

SF COMMENTARY 91

April 2016

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76 pages

The Best of Everything 2014–2015

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BRUCE GILLESPIE

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I must be talking to my friends

SF Commentary is now officially a year and a quarter behind schedule. My 'Favourites 2014' and Elaine Cochran's and Jenny Bryce's 2014 favourites were all written by the end of January 2015. Colin Steele's column of short reviews is complete up to the end of 2014, although he has since sent me a large number of reviews of books he received in 2015.

In July I decided to *catch up*. I would produce an all-letters issue of *SFC* by September, then the issues with the Big Articles by the end of October or November!

Hah! *SFC* 90 was finished only the end of November because it kept being held up on the way. I need to keep earning a living. I can't survive on the tiny bit of pension I receive from the current federal government in Australia, plus a tiny bit of private pension from a fund that was reduced by one-third during the GFC. I can't retire, so I need to take on all freelance work that is offered to me.

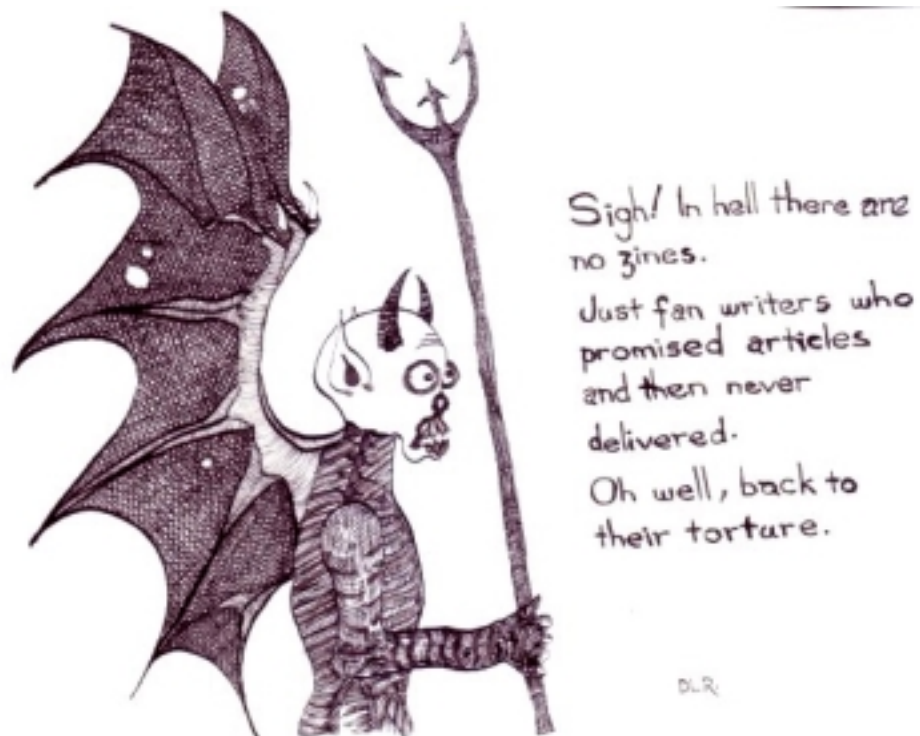
Of course, if there is one thing worse than having your fanzine held up by freelance work — it's not receiving any freelance work.

But does it matter that I am a year and a half late? Colin Steele's reviews talk about many of the books I've discovered only during the last 12 months. Elaine's and Jenny's discoveries seem current and fresh to me. When I look down my own lists, I find that I should have written lengthy reviews of all those items, but haven't had time. Better a paragraph notice than no review at all.

On the other hand, when I leaf through '2015: Year in Review' in the February 2016 *Locus*, I find few authors or books I've heard of, let alone seen and read. The only commentator whose lists chime with mine is **Paul Kincaid** (p. 37). Not only have I read several of his favourites, such as Kate Atkinson's *A God In Ruins* and David Mitchell's *Slade House*, but I've been able to track down several others he mentions, such as Steven Millhauser's *Voices in the Night*, Iain Banks' *Poems*, and Ian McDonald's *Luna: New Moon*. I've heard of Iain Pears' *Arcadia*, but haven't found a copy yet. And Paul makes Aliette de Bodard's *The House of Shattered Wings* sound enticing.

