1 *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) Margaret Atwood (Vintage; 324 pp.)
- 2 *Collected Fictions* (1998) Jorge Luis Borges (Viking; 565 pp.)
- 3 *Lavinia* (2008) Ursula K. Le Guin (Harcourt; 279 pp.)
- 4 *The Gallery* (1947) John Horne Burns (New York Review Books; 342 pp.)
- 5 *Bitter Wash Road* (2013) Garry Disher (Text; 325 pp.)

- 6 *Bilgewater* (1976) Jane Gardam (Abacus; 200 pp.)
- 7 *Life After Life* (2013) Kate Atkinson (Doubleday; 377 pp.)
- 8 *The Regeneration Trilogy* (1996) Pat Barker (Viking; 592 pp.)
- 9 *The Bride Price* (2013) Cat Sparks (Ticonderoga; 282 pp.)
- 10 *The Beethoven Obsession* (2013) Brendan Ward (New South; 269 pp.)

## Favourite short stories read for the first time in 2013

If there is life after death, just how bad could it be? **Michael Marshall Smith** asked himself this question, and offers the short answer in his story '**What Happens When You Wake Up in the Night**'. This story is not just memorable; it's impossible to not to keep thinking about it.

Why did I not choose **Cat Sparks'** '**The Sleeping and the Dead**' when I read it first in the collection *Ishtar*, which I praised last year? Because when I first tried reading it, I did not like its beginning, so did not read past page 2. When I reread the story in *The Bride Price*, Sparks' superb collection of the best stories of her career, it bowled me over. Not only is it a visionary yet plausible far-future outcome of the story of the warrior goddess Ishtar, begun by Kaaron Warren in the *Ishtar* collection, but on its own it is a ferocious story about the last days of humanity on earth.

Why do none of **Jorge Luis Borges'** most famous stories appear here, although they appear in his **Collected Fictions**? 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbus Tertius', for instance, is one of the best ten short stories ever written. Easy answer: the best of his *ficciones* appear in the Penguin collection *Labyrinths*, which I read in 1971. The stories that are listed below are the best of the Borges stories I had not read until last year.

- 1 'What Happens When You Wake Up in the Night' (2010) Michael Marshall Smith in: *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 21*
- 2 'The Sleeping and the Dead' (2011) Cat Sparks: *Ishtar/The Bride Price*
- 3 'Streetcorner Man' (1933) Jorge Luis Borges: *A Universal History of Infamy*
- 4 'The Elderly Lady' (1970) Jorge Luis Borges: *Collected Fictions*
- 5 'The Duel' (1970) Jorge Luis Borges: *Collected Fictions*
- 6 'Swan' (1987) Jane Gardam: *Showing the Flag*
- 7 'Groundlings' (1989) Jane Gardam: *Showing the Flag*
- 8 'Showing the Flag' (1987) Jane Gardam: *Showing the Flag*
- 9 'The Fisherman's Wife' (Michaela Roessner) in *Room: A Space of Your Own 32.2: Speculations*
- 10 'Granny's Grinning' (2010) Robert Shearman, in:

## Favourite films seen for the first time in 2013

I know I say it every year, but it is still the case that I would not be able to watch many of these films at all, or not on Blu-ray, if it were not the efforts of **Dick Jensen**. Also, during the year I saw some unexpected masterpieces (such as Lars Von Trier's *Europa*) because of the enjoyable film nights held during the year with **Frank, John, and Diane**; or those hosted by **Race** and **Iola Mathews**.

**Steven Spielberg** gives to his version of the story of *Lincoln* a weight difficult to find in other films on the list. He limits the action to a short period of Lincoln's life, the culmination, at the end of the Civil War, of all his efforts, and moves only among a small set of very vivid characters, especially the members of the Lincoln family. Spielberg is one of the few film-makers with much idea of the reality of American politics: even the most idealistic actions can be achieved only as a result of much horse trading and grubby under-table deals.

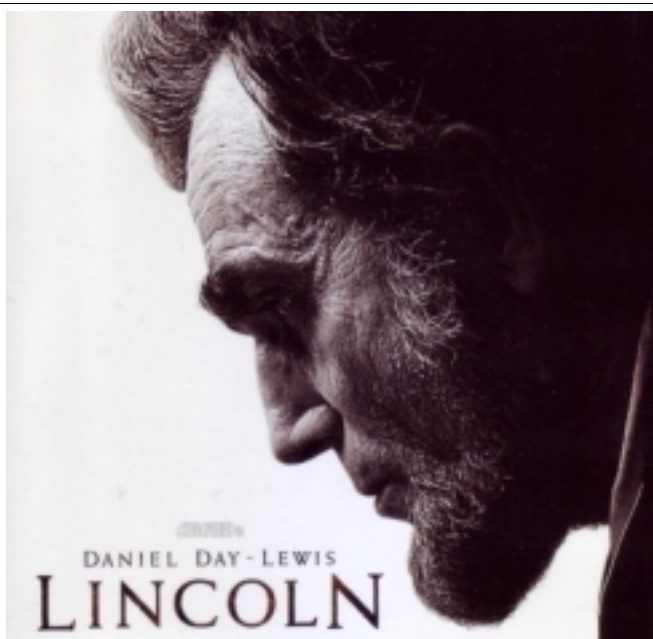
You may well ask why I included *Parade's End*, *Top of the Lake*, and *The Bletchley Circle*, three television series, as films? Because TV series seem to have become very good recently, and these three series work like films. Yes, they are much longer than any film one would see in a cinema, but each has the emotional intensity and high production values of the best cinema films.

The photography in *Parade's End* is delicious, with that visual intensity that has almost disappeared from cinema or TV, and it provides Benedict Cumberbatch with his best role yet (apart from Sherlock Holmes, of course).

*Top of the Lake*, an Australian film set at the edge of a New Zealand high-country lake, is as much of a tourist advertisement for New Zealand's South Island as *Lord of the Rings* was, but the drama in **Jane Campion's** tale is somewhat grittier.

Best script of the year, though, can be found **Giuseppe Tornatore's** *The Best Offer*, made in English in Italy, with Geoffrey Rush in his most interesting film role yet. One of those great narratives — you think you've guessed what's really happening, but you haven't.

- 1 *Lincoln* (2012) Steven Spielberg
- 2 *The Best Offer* (2013) Giuseppe Tornatore
- 3 *Parade's End* (2012) Susanna White
- 4 *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965) Otto Preminger
- 5 *Europa* (1991) Lars Von Trier
- 6 *Mirror Mirror* (2011) Tarsem Singh
- 7 *Amour* (2012) Peter Haneke
- 8 *War Horse* (2012) Steven Spielberg
- 9 *The 7th Victim* (1943) Mark Robson
- 10 *Cloud Atlas* (2012) Warchowskis and Tom Tykver
- 11 *Top of the Lake* (2012) Jane Campion & Mark Davis
- 12 *The Wicker Man* (Restored) (1974) Robin Hardy



- 13 *Lili* (1953) Charles Walters
- 14 *Life of Pi* (2012) Ang Lee
- 15 *The Public Enemy* (1931) William A. Wellman
- 16 *Bedlam* (1946) Mark Robson
- 17 *The Lone Ranger* (2013) Gore Verbinski
- 18 *Gravity* (2013) Alfonso Cuarón
- 19 *The Assassination Bureau Limited* (1968) Basil Dearden
- 20 *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) Michael Mann
- 21 *To the Wonder* (2012) Terence Malick
- 22 *The Rocket* (2013) Kim Mordaunt
- 23 *The Bletchley Circle* (2012) Guy Burt
- 24 *Palermo Shooting* (2008) Wim Wenders
- 25 *High Society* (1956) Charles Walters

## Favourite films re-seen in 2013

- 1 *Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) Michael Powell and Emric Pressburger
- 2 *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) Alain Resnais
- 3 *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) David Lean
- 4 *Casablanca* (1942) Michael Curtiz
- 5 *North By Northwest* (1959) Alfred Hitchcock
- 6 *Accident* (1967) Joseph Losey
- 7 *The Narrow Margin* (1952) Richard Fleischer
- 8 *The Red Desert* (1964) Michelangelo Antonioni
- 9 *Death Watch* (1980) Bertrand Tavernier
- 10 *The Boston Strangler* (1968) Richard Fleischer
- 11 *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) François Truffaut
- 12 *The Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec* (2012) Luc Besson
- 13 *The Hunter* (2011) Daniel Nettheim
- 14 *Grand Hotel* (1932) Edmund Goulding
- 15 *Little Caesar* (1930) Mervyn Le Roy
- 16 *Family Plot* (1976) Alfred Hitchcock
- 17 *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) Billy Wilder
- 18 *The Tin Drum* (Complete) (1979) Volker Schlöndorff

- 19 *Sabrina* (1954) Billy Wilder
- 20 *Harold and Maude* (1972) Hal Ashby
- 21 *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953) Charles Crichton
- 22 *Gaslight* (1940) Thorold Dickinson
- 23 *Billy Liar* (1963) John Schlesinger
- 24 *Nightmare Alley* (1947) Edmund Goulding
- 25 *Barbarella* (1968) Roger Vadim
- 26 *The Grand Tour* (1992) David Twohy
- 27 *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) Raoul Walsh
- 28 *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) Ludwig Berger, Tim Whelan and Michael Powell
- 29 *Things To Come* (1936) William Cameron Menzies

## Favourite music documentaries and performances seen first in 2013

All the world's a stage, but usually I can't afford to enter the theatre, let alone climb up on the stage. Or I'm so far from the stage I can't see what's happening. Hence the wonderful world of the DVD (or Blu-ray). How else could I catch up with first-rate performances of shows like **Stephen Sondheim's** *Sunday in Park with George*, **Berlioz's** *The Trojans*, or **Bartok's** *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (thanks to Dick Jenssen)? **The Rolling Stones** are playing in Melbourne soon, but tickets disappeared in three minutes when they went on sale, so it's very enjoyable to sit back and watch from a front row seat their 50th anniversary concert in Hyde Park.

These ratings are very arbitrary. Of course, Berlioz' music is much better than Stephen Sondheim's, and *The Trojans* is one of the few operas I enjoy all the way through. But there is nothing in world theatre quite like the integration of text, music, stage design, and acting that one finds in the best Sondheim pieces, such as *Sunday in the Park with George*. This performance features the original stars, Bernadette Peters and Mandy Patinkin.

A wide variety of DVD documentaries are still appearing. *Toscanini the Maestro* came with the Toscanini boxed set of the complete RCA recordings. It's one of the great films about a music master. And *Searching for Sugarman* ran for week after week at the local Nova Cinema before appearing on Blu-ray. It's a tribute to a humble man, Rodriguez, whose LPs inspired a generation of fans, especially in South Africa, and the detective skills of the people who found him and brought him to play in South Africa 40 years later.

- 1 *Sunday in the Park with George* (Stephen Sondheim/James Lapine) (1985) dir. Terry Hughes
- 2 *Les Troyens (The Trojans)* (Hector Berlioz) (2010) John Eliot Gardiner and Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique; dir. Yannis Kokkos
- 3 *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (Bela Bartok) (1981) Georg Solti and London Philharmonic Orchestra; dir. Milos Szimetar

- 4 *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (Bela Bartok) (1989) Adam Fisher and London Symphony Orchestra; dir. Dennis Marks
- 5 *Toscanini the Maestro* (1985) Peter Rosen
- 6 *Searching for Sugarman* (2012) Malik Benojelloul
- 7 *Paul Kelly: Stories of Me* (2012) Ian Darling
- 8 *Sweet Summer Sun: Rolling Stones Hyde Park Live* (2013) Paul Dugdale
- 9 *Death In Venice* (Benjamin Britten) (2010) Bruno Bartoletti and Orchestra of Teatro La Fenice
- 10 *Company* (Stephen Sondheim) (2007) Lonny Price
- 11 *Dave Alvin: Live from Austin Tx: Austin City Limits* (1999) Terry Lickona
- 12 *Eric Clapton: Unplugged* (1992) Milton Lage
- 13 *Freddie Mercury: The Great Pretender* (2012) Alan Yentob
- 14 *The Ballad of Mott The Hoople* (2011) Chris Hall And Mike Kerry
- 15 *Neil Young: Journeys* (2012) Jonathan Demme
- 16 *Bang A Boomerang: Abba in Australia* (2012) Matti Croker
- 17 *Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings: Let the Good Times Roll* (2013)
- 18 *Mother of Rock: Lilian Roxon* (2010) Paul Clarke
- 19 *Levon Helm: Ain't In It for My Health* (2013) Jacob Hatley
- 20 *Five Years: David Bowie* (2013) Francis Whateley

## Favourite popular CDs heard for the first time in 2013

I'm peeved that **Chris Russell's Chicken Walk** is not by now the most famous band in Australia. Two guys (guitar/vocals and drums) make a sparkling blues racket that rivals that of any of the world's great blues performers. They sound a lot like Buddy Guy, only better. Okay, a band like the Chicken Walk wouldn't exist if Buddy Guy hadn't been there before them, but that doesn't make these two CDs any the less enjoyable.

For some reason we still haven't seen the year-old film of *Sing Me the Songs*, the concert that celebrates the life of **Kate McGarrigle**, the great Canadian singer who died recently. I'm eager to see her famous children, Martha and Rufus Wainwright, lead a band of her friends, including Emmylou Harris and Chaim Tannenbaum, in a wide variety of folk and pop songs, many of them obscure, even to people like me who have bought all the McGarrigle Sisters' albums. In the meantime, the double-CD version makes wonderful listening.

- 1 Chris Russell's Chicken Walk: *Shakedown* (2013)
- 2 Chris Russell's Chicken Walk (2012)
- 3 Various: *Sing Me The Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle* (2013) (2 CDs)
- 4 Judy Collins: *Live at the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the Temple of Dendur* (2012)





- 5 Terry Allen: *Bottom of the World* (2012)
- 6 Tom Russell and Norwegian Wind Ensemble: *Aztec Jazz* (2013)
- 7 Gabriel Rhodes, Kimmie Rhodes and Various: *The Beautiful Old: Turn-of-the-Century Songs* (2013)
- 8 Caitlin Rose: *Dead Flowers* (2009)
- 9 Sweet Jean: *Dear Departure* (2013)
- 10 Mark Seymour: *Seventh Heaven* (2013)
- 11 Willie Nelson: *To All the Girls...* (2013)
- 12 Ry Cooder and Corridos Famosos: *Live at the Great American Concert Hall* (2013)
- 13 Audrey Auld: *Resurrection Moon* (2012)
- 14 Uncle Tupelo: *No Depression (Plus Bonus Tracks)* (1990/2003)
- 15 Roger Knox and the Pine Valley Cosmonauts: *Stranger In My Land* (2012)
- 16 Dog Trumpet: *Medicated Spirits* (2013)
- 17 Jan Preston: *My Life as a Piano* (2013)
- 18 Neil Finn and Paul Kelly: *Goin' Your Way* (2 CDs) (2013)
- 19 Amos Lee: *Mountains of Sorrow, Rivers of Song* (2013)
- 20 Ian Hunter and the Rant Band: *When I'm President* (2012)
- 21 Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell: *Old Yellow Moon* (2013)
- 22 Hans Theessink, Terry Evans, and Ry Cooder: *Delta Time* (2012)
- 23 Deadstring Brothers: *Cannery Row* (2013)
- 24 Various: *The Speaking Clock Revue* (2011)
- 25 Various: *West of Memphis: Voices for Justice* (2013)
- 26 The Greencards: *Sweethearts of the Sun* (2013)
- 27 Eric Burdon: *Til Your River Runs Dry* (2013)
- 28 Caitlin Rose: *The Stand-In* (2013)

## Favourite popular boxed sets bought during 2013

The popular music boxed set is taking a different direction from that of the classical music boxed set. In classical music, the boxes are for reissuing huge amounts of

valuable historical documents (many of them never before on CD) that may never appear again in any non-volatile form. Popular music packages, however, seem designed to make us poor saps re-buy stuff we have already, as long as we can buy the luscious extras. In the case of the new **Eric Clapton** boxed set, there are lots of extra tracks as well as the remastered CDs *461 Ocean Boulevard*, *There's One in Every Crowd*, and *EC Was Here*. The latter was a rather short concert LP in 1975, but with many added tracks now has become a statement by Eric Clapton: 'This was how good I was. I was never better than this, and nobody else was either.' Dazzling guitar playing, mainly of great blues songs.

It's taken for granted that two fine **Miles Davis** collections (*Live in Europe 1969* from the *Bitch's Brew* era, and five albums reissued from late in his career) will be a valued addition to CD library, but some might not realise how important **Duane Allman** was during a short period from 1966 to when he was killed in a motor cycle accident in 1971. *Skydog* features many of Allman's best performances as a backing guitarist, especially at Muscle Shoals Studios, plus his best performances with Derek and the Dominoes (one of Eric Clapton's groups) and the Allman Brothers Band.

I'm no **Pink Floyd** fanatic, but I haven't heard most of their early albums, apart from *Meddle*. I held out for a year, but when I found that the 16-CD *Discovery* was still around, including all of Pink Floyd's albums, I yielded to temptation. Yield to temptation: that's the story of my life.

- 1 Eric Clapton: *Give Me Strength: The 74/75 Recordings* (5 CDs + Blu-Ray)
- 2 Miles Davis Quartet: *Live in Europe 1969* (3 CDs + DVD)
- 3 Miles Davis: *Original Albums Series* (5 CDs)
- 4 Duane Allman: *Skydog: The Duane Allman Retrospective* (7 CDs)
- 5 Modern Jazz Quartet: *Original Album Series* (5 CDs)
- 6 Bob Dylan: *Another Self-Portrait* (4 CDs)
- 7 Pink Floyd: *Discovery* (16 CDs)
- 8 Stephen Stills: *Carry On* (4 CDs)
- 9 *Complete Easybeats* (6 CDs)
- 10 Various: *Complete Pop Instrumental Hits of the Sixties*,



- Vol. 1: 1960 (3 CDs)
- 11 Ray Charles: *Complete ABC Recordings 1959–61* (3 CDs)
  - 12 Archie Roach: *Creation* (4 CDs)
  - 13 The Band: *Live at the Academy of Music 1971* (4 CDs + DVD)
  - 14 Emmylou Harris: *Original Album Series Vol. 2* (5 CDs)
  - 15 Allman Brothers Band: *Brothers and Sisters: Super Deluxe Edition*
  - 16 Beach Boys: *Made in California* (6 CDs)
  - 17 Various: *Silver Roads* (2 CDs)
  - 18 Jerry Lee Lewis: *Southern Roots* (2 CDs)
  - 19 Fairport Convention: *Rising for the Moon* (Deluxe Edition) (2 CDs)
  - 20 Eagles: *Studio Albums 1972–1979* (5 CDs)

## Favourite classical CDs heard for the first time in 2013

There's not a lot I can say about a list of items as disparate as this one. The **Christian Lindberg** version of **Pettersson's Symphony No 6** towers over the rest, but I would expect few people to agree with me. Pettersson's Scandinavian orchestral music is restless, angry, all-encompassing, late twentieth-century but also romantic. Not many of his CDs arrive in Australia, and I was lucky to find this in the shop that for nearly 50 years was called Discurio (and now is called merely Title).

I've spent 40 years looking for a really satisfactory set of the **Brahms symphonies**. **Karl Bohm's** comes very close, although the performances are much less aggressive and percussive than the recent John Eliot Gardiner set. The set I would really like to hear is the Barbirolli recordings, but I saw the boxed set only once in a shop nearly 30 years ago, and *didn't buy it!*

Most of the other recordings are my first picks from various boxed sets. There are plenty more to come.

- 1 Christian Lindberg (cond.)/Norrköping Symphony Orchestra: **Allan Pettersson: Symphony No 6** (2012) (SACD)
- 2 Karl Bohm (cond.)/Vienna Phil Orch.: **Brahms: Symphonies 1, 2, 3, 4/Haydn Variations/Alto Rhapsody/Tragic Overture** (1976/1977/1978/2002) (3 CDs)
- 3 Georg Solti (cond.)/London Phil. Orch./Choir of Royal Opera House, Covent Garden: **Mozart: Così Fan Tutte** (1974/2011) (Solti *The Mozart Operas*, CDs 1–3)
- 4 Arturo Toscanini (cond.)/NBC Symph. Orch./Robert Shaw Chorale: **Beethoven: Missa Solemnis** (1953/2012) (Arturo Toscanini, CD 61)
- 5 Georg Solti (cond.)/Chicago Symph. Orch.: **Mahler: Symphony No 5** (1970/1996) (Solti *Mahler Symphonies*, CD 5)
- 6 Paavo Jarvi (cond.)/Royal Stockholm Phil. Orch./National Male Choir of Estonia: **Sibelius: Kullervo**



- 7 **Op. 7** (1997/2010) (*Sibelius*, CD 1)  
Rudolf Kempe (cond.)/Staatskapelle Dresden:  
**Richard Strauss: *Metamorphosen/An Alpine Symphony*** (1970/1975/2013) (*Richard Strauss Orchestral Works*, CD 7)
- 8 Alfred Brendel (p.)/Bernard Haitink (cond.)  
London Phil. Orch. & Choir: **Beethoven: Piano Concerto No 5/*Choral Fantasia*** (1977/2010) (*Alfred Brendel*, CD 12)
- 9 Gerard Willems (p.)/Anthony Walker (cond.)  
/Sinfonia Australis: **Beethoven: Piano Concertos 1 and 2** (2003/2013) (*Willems Beethoven and Stuart Piano*, CD 12)
- 10 Gerard Willems (p.): **Beethoven: Piano Sonatas 5, 6, 7, 19, 20** (2000/2013) (*Willems Beethoven and Stuart Piano*, CD 5)
- 11 Norman Del Mar (cond.)/Bournemouth Sinfonietta: **Gustav Holst: *Somerset Rhapsody/Brook Green Suite*** (1980)//Yehudi Menuhin (cond.)/  
English Chamber Orch.: ***A Fugal Concerto*** (1993)//Malcolm Sargent (cond.)/Royal Phil. Orch.: ***St Paul's Suite*** (1965)//Charles Groves (cond.)/London Phil. Orch.: ***Hymns from Rig Veda/Ode to Death*** (1977) (*Holst Collections Edition*, CD 2) (2012)
- 12 Goldner String Quartet: **Carl Vine: String Quartets** (2012)

## Favourite classical boxed sets bought during 2013

Much CD buying hath made me mad. My bank account tells me that I shouldn't have bought any of these boxed sets. But I am convinced that the mega-companies, such as Universal, are putting out huge boxed sets of their major recordings before they quit issuing real recordings. The good news is that the average cost per CD is often only \$2 or \$2.50. The bad news is that vast amounts of fabulous music in the vaults will probably disappear forever when copies of these sets disappear. I will have to stop buying music — the horror!

Not that there is a lot of rationality to the choice of performers who are being memorialised. **Karajan**, yes, with two earlier EMI boxed sets from about five years ago, and now two major collections, ***The 1960s*** and ***The 1970s***, from Universal. Good sense here. But why not a similar tribute paid to Georg Solti, instead of a few odd collections that represent only a fraction of what he recorded with either the London Symphony Orchestra of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra? And why only a few of the top conductors anyway? Or a few top pianists, or violinists?

I have sets of the **Mahler symphonies** by Bernstein (two different sets), Tennstedt, Abravanel, and many recordings of other favourite performances, but the more I listen to **Georg Solti** and the **Chicago Symphony**



**Orchestra**, the more I think this might be the best of them all. Solti had the advantage of working with a great orchestra in a great hall with great engineers, but much of his success must be attributed to his sense of fine detail. I should have bought this 1996 set years ago.