Where does the rest of my time go? Into interesting social events that aren't strictly necessary to the Editorial Way of Life, but very necessary for my health and sanity. I can't sit at a desk for as long as I once did. The episode of *My Crook Back* from February 2015 made me nervous about sitting for more than an hour at a time. I try to walk for an hour every day. I've joined the committee of the Melbourne SF Club, so, for instance, a couple of weeks ago found myself part of the team on our annual stall at the Sydney Road Festival. Elaine and I like meeting friends for dinner from time to time. Life seems better than ever, if only I could afford it.

— Bruce Gillespie, March 2016



2014

Bruce Gillespie My favourites of 2014

Interstellar gas

Christopher Nolan's film *Interstellar* slipped in at a lowly 15th place on the list of 'Favourite films seen for the first time in 2014' because I felt that I had not really seen it ... or rather, heard it. When I saw it at the Nova Cinema in Carlton, I couldn't catch much of the dialogue in many of the most important scenes, so I didn't really know what happened. (Nolan has since admitted that the dialogue is just a bit unlistenable. Without admitting his blunder he seems to have shipped out digital disks of an updated version. Many friends who saw the film in

January 2015 said that they have had no problems hearing the dialogue.)

I caught enough of the action of *Interstellar* to realise that it is the most ambitious SF film since Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Not the best, but the most ambitious. Nolan tries to justify all the wildly implausible scientific premises that underlie the action of the film. His main helper and guide in the scientific department has been **Dr Kip Thorne**, one of the leading theorists in astrophysics since the 1960s. A couple of years ago, Dick



Miller's Planet orbits Gargantua, a black hole: a shot from *Interstellar*.

Jenssen gave me a copy of Dr Thorne's magnum opus, *Black Holes and Time Warps*. I failed to get past page 40 when I first tried to read it. Powered by Chris Nolan's mighty images of planets circling a black hole, I plunged back into *Black Holes and Time Warps*. Given that I cannot understand any of the mathematics, I was amazed to find how carefully Thorne has explained modern astrophysics. In particular, I was impressed by the introduction, which is written as a science fiction story. It tells of an expedition that sets out to explore a series of extra-solar system stars. Even as they set off, they realise that they are leaving Earth's time far behind, while they age little between star systems. Eventually they end up 4 billion years in our future, exploring space around a black hole named Gargantua. By this time the crew can hardly be described as human, and their technological powers have developed far beyond any we might imagine. Even so, some of them yearn to go home. So they build a time warp, and return to the Earth of our not-too- distant future.

Black Holes and Time Warps appeared in 1994, so the

background idea for *Interstellar* has existed in Kip Thorne's cranium for more than 20 years. A couple of years ago, as Thorne reached the age of 72, he was given the opportunity by Christopher Nolan to use these ideas as the basis for the action of *Interstellar*.

The result? *Black Holes and Time Warps* is a more exciting reading adventure than *Interstellar* is a cinematic adventure. If, like me, you could not work out what happened to the ship's crew after they hit Miller's Planet in the film, read **Greg Keyes'** official movie novelisation of *Interstellar*. It's reasonably well written, concise, and contains all the plot of the film. Also, try to get hold of the illustrated book *The Science of Interstellar*, also by Kip Thorne, sent to me by Dick Jenssen. Unfortunately, Thorne tends to assume you have read his *Black Holes* book before reading his illustrated version. However, he does fill in many details of all the speculative science that has been published since *Black Holes* appeared. He also tells a few tales of where Nolan demanded that he concoct the science to justify the plot.

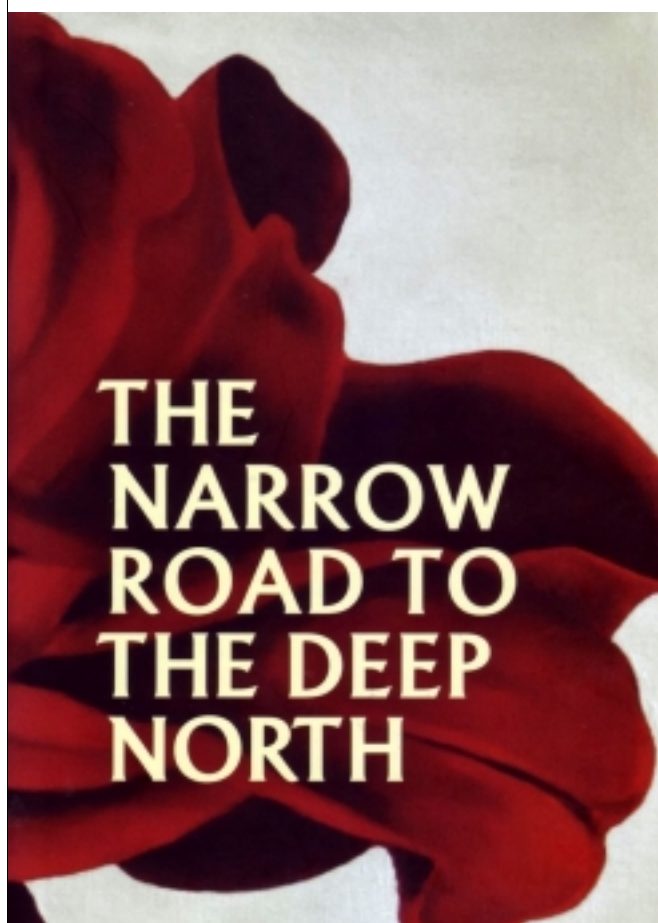
Favourite novels read for the first time in 2014

It's not like me to read the winner of the current Man Booker Award for the year, especially if everybody else has been reading it. I own several novels by **Richard**

Flanagan, but had not read them. But I had heard Flanagan talk several times on radio about this book, or rather, about the experience of writing it. He's a persuasive speaker. I found *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* to be a powerful narrative, but it could easily have been only that. For its first two-thirds, it is a litany of horrors. The main characters, Australian prisoners of war during World War II, are beaten and starved and shot by their Japanese captors as they are driven to build the Burma Railway. Some of them survive the experience, and return to post-war Australia ... which is when the narrative takes on a new weight of meaning. During the last one-third of the novel, Flanagan dives into the biggest questions, such as 'What is it that impels a person to keep hope and remain alive in the face of the knowledge of meaningless evil?'

The best-written novel of the year, though, is a book I plucked off the groaning shelves here at Howard Street. **Richard Russo's** *The Risk Pool* has been sitting on the shelf looking at me for over 20 years. I read the first page, and had to keep going. It's about a man in conflict with a hard-bitten father, a vulnerable mother, and various friends in a smallish town in the eastern USA. It should be a bit boring, but it is constantly surprising, informed by sprightly prose and memorable characters. It takes itself seriously, but is often very funny, and never mournful. I must read the other Richard Russo novels I've accumulated over the years.

Several novels on my list, i.e. those by **Jennifer Egan** and **Karen Russell**, were discussed in my editorial piece for *SF Commentary* 89. Both writers are worth finding and reading, although Karen Russell is the more accomplished prose stylist.



Under the Skin is No 3 in my list of 'Favourite films seen for the first time in 2014', but the film is very different from the novel upon which it is based. Although Michel Faber has never officially written a science fiction novel, in fact he's written two superb SF novels, *Under the Skin*, his first novel, and *The Book of Strange New Things*. *Under the Skin* boasts some very fine writing, but it also includes a background story (a conflict among the aliens who set up a base on Earth to harvest human meat) that disappears in the film. Both the book and the film feature a creature who looks like a very attractive woman who lures men into her car while wandering across the bleak Scottish landscape, then kills them. In both book and film, the alien falls in love with both the Scottish landscape and Earth's people.

Thomas Keneally, one of Australia's most distinguished senior novelists, did not allow the republication of his first novel, *The Place at Whitton* (1964), until 2013. I have no idea why Keneally kept it under wraps — unless the models for some of its characters have been both recognisable and still alive. Keneally uses as the stage set for his crime/mystery novel an institution designed to train young men until they become priests. I recall the richness of the physical detail of the book rather than the characters. The solution to the mystery itself is a bit pedestrian, but so are the solutions to most mystery novels.

Equally readable, and with a dark power that matches the feeling in *The Place at Whitton*, is Keneally's second novel, *The Fear*. Again, it has a sense that the 1950s was a period of great moral danger to people who took life too seriously. It is not a fantasy, but it reads like a dark fantasy.

Most of the other novels on this list are powerful

thrillers that renewed in me a sense of reading a book for the sake of enjoyment. I lost that enjoyment for awhile.

Until I get sick of his books, **Michael Robotham** (an Australian who lives in Britain) is my favourite suspense novelist. His *Life or Death*, his first novel set in America, is based on an irresistible premise: why should a man escape from jail the day before he was due to be released? (This happened in Queensland some years ago, although the escapee in the actual news item has never been recaptured.)

Robotham's *Shatter*, set in Britain, is nearly as powerful as *Life or Death*, although it is based on today's TV cliché, the serial killer who knows so much about his victims that he seems unstoppable.