The most welcome boxed set of the year (i.e., about bloody time it appeared!) collects all the **Beethoven recordings** that Australian pianist Gerald Willems has made, either solo or with Sinfonia Australis conducted by Anthony Walker, recording on the Stuart piano. The story of the Willems/ Beethoven/Stuart piano saga can be found in **Brendan Ward's** book ***The Beethoven Obsession***, which tells how Ward set up a project that connected ambitious pianist **Gerald Willems**, who took his early piano lessons while in a migrant camp after migrating with his family from the Netherlands after World War II; **Wayne Stuart**, who designed at Prahran Technical College a piano that improves greatly on traditional piano design; **Anthony Walker** and **Sinfonia Australis**; and various patrons. The DVD that is included in the boxed set tells the story of the enterprise, and shows a performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 5.

- 1 Georg Solti (cond.)/Chicago Symphony Orchestra: ***Mahler Symphonies*** (10 CDs)
- 2 Georg Solti (cond.): ***Mozart Operas*** (15 CDs)
- 3 Gerard Willems (p.)/Anthony Walker (cond.)  
/Sinfonia Australis: ***32 Piano Sonatas, Diabelli Variations; Five Concertos*** (14 CDs + DVD)
- 4 Karl Bohm (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: ***Beethoven Symphonies*** (6 CDs)
- 5 Vladimir Ashkenazy: ***Fifty Years on Decca*** (50 CDs)
- 6 **Decca Sound: *The Analogue Years*** (50 CDs)
- 7 Paavo Jarvi (cond.)/Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra/Estonian National Symphony Orchestra: ***Jean Sibelius*** (4 CDs)
- 8 Rudolf Kempe (cond.)/Staatskapelle Dresden: ***Richard Strauss Orchestral Works*** (9 CDs)



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# First, the letters ...

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**STEPHEN CAMPBELL**

**52 Aitkins Road, Warrnamabool VIC 3280**

Thank you for the paper copy of *SF Commentary* 85. As much as your lists are compelling, I like to read the less dry side of you that offers more opinions and insight into who Bruce Gillespie is. It is no mundane feat to have published this magazine for so long.

I've noticed a leaning towards commentary on media and publishing more than on science fiction, which to me is connected only in the mundane commercial sense more than in its essence. Rather than being a comfortable genre with recurring themes in a somatic embrace, SF is a producer of important heresies that the system is trying to cut the nuts out of, because it has no real social effect. It is a literature of 'I wonder', but without political or revolutionary garb. It is a constant thinker about the planet, because of its cosmic perspective, and reminds the reader of the immensities of space and the illusions of time, and this is where its heresy lies. The system depends on its linear incrementation of time in order to count its currency — then Philip K. Dick comes along and questions even that, to the point where respected academicians are following his thought in earnest. The only reason SF does not get totally suppressed is because of its seeming advocacy of the technologies that are the system's true power source.

Cordwainer Smith shows us a remote future where the technologies are like magic, but ancient and under constant repair, like the humans themselves. Even the perfect Instrumentality has to destroy and reconstruct the worlds to avoid stagnation into entropy. Rod McBan, the young man who bought Old Earth using alien technology and human error (stroon) finds that he, too, is just a puppet of fate — but this is not a heresy, merely a convincing telling of impossible events that somehow rings true in the real world.

In *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, D. G. Compton points a finger at surveillance mentality, and popular culture discovers *Max Headroom* as a result of this. The media is an invention justified by the use of a pixellated image of a human instead of a real being: entertainment disguised as news, and vice versa. Having no responsibility for truth produces a culture where responsibility itself subsides. Life becomes a game perpetrated and directed by an artificial medium.

Modern histories are rewritten and changed into fictions, but these histories are now written for entertainment and money in the twenty-first century, and can't be believed by anybody. I wonder ...

(14 November 2013)



**DAVE LANGFORD**

**94 London Road, Reading, Berks RG1 5AU, England**

80,000 words in each issue! Sometimes I count up the wordage in *Ansible* in hope of being reassured that all that effort has created a modestly impressive prose monument. But no: the complete run for 2012 tots up to a mere 38,515 words, a shade over 3200 per issue. Mere peanuts. Well, that's what I pay contributors ...

Of course the *SF Encyclopedia* has a few more words to its credit: 4,183,743 today, nearly a million more than when we launched the thing online in October 2011, and 2.8 million since the 1995 CD-ROM of the second edition which was the starting point for the current monster. Of course, relatively few of those words were actually written by me — my current subtotal is around 330,000 — but every last one of them was formatted and tamped into place by home-made software tools operated by a vast technical staff of (you guessed it) me.

One day I'll be able to rest. Maybe.

(29 October 2013)



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# Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)

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## Planck dimensions

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DICK JENSSEN, PO Box 432, Carnegie VIC 3163

The attachment is a Wild Speculation following a reading of Elaine's article in your SF Commentary 85. (Is there a Nobel prize in it?)

### Planck dimensions

From the standard definitions of various physical constants, and bearing in mind that Planck's constant, the speed of light and the Newton's Gravitational constant will be assumed to hold for all space and time, a few moments of manipulation of these constants will lead to universal measures of mass, length and time — the Planck dimensions.

The fundamental constants are:

$$\begin{array}{ll} c = 2.99792458 \times 10^8 \text{ m.s}^{-1} & \text{speed of light in a vacuum} \\ h = 6.62606957 \times 10^{-34} \text{ kg.m}^2.\text{s}^{-1} & \text{Planck's constant} \\ G = 6.67384 \times 10^{-11} \text{ kg}^{-1}.\text{m}^3.\text{s}^{-2} & \text{universal Gravitational constant} \end{array}$$

To compute the Planck dimensions,  $h$  is replaced by the more frequently used *reduced Planck constant*, or *Dirac's constant*,  $\hbar/(2\pi) = \hbar$  below:  $\hbar$  is pronounced 'h-bar'.

$$\hbar = 1.054571725 \times 10^{-34} \text{ kg.m}^2.\text{s}^{-2} \quad \text{reduced Planck's constant}$$

There is only one set of permutations which lead to basic measures (the Planck values) of mass, length, time and energy. These are:

- 1 Planck mass,  $P_M = (\hbar c/G)^{1/2} = 2.17651 \times 10^{-8} \text{ kg}$
- 2 Planck length,  $P_L = (G\hbar/c^3)^{1/2} = 1.616199 \times 10^{-35} \text{ m}$

Now speed is distance/time, and since the speed of light is fundamental, Planck time must be the Planck length divided by  $c$ . Thus:

- 3 Planck time,  $P_T = (G\hbar/c^5)^{1/2} = 5.39106 \times 10^{-44} \text{ s}$

From which it immediately follows that energy is:

- 4 Planck energy,  $P_E = (\hbar c^5/G)^{1/2} = 1.95618 \times 10^9 \text{ kg.m}^2.\text{s}^{-2} \text{ (joule)}$

One way of regarding Planck distance and time, though somewhat tautological in view of the relation between points 2 and 3 above, is to say that  $P_T$  is the time taken for a photon to cross the Planck distance.

### A wild speculation

If a computer is used to integrate a differential equation over time in order to find the future state of the system, the *computational stability* of that system must be taken into account. For such computations, the basic data are distributed at the intersections of an  $n$ -dimensional grid, and the integration proceeds in discrete time steps. Given the form of the equations involved, it is (usually) possible to find an inequality relation between the spacing of the grid ( $\Delta s$ ) and the spacing of time ( $\Delta t$ ) which will prevent the computation from becoming unstable — that is, will prevent small errors from growing exponentially and overwhelming the results. Basically, and rather crudely, the idea is that particles should not move more than one grid unit in unit time — that is,  $\Delta s/\Delta t < v$ , where  $v$  is the computed speed of a particle involved in the calculations.

So *perhaps* the speed of light *requires* the Planck length and Planck time to take the values above *in order to ensure that the entire Universe is stable*.

As stated above — this is a *wild speculation* — it is not saying that the Universe is a computer, but pointing out an analogy between computer simulations and quantum concepts. When modelling natural processes on a computer it has been found that there is an inequality relation between the spacing between data points in space ( $\Delta s$ ), data points in time ( $\Delta t$ ) and the speed of movement of the basic particles in the simulation. If this inequality is *not* observed, computational instability occurs and the process 'blows up'. Examples of such simulations are: atomic explosions, galaxy distributions, novae, weather forecasting, glacier flow...

But the Universe, at least according to quantum mechanics, seems to be *analogous to*, but *not identical to*, these computer simulations, in that there appears to be a granularity to both space and time — the Planck length and Planck time. Arguing, again *analogously*, this suggests that such fundamental discretisation of reality (or what quantum theory says may be reality) is what keeps our universe stable.

(26 September 2013)

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## RICK KENNETT

PO Box 118, Pascoe Vale South, VIC 3044

I heard the other day that Australian journalist Keith Dunstan passed away at age 88. I think he had some dealings with SF fandom way back; correct me if I'm wrong. I know he wrote an article in 1975 about the then upcoming Melbourne WorldCon. Some years ago I looked it up in the bound volumes of *The Sun* newspaper at the State Library. I was disappointed and a little surprised to see some of Dunstan's article was a lift from Franz Rottensteiner's *The Science Fiction Book*, with all that work's inaccuracies faithfully transposed, particularly the section headed 'Why There Is No Sex In Science Fiction'. I recall someone remarking — perhaps in the pages of *SF Commentary* — that this was like saying 'Why There Are No Spaceships In Science Fiction'. Be that as it may, at least Dunstan was in the main positive, and I'll take positive over accurate nine days out of ten. Nowadays, if journalists stoop to notice science fiction at all, it's often little more than out-of-date *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* references written in a snide tone. The 'As Others See Us' sections in *Ansible* are a real eye-opener in this regard. But I feel this is indicative of the state of journalism in general. Maybe this is why the highlight of my week's TV viewing is *Media Watch*. (Another highlight is *Mythbusters*, but that's because I like seeing them crashing cars and blowing things up with high explosives to prove that movie physics is mostly bollocks.)

**\*brg\* I hope you've already read my note about Keith Dunstan (p. 11) and his relationship to Space Age Books and Melbourne fandom.\***

But what else has Rick Kennett been doing besides grouching about the lamentable state of journalism? Well, he's been winning awards. Over the past few years I've been having some success with podcasts, finding them a more receptive market than traditional print or even traditional e-print. Most of my fiction submissions these days go to these audio web productions, particularly as they're open to reprints. A good way to recycle the back catalogue. Most of them pay token amounts or are freebies, but that's OK. I'm in this more for the fame than for the fortune. Though I've never really considered my work as Young Adult, *Cast of Wonders*, a podcast that specialises in this subgenre, has accepted several adventures of my gay space girl Cy De Gerch. (Because they're YA I only send them the stories where the Sapphic element is nonexistent or very low key, though it's surprising what will pass for YA these days.) A couple of the Cy stories have also been done on the more adult-orientated *Dunesteeff Audio Fiction Magazine*.

About two months back I happened upon a list of podcasts nominated for the 2013 Parsec Awards, what I think of as the podcast equivalent of the Hugo. (Are there Hugos for podcasts?)

**\*brg\* Yes, but they seem to allow podcasts in the Best Fanzine category anyway. Pfaagh! I've still never heard any the many SF podcasts.\***

There in the single reader category was my *Cast of*

*Wonders* story, 'Now Cydonia'. Gosh! Further down in the multiple voice-actors category was my *Dunesteeff* story, 'The Road to Utopia Plain'. Golly! But as they were listed there among more than a hundred other worthy contenders, I entertained no false fancies. A couple of weeks later *Cast of Wonders* emailed to say 'Now Cydonia' had made the finalists list. Looking, I was astonished to see 'The Road to Utopia Plain' had also made the finalists. Now I was doing nothing but entertaining false fancies.

Anyway, both stories won in their categories. False fancies fulfilled. A week later on YouTube I saw the awards ceremony, which had been held at DragonCon in Atlanta, Georgia. The one for 'Now Cydonia' was presented by Sylvester McCoy, the last actor to play *Doctor Who* in the original series. As a child of the sixties who'd watched *Doctor Who* from the very beginning, all I could think as I watched the presentation and heard my name uttered by the man himself was, 'Sylvester McCoy — he's rather short, isn't he.'

(15 September 2013)

**\*brg\* Congratulations on boldly seeking fiction markets where fiction markets have never been sought before. Your career reminds me of that of Paul Collins, who kept trying every possible fiction market for many years before breaking through.\***

## GUY SALVIDGE

72 Newcastle Street, York WA 6302

Steve Jeffery's letter mentions Tessa Dick's *The Owl in Daylight* and its apparent disappearance from the internet. Tessa published the novel online through CreateSpace and it was briefly available for purchase there. Soon after, Tessa was forced to remove the novel from sale, as she was being threatened by the PKD Trust over the use of the title. Thus the book is no longer available, just as Anne Muni's memoir *A Family Darkly* is not available, because of the actions of the PKD Trust. This is a shame, because I'd love to read the Mini book, and I think Tessa's novel is wholly in keeping with PKD's intentions. It's a good read all round.

Thanks for your kind words about my *Yellowcake Springs* as well! The sequel (and finale), *Yellowcake Summer*, has recently been released through the same publisher.

(28 September 2013)

I'd like to read that Cat Sparks collection, *The Bride Price*. I read a story of hers in Twelfth Planet's anthology *Sprawl* and thought it exceptional. We are in agreement about the works of Kaaron Warren as well. I'd have loved to have gone to the AFL Grand Final and trundled over to see you as well, but many factors conspired against me, including lack of money and not actually being a Freo member. So I had to content myself with shouting at the TV. I would like to read that Anne Muni book, but it seems now that I never will, at least not until PKD's daughters relinquish their control over his estate. It's a philidickian turn of events that I doubt even he could have imagined.

(30 September 2013)

## GREG BENFORD

Dept of Physics and Astronomy, University of California, Irvine CA 92697-4575, USA

I see Joseph Nicholas is still running that same old line from the 1960s. He labels anything that thinks about our approaching major problems as 'blueprint fiction'. This echoes old ideas: 'Science fiction, just like any other artistic endeavour, is primarily addressed to the present, and any ur-future it might concoct for the purpose of story is simply a vehicle for the dramatisation of present experiences and expectations.'

So SF is just another reflection of the present? No different from any other sort of fiction, also timebound? Of course we carry elements of our present into our ideas of the future, but really, this colossal overgeneralisation is schoolboy wisdom. Essentially, Joseph Nicholas says we can't think fictionally about the future at all! Such bunk was fashionable decades ago, but now? Good grief!

I note that the 'SF is really about now' argument never works through examples to make its points. It's just a facile assertion. Pointing to Gernsback doesn't make the argument, either.

I think Gibson wants to see the present as SF because it's the only way he can think in his style-focused work now. As he showed long ago, he really doesn't focus on his few ideas at all, but rather at mood and zeitgeist. Great writer, though, and about as useful in thinking of our future as Henry James, another stylist isolated in his amber.

SF doesn't have to be predictive to be useful, though it can be. (Example from my own work: I wrote the first description of a computer virus in 1969, and propagated the first one on DARPA net that year, too.) Through the rich history of science fiction it's been a genre that lets us try ideas on for size and work them through to their consequences, all the while reminding us of how much we have to learn.

(30 September/23 November 2013)

**\*brg\* You could make a good case, as John Foyster used to do, that any SF story written at a particular time can't help being mainly about the time when it is written. But then I remember the SF stories that seem timeless, constantly far-future-reaching, such as those of Cordwainer Smith or Olaf Stapledon, or the stories of Philip K. Dick, which are constantly telling our story now (whenever that now is), no matter how many years ago since they were written.\***

## IAN NICHOLS

241 Hancock Street, Doubleview WA 6018

Enjoy your retirement, but you may find yourself getting restless. I retired to finish my doctorate, then got bored and went back to teach at university, then had an epiphany. I realised that, under Australia's arcane tertiary funding arrangements, I can study anything I want, funded by the government, and never have to pay anything back until my income reaches over \$55,000, which it's unlikely to do unless I get a really big book

deal. So now I'm undertaking a Graduate Entry Diploma in Art History, and loving it. After I finish next year, I might do another doctorate, just to take advantage of the travel funds that are offered. I can go on studying for the rest of my life, which is a consummation a damned sight better than sitting around mumbling about the youth of today. After a while, you might find you get a little itchy to do something, too.

(28 September 2013)

**\*brg\* Ian has already suggested that I should plunge into a PhD, which would pay a lot more than pension-plus-freelance-indexing. Surely PhDs should be awarded seldom, and only to people who make brilliant new discoveries in the field in which they are working. Also, I have all these fanzines I want to publish, even if little income to print them.\***

## LLOYD PENNEY

24 Eva Rd., Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2, Canada

I'd like to retire from paying work too, but I've had nearly none this year so far, and I am trying desperately to find more. My newsletter job ended just before Christmas, and the evening job at the newspaper ended in March. The newsletter company did little to give me the training I needed (my boss worked from home), and the newspaper discovered how to automate my job. My services were no longer required, even after eight years. The resumé's flow out every day, and very little ever comes back. I need to find something very soon, or disaster will befall us.

Far too many people have left our ken, and more since you produced this issue. Larry Tucker, a legendary fan from the Detroit area, Ann Crispin, author, Elliott Shorter, Bobbie DuFault — so many more, including Tom Clancy. The obituary sections of some fanzines we both know are simply too long, and too sad.

I did buy and read *Among Others* by Jo Walton, and got an autograph out of it. I've met Stephen Jones, mostly because he and his SO Mandy Slater were guests at our local convention, and Mandy used to live in Ottawa, and for a while in Toronto.

I've seen even fewer new movies in 2012, but I fully agree with you on the movie *Hugo*. A great movie with a great story, left incomplete. I did a little research to see if I could find out why Oncle Georges was running a toy shop in the Montparnasse train station in Paris. Méliès was indeed a famous movie maker in France, but Thomas Edison wanted to get rid of all potential competitors for his own firm, and Edison forced Méliès out of business.

A few years ago, I bought the DVD of *Scrooge* for Yvonne. She watches that movie every Christmas, and now she can watch it whenever she wants, without commercial interruption or having a television station carve pieces out of it.

As you might recommend the *Miss Fisher Murder Mysteries* to overseas viewers, I would recommend to you from Canada an extremely popular show called *Murdoch Mysteries*. It takes place in Victorian Toronto, and is

broadcast in about half of the major television markets in the world. This is the show on which I won a walk-on background role. The main sets for the show are in an isolated area in the east of Toronto, and we've been on set three times now.

Robert Charles Wilson's wife Sharry will soon be releasing a biography of Neil Young. This might be something you'd like to find when it's released.

I've been seeing some interviews with Joni Mitchell, especially with CBC interviewers, and I have to wonder if she's gone off the deep end, or is starting to believe her own publicity. The interviews I saw made her out to be weird to the point of extreme eccentricity to mild insanity.

Stephen Hawking spent some time just west of Toronto in the city of Kitchener-Waterloo, working for the Perimeter Institute, a science think-tank, and I wish I'd had the chance to meet him. I see mention of the Higgs boson, and Peter Higgs is the co-winner of this year's Nobel Prize for Physics. I recently had to look up the newest metric prefixes because I heard some odd words, and zepto- was one of them. A zep-tometre is a measurement of 1 by  $10^{-21}$  metres, perhaps beyond microscopic. There's even a yoctometre, 1 by  $10^{-24}$  metres. I am not sure if anything smaller than this is needed. These newer terms were created in 1991.

(10 October 2013)



Joe Szabo: 'Underwater Sunlight'

## LARRY BIGMAN

21 Bel Air Drive, Orinda CA 94563, USA

I did receive *SFCs* 83 and 84 from you last fall — thank you! I love that you have kept your zines going all this time. I know compliments unsettle you, but I must say that for longevity, content, and production, I can't think of another fanzine historically that surpasses *SFC*. Of course, I don't for a minute think there are enough folks who know or recognise this now, but that's the story of all modern popular culture.

I just got some of your other zines from Robert Lichtman, who let me know you just published 85. I sent you \$100 a few days ago to keep them coming, so looking forward to this year's model!

**\*brg\* Who says that compliments unsettle me? The more the merrier. If only the compliments paid the bills. Therefore thanks very much for that \$100 subscription.\***

As I get closer to retirement, getting back to writing is more of a pressure on me. I know I've been threatening this to you for years now, but when I've had my head down in six-to-seven-day weeks for the past months, it's hard to come up for air, let alone to think more pleasant and deeper thoughts about writers and writing. But I do intend to fulfil my threat. I still need personally to write my Philip K. Dick article: part pop criticism, part social criticism, part memoir. I will send it to you when com-

plete, to see if you think it's up your alley.

I can't believe it's now nearly a decade since the San Francisco Potlatch! Take care.

(18 October 2013)

Bruce, I could in principle retire in a little over a year when I turn 60. But our sons' college debts are still with us, so I don't know yet about the timing. Otherwise, I keep buying books, etc., with full intention to dive in, and have only managed to read Priest's *The Islanders* and Blish's *A Case of Conscience* (never had before!) over our vacation in April this year. Otherwise, it's getting the work done daily, recuperating in the evening, and doing it over again the next day! Ah, the twenty-first century! But glad to hear you are at least busy with work, as I recall some past sparse times for you. If you have a spare *Treasure*, that would be great. Also, I still need some *Metaphysical Reviews* (aside from that one pesky *SFC* 68), assuming you have any spares around in the first place.

(18 October 2013)

As for *The Metaphysical Review* in the old series I only have numbers 1 and 2, so need the rest. And of the later series I need numbers 1, 3, 5/6, 10, and 28/29. If you happen across any of those please let me know what you'd like for them.

(1 November 2013)

**\*brg\* I throw this to readers who might want to**



find a good home their long run of *Metaphysical Review*. I have only one file copy of most issues.\*

**PETE YOUNG**

**c/o 22 Tippings Lane, Woodley,  
Berks RG5 4RX, England**

As promised, *Journey Planet 16: The Philip K. Dick Issue*, which I have guest-edited/co-edited with James Bacon and Chris Garcia, is now out there!

Thanks very much for your valued contribution — the whole thing was fun to design and edit; it has been a labour of love for the last six months and has enabled me to keep in touch with a whole bunch of interested people as well as making several new acquaintances. I do hope very much you'll enjoy it!

Rather than clog up your mailbox with a 12 MB file, I'll instead point you to where it's already available as a free PDF at efanzines.com — it can be viewed and downloaded directly from: <http://www.efanzines.com/JourneyPlanet/JourneyPlanet16.pdf>.

If you have anything to say about this issue, you can always drop a letter of comment to [journeyplanet@gmail.com](mailto:journeyplanet@gmail.com), or to me directly.

I will soon have the second issue of my own fanzine *Big Sky* ready, so I'll notify you when that's available. It has a theme of 'Pulps': a mixture of genre and mainstream.

(18 October 2013)

**TIM TRAIN**

**8 Ballarat Street, Lalor VIC 3075**

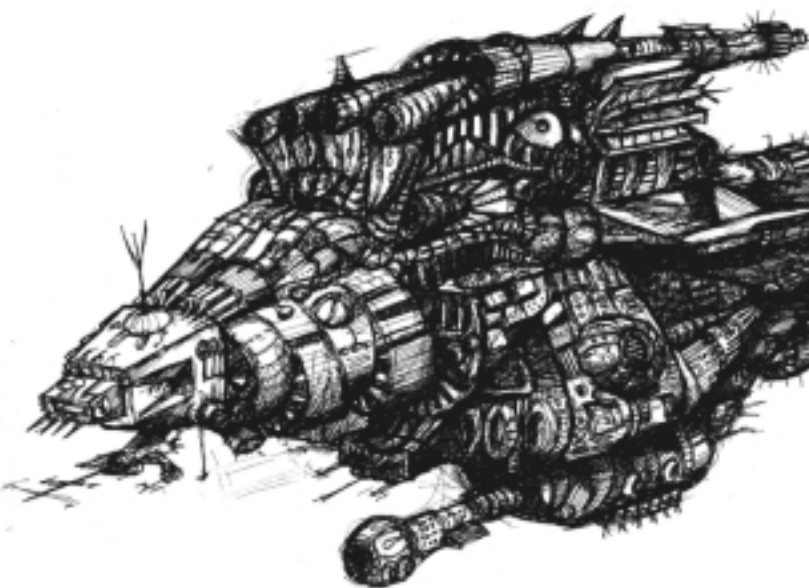
I think the Sticky Institute has stocked some partial zine histories in the past. Nothing complete has ever been written; maybe never will because of the fragmentary nature of zine communities and the ambiguities. For instance, when do zines stop and mainstream publications begin? A recent book of zine history — *Fanzines* by Teal Triggs — ran into a spot of bother, as Triggs had, apparently, not bothered to make contact with many of the artists/ziners included. <http://fanzinesbytealtriggs.weebly.com/Zinewiki.com> is also an excellent resource.