For many years all I had heard about **Robert Harris's** *Fatherland* was that it featured the Nazi takeover of Britain during World War II. Not so. This year I finally saw a copy and bought it. Britain is mentioned briefly, but all the action takes place in Berlin after it has been transformed by the Nazis into a city filled with vast monuments to themselves. Rather like Martin Cruz Smith's Renko (a policeman who works in the Soviet Union's Moscow), *Fatherland's* policeman hero is a honest cop trying to make sense of a murder committed within a totally corrupt regime.

Strange Bodies (**Marcel Theroux**) is another SF novel that doesn't carry the label. It tells the story of a man trapped in a strange body, and how he came to be there. As with *Under the Skin* or *Swamplandia!*, it seems astonishing that it was not nominated for SF's glittering prizes instead of the rather pallid books that have won during recent years.

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|---|---|----|---|
| 1 | <i>The Narrow Road to the Deep North</i> (2013) Richard Flanagan (Knopf; 467 pp.) | 8 | <i>The Fear</i> (1965) Thomas Keneally (Horwitz Grahame; 229 pp.) |
| 2 | <i>The Risk Pool</i> (1988) Richard Russo (Random House; 479 pp.) | 9 | <i>Fatherland</i> (1992) Robert Harris (Arrow; 386 pp.) |
| 3 | <i>Swamplandia!</i> (2011) Karen Russell (Vintage; 316 pp.) | 10 | <i>Strange Bodies</i> (2013) Marcel Theroux (Faber; 376 pp.) |
| 4 | <i>Under the Skin</i> (2000) Michel Faber (Canongate; 296 pp.) | 11 | <i>Shatter</i> (2008) Michael Robotham (Sphere; 466 pp.) |
| 5 | <i>The Place at Whitton</i> (1964/2014) Tom Keneally (Knopf; 289 pp.) | 12 | <i>Personality</i> (2003) Andrew O'Hagan (Harcourt; 311 pp.) |
| 6 | <i>Life or Death</i> (2014) Michael Robotham (Sphere; 434 pp.) | 13 | <i>Available Dark</i> (2012) Elizabeth Hand (C&R Crime; 243 pp.) |
| 7 | <i>The Keep</i> (2006) Jennifer Egan (Anchor Books; 255 pp.) | 14 | <i>Look At Me</i> (2001) Jennifer Egan (Corsair; 517 pp.) |
| | | 15 | <i>Interstellar: The Official Movie Novelization</i> (2014) Greg Keyes (Titan Books; 279 pp.) |
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Favourite books read for the first time in 2014

See the beginning of this section for my discussion of **Kip Thorne's** *Black Holes and Time Warps*. First-class reading for those who want to renew their sense of wonder.

I'm not a fan of the writing of **H. P. Lovecraft**. Indeed,

after reading many short quotations in **L. Sprague de Camp's** famous biography, I cannot work out why anybody reads Lovecraft's prose. That's not the point of the biography. De Camp presents all the contradictory sides



of Lovecraft's character. In the process, he writes one of the great vivid biographies. Can one like Lovecraft, despite what one finds out about him? Certainly. He was a prodigious writer and producer of apa contributions, and indeed scorned the idea of professional publication. He could well be the patron saint of ANZAPA.

Three collections that should have been lauded by the SF and fantasy community, but have been ignored, are **Karen Russell's** *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, **Elizabeth Hand's** *Errantry*, and **Steven Millhauser's** *We Others* (which I did not know had been published until I saw it on a remainder table at Readings). Again, I write about these in my Nova Mob talk/*SFC* 89 article 'Genres Work Both Way'.

Deserving of a much longer review is *Chequered Lives*, by **Iola Hack Mathews** with **Chris Durrant**. Iola began this book some years ago as a research project into the history of her family, who migrated to the new colony of South Australia in the 1830s. It grew, and became a first-class narrative about two hard-driving brothers, John Barton Hack and Stephen Hack, as they make their fortunes in South Australia, lose their fortunes, start their families, and move all over the place. The book even has a villain, a bloke who pursued the Hack brothers for every penny they owed. Complete with vivid illustrations and maps, *Chequered Lives* is a great yarn. Copies should be available from Wakefield Press, 1 The Parade West, Kent Town, South Australia 5067 (www.wakefieldpress.com.au).