(21 October 2013)

**JOE SZABO**

**29 Bessazile Avenue, Forest Hill VIC 3131**

Work is its usual animal — anxiety ... plenty one day and nothing the next. I am currently working on a full-time contract with a promotional products company working as a graphic designer. When there is work available, I'm working from home as a technical illustrator. I haven't been overly motivated with my art, but the last few months have proven to be quite productive. I hope I will soon have enough work to plan for another exhibition.



Joe Szabo.

Last week I was in Sydney seeing Kraftwerk as part of the Vivid Festival — a concert that was worth every cent spent on it; not to mention the way Sydney was lit up with some amazing lighting effects.

(23 October 2013)

I am currently working on a new series of paintings and drawings that I hopefully to exhibit next year — pending finding a gallery that doesn't charge the earth.

I have attached a series of black and white images for you to use should you find them suitable. You may already have a few of these from previous correspondence, but I hope that they will be of use, and help to compensate for the many fanzines I've received over the years.

(5 November 2013)

**\*brg\* Better — I have colour versions of most of the ones you've sent me. However, I haven't featured any of your art for a long time, so I am grateful for the reminder. Looking forward to any exhibition of your new art.\***

**PATRICK MCGUIRE**

**7541-D Weather Worn Way,  
Columbia MD 21046, USA**

I have now seen a couple of episodes of the *Miss Fisher Murder Mysteries* TV series that you mentioned to me last year. However, Maryland Public Television only bought four episodes to test the waters. I missed one of them because I was at Capclave, and I think I missed another because I simply forgot to turn it on. Presumably those will be rerun at some point, and hopefully MPT will acquire the rest of the series (or the public library will get the DVDs). I enjoyed the two I saw, but I was disappointed that they crammed one novel into each episode, which I think led to undue compression and to some dubious plot rewrites.

(24 October 2013)



I should get through at least Series 1 without problems. I'm sorry to hear Series 2 is worse, but perhaps it is not surprising, since, as you say, they had exhausted the books. (If they had taken at least two episodes per book, which I think would have better served the novels, they would have had material for the second season! But I gather that even for miniseries, the fashion is now for completeness in one episode, with at most a continuing story arc in the background.)

I recently finished and submitted to *NYRSF* my very long article on the Strugatskys' traditional SF (as distinct from their other work). They will have to serialise it, but I don't know yet when, nor if there will be substantial edits. Their policy is to run their rewrite past the author if there have been 'substantial' changes, but in other cases, the first time I knew a submission had been published was when I saw it in the issue. David Hartwell was at Capclave, but said he hadn't seen the Strugatsky article yet.

(29 October 2013)

I wanted to say something more about the *Miss Fisher Mysteries* before they fade in my memory. As I mentioned earlier, Maryland Public Television showed only the first five or so episodes, but my local public library fortunately acquired the whole first season on DVD, and I have now watched them all.

I thought they were pretty decent. The production values were fully up to the standards of the mysteries from the BBC or Granada, and I thought the stories were better than those of the majority of British shows. (Nothing really comparable is produced in the US, and even Canadian crime shows such as *The Border* come across as sort of a hybrid of the British and American styles. Some German mystery shows and what seem to be German-Italian coproductions sometimes show up here dubbed into Spanish on one of the Spanish-language channels. Those are closer to the British style. The same Spanish channel is also running something dubbed into Spanish whose English title is *Sea Patrol* and which seems

to be Australian, but I have not watched an episode through.)

The Fisher show seems to have done an exceptionally good job of portraying Australia in the 1920s. If there were anachronisms (if I remember correctly, the making-of feature discloses that the Hispano-Suiza used actually dates from the 1930s), they were not obvious. I was particularly struck by how all of Melbourne's office buildings, whether governmental or private, were only a few stories high. The making-of feature shows how all the Melbourne high-rise buildings were removed by processing from one shot of the city centre from across the Yarra. (I think that on my Australia trip I stood at the point where the camera was.) By contrast, the novels have some easily spotted anachronisms (such as references to American radio shows that had not yet aired).

On the other hand, I thought the Fisher TV series markedly inferior to the books. The most important difference is that Phryne Fisher has had the back story of a murdered sister wished upon her. Somewhere — I believe in the introduction to her short-story collection — Kerry Greenwood said she had consciously made Phryne a sort of female James Bond, and was writing in reaction to the female detectives popular at the time, who were all psychologically wounded in one way or another. Phryne was to be unapologetically rich and competent. Since the advent of Phryne, the cliché of the wounded protagonist has spread also to male protagonists, particularly on TV detective shows, so that every second crime-solver of either sex is labouring under the psychic burden of a murdered family member, whose killer generally remains unpunished to this day. I think it was an incredible copout on the part of the Fisher script writers to extend this overworked cliché to Phryne. (To be sure, Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker were there decades ago, and Clark Kent had his whole planet blow up on him.) One also has the impression from the novels that the upper reaches of Australian society in the 1920s were greatly impressed by aristocratic titles, even Phryne's mere 'Honourable'. The TV show makes much less of this, almost treating Phryne as an ordinary citizen (pandering to the more democratic modern mass Oz audience's opinions?), and thus seems to be false to social history.

(9 December 2013)

**\*brg\* Kerry Greenwood, author of the Phryne Fisher mystery novels, spoke to a large audience at the Darebin Public Library in 2012, followed by a talk to the Nova Mob. (Kerry has been a long-time friend of some members of the Melbourne SF community, and she has written quite a few YA SF novels.) She praised the attention to period detail from the ABC's production design team. I gained the impression that she's resigned to the differences between Phryne Fisher in the books and those in the two seasons (so far) of the TV series. Unfortunately, the episodes of the second series are not based on Greenwood's novels. The second series scriptwriters have not been up to the task of bringing to life the main characters and their various background stories. The episodes are entertaining enough, but with a certain lack of zest.\***

**DAVID LAKE**  
**7 8th Avenue, St Lucia QLD 4067**

I suggest you get hold of a book that has pleased me enormously: *The Universe versus Alex Woods* by Gavin Extence (Hodder, 2013). Gavin is a young English writer, and this is his first novel. I have exchanged emails with him, and he has promised to send me a proof copy of his next one.

It's not SF, but it starts with a meteorite hitting Alex (10 years old) on the head and giving him epilepsy. Still, he's a first class student in science and has read all my favourite SF books. After a few years he makes friends with Mr Peterson, an old Vietnam veteran who is living in Alex's village in Somerset. They both set up a Vonnegut Book Club ... but by the time they get to the last book (*Timequake*) Peterson is suffering from a slowly terminal brain disease. Alex, now 17, is an excellent driver, and he drives Peterson from Somerset to Zurich... I won't spoil the ending for you: it is both tragic and happy. And there's a good deal of humour.

I bought the book from a local Dymock's for \$20. And I read it three times over without a gap.

(1 November 2013)

**JERRY KAUFMAN**  
**3522 NE 123rd Street,**  
**Seattle WA 98125, USA**

We spent time with Bill Wright here and at Worldcon during his recent DUFF trip. In Seattle, we spent an afternoon with him and Andy Hooper at the Boeing Museum of Flight. Andy's very knowledgeable on aircraft and spacecraft, so he and Bill had intense discussion of everything on view.

(25 November 2013)

**\*brg\* A lively description of Bill's visit to the Boeing Museum can be found in a recent issue of Andy Hooper's *Flag*.\***

From the front cover image by Ditmar (looks like the tortoise is winning the race) to the Lovecraftian back cover by Steve Stiles (from his Blue period), there's mystery, magic, and intrigue on every page. (You may use this quote in your next advert — it'll convince thousands to buy a sample copy.)

As usual, I've read very little from your list of books first read in 2012, and what I have read, I read years and decades ago, such as *The Wind in the Willows*. Somewhat the same is true of your movie watching, although I have seen *Hugo* and *Midnight in Paris* and liked both of them very much. I've seen both Chaplin films, and *Coal Miner's Daughter*, but quite long ago.

In other categories, much the same applies: practically no overlap. We watch a lot of television drama around here, mainly in the crime genres and the SF-fantasy area, although nothing from the premium channels. It seems to me that for television, SF and fantasy can't well be separated, as much fantasy uses SF trappings. (For example, we find *Warehouse 13* entertaining, but the premise that famous people impart some quality

associated with them into possessions that then exert a magical power, and that there is a secret US government department that obtains and stores these objects for public safety, sounds like SF in its presentation but is pure fantasy.)

I did buy several classical music box sets I found exciting, but I bought them in 2013, not 2012: sets of Benjamin Britten orchestral music and chamber music. When I try to remember what I heard in 2012 and what I heard in 2013, I find I can't distinguish them — I don't keep notes like you do on everything I've consumed, although I do have a Google+ account where I write about the books I've read.

So I don't know in which year I first listened to Fleet Foxes, but I recommend both their first and second albums. If you like folkish melodies and rich vocal harmonies, give them a listen. I'd also recommend the Decemberists for the same reason, Black Keys for amazing garage rock, Midlake (I just discovered their *Trials of Van Occupanther*, an older album, and haven't listened to the brand new one), any old thing by Jack White, London Grammar (a very new young British group), and just about anything that Kathleen Hanna's involved with (her newest group is the Julie Ruin, which is split between songs that sound more like Bikini Kill and ones like Le Tigre, her previous groups).

I've been finding more excitement in reading British rock mag *Mojo* than in *Gramophone*.

I really enjoyed Elaine's article about popular physics books, and should take this with me the next time I get to Seattle's Capital Hill neighborhood (or is it Capitol Hill?; I'm never quite sure), where's there's this friendly little bookstore called Ada's Technical Books. It's named after Ada Lovelace, and features many books on computing, various sciences, science fiction, etc. (I just took a quick look at their website, and found their Classics of Science Fiction book club is going to take on *The Purple Cloud* by Shiel.)

**\*brg\* Melbourne also has a newish science bookshop, Embiggen Books. It has a strong SF section.\***

Looking through the letters again reminds me that I re-met Damien Broderick recently for the first time since my DUFF trip in 1983. Even though he's been living in the US for a long time, our paths had not crossed. If we hadn't been on the same panel about Australian fandom at LoneStarCon 3, I might not have run into him even there.

I no longer remember why Lou Stathis was mentioned in a review of *Time Out Of Joint*. He may have been in APA-45 but I wasn't. Could we all have been members of CAPRA, the Cinema Amateur Press Association instead? My mailings are all buried deep in our storeroom, so I can't go look for them.

**\*brg\* That must be the connection. I was in CAPRA for only a year or so, 1972-73.\***

I was interested to read about Jeff Hamill's political affiliation. I wonder if he worked on the campaign of Kshama Sawant, a Socialist who successfully ran for a seat

on Seattle's City Council this month? Jeff came to one of our house parties, and one of our monthly fan gatherings, but I don't think we got a spark going, and he hasn't returned for any more parties.

(25 November 2013)

## NED BROOKS

4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn GA 30047, USA

The copy of *IGOTS* (*It Goes on the Shelf*) I just sent you also mentions Alan Garner's *Boneland*, but while I understood it well enough, I liked *Thursbitch* much better. I can remember liking *Elidor* and *Moon of Gomerath* long ago — but not what they are about! In between I also read his *The Guizer*, *Strandloper*, and *The Stone Book Quartet*, and enjoyed them.

To me it seemed that *Thursbitch* was poetic and fast-moving, while *Boneland* seemed to lack enough content for a novel, and was padded out by churning the plot. I must admit I did not reread the two novels of the supposed trilogy it would complete.

The most impressive fantasy novel I have read recently — just too late to be mentioned in *IGOTS* 35 — is Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate*, a gruesome tale of a gruesome age.

I have seen the 1951 film *Tales of Hoffman* many times. For a while back in the twentieth century it was always shown on TV at Christmas in Atlanta.

The local FM station plays Havergal Brian's *Gothic Symphony* occasionally, but only on seeing your review did I learn how to spell 'Havergal Brian'.

I agree with Jennifer Bryce about Dickens' *Hard Times* — I read it long ago, and thought perhaps it led to some relief in the abuses of the Industrial Revolution. I once was given a 24-volume set of Dickens, plus two more volumes of biography, and thought it would hardly justify the shelf space it would take up, so I sold it to a bookshop in Norfolk VA. I was reminded of Dickens again today when the thrift store turned up a copy of Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* — a graphic novel giving the other side of the *Oliver Twist* account.

It boggled my mind to see from your letter column that I am older than Franz Rottensteiner! At the thrift store today I found his 1973 anthology from Seabury, *View From Another Shore*.

(6 November 2013)

## GILLIAN POLACK

Chifley ACT 2606

I finished my PhD and have been trying to do too much ever since. I somehow ended up as the Australian-New Zealand correspondent for *Europa*, which is fun. This wasn't Mihaela's doing — it was Christian Tamas, from Romania.

**\*brg\* Mihaela Perkovic from Croatia was last year's GUFF winner. She toured Australia stirring up whirlwinds of enthusiasm for fan fund races, and for international fandom in general.\***

Would you like to read said PhD? It's a time travel

novel and a dissertation. I rather suspect you might enjoy the novel. I'm looking for a publisher for it, but things go very slowly in the world of publishing, especially when one is not known and when one writes just slightly outside the expected. It would help if my novels were faster paced, too.

I've had a short story sale since we last spoke, and a bunch of academic publications (all short), and I'm working on two non-fiction books (almost finished one!), but otherwise, I've mostly tried to push ahead with things and find that elusive academic job. I'd rather like to work in the UK, if I can, or here, or in NZ.

It was worth doing that second PhD to discover that my heart really and truly is at that place where academia meets criticism meets my own writing, and that I need to teach and to research and to write creative and research work in about equal proportions.

I sent *someone* a piece on *Lavinia* (I don't remember if it was to you or *ASiF*), but I didn't welcome the novel in the same way as most people did. I felt it undermined the role of women in the way it handled Lavinia's character, which was disappointing coming from Le Guin. I found it curious that most other readers I've talked with about it don't seem to see that. They assume that a woman as protagonist is sufficient, whatever the levels of power she wields in her society and whether that power is supported by those around her. Lavinia's authority is undermined on a regular basis, even in the areas where she is expected to wield command. I would not have reinterpreted the story in the same way as Le Guin, I suspect. I agree that it's more historical fiction than SF, but it's borderline, so it still fits as SF, like otherworld novels that contain no magic or astonishing science.

(14 November 2013)

There are some problems with the reconstruction in *Lavinia*. Le Guin describes the areas where Lavinia has inherited power, but actually has Lavinia ignorant about them and disempowers her. Where Lavinia is disempowered by the invaders, I feel Le Guin is much stronger, but Lavinia's not that strong in her own domain despite all the descriptions of her training and she's pig-ignorant about management and leadership. I think it is a lovely endeavour to give us someone who history misses, but to not understand *why* history misses her (a male-focused narrative) has given us a female-focused narrative that gives us again the reasons Lavinia was not the subject of story originally. She's still not fully the subject of story — the novel is about eliding women from history, not how the actual past is different than the history we're told. The gap between the descriptions of how the society ought to work and the way Lavinia moves within it really got to me, I'm afraid. I have a similar problem with the Earthsea books. Le Guin is one of my favourite authors of all time, but there are some issues that bug me.

It's timely you mentioned *Lavinia*, because this relationship between us and our history is going to be one of the subjects of my next novel (the one I've only just barely started researching). I want to show that actual difference between what we think we know and what actually happens to people and how belief systems operate. To this end, I think I'm writing a story about two



comfortably-off Englishwomen travelling in 1682 (the tail end of the witch craze in England). There may well be demons and ghosts ... I'd better grab my today's reading for this, and get it underway. I'd also better grab coffee!!

(14 November 2013)

**\*brg\*** I keep hoping you can remember where you sent your original review of Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*. Few reviewers in our field have expressed doubts about its artistic qualities. Apart from from Jo Walton's *Among Others*, few recent novels have been as universally enjoyed by SF fans as *Lavinia*, despite the fact, as I've written in my own mini-review, it is not SF but historical fiction, and, given the assumptions of the characters, not a fantasy. But when have little considerations like this ever prevented SF fans from giving awards to non-SF novels or short stories if they like them, or ignoring SF books if they are not written by one of 'our people'?

**DOUG BARBOUR**  
11655-72nd Avenue, Edmonton,  
Alberta T6G 0B9, Canada

I noticed you just catching up with Simmons's *LoveDeath*, and wondered how you had missed it. One of his finer works, all the stories, but most certainly 'The Great Lover', a story I should reread during the next, anniversary, year. I suspect we'll see a lot of new fiction about World War I and reprints of the better earlier fictions.

(14 November 2013)

**\*brg\*** You make the assumption that I would do anything other than miss major items in the field. There's too much being published. *LoveDeath* has sat on the shelf since 1991, looking inviting. In a fit of Simmons reading, I picked it from the shelf and finally discovered it. I could just as well have chosen any other well-known SF or fantasy book from recent decades. 1974 was the most recent year in which anybody with my slow reading rate could keep up with the field.\*

I read Colin Steele's reviews, with a certain frustration at times. I kept wishing he'd said more about some books, less about others. But I was certainly reminded of or alerted to some titles I will go after. It's interesting — and a question of taste — I imagine many readers enjoy his quoting writers on their work in his reviews, but given that they're rather short, I would rather have his thoughts, not theirs.

I thoroughly enjoy your lists, even though I am not a lister myself, nor do I enjoy trying to figure out which book was number one, though I can certainly, if I ever found the time, make up a list of those I enjoyed the most in any year (I think). But now I do also keep an aide-mémoire such as Jennifer Bryce's on the books I have read, though not of plays or TV or movies seen (very few of the latter). I've attached my 2013 Books (all but poetry) file.

(28 December 2013)

**\*brg\*** The greatest excitement from editing *SF Commentary* comes from receiving, out of the blue, long review-articles like yours, or Jenny Bryce's article about her favourites of 2011, or Michael Bishop's recent contribution. Thanks, everybody, who knows how to make my day.\*

**MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER**  
PO Box 8093, Silver Spring, Maryland 20907,  
USA

Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 85. I have always enjoyed your 'best of' lists, and if you ever collected them as a book I would buy one. But *Frost Nixon* isn't about events that took place in 1974 — the film is set in 1977, three years after Nixon was forced to resign, at a time when he was financially desperate and when Frost was, I think, scrambling for money too. Of course this film wouldn't work without Frank Langella's very fine acting.

**\*brg\*** But Frost and Nixon during that interview were discussing events that took place in 1973 and 1974. I can remember staying with Roger and Judy Zelazny in Baltimore in the week in September 1973 when the official Watergate investigations had just begun in Washington, and the first mention was made of missing minutes on the White House tapes.\*

As for music: how did you discover the Carolina Chocolate Drops? I can't imagine they have sold very many records in Australia! I heard them in 2010 at the North Carolina State Fair, and very much enjoyed them, from their introduction, where they said they were from Wilkesboro, North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, and 'Phoenix, Arizona North Carolina', and then learning how they met, at a convention about old-time African-American banjo playing. They're very talented, and can turn anything into a traditional spiritual. There's a video on YouTube showing them taking a modern rap song called 'Hit'em Up Style' (man walks out on a woman; she gets his credit cards and starts spending like crazy) and turning it into a 1920s blues song. Again, this is a very talented group, and I'm sure they'd be pleased to learn they had Australian admirers.

**\*brg\*** I heard the Carolina Chocolate Drops on Melbourne's alternative radio station 3RRR when they were touring Australia for the first time. I have one of their CDs, but did not see any of their concerts.\*

Let me give one 'best of' of my own — the best play I saw this year was *Coriolanus* at the Shakespeare Theatre. Patrick Page as Coriolanus not only has a magnificent voice, but he was also very good at showing how Coriolanus's overwhelming hubris and pride led him to nearly abandon Rome and destroy it. The other cast members were also good, particularly Diane D'Aquila as Volumnia. The gimmick was that director Michael Kahn took the rhythms of street drummers and adapted the drumming for the stage. Here the drumming successfully



underscored the action. I sat in the balcony and happily wallowed in Page's great speeches.

Lloyd Penney wonders if fans are welcome at World Fantasy Conventions. Well, I've been to four of them and I had a good time. They're more upscale than the average con — they're more expensive, but you get a ton of free books — and the panels are mostly more serious. But I found enough fans at these cons to enjoy myself.

As for the *New York Review of Science Fiction* — it not only exists but also hasn't changed that much since it went online. In fact, the only substantial change is that it was redesigned so that each issue is 32 pages of larger type. So you still have competition (although we need more sercon zines, not fewer ones).

(18 November 2013)

## CY CHAUVIN

14248 Wilfred, Detroit, MI 48213, USA

While I liked the Ditmar cover, I was surprised by the Steve Stiles back cover. I don't know if I've seen any of his work in colour, and the strange blue flowers/tendrils seemed sort in the style of Frank R. Paul, which sort of also fit with retro look of Ditmar's cover. I loved the fact that it was so colour drenched.

I enjoyed very much Dan McCarthy's contributions to Stipple-Apa, where he will be really missed. Despite the distance of time and space, he made his mailing comments very personable and I felt he was a friend. It was sad to read some of his struggles with aging, and one of his last comments in the apa was, 'I hope I don't have to feel like this the rest of my life.'

I'm glad you wrote about the Alan Garner books, since I've enjoyed his earlier books, and read some two or three times, with different types of enjoyment. It sounds like these later books are more like *Red Shift*, which is densely written, with as many words clipped as possible — and then there are story lines happening both now and in the past (several pasts, in fact, if I'm remembering correctly). In stories like this, you have to have faith in the author; and have eaten your oatmeal to start off the day. I'm not surprised that some may not

have the stamina or faith to read them. It helps that his books are short. Sounds like *Boneland* and the other should be interesting.

I enjoyed *Among Others* by Jo Walton a lot, and enjoyed hearing her talk at the worldcon (although she didn't talk about her book). Although warned, I was still surprised by the extent of her references to other SF and fantasy books. I think I was still wishing for more of the fantasy element in her novel, not because *Among Others* really needed it, but because I enjoyed her delicate handling of fantasy, and would like to read more of it. (Her 'Farthing' novels do not offer the same type of experience.)

Another novel that deals with fandom, and has many parallels with *Among Others* is *White Sands, Red Menace*, by Ellen Klages. The novel is set in the 1940s, near the White Sands rocket testing site in New Mexico, and mentions heckographs, and one of the characters publishes a fanzine and even receives a letter from Harry Warren Jr. Other similarities include the young ages of the main characters, and the fact that one girl is slightly lame, with a leg slightly shorter than another. But it is not SF or fantasy in any sense.

(21 November 2013)

## BRAD FOSTER

PO Box 165246, Irving, TX 75016 USA

Thanks for the copy of issue 85 of *SF Commentary*. Seems like it's been a while since I was able to have any sort of presence in your wonderful zines, so nice to see I have made *some* sort of contribution with that little fillo this time. You noted in your last email you were holding the final piece on hand for issue 86, so I will wait for that one to come out, and then send you some fresh works at that time to keep up my subscription!

I loved the idea of *A History of Books* as you explained it on page 7, and will be adding that title to my own list of 'see if can find this' books.

Cindy and I loved *Hugo* as well. It was one of the few movies we managed to get to a theatre to see on the large screen, and well worth it. I also think I saw an on-line trailer for *The Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec* some time ago, and it looked to be amazing. It was in French, but I figured since it was from Besson, surely it would be showing up over here in English! But, it seems nothing like that has happened yet. What is wrong with people???

**\*brg\* It's more a case of 'what is wrong with film distributors?', who have always made arbitrary decisions about what they think will work in particular territories. Why was *Adèle Blanc-Sec* not given cinema distribution in Australia, where the arthouse circuit works very efficiently to promote lively European or Asian films.\***

I was knocked out to see the Mahavishnu Orchestra in your list of favourite boxed sets on page 25. I've not been able to listen to my LPs in years. I really need to get a good turntable again. I could put on just about any of those things, close my eyes, and be totally transported by

McLaughlin and the team. (I have found a number of songs on places like YouTube, and have saved the links to play occasionally while working on the computer, but these tiny speakers do *no* justice to the soaring sounds. Just clicked on one while finishing this email, John with Mahavishnu IV, a live performance of 'The Wait'. That one *really* needs to be cranked up, but I will take what I can get now, and let my memory fill in the rest.

**\*brg\* I've just sent you the five-CD 'Original Albums' little boxed set featuring the Mahavishnu Orchestra set. I'll look out for the two Weather Report sets.\***

I appreciated Jennifer Bryce's list of books for memory jogs. I've been doing that for years, though my usual one-line comments are less memory jogs, and just kind of place holders. Doing the lists lets me check back when I come across a book in a used book store, and wonder: 'Do I remember this book because I've already read it, and thus don't need it? Or do I remember it because I've read about it, and have been looking for it?' I have been posting my stuff up online for about a decade now: <http://www.jabberwockygraphix.com/readlist.html>.

Also, while I have not the background nor real intellect to be able to understand most science books, I do love the energy that many scientists bring to their work, most notably folks like Richard Feynman, and I treasure my copy of his *What Do You Care What Other People Think?*  
(21 November 2013)

Thanks for the offer of picking up the Mahavishnu set if I can't get it here. Too many bills and loans to pay off from house repairs and eye surgeries of the last couple of years, so we've cut our budget to the bone. Music these days is pretty much what I can listen to off the TV or internet. (Though, since I still have the old records, been keeping an eye out for a decent low price on a nice turntable with speakers.)

The life of the freelancer has always had its financial ups and downs. I hope that in a couple of years we'll be out of this particular 'down' again!

If you ever run across any paying gigs anywhere that need an artist, feel free to send that info my way! :)  
(22 November 2013)

**DJ FREDERICK MOE**  
**36 West Main, Warner OH 03278, USA**

I call myself 'DJ Frederick' because I have been a radio DJ off and on since the 1970s.

Thanks for the information on ANZAPA. I'm still new to the world of apas, and discovered them only three years ago. I'm a member of the AAPA: I was just elected to their board and will become their mailer in January. I'm considering joining the SFPA, and I originated the Cuneiform APA in 2012, which is very small: five members. James Dawson is doing editing duties this year.

My new/survival job is going to cut into my reading and writing time. I'm not too thrilled about that, but I need the cash.

Podcasting can be fun, but people need to realise that it is 'narrowcasting', not 'broadcasting'. There are some unique and enjoyable podcasts, although 95 per cent I've come across are rubbish. I prefer over-the-airwaves radio to podcasting and internet 'radio' any day of the week.

I was glad to see Neil Young's *Psychedelic Pill* on your list, as well as the TV show *Lewis*. There is an excellent 'prequel' series to Inspector Morse called *Endeavour*, which is produced by the same folks who did *Morse* and *Lewis* — shown on PBS here — I highly recommend.  
(2 December 2013)

**\*brg\* DJ Frederick Moe sent me a set of his small fanzines that cover the field of radio broadcasting, recorded music, and audio. It's a fandom I knew nothing about, although its existence is hardly a surprise. As John Bangsund wrote many years ago, life is a series of fandoms. Write to DJ if you want to know more.\***

**PEGGYANN CHEVALIER**  
**Ypsilanti MI 48197-5336, USA**

Speaking of Michael Waite, 24 November 2013 would have been his 77th birthday. Matt and Guy and I visited his grave that frigidly cold Sunday. Guy played Birgitt Nielsen from the car CD player, we cleaned off Michael's marker, and walked around the lovely old cemetery till we were nearly frozen. Just yesterday, Michael's house, which is bank owned, was listed 'for sale' and several people were looking at it. The bank is asking far less than half what Michael owed. I'm afraid of who or what (a rental agent?) might snatch it up. If Matt and Guy and I had any funds to our name, we'd buy it, sort of 'protect' it ... Ah well, nothing one can do but hope for the best. New neighbours are always such a frightening prospect.  
(6 December 2013)

**MURRAY MOORE**  
**1065 Henley Road,**  
**Mississauga, Ontario L4Y 1C8, Canada**

Among the many fine, and also unread, books in our house, is an original British edition of George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*, found by me in a vanished Toronto used book store. I might start reading it, inspired by your writing about it, but for the fact that two days ago I started reading other Australian writers. Home from SFContario 4 I brought a copy of *Southern Blood: New Australian Tales of the Supernatural*, edited by Bill Congreve, Sandglass Enterprises, 2003.

I also can't read *The Sea and Summer* and *SF Commentary* simultaneously. Multitasking is possible only so far.

Another author I came home from SFContario thinking I should (re-)read is Theodore Sturgeon.

George Turner. Theodore Sturgeon. Bruce Gillespie.

You can feel guilty that you are preventing me from reading George Turner and Theodore Sturgeon. Rather I recommend option 2. At an appropriately casual moment you will remark, 'Murray Moore, a Canadian fan you know, is reading me instead of George Turner and Theodore Sturgeon.'

In his letter Jerry Kaufman ponders the pronunciation of phocomelus. What would Jerry make, I wonder, of the first name of my great-great-niece, Arenal Caroline Marie Hines? The inspiration for Arenal seems to be the Costa Rican volcano of the same name. My great-niece's father lives part of the year in Costa Rica.

You see the error in the name, of course, Bruce. Arenal. Children give their friends nicknames whenever possible. Every day for my great-great-niece will be Talk Like a Pirate Day; Ar this and Ar that. I am considering embarrassing her parents by asking 'is your daughter named Arenal because she was conceived near that volcano?'

David Lake, I want to visit you to see your house, with its mural-covered walls, and your fence with its painted line of Old English.

*SFC* cannot be, as Bill Breiding exclaims, 'the *New Yorker* of fanzines': *SFC* lacks cartoons. I know of what I type. *The New Yorker* is my lone magazine subscription.

Because of Pete Young's letter on indexing *SFC* I have contacted Pete and offered him the *Index To Science Fiction Review* 28-43, Nov. 68-Mar. 71, several copies of which I rescued from the free-to-take pile in the LoneStarCon 3 Fanzine Lounge. Index by Gregory Bridges, for the August 1983 FAPA mailing.

In my previous letter of comment (5 January 2013) I related that I had winnowed a pile of books taller than myself from shelves in our house. I can report that I haven't found myself wishing that I had kept Title X. The time has arrived that more culling should be done; out with unread books to make room for the brighter, shinier, new books. Space exists for additional bookshelves but I lack Ray Wood's advantage of having a house to myself. Ray might want to consider the Ned Brooks Solution to conveniently storing more books than his house will hold: buy as an annexe a next door house.

While reading Steve Jeffery's letter, the thought formed that you and your fanzines, Bruce, are a rich and large ecosystem. You are like a coral reef, growing every year, becoming more complex; an environment, a shelter, for other organisms that flourish in a symbiotic relationship with you.

You visited Ed Cagle in Kansas, Bruce, and Bob Tucker in Illinois, during your previous century walkabout about which I see most often references by you only to attending Torcon 2. I infer the existence of a great, lost, trip report by yourself, Bruce.

(14 December 2013)

**\*brg\* I've never made a check of people who were mortally offended because I did not write a detailed version of the first part of my 1973-74 journey. Probably they just crossed me off their list. I did write a short-notes version of the first part of the trip in *SFC* 40, and meant to write the complete report as soon as I could in 1974. 1974 happened, and I didn't. I compounded the error by writing a complete report of the last month of the trip, in England in January 1974. Ah well. Many of the justifiably pissed-off good people of Canada and USA are no longer alive, including Mike Glicksohn; Roger Zelazny; John Miesel; Leigh, Norbert, and Michael Couch; Jackie Causgrove; Bob Tucker; Ed**



Photo: Murray Moore (see his letter, below.)

**and Sue Cagle; and Richard Delap. All my British hosts are still alive except Syd Bounds. My mother saved all the letters I wrote to my parents during my trip, and gave them to me a few years before she died, so I could still reconstruct my 1973 report. Whenever.\***

The only thing worse than frantic social activity, Bruce, is no one wanting to spend time with you.

Snow is falling, for the second day in a row, and only the third snowfall of this winter. I am going this evening to a performance of a play in Toronto, mostly by subway train after driving to the subway station, then walking from a subway station. Included in the walking will be a visit to Toronto's best used book store.

Another comparison: *SFC* is like a garden, a garden that has been years in the making; a large garden with many sections, impressive views; admired by its visitors. But unlike a garden, *SFC* will outlive its creator.

(15 December 2015)

Snow is not guaranteed this century on Christmas Day but this fall of snow from the last two days likely will remain. You might not credit this statement, Bruce, but I enjoy moving snow in the dark and quiet of a winter night, as I did from our driveway around midnight earlier today.

(16 December 2013)





**GIAN PAOLO COSSATO**  
**Cannaregio 3825, Calle Fontana,**  
**30121-Venezia, Italy**

I realise, in hindsight, that I should have clarified the meaning of the image supplied. The cards forming a pentagon were found among the papers left by my ancestors, printed very likely in 1912 soon after the San Marco Tower had been rebuilt (see underneath).

Age notwithstanding, they still have a ring of modernity.

The one at the very bottom says on the wall, 'For the safety of monuments, songs and sounds are forbidden.' The policeman says: 'In contravention' which stands for 'fine' in Venetian. Today there are areas of Venice where young people spend the night doing exactly that; plus the use of bongo drums and, unfortunately, drugs (which 100 years ago did not exist, wine being the only way to ecstasy, no pun intended). Therefore vibrations represent more than ever a danger.

On the left: 'Next century! Look there, foreigner: That's the bell-tower that fell.' However peculiar it might appear, I saw people dragging bicycles up to San Marco Square. Dragging not driving (which in Venice you cannot do, also very impractical should you try).

Next above: 'Attempt against the solidity of monuments!' You see a dog-catcher in action and a lady at the window who shouts to the policemen, 'Collar that piddling dog before the building collapses'

On the right of the previous: it refers to the fall of the San Marco Bell-tower. The guy with the binoculars is looking at the San Stefano Tower, and the comment

above the lantern with the policeman says: 'Bell-tower on the verge of falling', while the other bell-tower (in this case the San Marco one) is actually falling and is described with the words (on the right side), 'Standing bell-tower!' and at the foot 'Guaranteed without danger!' The phrase in the middle says: 'Verdict of the board!' At the time the board had decreed that the San Stefano Tower was on shaky grounds while the San Marco one was a model of stability. Funny thing is that up to now the San Stefano one is still standing, however slightly leaning, as it was a century ago, while the San Marco ... see below for the real story.

The last one that completes the pentagon is more that ever the epitome of what's happening to Venice today. (Of course Rome, Florence etc., not to mention places like Pompei are steeped to the last brick in the same sort of trouble.) Antiquity might be a blessing but also a curse. How far into the future can you stretch the attempts to mend the past to make it look like it was new? And at what cost? Anyhow the bloke on the left bellows a warning to the dame on the balcony: 'Milady, the crack is getting broader and broader!'

'Due tuffi nel passato' means 'Two plunges into the past'. And further below 'Let's toast to SF'.

The chap on my left is Robert Sheckley (2000). And as a measure of the ravages of time I am enclosing a picture of Bob and myself in San Marco Square shot in June 1977.

What follows is a short history of what happened to the San Marco Bell-Tower on the 14th of July 1902. In case you are interested you'll find an abundant selection of pictures googling 'campanile di san marco crollo' with the actual moment of the collapse.



### History

At the beginning of July 1902, a crack was noted on the north-east corner of the belltower at the height of the roof of the loggia. The crack widened dangerously in just a few days, rapidly extending upwards until on 13 July it reached the bell chamber. The following morning the bell tower gave way, collapsing in on itself in the deserted square. It had been evacuated, people expecting the worst.

The collapse also destroyed the north corner of Sansovino's library and the loggia, which was later reconstructed using the original fragments salvaged. The collapse also irrevocably damaged four of the five bells. Only the so-called 'Marangona' emerged practically intact.

A resolution to reconstruct the bell tower was passed that same evening by an extraordinary session of the City Council. A ceremony was held on 25 April 1903 to lay the first stone and the new belltower was inaugurated on 25 April 1912.

No reference was intended to 'Gravity' with the woman floating in space at the very top of the image. The name is Valentina Tereshkova.

(26 December 2013)

My address is always the same. There I was born and there I still live. In 1898 my great-grandfather, at the time mayor of the small Burano's Island and pharmacist by profession, bought an old apothecary in Venice and the first floor above, expanding his activity. (At the time he had two pharmacies in Burano.) Now the first floor has been turned into two apartments and the pharmacy has changed hands several times and half of it has become first a camera store, then a pub and now a bank.

I was interested in your reference to Murnane's *History of Books*, which you mention in *SF Commentary* 85, about the value of books on shelves. I look at them and wonder. Shreds of memory getting thinner and thinner, albeit with the comfort of some remarkable flashes now and then. Sometimes even the titles of the few hundreds I have translated are turning into a blur, not to mention their content. Perhaps age is beginning to take its toll. I have undergone cerebral NMR (MRI) and CAT with inconclusive results, so far, also in connection with a tremor affecting my left hand. Still, life goes on. I've just

scanned a story, *Othello the Moor of Venice*, by the Italian artist Dino Battaglia, which will be published for the first time in Italy in one of four volumes I am working on, collecting works about Venice by various artists. Battaglia (now deceased) is considered one of the best Italian illustrators of modern times. But this specific story had never seen the light in his own country, till now. It was published in 1966, in installments, by Fleetway Publications (UK) in the educational magazine *Look and Learn*. The issues of the same run were also hosting an SF story, 'The Silent Men', by James Muirhead, who later has become rather known as a vulgariser.

(3 January 2013)

### STEVE SNEYD

4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield,  
West Yorkshire HD5 8PB, England

'Kipple' is not a Philip Dick coinage per se, although his meaning — 'entropy', general unstoppable accumulation of gunge with time — is very different from its earlier meaning. It's an old English dialect word from the north of England. It gets into Wright's monster dialect dictionary (now, sadly, vanished from our town's reference library) as meaning sexual congress/mating/coupling. It later turned up in a music hall sketch, from the late nineteenth century, when the man chatting up the woman says, 'Do you like Kipling?' She replies, 'I don't know. I've never kipped.'

I've often wondered where Phil Dick came across the word, unless the joke crossed the Pond and somehow found a home in California.

In further reference to P. K. Dick: I hardly thought that Ridley Scott was attempting to follow the text of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in *Blade Runner*. Like a jazzman with a melody, he was riffing with its mood and setting. The book and the film are two quite separate artworks linked thematically.

'Eando Binder' takes a 'they', not a 'he': Ean and Oscar Binder, brothers, used the name for their writings.

The Stiles back cover of *SF Commentary* 85, showing the multi-eyed vagina-dentated demon, is a fine tribute to H. P. Lovecraft, who has taken a recent giant leap into public consciousness. His name can now be used by

mainstream journalists as a shorthand for horror fiction and movies, without the need to explain to readers who he was.

I see a wonderful place name in your WAHFs: Dacula, Georgia. The local citizens must be tempted to add an 'r' in order to attract vampire fans as tourists.

'Funny animal' comics have always included a lot of social and cultural comment, especially in *Fritz the Cat*, *Sloopy*, and *Flook*, which included subtle digs at McCarthyism, etc. through the years.

In T. S. Eliot's work, I would agree with Ray Wood that 'Marina' is his most musically beautiful poem. It's ironic that it was inspired by Shakespeare's dullest play, *Pericles*, supposedly actually written in collaboration with a hack who doubled as a brothel-keeper.

I did try *Blackout*, one of Connie Willis's two Blitz novels, but the Coventry sequence was as far as I got. I found her jokiness wearisome. Black humour might have worked, but not hers. I felt a wrongness of atmosphere, and just gave up.

(22 November 2013)

**\*brg\* Kate Atkinson's most recent novel *Life After Life* offers a much more engrossing and chilling fictional reconstruction of the Blitz than Connie Willis does in *Breakout/All Clear*.\***

**MILT STEVENS**

**6325 Keystone St.,  
Simi Valley, CA 93063, USA**

In *SF Commentary* 85, I see your reading habits are somewhat similar to mine. Most of our reading is from years past. Last year, I read two of Olaf Stapledon's novels. Most of my reading is later than that, but it could be from any time in the last century. The Hugo Awards do drag me back to the present for at least four or five novels. Unfortunately, I find myself becoming increasingly unimpressed with the Hugo nominees. Maybe I am becoming more jaded, or maybe the electorate is becoming less discriminating. For 2012, one of the nominees was about zombies. That gives me a creepy feeling in a bad sort of way.

I think you are right about many short stories having ambiguous titles. Part of the problem is the disappearance of interior illustrations. The illustrations functioned as a memory tag for the stories. At best, they added quite a bit to the story. Unfortunately, cover art has suffered from increasing clutter and diminished size. Interior illustrations have disappeared altogether.

In 2012, there was one short story writer who really impressed me. Catherine Shaffer had three short stories in *Analog*. I think all three would make reasonable movies. 'Interstellar Incident' would make an animated feature. It was about two junior diplomats, one human and one alien, who have the unfortunate task of planning a dinner for two species who find the eating habits of the other species disgusting. 'Trianium Soul' is about a sociopath who has to accept an implant that gives her a conscience. 'The North Revena Ladies Literary Society' is about an apparently average housewife who isn't. It also involves time travel and terrorists who replace parts

of their brains with computer chips.

Elaine Cochrane has certainly assembled an impressive list of books about physics of the goshwow variety. I read *A Brief History of Time* when it appeared. I remember the bit about black holes evaporating. According to the book, time might run backwards after the universe began collapsing on itself. This would make it extremely inconvenient for life. In the years since that book was published, new cosmological theories have been appearing fairly regularly. I haven't been paying much attention. I'm not sure whether I am afraid I won't understand the new theory, or I'm afraid that I will. The surest sign of insanity is when everything starts making sense.

In a universe with dark energy, you wouldn't turn on the light. You would turn off the darkness. That thought makes my head hurt.

(5 January 2014)

For years, my vision had been getting worse, and my letter-hacking became more and more perfunctory. Then I bought a software package called Jaws, which reads computer screens. It sounds something like Stephen Hawking with a speech impediment, but you can get used to it. Reading fanzines at efanzines.com became quite easy. I'd already shifted to audible books, and I've now shifted to audible fanzines as well. I thought nothing would ever stop me from collecting various paper publications, but this series of events has.

(7 January 2014)

**JASON BURNETT**

**PO Box 18496, Minneapolis MN 55418, USA**

I'd never heard of George Turner before reading about him here. Your writeup has made me curious enough to check him out. Unfortunately my local library system doesn't have a copy of *The Sea and Summer (Drowning Towers)*, but it does have *Genetic Soldier*, *The Destiny Makers*, and *Brain Child*. I checked out and read both *Brain Child* and *The Destiny Makers*. I enjoyed both — Turner's style reminds me of that of John Brunner (or my memory of Brunner, last read about 25 years ago) and he obviously put a lot of thought into extrapolating his future. My only complaint is with his endings; not with the endings themselves so much as with the manner of their unveiling. By the time Turner was writing these books, mysteries had moved away from assembling all the suspects in a room so the detective can explain everything, but he seems stuck in the rut.

**\*brg\* That's an observation about George Turner's SF novels that nobody else has ever made — that the endings resemble those of the suspects-assembled-in-a-room-at-the-end mystery novels of Agatha Christie. I hope you can catch up with *The Sea and Summer (Drowning Towers)* soon.\***

Jennifer Bryce's writeup of *Naqoyqatsi* has reinforced my desire to someday see the 'Qatsi' trilogy. I've seen clips on YouTube and was very impressed with those bits. I think it's rather a shame that the ever-rising cost of producing movies (despite the fact that the proliferation



of technology should be driving the costs down) discourages experimental, non-narrative movie-making. Some movies play around with alternative forms of narrative (*The Fountain* and *Pulp Fiction* come immediately to mind), but most movies are stuck in the White King's formula for storytelling: 'Begin at the beginning ... and go on till you come to the end: then stop.'

(9 January 2014)

**FRED LERNER**

**81 Worcester Avenue, White River Junction,  
VT 05001, USA**

I retired from my job as a bibliographer on 11 January, so now I've got time to catch up on some of my reading. This included *SF Commentary* 85, though reading it didn't really put me ahead of the game, for it offered an abundance of suggestions for further reading.

One thing I expect to be doing is rereading books that I didn't much like the first time around, but are favourites of people whose opinions I respect. Thus I'll probably take *The Last Unicorn* off my shelf to see if I can get over my visceral objection to any tale in which a magician is called Schmendrick. (As this is the only thing I remember about the book, you can see what a strong negative impression it made.) I haven't got any such unfortunate memories of Alan Garner's books, but you've made a strong case for me to have another look at them.

The first book that this issue inspired me to read was *The Falling Woman* by Pat Murphy, and I have Mark Plummer to thank for that. I've had the book on my shelves for years, and I don't know why I never read it before. The novel is set among Mayan ruins in the Yucatan, and perhaps one reason I fell into it so easily last week is that my wife and I recently returned from a week-long trip to Costa Rica. This was our first experience of the tropics, and although our focus was on nature we did get to one museum, the Museo de Oro in San Jose. There we saw many examples of pottery and other artifacts; and while these were from a different culture, they had enough in common with the sort of thing that Liz Butler's expedition uncovered to give me more of an understanding of her motivations and experiences than I might otherwise have been able to feel. ('Whatever happened to Pat Murphy' you asked. According to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, where she co-authors the 'Science' column with Paul Doherty, she works for 'Klutz, a publisher of how-to books for kids'. Though *F&SF* says that she also writes science fiction, she publishes it in places that I don't see.)

I must mention Jennifer Bryce's comments on the musical performances she attended. I haven't got much of an appreciation for music; I'm just not capable of actually listening to it, unless there are words that I can follow. (Perhaps in my retirement I'll find some opportunity to learn how to listen.) Reading Jennifer's reviews gives me some sense of what I'm missing, and makes me wish I could attend a concert with her, or spend an evening having her guide me through some of her favourite recordings. Let me thank her here — and add that I expect to add some of the books she mentions to

my reading list as well.

(7 February 2014)

**ROBYN WHITELEY**

**10 Brady Street, Richmond VIC 3121**

I've been thinking of you off and on all morning because I started the morning with one of your magazines while I was sitting on the toilet. I remember thinking that I don't know any of the people whose letters you publish but I enjoy the letters. I was trying to think yesterday why I didn't get into music the way other people do, and I reckon it was because I spent all my spare time writing letters!

It's the same magazine [*SFC*85] that contains Elaine's article on books about physics. I didn't understand most of it and I haven't read any of the books, but I was struck by the way you can know someone for years and know so little about them — I had no idea Elaine read such books.

**\*brg\* You can't do her job — freelance book editor, mainly of maths and science textbooks — by being merely another editor. You have to know what you're talking about, because many of the authors you are editing are a bit hazy on much that goes on in science. Elaine keeps up with *New Scientist*, etc, and has read the kind of books she reviews in *SFC*, but more important is her close interest in what is actually going on in science and the study of the natural world. She has all the skills I don't have, and is much better than me at the one skill I do have, which is editing the English language.**

Then I came in and turned on the computers and while I was waiting for them to get to the point of use, I sorted a bit more of the pile on the desk and came across more things about music that I've been saving to send to you.

Finally, I opened the organiser to find out who's celebrating today and there I found that it's your thirty-fifth wedding anniversary today, so congratulations, and I hope you have a very pleasant day celebrating in whatever way is appropriate.

(3 March 2014)

**\*brg\* Thanks very much for the thirty-fifth anniversary wishes. I must admit that both of us had completely forgotten the date. As with most years except our thirtieth, we would probably have forgotten for a couple of days. The other reason for this is that our actual thirty-sixth anniversary of becoming a couple is 5 March. We tried to have our wedding as close as possible to a year after we got together, but the dates did not quite coincide.**

**Thanks, as always, for the concert programs you've been sending us, and thanks for the free concert tickets during 2013.\***



## We also heard from:

WERNER KOOPMANN (Buchholz, Germany), who has sent many things over recent months, including a whole box of books, postcards from a cycling holiday, and his own photos from a recent trip to Oslo. He asks to become a downloader, because the postage for the most recent issues of SFC came to '(2,60 A\$ times 3), which is about 12 Euros; for which you get two good meals in our favourite restaurant (Brazilian) in Jesteburg.');

DAVID McDONALD (Melbourne);

DAMIEN BRODERICK (San Antonio, Texas) ('SFC 85 is terrific, and eclectic. Even electric in places.');

NICK BUCHANAN (somewhere in USA);

GUY LILLIAN (Shreveport, Louisiana);

PAUL DI FILIPPO (who sent two books, by airmail, in exchange);

LOUIS DE VRIES (Caulfield, Victoria);

RANDY BYERS (Seattle, Washington);

JEANNE MEALY (St Paul, Minnesota);

BILL BURNS (Hampstead, New York);

TARAL WAYNE (Toronto);

TERRY KEMP (somewhere in USA) (son of the illustrious EARL KEMP), who sent me a copy of a very favourable review he wrote of SFC 85, including: 'There's a lot going on inside this zine since it is almost the size of a typical paperback novel. ... The letters are the best part of this zine, they run the gamut of subjects just as they also include writers from around the world';

JUDY BUCKRICH (Gardenvale, Victoria) (who wants me to do a lot more to promote the re-release of George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* in paperback, despite the almost complete lack of interest from Hachette Australia, the distributor);

ROG PEYTON (Birmingham, England) (who sent me two delectable CD compilations of the best 1960s and early 1970s songs by Lee Hazlewood);

DORA LEVAKIS (who reports from the Top End that Lance, human male, and Thomas, feline male, 'continue with their regular competition of who is going to sit first on Lance's armchair. Amusing that Thomas sees Lance as some type of competition.');

DANIEL KING (Perth, Western Australia) (enquiring about his article about J. G. Ballard, which he had hoped would appear in the middle of 2013, reports that he is no longer an academic, 'but mainly works with asylum seekers');

IOLA MATHEWS (South Yarra, Victoria) (who 'enjoyed the pieces about books and movies (even though I don't read SF) and was bowled over by Elaine's erudition on science matters. I once tried to read Stephen Hawking but could only understand a fraction of it.');

JOSEPH NICHOLAS (London) ('Did you know that I turn 60 next month, and will retire from full-time employment on 31 March 2014? I'm rather looking forward to it, even though my income will contract to a third of its current level and foreign travel will become rather more of a luxury. On the other hand, I will qualify for free travel throughout London, so that might be some compensation!');

ROBERT LICHTMAN (Oakland, California) (who was 'a little surprised at receiving another \*brg\*, since I somehow got the impression that you'd replaced that title with *Treasure*. I don't have any apazines pending just now, happily, and I'm working on another *Trap Door* that I hope/plan to mail out before the year is over. It'll be No 30 and the 30th annish, plus mark 55 years since my first fanzine — a bumper convergence, yes?' Yes — and \*brg\* will appear mainly in ANZAPA, with very few spare copies, while *Treasure 2* will appear Real Soon Now);

DEREK KEW (Bulleen, Victoria) (who was 'pleased to see a photo of Vol Molesworth in your latest SFC. There was a time in my early youth I couldn't find another SF magazine and I chanced on his flimsy publications beginning with *The Stratosphere Patrol* then *Spaceward Ho!* and finally (I think) *The Three Rocketeers*. I still have them, though two are falling to pieces and held together by a paper clip. Surprisingly *Spaceward Ho!* is in reasonable condition. I never knew anything about him. ... Tell Elaine I have read nearly all the books she described in her article. I still have them.');

ALEX SKOVRON (Caulfield North, Victoria) (who enclosed his subscription renewal, although I suspect he is currently subscribed up to No 186, not No 86: 'I enjoyed Elaine's survey of books on the shape of the universe, quantum physics, time-space, etc. We're off to Israel for a month just before Xmas — a wedding in the family, and our first chance in 35 years to catch up with a country full of relatives.');

JOHN LITCHEN (Robina, Queensland) (who tells me that he's just started on part 9 of his ongoing autobiography, which puts him three episodes ahead of those I have published so far in \*brg\* and *Treasure* — 'I may reset my book *Fragments from a Life* ... [for] people out there who may be interested in it, especially those of Greek heritage. I also redid the *Attributes a Writer Needs* book, now on Amazon);

COLIN STEELE (Canberra, ACT) (who reports gleefully that winner of the recent ACT Writing and Publishing Awards: Fiction Book Category was — tantara! — our own Kaaron Warren, for her *Through Splintered Walls* (Twelfth Planet Press), a book that continues to pick up awards all over the place, including a World Fantasy Award);

KAARON WARREN (Canberra, ACT) (not only celebrating the ACT award, but also for her recent Shirley Jackson Award);

GERALD MURNANE (Goroke, Victoria) (who sent several very entertaining letters);

THOMAS BULL (Doncaster, Victoria) (who Keeps In Touch, and who gave me two books when I was least expecting them).

Thanks also to the people who sent Elaine and me Christmas cards, including those who sent their annual family newsletters, both in print and as internet attachments: MERV and HELENA BINNS (South Oakleigh, Victoria); HENRY, JUDY, EMILY,

and ANNE GASKO (Wallan, Victoria); MARIANN McNAMARA (Adelaide, South Australia); my sister JEANETTE GILLESPIE and her partner DUNCAN BROWN (Guildford, Victoria); ALAN, JUDY, TIM, and ANDREW WILSON (Glen Iris, Victoria); and MARK,

JAE HEE, MICHELLE, and DAVID LAWSON (Hornsby Heights, NSW).

— Bruce Gillespie, 29 December 2013

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## And now the feature letters ...

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### Yvonne Rousseau Gentill Miles off course

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

Thank you for the latest *\*brg\** and for *SF Commentary* 85, October 2013, where the caption to Ditmar's cover, 'The Alien Race', made me laugh aloud.

In this issue, also, Steve Jeffery commented on Ditmar's 'The Aliens', the cover for *SFC* 84, as 'something special, and thanks to Vida Weiss for inspiring it'. I have forwarded this comment to Vida (my daughter), who is very pleased. As Ditmar explained in *SF Commentary* 80A, August 2010, Vida had for many years wondered what kind of reflections would be seen by someone standing inside a pentagonal mirror room. When she mentioned this during a Friday-night gathering at the Ciao restaurant in Melbourne on 16 April 2010, people became very excited and began arguing and making diagrams all over the protective paper on the restaurant tables. The scene was enchanting: like travelling back in time to undergraduate days. Afterwards, Elaine Cochrane emailed to Ditmar, wondering whether his VUE world-3D-modelling software could produce appropriate images — as indeed it did.

Now, in *SF Commentary* 85, Elaine and Ditmar again unite in the cause of enlightenment: naming and summarising trustworthy guides to 'real gosh! wow!' current scientific thinking. They may yet inspire me to make another and more successful attempt to read Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (1988).

Unable to respond to all that I'd like to, I concentrate instead on something from Jennifer Bryce's reading list for 2012: **Sulari Gentill, *Miles Off Course*** (Pantera Press, Neutral Bay, NSW, 2012). This is set in Australia in autumn 1933: the third novel in the 'Rowland Sinclair' crime series.

Like Jennifer, I found the novel 'a little disappointing' — although unlike Jennifer I haven't read anything else in this series. Reading Gentill, Jennifer is 'fascinated by her skill at dealing with history (particularly having "real" people such as Norman Lindsay and Miles Franklin, pop up)'. Unfortunately, Gentill's portrait of Miles Franklin is both hostile and inaccurate: representing Franklin as a humourless feminist and a figure of fun.

Miles Franklin and Norman Lindsay are important and somewhat controversial figures in Australian literary lore. Both were born in the year 1879. Miles died in 1954 and Norman in 1969.

Norman Lindsay was an artist and a writer and is most fondly remembered for *The Magic Pudding* (1918) — which he described as 'this little bundle of piffle'. In 2008, Philip Pullman (author of *His Dark Materials*) included *The Magic Pudding* in his Waterstone's Writer's Table list of 40 favourite books: 'If anyone can read this without laughing, heaven help them.'

Miles Franklin was 21 in July 1901 when she published her first novel, *My Brilliant Career*. She was aided by the writer Henry Lawson, who showed the manuscript to his own literary agent in London, and who provided a preface.

**Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin** was the author's full baptismal name. She had selected 'Miles Franklin' because she wanted 'to pose as a bald-headed seer of the sterner sex'. This wish was thwarted when Lawson's preface described her as a 'little bush girl'. In addition, Lawson pretended that he had known by the time he had read three pages that 'the story had been written by a girl'. In fact, in that era of Australian masculine 'mateship', Lawson had not been able to tell until they met whether (as Miles expressed it) she was 'a mate or a mere miss'.

Overseas, the author of *My Brilliant Career* was compared with Emily Brontë and Émile Zola. In Australia, however, some readers were more interested in identifying themselves as the originals of the characters involved in the fictional Sybylla Melvyn's adventures. In particular, her Uncle George accused her of lampooning his family as the M'Swats: the vulgar and dirty household where Sybylla was sent from her grandmother's cattle station to be governess, just as Miles herself was sent in January 1897 at the age of 17 to be governess for her uncle's family. Sybylla and Miles were equally unwilling.

Sulari Gentill introduces yet another version, where Miles Franklin in 1897 becomes governess not to Franklins or M'Swats but to the upper-class Sinclair family, eight years before Rowland Sinclair was born. The fictional Mrs Sinclair's advertisement for a governess for her sons Wilfred and Aubrey appears among the chapter epigraphs, which are mostly from Australian newspapers of the 1930s, and which agreeably enhance the narrative.

Crime writers have become rather fond of inserting famous figures from real life into their novels. For example, Nicola Upson recently published the fourth in a series starring the writer 'Josephine Tey' (Elizabeth Mackintosh) as detective. Science fiction includes similar figures: recently, for example, H. G. Wells in Christopher Priest's *The Adjacent* (2013). In both genres, the author must cater for readers at both extremes: those who know almost nothing about the real-world character and those who know a good deal.

In *Miles Off Course*, Miles Franklin is imagined in 1933 as lolling for several weeks in the Rules Point Guesthouse in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales (in reality, this was a region where she had many relatives). She is calling herself 'Sarah Brent' and loudly announcing to one and all that she is 'incognito' and is having trouble finishing writing a novel — whose working title turns out to be *My Brilliant Monkey*.

'Sarah Brent' is identified as Miles Franklin only in Gentill's 'Epilogue': 'In 1933 Endeavour Press published

*Bring the Monkey*, a light novel by Miles Franklin, illustrated by Norman Lindsay.'

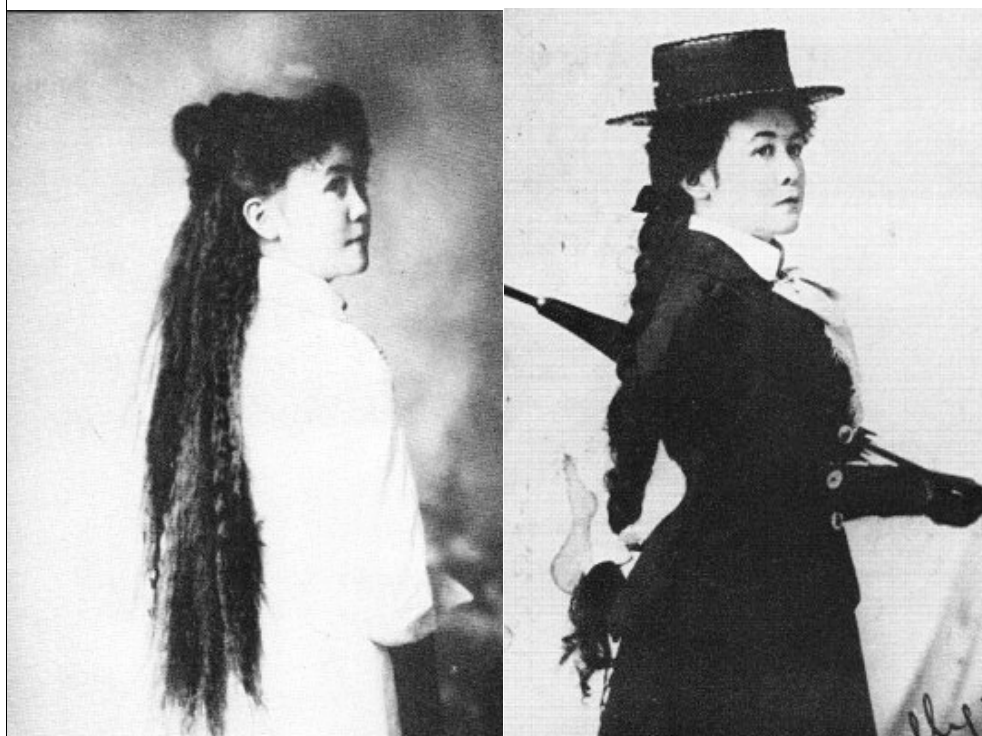
In fact, this was the second publication of *Bring the Monkey*. It was already completed in 1933, when Gentill's 'Sarah Brent' was 'muttering, "The words, where are my words?"'. Indeed, it was first published in 1931 by Cecil Palmer in London. In the same year, Miles Franklin published not only *Old Blastus of Bandicoot* but also *Back to Bool Bool*: the third novel to appear under her pseudonym 'Brent of Bin Bin'.

To hint that she is writing about Miles Franklin, Gentill includes the use of 'Brilliant' in a title — an author with unusually abundant hair — a manuscript about a monkey — shorthand entries in a diary (in a code that was finally deciphered in 1981 by Dorothy Hayes) — 'Brent' as a surname — and 'Sarah Frankling' as an early alias (which in fact was used not in 1897 but in 1903 to 1904 when Miles spent 12 months in domestic service for an undercover journalistic stunt). In addition, Miles Franklin's background included years in Chicago and London and her six months service with a Scottish Women's Hospitals unit in Macedonia in 1917–18. To solve the problem of conveying this biographical information to readers, Gentill causes the character herself to boast to others about her own past. Unfortunately, this creates the false impression that she is a boring skite.

Among Gentill's clues, 'Brilliant' is the most likely to be recognised, since it applies also to the 1979 film of *My Brilliant Career*. Here, in Eleanor Witcombe's adaptation, the heroine makes an uncomplicated choice in rejecting an eligible marriage in order to devote herself to her art (her 'career').

The second-most recognisable clue is the woman's 'extraordinary amount of grey hair piled in a bouffant knot on her head'. Yet this is completely anachronistic. Like the youthful character Laleen in *Back to Bool Bool*, Miles Franklin considered that uncut hair at the age of 53 looked 'frowsy'. Gentill nevertheless makes fun of 'Miss Brent' as incommoding others with her 'extraordinary volume of hair'.

Often, we treat our elders with disrespect. Although Norman Lindsay and Miles Franklin were both regarded as rebels in their youth, they lived long enough for their juniors and successors to resent them as entrenched and restrictive. In particular, there has been controversy about Miles Franklin's bequest of funding for the annual Miles Franklin Literary Award, first presented in 1957. As her biographer Jill Roe observes (2008), 'the prize now has the standing of an



antipodean Booker or Pulitzer.' George Turner won it in 1962 — before he began writing science fiction.

Miles Franklin had specified that the winning work, in addition to being of 'highest literary merit', should present 'Australian life in any of its phases'. This stipulation is explained by the state of publishing that she described in an address to the English Association at the University of Sydney in November 1940. She quoted a local bookseller who would 'never stock that Australian stuff, unless someone orders it specially' and also a New York agent's advice against going deeper than the stereotypical bushranger or beachcomber when writing about Australia (to which Miles replied: 'Is the English or the Russian or the French author rejected because of his great love for and understanding of his own country?').

Fashions in publishing have changed since then. Australian settings are no longer scorned. In addition, the judging panel has made some unpopular decisions about what is eligible for the award. Miles Franklin has tended to be blamed for these, as if she would necessarily have agreed with the panel. Somewhat hostile comment about the awards has usually been accompanied by the image of an elderly Miles Franklin — looking, as her biographer Jill Roe observes, 'like someone's aunt'. In earlier years, the most familiar image dated instead from about 1900: an elegantly shapely Miles, with astonishingly abundant long dark hair of which she was understandably proud.

In Gentill's novel, the frumpish 'Miss Brent' notices Rowland Sinclair's extraordinary resemblance to his brother Aubrey, who was killed in France in 1916 while fighting in the Great War. Seventeen years after Aubrey's death, she happens to be carrying a photographic postcard showing Aubrey as a soldier in Egypt at the age of 21. Rowland and his friends (Edna, Milton, and Clyde) recognise it as a duplicate of the card on Rowland's mantelpiece at home.

As governess to Wilfred and Aubrey, 'Miss Brent' supposedly developed a motherly fondness for Aubrey, exchanging letters with him and even revisiting the Sinclair family. Just before Aubrey enlisted as a soldier, he sent her a completed manuscript for her critique. If Aubrey had really existed, Miles Franklin would have carried this manuscript with her from Chicago to London — where Wilfred would later have sent her the news of Aubrey's death. Since then, 'Miss Brent' has kept Aubrey's manuscript among her papers, unsure how his parents would react to it. After she sends it to Rowland, he compares this youthful novel (written before the onset of war) to the unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (product of the war's aftermath): 'like Lawrence with a sense of humour'.

Meanwhile, Edna has read the newly completed manuscript of the 'monkey novel', which she finds 'terrible. Simply awful'. Miles Franklin's *Bring the Monkey* was a parody of the British detective novel of the time. In real life, Norman Lindsay considered it 'a delightful thing'. It made him laugh outright in many places. Miles Franklin was visiting him and his wife Rose in the New Year of 1933, when he pleased her by offering to provide sketches of the monkey as chapter decorations for the Australian edition. By contrast, the Norman Lindsay of Gentill's imagination has to be tricked by Rowland into

illustrating the novel. He then fumes about its author as 'that woman' — for whom the monkey that Lindsay depicts is not intelligent enough.

Like Lindsay, I sometimes laughed aloud when reading *Bring the Monkey*: for example, when the narrator is trying to dissuade her friend from keeping a monkey. She advises her to think of the smell. "'I never heard that monkeys *smell*!'" — "Then you must have been very deaf in the Zoo.'" This riposte brilliantly conjures up the depressing zoos of the past where visitors exclaimed loudly about the stink of overcrowded monkey houses with concrete floors where frantic animals clung to the bars and begged for peanuts.

Although Rowland also laughs aloud when reading the monkey book, it is with derision (shared by Milton and Clyde, who make him read out to them the passages he is laughing at). In real life, too, the book is not a universal favourite.

Questioned by Edna, Miss Brent emphatically denies having owned a monkey herself. She embarks on a characteristic 'tirade': 'The monkey, Percy, is the key to the underlying message of the novel. It symbolises the selfish frivolity of the upper classes. A victim of fashionable excess, taken from his natural environs to be paraded for the amusement of the idle rich, and yet the hero of this tale.'

In Colin Roderick's biography of Miles Franklin (1982), there is a useful photograph taken in London in 1932. Miles Franklin is holding the inspiration for her novel's Percy: Peter, the rhesus monkey belonging to her friend Jean Hamilton. Her hair has been stylishly cut and is still dark — unlike the hair attributed to 'Miss Brent'. Indeed, according to Jill Roe's biography, as late as 1951 Miles Franklin's hair 'was still brown with just a few grey threads'.

There seems no reason for Gentill to deny the existence of the monkey, except as an excuse to ascribe to Miles Franklin a very unconvincing literary analysis. By contrast, in January 1933 the publisher P. R. Stephensen wrote to Nettie Palmer that Miles was 'the most gifted





woman writer in the world': 'Images fall from her like ripe fruit even when she is talking'.

Unlike Gentill's bossy and interfering 'Miss Brent', Miles Franklin was a witty feminist. She did not make vague allusions to 'the patriarchal conspiracy'. Instead, she wrote in *My Career Goes Bung* (her sequel to *My Brilliant Career*) about the 'cowardly inconsistency' of a man who complains to Sybylla Melvyn 'that a woman's whole aim in life was to chase some poor devil and trap him into having to slave for her ever after'. Sybylla reflects in response 'that women were compelled to marry by nearly all other occupations being closed to them, and by the pressure of public opinion. Men want

it both ways like a bully arranging a game.'

Finally, I am puzzled that Gentill refers to the 'hood' and the 'trunk' of a car, where Australians in 1933 would have talked of the bonnet and the boot. Perhaps we should adopt the attitude of Margery Allingham's detective Albert Campion in *Flowers for the Judge* (1936). We should be 'duly sympathetic' towards 'young persons who voluntarily shut themselves up half their lives alone, scribbling down lies in the pathetic hope of entertaining and instructing their fellows'. Or perhaps, in inventing 'Sarah Brent', Gentill is merely taking vengeance for the M'Swats, on behalf of Uncle George Franklin.

(1 December 2013)

## Leigh Edmonds

### Fan history and cultural history

**LEIGH EDMONDS**  
**Ballarat East VIC 3350**

Feel free to write about shared fan memories. I really don't remember very much of what happened in my personal past except, of course, a few excruciatingly embarrassing moments that erupt into my mind when they are least needed. This is why, when it comes to writing history, I write out thousands of individual cards containing the source information I need for the writing.

Talking of which: don't work up too much anticipation for the history of Australian fandom I'm thinking about. It's not that I don't think about it — in fact, I have most of the structure worked out — but at the moment I don't have the time or the resources to do all the research needed. While talking to people at the most recent Aussiecon it came to me that I needed a set time period to cover so that the work was actually manageable, so I'm focusing on the period from Olympicon (1956) to Aussiecon (1975). There will also probably be a prelude summarising what had gone before, from the Sydney Futurians to the Melbourne SF Club. No doubt the evidence will give greater shape to the story and that will depend on the research.

It might not escape your attention that this period also begins during the reign of Menzies and concludes in the reign of Whitlam. I will probably draw links between the cultural changes taking place in Australia to the environment in which Australian fandom could reach some sort of maturity, both as a social group and as a source of the literature itself and a focus for well-informed and well-written criticism. I'm thinking of bringing the story to an end with Le Guin's Aussiecon 1 Guest of Honour speech about knocking down the ghetto walls to let the rest of the world in. In terms of the culture of fandom, this seems to me to have the same turning-point status as Al Grasby's multiculturalism speech of 1973 or 1974. As you can see, I'd like to write more than a record of events: more a story about a group of people finding a place for themselves in their sub-

culture and their place in the wider culture, and their subculture's place in it too.

But all this will have to wait for some time while I knock off some other projects. I have a three-volume history of Australian civil aviation (a love that goes further back than fandom), a PhD thesis, and a manuscript about the structure and organisation of the RAAF during the Pacific War that I got a grant to write, but which never got published. There's also a short history of the old Bendigo Gaol that fell through the cracks and never got published, even though I was paid for it. I'd like to get all this into print before I start working on anything new, because I have a bad habit of researching and writing something and then getting excited by the next project and not finishing off the old project. In addition to all that, I have something like 20 or so stf stories in first and second draft that I should do something about too.

The other thing putting off the fannish history is the resources. At the moment Valma is just not well enough to travel, though we're working on it. Our plan is to spend winters living in our flat in Perth. Purely by good fortune, the Western Australian government has built a railway line that stops not too far from our flat and then runs down past the Murdoch University campus at Murdoch and also its campus at Rockingham. This means that I will have good access to the fannish collection that Grant Stone established there during his time as librarian. It's just a matter of getting to Perth as planned, and I can't say when that will be at the moment.

So, yes it will happen, but when is the question. Unless, of course, I get the invitation that many of our friends are starting to get to go off to the perpetual convention in the Tucker Hotel in the sky.

(21 October 2013)

Some interesting comments here about fmz and history. I'm off to a seminar of the Professional Historians Association this coming weekend that deals with some of these points and I will be interested to see what others make of them.

I wouldn't say that the victors writing history does

away with information (historical evidence) about the losers. All that happens is that most people take for granted the stories that they are told and assume that they are true, but that doesn't change the evidence that survives. This is one of the reasons for aiming to write a history of Australian fandom, and in a way that will be interesting to fans and to a mundane readership as well.

Unlike you, I have no paying projects at the moment. The most recent one is a return to Haileybury College to write the history of their cadet unit. This came about because one of the ex-officers wanted to write a history but couldn't figure out how to do it, and got in touch with me. After a couple of discussions he decided that it was easier for him to get me to write it instead of him trying. I found the task fairly easy and I guess that the reason for this could be termed 'technique': knowing how to go about doing something, and making something look easy or effortless through a lot of hard work. That comes through having researched and written a PhD thesis under fairly gifted supervision and then having honed the technique over the years. As we historians say when we get together: people think that anyone can write history because they remember things from the past, but it's not that simple.

When I finally get around to the fan history the first place I will start is with newszines like *Etherline* and *Norstrilian News* and use them to create a skeleton on which to hang everything else. Also I'll look at the chronology in the Bicentennial collection of books and some of the other general histories like the Oxford series to see how what fans were up to links with what the wider mundane society was doing. This is long, painstaking, and often deadly dull work, but if you don't do that the

history ends up without a structure, and all good stories need structure. (I sometimes wonder if I shouldn't try to find a source of finance to bring in at least some income for the investment of what I guess would be at least a three-year project, but, as I mentioned before, I'd like to get some other projects off the table before then.)

It's a pity you won't get to visit the West. Perth is my favourite Australian city and I have very fond memories of Valma and I sitting on our back patio consuming a bottle of cheap bubbly, often with friends like fans or historians. The last time I was there (because of the Australian Tax Office project) I spent a very pleasant morning sitting with my old supervisor outside the cafe of the Cygnet Cinema (a lovely art deco theatre) chatting in the warm weather. Our flat is a block away from the Como Shops where the Cygnet is, and 11 minutes from the centre of town by bus. Of course, Perth now is much bigger than it was when we were there, but even then we rarely went further south than Fremantle and further north than Grant and Cheryl Stone's place, but I suppose that's like living in Carlton and never seeing Melbourne's outer suburbs.

Fond memories aside, we find Perth to be a much more habitable city than Melbourne or (ghod forbid) Sydney. As soon as you get out of the aeroplane you notice a difference in the air and in the light, and the drive into the city along the Great Eastern Highway (with occasional views of the Swan) is much more enjoyable than the Tullamarine Freeway. I could rattle on about Perth endlessly, but it is recommended. Perhaps you should see if you can encourage some Perth fans to make you a GoH. That's how we got there the first time.

(23 October 2013)

## Steve Jeffery

### Wherefore good talk about science fiction?

#### STEVE JEFFERY

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

My letter mentions scanning the new and forthcoming books lists and adding them to various Amazon wish lists as broad hints for Santa's little helpers, and here I am doing it again for this year.

Jo Walton's *Among Others* was already there, following a review in the latest *Vector*, as is the new Chris Beckett collection, *The Peacock Cloak* (Newcon Press, 2013). I wasn't even aware this existed, but on the strength of Beckett's debut collection, *The Turing Test*, it went straight onto the wish list, although I have to admit I wasn't as impressed with his last full novel *Dark Eden*, which suffered from turning his rebellious outcast protagonist into a cross between Robinson Crusoe and Leonardo da Vinci, (re)inventing everything he needs to stay alive and explore the world after he is exiled from the community of hidebound, myth-obsessed, stranded

colonists (which itself has echoes of Hoban's *Riddley Walker*). I assume the name *The Peacock Cloak* is a reference to the Aubrey Beardsley illustration (which also, I think, graces the cover of an old Humble Pie LP), although Martin McGrath's review doesn't mention this.

From your own list, *Ishtar* went straight on my wants list. The Kindle edition is being offered for a ridiculously low £1.99, so this is a complete no-brainer. I'm sure Elizabeth Hand used Ishtar as a character in one her works (*Waking the Moon?*). I have a couple of Hand's collections, *Last Summer at Mars Hill* and *Bibliomancy*, which really should repay re-reading sometime, but there are a couple of other collections I wasn't aware of: *Errantry: Strange Stories* (2012) and the earlier *Saffron and Brimstone* (2006), as well as *Available Dark*, the sequel to the excellent novel *Generation Loss*.

Kaaron Warren: both *Through Splintered Walls* and *The Grinding House* are available — at least in a Kindle edition — and ought to be added to the list.

Gerald Murnane's *A History of Books* is listed at £16.47 for the paperback and £14.47 for the Kindle edition. No

contest really.

All this is likely to prove a tad expensive for poor Santa, but luckily I still have part of an award from work that can be translated into Amazon gift vouchers that can be used to lighten the load on the Santa sleigh before or after Christmas.

I finally got round to watching the Julie Taymor adaptation of *The Tempest*. The gender switch, with Helen Mirren as Prospera, worked better than I expected, and brought a different perspective to the relationship between Prospero/Prospera and Miranda (an absolutely luminous Felicity Jones), more a tigress protecting her cub than an old lion bemoaning his lost pride (in both senses), although Mirren didn't shy at Prospera treating Miranda as a thing to be manipulated (for her own good, naturally — where have we all heard that before?) when it suited her plans. I could probably have done without the capering Russell Brand, though (or the Shakespeare slapstick comedy turns in the original) but it didn't distract too much.

Listening: I like a bit of electronica and funny noises (Daughter were a nice find from the BBC coverage of this year's Glastonbury, to go along with Portishead and Sigur Ros) but a lot of recent listening also falls into that genre you describe as alt.country/folk, such as The Civil Wars. We recently visited our friend Judith from the monthly pubmeets, ostensibly to go through a couple of boxes of books for anything we fancied before they went to the charity shops, but Judith also had a box of CDs left after her friend Hilary sadly died of cancer last year. I came away with about half the pile, including a lot of Thea Gilmore, Beth Orton, Gillian Welch, Heather Nova, plus a few I already had but could probably find a good home for, like Nick Drake and Rufus Wainwright. I didn't get to know Hilary well, but I was surprised at how much our musical tastes overlapped, and wished I'd got to know her better before she was too ill to come along to the meetings.

I've also been listening to a lot of Belly again. I saw them live in Philadelphia with Radiohead supporting. Radiohead's debut single 'Creep' was all over the radio before I left, so this must have been 1992 or 1993. Vikki and I saw Belly a couple of more times in the UK, once at Shepherd's Bush Empire and again at the Astoria a year or so later. Most of the songs are based on simple two- or three-major chord riffs (perfect for a technically challenged guitarist like me to strum along to), but the rhythms and drum patterns constantly shift and morph underneath them, and there are some very dark and twisted lyrics in the singalong choruses of songs like 'Gepetto' and 'Full Moon, Empty Heart'.

I remember listening to the BBC Proms broadcast of Havergal Brian's immense *Gothic Symphony*, but was it really over two years ago?

With the intriguing list of music documentaries in your list, I wish the BBC would revamp its BBC4 Friday night schedules from time to time rather than endlessly recycle the same programs, no matter how interesting they were the first time around. I can't recall the number of times they've rebroadcast the one on Allegri's *Miserere*. By now we all know it was famously banned from public performance outside the Vatican by the then Pope until a young Mozart heard it and transcribed it from memory

(the first Wilkileaks?). Enough, OK? That said, there have been some good things among the endless round of repeats, like Peter Bogdanovitch's epic four-hour documentary on Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, *Running Down a Dream*, and last night's Pink Floyd fest, centred around the Nassau Stadium concerts recorded for *A Delicate Sound of Thunder* in 1988 (oh those mullet hair-styles!).

Re alt.country: it's nice to see the return of the BBC *Transatlantic Sessions* series that preface these Friday night documentaries, mixing fiddle player Aly Bain, steel guitarist Jerry Douglas, and bass player Danny Thompson with a changing roster of guest musicians, singers, and styles, from Celtic ballads to bluegrass. Sitting strumming along on guitar is a nice way to unwind after the week and having failed to answer most of the general knowledge questions on *Mastermind*, which precedes it.

Space and time to listen to them precludes buying too many CD box sets, even at the ridiculously low prices some of the reissue sets are being offered. I have one of the first five Jeff Beck albums, several of which I have on vinyl, and recently succumbed on a whim to the Mahavishnu Orchestra box set, which included a couple of later albums I'd not heard before, between the original group breaking up and reforming for *Visions of the Emerald Beyond*. I wish there was a similar Caravan box set of the original albums, but the best I've found is a CD anthology. Anthologies always take a bit of getting used to if you're familiar with the original albums, as tracks don't follow each other in the expected order. (I've never really bought in to the idea of classical CD anthologies for that reason.) Somehow it just all seems wrong, although I suspect 90 per cent of the iPod generation have no idea what I'm talking about. Even when I rip CDs to my budget MP3 player, I tend to rip the whole album in track sequence.

It's also interesting to see someone else's take on their best books, music, and films of the year, although Jennifer Bryce's listings hasn't proved as unfortunately disruptive on my wallet as yours has, as those books by Bennett, Mantel, Barnes, and McEwan that I haven't read yet are more easily available from the library. I remember seeing the first of the Qatsi trilogy, *Koyaanisqatsi (Life Out Of Balance)* scored to Steve Reich's music back in the 1990s. I knew of (and may have seen) the second, *Powaqqatsi (Life In Transformation)*, but wasn't aware they were part of a trilogy.

Elaine Cochrane's sample of popularisations of the oddities of quantum theory and physics was nicely done, and both useful and informative for someone whose brain folded a third of the way into the first of Greg Egan's new Orthogonal series, *Clockwork Rocket*, and decided to give up following the diagrams and equations and just go along for the ride. A useful follow-on for Elaine's selected bibliography too, from Dick Jenssen. Thanks both.

I have Gleick's biography of Feynman, plus the latter's *The Meaning of It All* and *Six Easy Pieces* (so that's why I didn't understand half of it) and I've read Farmelo's biography of Dirac, *The Strangest Man*, which I remember being a bit of a monster in the size of the hardback and the strangeness of Dirac's personality and theories. Apart

from a slim undergrad primer on quantum thermodynamics from my first year chemistry course (which I didn't understand then, and don't even now), my shelves are a bit physics-light, so this is a good remedial reading list if I want to try and catch up. I tend more to books on cosmology and maths, such as Kitty Fergusson's *Measuring the Universe* and a book on the four-colour map problem, *Four Colours Suffice*, or Leonard Mlodinow's *The Drunkards Walk*, on how randomness affects our lives.

Tara ponders transplants and transfusions as a possible cure for vampirism, although with possible unintended consequences. I remember the latter was used as plot device in the movie *Near Dark*, which I thought as a copout since, if it worked, vampires would be cured by drinking the blood of non-vampires. And if they were themselves the infecting agent or vector, then surely they would just have easily transformed any whole blood they were transfused with? It didn't make sense at the time (other than to provide a romantic feel-good ending) and ruined a film that was otherwise notable for a brilliant sequence filmed inside a sun-drenched and bullet-ridden barn in which the vampires were hiding, but has since been done so many times it's become a cliché.

(4 November 2013)

Matthew Davis mentions his approach to his long article on Theodore Sturgeon (for which, thanks to both) as being 'generalist' rather than academic. Having suffered a number of McFarlane review titles, I am of the camp that considers this a positive. When I read an article, I want to know what the author/reader/critic thinks about the works she or he is reviewing rather than an undergrad style essay 'this is my [tutor's] pet theory, onto which Procrustean bed I will select, distort, and lop and ignore the evidence in order to make it fit'. The best, or at least some of the most interesting, articles are often a journey of discovery — both for the writer and the reader — rather than a working to a foregone conclusion.

I had to have a look at the ISFDb following Pete Young's comment on the indexing of your fanzines. Naturally I became sidetracked and typed some other names in the search box. Wow. I don't know whether I should be pleased or alarmed that such a large chunk of my fannish history is documented there in that level of detail. God help us if Pete starts asking about apas.

Judging by the front wing design and side pods, the F1 Ferrari on Ditmar's 'The Alien Race' on the cover of this issue would appear to be the 1999 F33 design, and I suspect the painting might have done from the 1/8th scale model. You might think the Ferrari would easily outpace the turtle on the ground, unless you've seen a

Grand Prix car leave the track and end up in the gravel trap. On sand, given the likely effect of too much wheel spin, I'd probably put my money on the turtle.

On the shelves somewhere, buried behind the TV with the oversize art books, I have an illustrated copy of Lao Tsu's *Tao Te Ching* by Wildwood Press, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, which I bought many years back largely because it also had the original Chinese characters and for the black-and-white photographs (by Jane English) that accompany the text. From your own comments to Ray about your preference in the visual arts, you might appreciate these.

My father, as a freelance photographer, would doubtless recognise a number of the cameras in Ray Wood's collection. I know he had several Pentaxes, a Praktika, a Nikon, and a couple of twin reflex Yashicas, and at one time the loan of wood and brass large-format (either 5 by 4, or 8 by 10) plate camera. I can't remember if it was actually a Gandolfi, but it was in itself as much a work of art as the pictures it captured.

He also shares your liking for black-and-white photography. When I could find (and afford) it, I would look out for the *British Journal of Photography* annual collection for Xmas or birthdays.

I'll bet somewhere there is even a Photoshop plug-in to reproduce the different grain effects of varying silver film speeds and sensitivities on a digital image. But — as with digital effects and software that claim to mimic the sound of old analogue FX pedals and guitar amps — I wonder how easy it is for a pro to still tell them apart. As software gets ever more sophisticated and computers more powerful, this tendency to a form of 'simulated authenticity' feels very PhilDickian.

Patrick McGuire wonders about other outlets for serious SF criticism than *SFC* and *NYRSF*. There's the BSFA *Vector* and *Foundation* journals in the UK, although both currently with rather erratic publishing schedules (*Foundation*, supposedly three issues per year, seems to have published only one issue since 2012). Online, there's the fanzine *Journey Planet*, but I'm not sure of any other that publish the same long critical articles of the sort that *Steam Engine Time* and *SFC* feature. Is *Riverside Quarterly* still going?

**\*brg\*** It's many years since the last issue of *Riverside Quarterly* appeared, and Leland Sapiro, its editor, died in 2013, in his eighties. *Vector* is a lot better than *SF Commentary*, but it is available only to BSFA members. Unfortunately, the last time I looked, BSFA membership was too high for me to justify paying it, since *Vector* is now the only magazine published by the association. *Foundation* is still available, but has achieved a state of terminal boredom under the editorship of Graham Sleight. I've been told that a new editor has been appointed, so I've resubscribed. :: In Australia, recent editors of the MSFC's *Ethel the Aardvark* have made quite some effort to attract interesting articles about science fiction, but it remains a club magazine, therefore unavailable to fandom at large.\*

Patrick also posits a change in Australian sf activity





moving from fan criticism to pro-authordom as it became easier for writers to find publishing outlets (albeit primarily in YA and fantasy). This raises a question. Is there a nominal balance between the number of people actively producing works and those engaged in commentary and criticism on that work, and what happens if that ratio skews too much to one side or the other? In other fields, it seems to be roughly 10:1 (Formula One racing: a grid of 20 to 25 drivers and two or three TV commentators; a similar ratio for soccer and cricket punditry, with 22 players and two or three commentators). In my own workplace, the quality assurance and regulatory compliance overhead seems to be roughly 10 per cent over the manufacturing workforce, though in certain specialist areas, such as my own, it diverges markedly, with four software QA staff for the same number of programmers. Which either means we get 1:1 personal support or interference, depending on your point of view.

It also raised the question of why, compared to SF, there seems to be little non-academic criticism of fantasy as such (apart from a few notable exceptions, such as the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*), and where it does appear it is

mostly subsumed within fanzines and journals that are bylined under an SF banner. Given that sales of fantasy outpace those of SF by a wide margin, there seems a curious inverse relation to the amount of commentary and criticism between the two sibling genres. Vikki suggests the reason is that fantasy fans primarily read for enjoyment and don't care too much about navel gazing into the genre and over-analysing the books they read. It's not, though, that they are not interested in anything beyond the book itself, as evidenced by the huge Wiki that is devoted to George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice*. More perhaps that they treat such metatext as another form of immersive experience rather than wishing to stand back and comment on it from a critical distance. Or is this overly simplistic?

Patrick also mentions Algis Budrys, and I wonder if he is aware of the *Ansible* editions of his *F&SF* critical columns, collected as *Benchmarks Continued: F&SF 'Books' Columns 1975–1982* (November 2012), *Benchmarks Revisited: F&SF 'Books' Columns 1983–1986*, and *Benchmarks Concluded: F&SF 'Books' Columns 1987–1993* (July 2013). (6 November 2013)

## Steve Stiles

### In defence of comics

#### STEVE STILES

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It was agreeable seeing my *Lovecraft's Fever Dream* on the back cover of *SFC* 85. It's one of my favourite pieces for this year and I'm glad it reproduced so nicely. It's been wonderful to be able to colourise my artwork with Photoshop after all these years of mainly working in black and white, but when it comes to print, the repro quality is often something of a crashout, and results can sometimes be disappointing.

Additionally, it's been nice to have actually contributed an illustration to *SF Commentary*, inasmuch as you've been kindly sending me your fanzine for all this time. During my ten years of working for Daedalus Books, my LoC writing has been rare and infrequent because of the long commute (and my evenings often chewed up by Daedalus' generous benefit of ten free books a month); with so little spare time I had to choose between writing and fan art. My enjoyment and forte is largely with the latter as fanac, but you hardly ever use interior cartoons, so I was happy to finally produce something I thought you might want to publish.

**\*brg\* I do get around to using the interior illos that are sent to me, but I don't often receive them in batches. You seem happier with illustrating particular articles, but that assumes I am sufficiently well organised to send you page layouts, with all the proofreading finished, in time**

**for you to provide illustrations. I'm very happy to publish a Stiles colour cover — thanks for this issue's.\***

That said, I was startled to see my Popeye pastiche on page 52. Did you request that? I don't remember submitting it to you, and it doesn't have anything to do with science fiction. What it was originally created for was to announce my retirement from Daedalus, a drawing I tacked up on the company bulletin board and posted on my Facebook page. The guy in the tyres is supposed to be me (although I really don't look that good). The genesis of inspiration for that illo goes back when I was a child of five or six; my father took me to the neighbourhood movie theatre where a Max Fleischer *Popeye* cartoon opened the bill before the featured movie. In it, the one-eyed sailor received a sadistic beating from Bluto, who then inserted the hapless and unconscious seaman into a stack of tyres that he then hurled into a handy barge of wet cement; the cement quickly hardened, sinking the barge and dragging poor *Popeye* to a watery grave. I was horrified and ran out of the theatre, crying (much to the disgust of my father). As I grew a little older I learned to enjoy the *Popeye* cartoons running on television, and now I even have three volumes of the E. C. Segar newspaper comic strip, which was pretty violent in its own right. Moreover, still more ironic, these days I do Lovecraft-inspired illustrations and watch *Dexter* and *Coven* on TV without hardly ever running out of the room.

Your comments to Tim Marion regarding comics brought me up short a bit, and prod me to respond to

them, inasmuch as I've had more than a two-decade career as a comic book illustrator and have written 82 articles on comics and comic strips for the now defunct *ChannelSpace Entertainment* dot com <http://stevestiles.com/comar.htm>. You can see where some my interests are. I can't expound you out of your tastes — I don't care for the ballet or for country and western music, legitimate forms of entertainment that many are impassioned about — and certainly the comics aren't exempted from Sturgeon's Law, but I don't think that all the comics are poorly illustrated toss-offs fit only for pre-teens (if so, as a collector of some of them I'm a rather stunted seventy-year-old). True, many comics are usually skimpy on narrative, and dialogue can be minimal — 'Hulk angry! Hulk SMASH!' — as befitting the superhero genre, which dominates the field — as does, perhaps, space opera in science fiction ('Three Fought Against The Galaxy!'), overshadowing more thoughtful and creative efforts.

Still, comparing short stories and novels to comics and graphic novels is like comparing apples to oranges; they're related but the aims and requirements differ. I got into the field because I like drawing and story telling, and comics combine the two, as well as aspects of cinematography and stage direction. What initially started me thinking about a future career in comics was the publishing company Tim mentions, EC Comics, which had a very talented pool of writers and artists and featured adaptations by Ray Bradbury ('There Will Come Soft Rains', 'A Sound Of Thunder', 'The Flying Machine'), a writer who influenced EC's copy-heavy editor/writer, Al Feldstein. It was EC that led me to seek out more Bradbury stories in the library, and after I ran out of his stories

it was on to Heinlein and Asimov, and on and on.

As for the supposed crudeness of the drawings in comics, it was also EC that led me to go art school and inspired an appreciation of art in general. Today the two major comics companies, Marvel and DC, are mainly superhero publishers and have a sad tendency to encourage a house style. I was continually exhorted to draw like Jack Kirby in the five years I worked for British Marvel, despite the fact that I was ghosting splash pages for dozens of other artists. And there's a limit to what you can do with overly muscular men and overly bosomed women, all in skintight leotards, doing battle with the super-powered monster of the month. But — Sturgeon's Law again — the 10 per cent or so comic book illustrators who rise above that are worth appreciation if that's one's inclination. Tim mentions Mike Mignola and Reed Crandall, two artists whose approaches are miles apart but who are equally excellent. I could easily fill a few paragraphs with names of artists who did or are doing worthy work. Currently a new favourite of mine is a newcomer, Gabriel Rodriguez, who has illustrated Joe Hill's *Locke & Key* and Clive Barker's *The Great And Secret Show*, neither being superhero titles.

Sorry for the rant but, besides my admiration for many in comic art, my inclination is to avoid speaking ill of the dying, which is what the industry is doing now, kept only on life support by Hollywood. Thanks to production costs, ridiculous prices, limited distribution, management blunders, and the internet, comics may not last more than a few more decades, gone the way of the pulps — and maybe even the bookstores.

(7 November 2012)

## Tim Marion

### In defence of comics

#### TIM MARION

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Thanks for the Michael Waite obituary, as well as the photo of him. I was very surprised to read that Peggyann Chevalier did a biographical memorial publication on him, as I would have thought that I would have been sent a copy — I'm sure I would have enjoyed learning more about Michael. I'm also surprised that I didn't receive Robert Lichtman's publication, and most of all surprised that Ditmar and Bill Wright didn't send me their publication on Michael ... It was through him that I first met them and (later) you! It makes me feel as though, since I stopped doing fanzines (when I lost my job over four years ago), I have been forgotten completely.

You end Michael's obituary by saying this last fanzine (by Ditmar & Wright) is available through [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com) (which my Adobe Reader doesn't want to open), and add that it was also for 'ANZAPA, and other interested fans'.

**\*brg\*** I did write to Tim to suggest that if he had never exchanged emails with Peggyann Chevalier, and if his address did not appear in Michael Waite's handy address list, it's unlikely that he would have heard from Peggyann. Michael's neighbour was doing her best to get in contact with his friends after he died recently. I sent various email addresses to Tim, in the hope he can track down some of the kind things written about Michael in recent months.\*

I had never heard of Dan McCarthy before, but that must be my extreme loss as you portray him as a sort of creative genius.

**\*brg\*** Hardly that, but a person who had an all-round interest in all the arts and many of the crafts. Murray and Natalie MacLachlan, now living in Melbourne, knew him much better than any of the other members of ANZAPA. Murray wrote about his own memories of Dan McCarthy for ANZAPA.\*

In the last paragraph of Martin Morse Wooster's letter, he immodestly admits about his first critical fan-writing, 'But I realised that back then, I was pretty talented.' Immodest, but refreshing too. So many times a writer (especially myself) will decry his first writings (and perhaps justifiably so!). It's good that he has pride in himself.

Martin goes on to ask many questions that you do not answer, either due to tiredness or modesty on your part. He asks, 'What do you think about what you wrote and the way you wrote 40 years ago? Do you think your writing has changed? Are you a better critic now than you were in 1970? Have your tastes in sf changed — and how have they changed?' I would like to know too.

**\*brg\* I did feel guilty that I failed to answer Martin's questions, especially as he has been a consistently interesting contributor to my magazines over the years. I plead pure laziness when trying to finish off an issue. And these are not the sort of questions one can answer in a letter column. To do so properly would be to write my autobiography. The short answer is that I wrote best about science fiction for fanzines during the years when I was writing journalism for a living, between 1971 and 1973. My colleagues at Publications Branch of the Victorian Education Department were excellent teachers and taskmasters. In the years since I've become much less inclined to write at length about most SF authors, and I rarely indulge in the boots-and-all method of stomping on uninteresting SF books. I try to draw the attention of readers to recently discovered fine authors whose talents have surprised me. The SF I like most is still the SF I liked most in the late sixties and seventies, but such authors have a disconcerting habit of failing to deliver their next book because they have left the clubhouse.\***

## Alan Garner

I remember the rush I got from reading *The Weirdstone* (the title of the American edition) when I checked it out from my elementary school library in 1970. With information given to me by Ned Brooks, I ordered all four of Garner's first 'children's' books (later articles claim they weren't really written for children, just marketed that way) and enjoyed them immensely. However, first with *The Owl Service* and later with *Red Shift*, I began to feel more and more as though someone else (the dust jacket writer, Ned, or anyone else) would have to explain what the book was about before I could even figure out what the characters were talking about! I began to wonder, why make the bother? I would think that a book should explain itself, and if it's too obscure, it's beyond interest. With so many other books, fanzines, and magazines piled up, I'm not going to make the effort to read anything else by him. Although your reviews seem to laud his books, they also make mention of how hard they are to understand. Ursula K. LeGuin and I share the same birthday, but I doubt that it's only Libras who have this reaction to Garner's recent books.

## Peter Beagle

I'm surprised that you have only just recently read *The Last Unicorn*, since I recall your telling me how much you like Beagle. I think I read it back in the 1980s just after I had seen the animated movie. This movie, by the way, I highly recommend. It's a very faithful adaptation. The one variance, the inclusion of the Pirate Cat, was actually very much appreciated ('Arrr, that be good!' says the Pirate Cat when he's petted). One story, however, says that Beagle didn't get very much money from the movie, and certainly no royalties on the DVD.

My reaction to Beagle's writing is still tainted by the memory of that awful short, 'Lila the Werewolf'; enough so that I doubt I'll seek out any other fiction by him.

## Comic books and Robert E. Howard

In response to my letter, you say, 'The trouble with comic books ... for someone over 12 years old is that there are not enough words.' Almost true today, but certainly not true back in the 1950s with such lauded classics as the EC Comics. Those comics had so many words — dialogue as well as needlessly expositional captions — that the art could barely fit into the panels. Honestly, I much prefer the modern way of comic book storytelling, where much of the exposition is observed through the art without captions having to explain what's going on.

This is where I think many SF fans fail to appreciate comic books — for them it's too much effort, and too distracting, to stop reading look at the art and interpret what is occurring; much easier just to read straight textual descriptions of the action.

I must admit, however, to a total disenchantment with the entire comic book industry in the last few years. So many of them are written and illustrated by people I've never even heard of, newcomers to the field, basically. There are a lot of newcomers because the old-time professionals demand pay commensurate with their talent and experience, and thus the biggest comic book companies decide to go with cheaper, new talent instead. And of course, there is always a constant influx of new talent: kids who want to 'go pro' with all the fame and prestige that comes along with it. But God forbid if they become famous and want more money! To get that money they'll have to take their talents somewhere else and hope that everyone remembers them from their comic book accomplishments. There is an almost organised crime way of looking at personnel and the talent that it takes to create the books that bring in the money: everyone can easily be replaced. Comic books are also very expensive these days, like around \$4. I can't be sure, I admit, but I'm imagining, based on my knowledge of both economics and the comic book industry (from interviews I've read and what long-time professionals have told me), that the actual creators (scripter, penciller, inker, and letterer) all get a part of \$1 out of that \$4, with not quite another dollar going to pay for distribution, paper, printing, and ink. The remaining \$2 goes to presidents and vice presidents in charge of sales,

publishing, advertising, marketing, circulation, dish-washing, you name it. The major industries are too top-heavy with executives who have very little to do with the actual creative output of the book. The artists and writers are treated as though they are the least important component of the process. There is a great awakening coming to the comic book industry, but I suspect that, as Alan Moore predicts (and he is not the one I was referencing above), Marvel and DC will eventually devolve into publishing nothing more than graphic novel movie adaptations.

I agree that the art on the *Prince Valiant* strip was great, as well as the scripting. Both were done by Hal Foster, by the way. I'm not sure these could be called 'comics', however, as the dialogue and expository text was always at the bottom of each panel. Probably Vaughn Bodé would have called it 'pictography'.

Later you say, 'The first time I saw some Conan stories were in those all-reprint issues ... Sol Cohen perpetrated when he took over the magazines [*Amazing* and *Fantastic*] in the late 60s.' Those digest-sized reprint mags, under various titles, that Sol Cohen published were a Godsend to some 10-year-old proto readers of science fiction (which I was at the time). They were a great introduction to the old pulp SF.

Then you say, 'I couldn't believe that SF people had anything to do with such crap — backward-looking, dedicated to the primitive, lots of blood, nothing but adventure fiction, almost no SF ideas...' I'm disappointed, but not necessarily offended, that you relegate the Conan stories as being 'crap'. I admit Howard, although an intellectual, was someone who believed that 'barbarism is the natural state of mankind'; a state to which we will inevitably return. The Conan stories, and other stories by Howard, may have contained some elements of science fiction (as did some of H. P. Lovecraft's fiction), but mainly it was a combination of adventure fiction and horror, and never pretended to be otherwise.

I find the Conan stories, and other heroic fantasy by Howard, to be riveting in terms of the charging-ahead, galvanised writing style. To me, it would seem as though the reader is irresistibly drawn to the next word, faster and faster, as it seems so exciting. In that sense, even his regular, non-heroic horror stories are worth reading despite what I feel are somewhat pedestrian and/or predictable endings. (But of course, he wrote horror in the late 1920s, and was probably one of the first authors to use twist endings.) In that sense, I would almost compare Robert E. Howard to Harlan Ellison. Both writers reach the reader on an emotional level and seem to pull the reader helplessly onward.

**\*brg\* My only experience of trying to read Robert E. Howard was when Sol Cohen reprinted those stories in *Fantastic* at the end of the sixties, but I didn't find any trace of a 'galvanised writing style' there. I read those stories only because at that time I was committed to reading every story that appeared in the SF magazines. Everything about Conan was opposed to everything I looked for in science fiction, especially brilliant ideas about science, the future of the world etc. I have no interest in fictional characters whose only**

**characteristic is sporting large muscles, or characters who are committed to stupid forms of violence. For the same reason, I've no interest in superheroes, whether in comics or fiction.\***

## Lloyd Penney's letter

I love this statement from Lloyd's letter: 'I can only imagine that a fanzine from the 40s or 50s would see electronic zines and a place to store them as pure science fiction, but us jaded modern fans would rather go back to paper zines and complain about those phony e-zines ... For readers of such a far-seeing literature, we sure can be short-sighted and conservative.' Props on your writing chops, Lloyd! That was a wonderfully perspicacious observation.

## Quick notes

I'm glad Paul Anderson is OK after the bicyclist hit him. I wish Sue Burstzynski had described her book, *Wolfborn*, a bit (as I'm curious/interested), but understand her reluctance not to 'huckster' among friends. I really liked the photo of Damien Broderick with kitten.

Your tastes in music sometimes coincide with Jeff Kleinbard's tastes (Neil Young and Crazy Horse; Sandy Denny) and occasionally with mine (The Watsons). Of course, your tastes in music are so wide that you probably have some in common with almost everyone in fandom.

## Mark Plummer's letter

Mark Plummer and I seem to share some music tastes, although I find myself in a bit of a disagreement with him when he says that Led Zeppelin was 'very much a part of a genre of music listened to by older kids, album bands like Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, and Jethro Tull who rarely if ever troubled the Top Forty.' Perhaps my memory is a little better for that era, being a mere half-dozen years older than Mark, or perhaps things were different over here on this side of the Great Divide, but both Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull had numerous hits in the early 1970s. Pink Floyd had hits too, but later, and only after they had adopted a slightly more 'pop' sound (with songs like 'The Wall'). Admittedly, Deep Purple only had one big hit that I can recall, 'Smoke on the Water'.

**\*brg\* You're incorrect, Tim. Album tracks by Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, and Jethro Tull were played on radio, and played often. The record companies issued few if any singles by these groups. Suddenly in 1970 people began to prefer buying LPs to singles, so even singles were used mainly to promote LPs. That continued until the modern era of iTunes — so music has descended back to the singles-based era of the fifties and sixties.\***

I do, however, like Mark, recall drinking Liebfraumilch; or at least, having it put in front of me by my older



and more sophisticated high school friend, Rick Griffin (now running an antique store in Phoebus, Virginia, not far from where we went to school together), who would jest that it was 'leapfrog milk'. Other mutual friends of ours introduced me to the Australian Foster's Lager, which had a very interesting flavour and came in large cans like motor oil and which we could only purchase in selected supermarkets. Or, I should say, my friends purchased it, as they were all a couple of years older and at least one grade ahead of me. I didn't realise, in my first drinking experiences naïveté, that what we were really drinking was no doubt the proverbial 'panther piss' compared to the actual lager in Australia. After another year or so I was old enough to buy it for myself and by then the interesting taste of it seemed diminished. In recent years a cold, Mexican cerveza might do it for me, but mostly, I'm disinclined now toward any sort of beer. I find I like sissy sweet drinks now, and only when I can't get something else I find more satisfying. I just finished a tiny bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream which I really shouldn't have spent the money on, considering how expensive it is. It barely even hit me.

Back in the 1980s, when I first started the VHS video project (and now DVD) I mentioned a couple of issues ago, I began a computerised listing of my 100 favorite movies of all time; a list that is long since lost. The problem with such a list is, even since then, my tastes have changed significantly enough that if and when I might rewatch some of these old treasured classics, I might be inclined to remove them from the list. But, the plus side is that, for the most part, I feel I'm watching a fantastic movie all over again, especially in these days of huge flat-screen and high-definition.

I have also, on occasion, reread a favourite book, and can't help but remember its first line. 'The wizard Heald coupled with a poor woman once...' is how *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*, by Patricia A. McKillip, began. There was something very lyrical and almost enchanted about the writing style she used for that book; almost as though the entire work was some sort of spell cast over the reader. Too bad I never found any of her other work nearly as compelling.

## My letter

Mighod, I seem to come across as almost a bit churlish in my complaints to you about the printing of *The Prisoner* review. Thanks, really, for the exposure, Bruce. As I have probably said elsewhere (maybe in that bitter loc I never wrote about fanzine fandom), you and Elaine are the only ones in fandom who really take me seriously any more. (Oh boo hoo!) (Self-sarcasm.)

Good grief, did I really say that 'Eando' Binder wrote those *Captain Marvel* stories, etc.? I really didn't say that 'Eando' Binder was actually a writing entity composed of both Edward and Otto Binder? It was Otto Binder, singly, who is credited as having written those *Captain Marvel* stories, as well as the *Marvel Avengers* novel in 1968, and probably most of the Adam Link stories. He did indeed collaborate with his brother on some stories, but what those stories were I don't know.

## Steve Jeffery's letter

Steve Jeffery really had me cracking up hard at first with his wry, British sense of humor. *SFC* is a great mag but rarely do I get a laugh from it.

## Patrick McGuire's letter

Good dissection of Bujold, with whose work I am not familiar. He later takes you (gently) to task for what he feels is your attempt at lengthening Arthur Conan Doyle's surname to 'Conan Doyle,' when in fact it seems obvious you were merely dropping the first initial. Frequently, the author of Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger is listed as merely 'A. Conan Doyle'. Therefore, you were actually referring to him by using both 'first' (in this case, a substitute for the first) and last names. (And isn't that a relief?)

(15 November 2013)



## Part 1: The event

Every year the Sherwood Oak Housing Co-operative (referred to as merely 'the coop' in their memos, which

may be appropriate, considering how many people are living here in such close proximity) has a Halloween Festival outdoors. This is a major source of contention for Nicole, a neighbour who acts as a sort of maven for the abuses and excesses of the Board of Directors. Recently this obviously perennially corrupt Board members rewrote sections of their own constitution (without a vote approving such) in order to do something they wanted. But on this matter Nicole's contention is that the Board spends thousands upon thousands of dollars each year on this event; money that is never recouped. Moreover, there is an admission charge to the festival rather than having it be free to all the cooperators who were already paying for it.

Despite being antisocial, I actually had a temptation to attend this festival, especially so when I discovered that a ticket had been delivered to us by mistake. The festival was to take place in the large courtyard between buildings 1 (where I live on East Broadway) and 2 (on Grand Street). These buildings are two, large 20-storey buildings with three wings each. My building has 264 East Broadway, 266, and 268, which are also known as wings C, B, and A, respectively (and counter-intuitively). The ticket, which had obviously been paid for, was for the residents of the A wing.

'It's just for little kids anyway,' said Jeff Kleinbard, my roommate (aka 'Cohen the Barbarian').

'Well, that doesn't mean that adults can't go and have a good time too.'

'Yeah, but it's mainly for kids. The only adults that will be there will be their parents.'

'Yeah, but adults enjoy Halloween too. I bet many of those parents will be out there in costume.' Obviously I had some interest in attending.

Jeff couldn't see my point, and merely mentioned that the residents of the apartment corresponding to ours in the A wing would be very surprised and upset that they didn't get their invitation.

A little while later, the doorbell rang. It's the tall, attractive porter whom I once tried to be friends with, the only female porter in the crew. I had been friends with one of the porters before, who had turned out to be a sort of (comics) fan. I had thought that I might possibly be friends with this young lady, but then every time she was with other porters she couldn't even acknowledge me, which I found a bit of a turn-off. My preference since then was not to even try to be friendly again.

She, in her faltering English, tried to ask for the ticket, and she got just enough across to make me understand that she wanted the ticket to the Halloween Festival and that she had delivered it by mistake. Not even reluctantly, I gave it back to her, and thought that would be the end of it. Which, basically, it was.

As time passed and a crew started setting up the elaborate Halloween decorations over almost every square inch of the several-thousand-square-foot courtyard, I realised that this was something I really did not want to be involved in after all. It just seemed too tacky, too garish, too forced, too strained. I admit some of the plastic sculptures were amusing. There were torsos of 'corpses' next to gravestones in the surrounding gardens, making it look as if they were clawing their way out of their graves. Those sculptures I actually found both



Tim Marion and his Hallowe'en cat. (Photo: Jeff Kleinbard.)

amusing and effective.

There were also sculptures of small, fierce dogs and cats — the tiny dogs with wide, outstretched mouths full of sharp fangs, and both the cats and dogs in an obvious state of decay, with patches of 'skin' missing off their backs, showing bones and bloody tissue underneath. I know I must sound like a wimp, but I actually found these sculptures to be somewhat disturbing.

Surrounding all the walkways were little, two-dimensional, black, tin cats with green marbles for eye-balls. These were held into the ground by black, narrow poles attached to them. Also on display were white, plastic skeletons about 12 inches long. 'Gosh,' I thought. 'These look nice. Sure wish I had at least one of each of those to decorate my room with.' But of course, I didn't really consider taking anything.

The next day, after the festival was over, all the decorations were pulled up and laying along the sides of the sidewalks or else in the middle of the courtyard, in piles. 'Sure wish I could take a couple of those,' I thought again to myself. I realised that since the festival was over it probably wouldn't do any harm to take a couple, but assumed that they would be saved for next year's festival.

As I walked along back into the building, I saw huge, plastic garbage bags next to all the piles of decorations. These decorations were just piled haphazardly, and some were already in the garbage bags. Suddenly it dawned on me. This was a part of Sherwood Oak's excess. All these decorations had been out overnight and thus were used and were actually going to be disposed of.

So I put one of those flat, tin, black cats, as well as a white skeleton, into my shopping bags and walked on. Not only did no one care, but there wasn't even anyone around to gather up all the 'garbage'. It was laying there all day until the porters or other maintenance people took it all up. Definitely not worth the time of the

volunteers to clean up, I guess.

Anyway, this is how my room got a little touch of the Halloween spirit this year, without too much intrusion on my psyche or time from other people, thus maintaining my thin veneer of anti-sociability. The tin black cat is still in the bathroom, while the skeleton is in my room. I had washed them off thoroughly in the bathtub before I even put them on display, of course.

Bah-hah-hah!

## Part 2: The media

### What I had planned last year

I had plans last Halloween to have a mini-frightfilm festival. These would have included:

- *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), which of course I have already seen almost innumerable times during the 1970s and 80s. However, I had never watched my DVD of it, which is a 40th Anniversary edition.
- *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) I have also seen before, but likewise, have not viewed my DVD of it. I find the movie very poignant because of the differences from the book. In the movie, the relationship the movie revolves around involves the vampire Louie du Lac and a young girl whom he has his vampire mentor Turn (as opposed to a romantic relationship between the two vampire men, which I can do without). The young vampire girl ends up sleeping with du Lac in his coffin and becomes, in effect, his loving daughter/niece. Much of this movie almost seemed to reflect my relationship with my own niece. Too bad that she went out of control, not unlike the vampire girl in the film.
- *Black Sunday* (1960) with Barbara Steele, a Mario Bava movie, which I have probably seen several times, however it's not at all memorable to me. The DVD I watched a couple of years ago was supposed to have been the 'complete' version of it (the movie has been butchered repeatedly, according to reports), but I still keep getting the feeling, judging from descriptions, that everyone has seen a different movie than I have. For instance, I know the witch that Barbara Steele plays comes back from the dead and haunts her living lookalike descendant (also played by Steele, of course), but I never saw her as being a vampire. I really should watch this again and pay closer attention. Instead, all I can recall is horrific and disturbing imagery of Barbara's lovely face having been spiked from her being imprisoned inside an iron maiden. If the viewer is a Barbara Steele fan (which I am) he or she might be inclined to sympathise with her character for wanting revenge after that! But of course, not at the cost of a hapless descendant.

### What I saw this year

But, as you may remember ... There was no Halloween

last year. Instead of Halloween, it was Hurricane. And flooding. And a long black-out, and an even longer period without plumbing. Halloween was definitely cancelled last year.

So this year, I had the noblest of intentions of getting back to the above list, but of course, life interfered. Instead, this is what I watched:

- *The Simpsons' Treehouse of Horror*: Guillermo del Toro's five-minute intro is loaded with more references than most single episodes, but was clever rather than amusing. The rest of the half-hour is so unfunny that I didn't even crack a smile. I haven't watched *The Simpsons* in several years, as the makers of the show both lost touch with their characters and with a sense of humour.
- *RIPD (Rest In Peace Department)* (2013): seen on Movies On Demand, based on a comic book from Dark Horse about a police department staffed with deceased cops who have to hunt down dead people who have somehow re-infiltrated our world while disguised in healthy-looking human suits. Once returned to this living sphere, the deceased cops appear totally different to us mere mortals: Jeff Bridges, a Wild Bill Hickok clone, appears to the general populace as a sexy blonde woman while Robert Ryan, when he is holding a gun, looks like the ubiquitous James Hong holding a banana. The escaped 'deados' that the cops hunt look normal until agitated, at which point they're somehow able to use CGI to morph into Something Special. Some interesting ideas that aren't developed fully, and a really lame, off, sense of humour. In other words, not nearly as clever as it thought it was. Some pretty women, however, including Mary-Louise Parker.
- *Incubus*: a movie from the early 60s in black and white and Esperanto, with subtitles. I can't believe that I waited so long to see this, and that it could be so utterly boring. There are just not enough psychedelics in the world to make this movie interesting. Also faulty use of the word 'incubus'. Shatner is decent, but nothing else is.
- *Splice* (2009): very scary, suspenseful, and thought provoking. Since genetic researchers (from Plum Island, perhaps?) aren't allowed to clone a human being for the valuable gene sequencing they need, they instead use human DNA in a cocktail with multiple other DNA. The result, a truly terrifying but disturbingly beautiful xenomorphic stew which grows up in a matter of weeks and murders, seduces, and rapes its way through the movie. This well-done, thoughtful, and disturbing movie definitely belongs on the same shelf as *Frankenstein*.
- *Toy Story of Terror!* (aired 16 October 2012 on ABC): a half-hour special that I watched despite my lack of familiarity with the *Toy Story* characters. Buzz Lightyear and other action figures and toys (including a cowboy, a younger cowgirl ('Jessie,' a claustrophobe), a chia-pet hedgehog, Mr Potato-Head, a friendly green Tyrannosaurus Rex, and an explorative blue triceratops) stay overnight with their owner (a young girl) and her mother in a spooky, rundown motel, only to find that their gang is disappearing, one by one. Good CGI animation and good charac-

terisations. No real ‘terror’ except maybe for the smallest of kids, but it definitely made me look differently at eBay and boxes.

- ***The Sorcerers*** (1967): The only real terror or horror here involved forcing oneself to finish watching the movie. Compared to today’s rock-’em, sock-’em standards, this is a very dull, drab piece that has three good things going for it: (1) Boris Karloff; (2) it’s British; and (3) it was made and takes place in 1967 (lots of miniskirts, mini-dresses and pop/rock band music). (Come to think of it, it’s pretty dull and drab for a movie made in the late 60s.) It’s good to see Karloff here, even if he is 79 and at the end of his career. According to what I’ve read, he had the intention of working (acting) until the day he died, and here he looks near that very day. Karloff gives the impression of one’s kindly old grandfather who nonetheless, if crossed, has a sudden, sinister, intimidating temperament. Professor Monserrat (Karloff) and his wife Estelle (Catherine Lacey) develop a machine that they use to control and experience the actions of hapless and improbable Ian Ogilvy. Although Monserrat wishes to use the device to help rehabilitate invalids by providing them with vicarious/voyeuristic adventures which they ordinarily could not experience, Estelle, who has a stronger will, begins to dominate with her more selfish desires. The story turns sordid as Estelle decides to take advantage of the situation and, essentially, goes on a thrill ride at the expense of Mike, Ian Ogilvy’s character. She really gets hot when she makes Mike kill a previous leggy girlfriend, then later the cute chanteuse of the club’s rock band. Mike is in considerable difficulty after this, but since the Professor and Estelle experience everything Mike does, what goes around most definitely comes back around. Not the worst movie ever made, or even in the running, but definitely not on anyone’s ‘must-see’ list either. I guess I should mention that Susan George looked particularly impressive, both in a black bikini and later in a see-through, mesh mini-dress (if only she could have managed more than one, wan facial expression).
- ***Judge Dee and the Monastery Murders***, a 1974 ABC Movie of the Week adapted from Robert Hans van Gulik’s novel *Judge Dee and the Haunted Monastery*. I think I read my copy of this book many years ago, but couldn’t remember it, so I just read it again about two years ago. From the best of my memory, which really isn’t that good at all, this movie is a very faithful adaptation of the book. All-star Oriental cast with Khigh Diegh (who wasn’t really Oriental at all) performing the role of the world’s first detective, plus Keye Luke, Mako, Soon-Taik Oh, and even the ubiquitous James Hong. Really fabulous show — I could watch it over and over. Nicholas Meyer did an excellent job on the script adaptation and Leonard Rosenman once again did a fabulous job on the music. This version I watched I recorded on videotape in the late 80s when ABC aired it as a late-night movie. While watching it, I painstakingly recorded this decent recording onto a DVD, only to find out that, after all these years, it is suddenly available on

YouTube with a much better picture. I cannot recommend this movie highly enough.

- ***Thriller: Pigeons from Hell*** by Robert E. Howard. MeTV has been showing *Thriller* (an hour-long black-and-white horror anthology series from the early 1960s, introduced by Boris Karloff) during late hours on Sunday nights, which really isn’t all that big a deal as it was not usually that good a show, judging from the few I’ve seen. Although, this adaptation is very well acted. I’m disappointed that the script left out Howard’s ‘twist’ ending, an ending that genuinely was a twist. The script changes the two friends who stayed overnight in the deserted mansion to two brothers instead, one of whom is called ‘Tim’. Tim, in this case, is not your humble author, but rather a character played by Brandon de Wilde, who definitely looks bewildered when his obviously dead brother is strangely animate and starts slowly stalking toward him while carrying an upheld axe. How did he know his brother was dead, he was asked by the sheriff? Why, the fact that his head was split open and blood and brain viscera were leaking out; that was surely, so to speak, a dead giveaway. The script also adds a scene at the beginning for sensationalistic effect: the titular pigeons seem, to one of the brothers, to be attacking him. Robert E. Howard’s original story featured these pigeons only as a background mood device. Howard’s basic story, as well as this adaptation, misuses the word ‘zuvembie’, which, as far as I have been able to determine, is just another way of saying and spelling ‘zombie’. (It’s actually amusing that, in the Wikipedia listing for ‘zuvembie’, some overenthusiastic Howard fan claims that Howard invented the term.) As with my previous DVD creation, I soon found that it’s available on YouTube with better picture definition.
- Likewise there was no need for me to make a DVD (for my own future viewing pleasure, that is) of ***Lovecraft: Fear of the Unknown***, a 90-minute documentary on H. P. Lovecraft featuring interviews with (scientologist) Neil Gaiman, Ramsey Campbell, authority S.T. Joshi, John Carpenter, Guillermo del Toro, and others. It turns out that this too is available on YouTube. Which is a fortunate thing since, according to Amazon, a brand new copy of this DVD goes for only \$178,000 and change. For those who can’t afford that, you may be able to purchase a used copy for a mere \$500. No, I’m not joking; nor do I have any suspicion as to why those prices are so high. You would think it was something that had been excavated from Sunken R’lyeh.

## Jeff and I saw

- Jeff and I together saw ***They Live*** (1988), a chilling vision by John Carpenter from yesterday which nonetheless reflects today in a most uncomfortable way. Roddy Piper plays ‘Nada’, a down-on-his-luck drifter who somehow drifts into a construction job with Keith David. On the job, he finds a box full of sunglasses that had previously belonged to a relig-



ious cult whose members had just been raided and imprisoned by the police. Once he puts on the sunglasses, he discovers that the so-called 'cult' are able to see what is really going on — there are subliminal messages everywhere telling everyone to consume, not question authority, etc. Moreover, many so-called 'people' are actually frightening-looking zombie-aliens who have thoroughly infiltrated and taken over society. These aliens have collaborated with the rich to eliminate the middle class and turn the entire country into one, huge slave plantation (so to speak). The ending is wrapped up too quickly and easily in a convenient, almost *Outer Limits* fashion, but by that point, the viewer needs some relief. The entire movie is told in a strange minimalist style that nonetheless comes across as very effective. If I haven't made it obvious, this has become one of my new most favourite movies: a movie I could watch again, if not repeatedly, to catch all the many nuances of the story and familiar faces of actors from then. This is an irresistibly and marvellously subversive movie which gets my highest possible recommendation.

- We also saw, on Movies On Demand, *Pacific Rim* (2013), marginally starring Idris Elba (who is rumoured to be playing the new James Bond). This is Guillermo del Toro's vision of a Japanese giant-robots-versus-giant-monsters movie, and is one of the shiniest pieces of crap I've ever seen. The giant, fancy, shiny robots fighting the gigantic, scary monsters is at first exciting, but then quickly becomes tedious. The rest of the movie consists of lame dialogue between the characters, which is supposed to be character development but instead manages to be even more tedious than the giant robot-monster battles. Not a total waste — some thrills and chills — but not enough story to support the 2 hours and 11 minutes of it. I'm only glad I saw this so I know I'm not missing much (if that makes any sense). I might also mention that the giant monsters, or *kaiju*, may have been designed by Guillermo del Toro but they almost all look curiously similar to an enormous, anthropomorphic version of a long-nosed chimaera (a mysterious deep water fish).

## And television

As for TV series, there have also been several episodes of *Supernatural* (a sort of *Route 66* where two brothers travel around and kill demons and other boogies; I'm just sorry that this sixth or seventh season is their last), *Sleepy Hollow* (inspired by the Washington Irving short), *Grimm* (supernatural cop show with interesting CGI for the many tribes of anthropomorphic animals he encounters, and in that respect it reminds me much of Canada's import, *Lost Girl*, slated to resurface soon) and the new *Dracula* (where Dracula comes across as basically a good guy opposing the proto-oil business magnates, who, as we all know, are the real vampires).

Considering there are two vampire series on 'the CB' (*The Vampire Diaries* and its spin-off, *The Originals*), one

enduring one on HBO (*True Blood*), plus *Dracula* on NBC, mentioned above, it would seem as though the 'vampire genre' (whatever that is, really) is well represented on American TV at the moment. *Lost Girl*, whose lead character is a beautiful bisexual succubus, could be considered a part of the vampire genre as well as a cross-over with the supernatural cop/detective genre, to which all almost all the shows in the previous paragraph belong.

There are also at least two shows featuring witches: *The Witches of East End* on Lifetime and *American Horror Story* on FX. Not to mention 'zombies' on *The Walking Dead* on AMC (and I doubt that I would even have to mention them if they called themselves 'The Talking Dead' instead). Altogether it would seem as if the horror genre is a staple of American TV this fall 2013.

## Part 3: The literature

Here is a contrived pun worthy of Bob Vardeman but unfortunately it's mine.

When Manly was a young man he would go crabbing down by the local seashore. This involved rolling up his pants legs and walking out in the water and then gathering up the crabs he saw for a repast later.

Once, his father saw him engaged in such an activity, and he called out from a distance, 'Manly, wade well, man!'

In the latest issue of *SF Commentary*, Bruce Gillespie reports that he's gotten into reading horror fiction. Indeed, not too many issues ago in his fine magazine I waxed rhapsodic (sounds musical, if not slippery) about William Hope Hodgson's creation, *Carnacki the Ghost Finder*. I remember when I read those stories as a teenager I was utterly chilled and enthralled.

Thus inspired to remember these stories again, I have sought other supernatural detective fiction to rekindle my thrill. The closest I have come is the series of paperback novels (some in trade paperback, some in mass market paperback) about Hellboy, Mike Mignola's creation who has so far been featured in two movies, as well as many comic books written by Mignola. Of course, my preference in the comic books (and 'graphic novels') of *Hellboy* are those not only written by Mignola, his creator, but illustrated by him as well. Mignola's style has evolved into a craggier and more two-dimensional version of Jack Kirby's style, but with much darker graphic relief to give dramatic emphasis; a particularly effective style for a dark, moody supernatural comic book. Unfortunately, over time, Mignola seems to have lost interest in illustrating his character and has left those duties to others, perhaps the most successful of whom would be Duncan Fegredo. Perhaps Mignola became tired of 'filling in the blacks' (large areas on the page that require solid black ink). Maybe he should have done what the creators of *Batman: the Animated Series* did in the early 1990s and started out drawing on black paper.

Christopher Golden and others have written some rather good novels about Hellboy, who has some advantages over the usual supernatural crime fighter — since he is the son of Satan (presumably), he looks like a demon and appeared on this plane of existence when he

was a small child when some Nazis mistakenly summoned him. Always with him has been a huge gauntlet (made of some mysterious metal) on his right forearm, which may or may not be a key to opening the gates of Hell. Because of his unusual demonic strength and ability to commune with the dead, his stories almost come across more as a combination of the horror and superhero genres. (The real fantasy in these stories is that everyone treats him as though he looks like a normal person even though he has cloven hooves and lobster-red skin as well as broken-off horns on the top of his head.)

So all of this is by introduction of the fact that I just read *The Snow Wolves* by **Mark Chadbourn**, and liked it reasonably well. This was the last remaining Hellboy novel I hadn't read. Apparently Mignola has lost interest in illustrating the novels as well as the comic books. This trade paperback has no interior illustrations by Mignola, and even the cover is by Duncan Fegredo.

Before that last Hellboy volume, I read *Emerald Hell* by **Tom Piccirilli**. This Hellboy trade paperback does feature a cover by Mignola (a tiny bit of art), as well as Piccirilli's character 'Hillbilly John Lament,' who may or may not be inspired by Manly Wade Wellman's character John the Balladeer.

I finally read the collection of **Manly Wade Wellman's** *John the Balladeer* stories, and was considerably impressed. This mass market paperback edition has an atypically weak cover by Steve Hickman; one might almost assume he was uninspired by the material. I can't see why anyone wouldn't be inspired by these stories: although not originally a native to the region, Wellman nonetheless catches some sense of the feeling of ancient American arcanum. Honestly, he has the people all talk strange, and by that, I mean like no accent anywhere on Earth. And my family is originally from that region, so I am more than slightly acquainted with the accents of people who live there. But since all the place names are also fabricated, with the exception of Asheville, one might almost assume that these stories indeed take place in the western hills of North Carolina — on an alternate Earth in an alternate universe. Whatever; these are powerful stories that I humbly consider to be seminal in the legions of American literature.

*When The Old Gods Waken* is the first of five novels featuring John the Balladeer, and so far is the only one I've read. I found it to be not nearly as charming or as inventive as the short stories, but rich in background material and historical research. Two of the things revealed is that the ancient Britons, in their druidic pagan cult, no doubt worshipped Baal, the human-sacrifice hungry god of the ancient Phoenicians (known in the Bible as the Canaanites). Also that the name 'Baltimore' means 'grove of Baal' (which I'm tempted to say may explain something about some Baltimore fans I've known, but I'll try to resist).

From there, it was merely a surreptitious, sideways glance to Manly's other 'John' — **John Thunstone**. *The Complete John Thunstone* is an impressive 640-page book that reprints some fine line artwork by **George Evans** from the early 1980s from a previous **William Wellman** collection.

I admit I was totally unimpressed with one of the first



stories, where it seemed as though 'voodoo' was used somewhat incorrectly and inaccurately, so much so that even someone like myself could see the errors. But it occurs to me that in the 80-plus years since Wellman wrote that story, there have been many more immigrants from the Caribbean, and that at least some knowledge of voodoo (or 'Santeria', as the Hispanics call it) has entered the general population.

However, in Manly's 1983 novel of Thunstone (reprinted in this volume), *What Dreams May Come*, I was totally blown away by Manly's research, because this bit of arcanum I happen to have already known through the history of my family. For the first time ever ... *I have unstopped a highlighter and have marked sections in a book!* I can't even recall doing that to my few college textbooks when I was younger. Well, maybe I did. But I'm losing the point.

In the course of his investigations into a seeming supernatural phenomenon in England, John Thunstone interviews a young woman who is accused of, and who admits to being, a witch. To quote her: 'I learned from my father's cousin — a man, a spiritist medium. That's how the craft is passed along, from a man to a woman, and then from the woman to another man.'

I'm not sure where the word 'spiritist' comes from, but on the next page, she says: 'I can cure warts and I can stop the blood from a running wound. I can draw out the fire from a burn by saying a text from the Bible — I must not tell you what it was, or it wouldn't work for me

anymore.'

As incredible as it sounds, all of this is both true and represents authentic research, even though voiced by a personage in a work of fiction.

Flashback to the late 1980s. I was working at a barter advertising firm that should remain unnamed, especially as it is no longer in business and hardly of consequence to this story. The bottom of my left foot was almost totally devoured by large, inwardly-growing, white, powdery warts. My foot hurt all the time, whether sitting, raised, whatever.

My parents knew the cure, and they knew someone who could do it for me. My mother's older sister had married Leonard Scott, who remembered the old, white magic. Via my parents, he told me to have a picture taken of the bottom of that foot, with the warts circled and described, and he would send me a dollar for them. While my officemate and friend, Maritza (on whom I had a crush which, I'm now grateful from the perspective of my youthful old age, was never consummated) watched out for me, I stole a moment to place my foot on the screen of a photocopier (afterwards I washed off that screen, of course). I circled the warts and sent the picture on to my parents, who gave it to Leonard. I soon received a dollar in the mail. The idea was that Leonard had 'bought' my warts from me. (Somehow I was to imagine they had some intrinsic value, when in reality I rather much considered them free-for-the-asking.) He had apparently just (re)read the Bible verses; which verses being a secret that could only be passed to a woman to whom he was related only by marriage.

Of course, you better believe I thought all this was total bunk. But only a couple of days later, I started noticing a difference. The foot began to heal; the warts began to go away. But then the healing stopped. My foot started getting worse again while the warts got bigger and better all over again. 'What bull,' I thought to myself. 'Apparently it does work, but is only slightly successful.' My parents asked me to write down what was happening with my foot and send that to them in a letter. This letter included descriptions like, 'And the two on the heel are now growing together into one big one!' etc. The strange thing that occurred after this was that neither my parents nor Leonard even had a chance to see that letter. Within a day of mailing it (and they were all several hundred miles away from me), the healing suddenly became effective again. Over a period of a couple of weeks, it healed completely, and has stayed healed unto this day.

Those who don't know, and who are not aware, of this heritage of ritual immediately dismiss the entire process as 'power of suggestion'. It's pretty obvious to me that it's not; especially if it's been practised for so long on people who (previously) had absolutely no faith whatsoever (such as myself, for one). But if not for this miracle cure, I doubt I would be walking today, or perhaps even have the foot.

The unfortunate end of this story is that Leonard did indeed pass along his secret to a woman of the family to whom he was married. But he didn't tell my mother. No, instead, he told my mother's younger sister, Mabel, an incurable blabbermouth. From there, you can predict what happened. Mabel cured someone. Then the next thing that happened was her boasting to everyone, 'Oh,

look at me, I read this and that from the Bible and now they're cured!' So of course it doesn't work anymore and she can't pass it along to anyone. That knowledge is now lost in our family. The sacred chain has been broken.

## Two more supernatural investigators

I was curious about **Seabury Quinn's** stories of Jules de Grandin, both by reputation and because Thunstone keeps referring to de Grandin as though he were a friend and fellow demon buster. I read *The Devil's Bride* and was terrifically unimpressed — there were a lot of devil worshippers, but no real evidence of the supernatural. And a lot of sordid, horrid acts performed on women, too — honestly, it was a little lurid and distasteful. It makes me glad that I passed up those mass market paperback editions in the late 60s and early 70s. Until now I genuinely thought I was missing out on something good.

But much worse than my dissatisfaction with the story was the innumerable amount of typos. I'm not just being picky here; they really got to the level of distraction. Particularly bad was a substitution for a name in the second story included in this volume, a short story — 'House of Golden Masks'. At one point, after reading Maxie's dialogue for the entire page, there is suddenly a paragraph explaining who 'Marie' is! This Scorpionic Press edition (2012) is so miserable with typos it was all I could do to persevere to finish it. Indeed, I'm almost inclined to think they called their 'press' this because the innumerable typos keep treacherously stinging the reader. I seem to recall the same was also true of a reprint of the *Carnacki the Ghost Breaker* volume, although in this case, since I had already read the stories, I didn't care to wade through all the errors. A pox on the fiend who stole my British ed. mass market paperback from the 70s!

In 2012, Baron Winter once again assembled a small team of fighters of supernatural evil in the DC Comic *Night Force*. Originally Winter was created in 1982 by Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan, very soon after both Gene Colan and Roy Thomas (Marvel's best and most prolific artist and writer, respectively) quit their jobs at Marvel and moved to DC. With *Night Force*, Wolfman and Colan were attempting to recreate the success they had previously had at Marvel with *Tomb of Dracula*, which presented Dracula as an amoral but somehow surprisingly sympathetic and noble warrior and lover. However talented they both were, with *Night Force* they nonetheless failed to recapture the charm of the *Dracula* comic book, despite the physical and emotional similarity presented in the character of Baron Winter. The obvious difference was the lack of Tom Palmer, a genius and veteran inker who always added an incredible artistic depth to Colan's pencils on *Tomb of Dracula* and other comic books.

Thirty years later, Gene Colan is, alas, no longer with us, but Tom Mandrake is a more than worthy successor for this new series of *Night Force*, especially considering that Tom, like Gene, specialises in delicate pencils of noirish, macabre mood and value. Mandrake has been active as an illustrator in comics since at least the time Colan moved to DC; I sincerely hope that he is compensated according to his talent and stature. I know that in



recent years he has married another DC Comics artist, Jan Duursema (currently drawing *Star Wars* comics for Dark Horse), and it would seem as though the styles of both of them have improved as a consequence of their union.

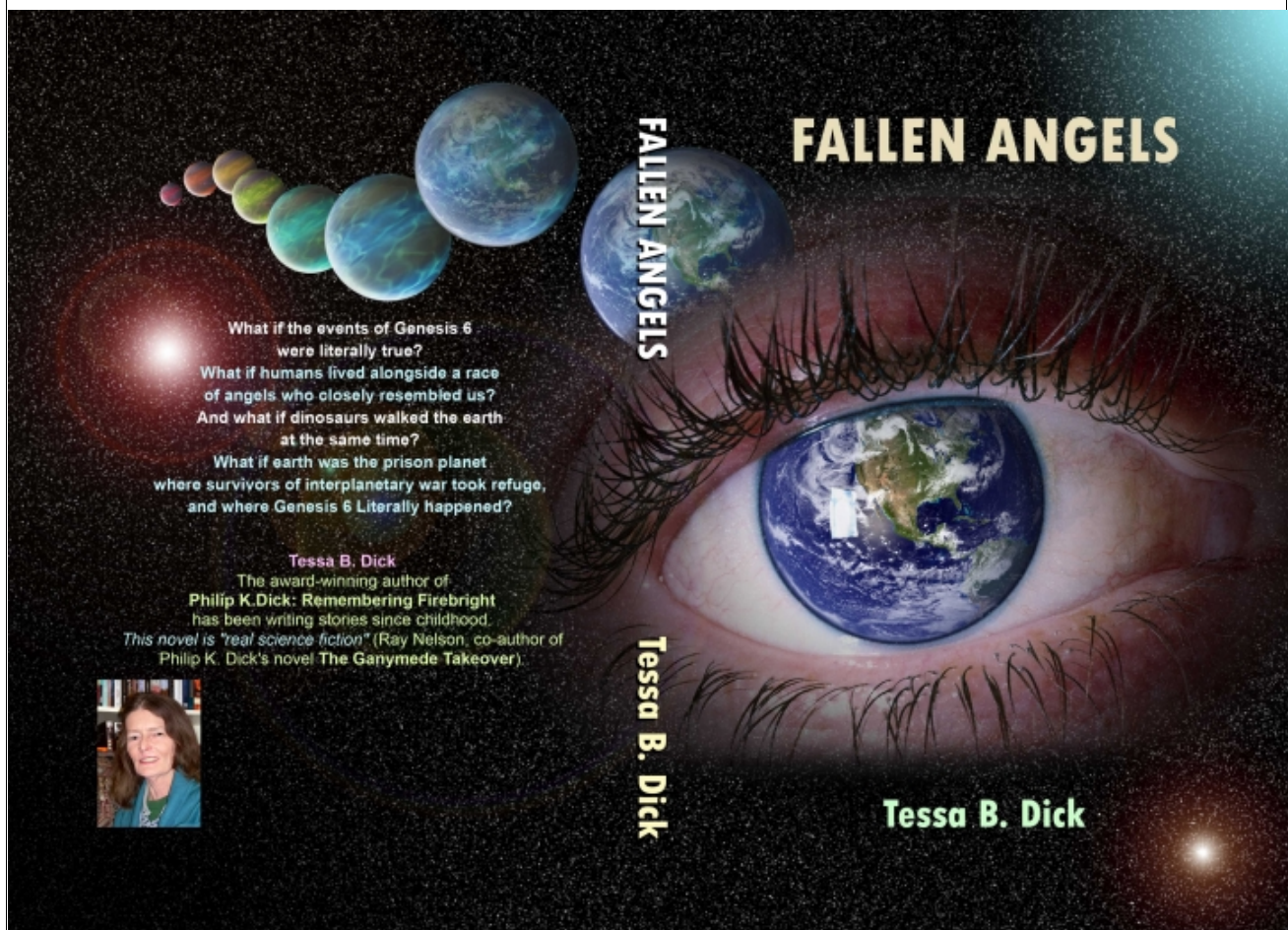
In 2012, DC Comics presented a new, seven-issue story arc (could be called a 'graphic novel,' yes) where the alternately detached and concerned Baron Winter once more gets involved in an occult scandal, drawing in innocents who help but pay a price for doing so. He looks a little cooler this time with long hair, and once more has his 'familiar', Merlin, a leopard, who may or may not be the actual wizard Merlin of yore. It's hard to describe the story as it's complicated, hard to follow, and any attempt to explicate it would spoil it anyway. Suffice to say that it's one of Mandrake's interesting scripts, with interesting developments and interesting characters who chatter on obsessively about themselves and their feelings to anyone around who will listen (a staple of comic book writing made popular by Steve Gerber and Don McGregor). The main draw here is the absolutely unbelievable, gorgeous, moody, dark art by Mandrake

—I have the very strong impression here that, like Colan, his pencils are so delicate, detailed and hard to follow for an inker that the colour has been painted directly on top of his pencils. The result is far superior to art that had been 'tightened up' by an inker. Indeed, this is one of the things that makes comic books almost infinitely superior to what they were when I was a kid: the entire illustrative and reproductive process has improved 1000 per cent, what with the advent of laser-separated colors, fancy paper that doesn't suck up the ink, etc.

These seven issues were collected into a paperbound volume in 2012, but unfortunately it is now out of print. They are mentioned here because, although I read the first five issues when they came out, I have only just reread those issues as well as the final two. They deserve a hardback reprinting.

So there you have it: some suggestions as to what to watch and/or read to get yourself in the properly spooky mood next Halloween. I can't recommend the non-event, but can definitely recommend at least some of the movies and books.

(4 December 2013)



To find a copy of *Fallen Angels*:  
[http://www.amazon.com/Fallen-Angels-Gnostic-Genesis-Origins/dp/1482312395/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1380325846&sr=1-1&keywords=tessa+dick+fallen+angels](http://www.amazon.com/Fallen-Angels-Gnostic-Genesis-Origins/dp/1482312395/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1380325846&sr=1-1&keywords=tessa+dick+fallen+angels)



# SF COMMENTARY 87

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80 pages



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