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|---|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy</i> (1994) Kip Thorne (Papermac; 619 pp.) | (Knopf; 243 pp.) |
| 2 | <i>The Narrow Road to the Deep North</i> (2013) Richard Flanagan (as above) | 9 |
| 3 | <i>The Risk Pool</i> (1988) Richard Russo (as above) | 10 |
| 4 | <i>Swamplandia!</i> (2011) Jennifer Egan (as above) | 11 |
| 5 | <i>Under the Skin</i> (2000) Michel Faber (as above) | 12 |
| 6 | <i>Lovecraft: A Biography</i> (1975/1976) L. Sprague de Camp (Ballantine; 480 pp.) | 13 |
| 7 | <i>The Place at Whitton</i> (1964/2014) Tom Keneally (as above) | 14 |
| 8 | <i>Vampires in the Lemon Grove</i> (2013) Karen Russell | 15 |
| | | <i>We Others: New and Selected Stories</i> (2011) Steven Millhauser (Knopf; 387 pp.) |
| | | <i>Life or Death</i> (2014) Michael Robotham (as above) |
| | | <i>The Keep</i> (2006) Jennifer Egan (as above) |
| | | <i>Chequered Lives: John Barton Hack and Stephen Hack and the Early Days of South Australia</i> (2013) Iola Hack Mathews with Chris Durrant (Wakefield Press; 291 pp.) |
| | | <i>The Fear</i> (1965) Thomas Keneally (as above) |
| | | <i>Fatherland</i> (1992) Robert Harris (as above) |
| | | <i>Strange Bodies</i> (2013) Marcel Theroux (as above) |

- 16 *Shatter* (2008) Michael Robotham (as above)
- 17 *Sourdough and Other Stories* (2010) Angela Slatter (Tartarus Press; 238 pp.)
- 18 *Errantry: Strange Stories* (2012) Elizabeth Hand (Small Beer Press; 286 pp.)
- 19 *Personality* (2003) Andrew O'Hagan (as above)
- 20 *Available Dark* (2012) Elizabeth Hand (as above)
- 21 *The Science of Interstellar* (2014) Kip Thorne (Norton; 324 pp.)
- 22 *The Stars Like Sand: Australian Speculative Poetry* (2014) ed. Tim Jones and P. S. Collier (Interactive Press; 180 pp.)
- 23 *Look At Me* (2001) Jennifer Egan (as above)
- 24 *Interstellar: The Official Movie Novelization* (2014) Greg Keyes (as above)

Other four-star books, in the order in which they were read:

- *Dark Sister* (1992) Graham Joyce (Headline Feature; 372 pp.)
- *Time Pieces* (1998) Michael Bishop (Edgewood Press; 90 pp.)
- *The Duties of a Cat* (2013) Jenny Blackford (Pitt Street Poetry; 24 pp.)
- *Malice Domestic 1: An Anthology Of Original Traditional Mystery Stories* (1992) ed. Martin Greenberg (Pocket Books; 275 pp.)
- *Sophie, In Shadow* (2014) Eileen Kerneghan (Thistle-down Press; 241 pp.)
- *A Million Windows* (2014) Gerald Murnane (Giramondo; 192 pp.)
- *Cloudy Nouns* (2012) Geoff Page (Picaro Press; 80 pp.)

Favourite films seen for the first time in 2014

The top three on 2014's list comprise a group of films that startle the viewer with the originality and beauty of their images rather than the coherence of their stories. **Paolo Sorrentino's** *This Must Be the Place* is a deep and strange film that I would not have watched if Dick Jenssen had not told me about it. It tells of a man who had led a pop band in the eighties, but has become stuck with a fortune although he hasn't performed for many years. At the beginning of the film he is nearly drowning

in the depression of no longer feeling able to take meaningful action. Sean Penn is unrecognisable as the rock star who looks rather like Robert Smith from The Cure. Called back to America from Ireland by his father and brother, he sets off on a road trip that rivals the strangeness of the road trips in Wim Wenders' films.

The Great Beauty, also by **Paolo Sorrentino**, is the story of a 65-year-old man who has been a fashion leader for so long, accepted as the arbiter of social life in Rome, that he has not created anything for many years. He wanders Rome, reminding fans of Fellini's characters in *La Dolce Vita*, until the ghosts of his own past and Rome itself overwhelm him. A stunning film to look at.

Because of financial constraints, in the film version of *Under the Skin* **Jonathan Glazer** has had to ditch much of the alien machinery of the novel. He substitutes startling, super-sensual images that overwhelm the viewer. As in the novel, an alien disguised as a woman patrols the roads of Scotland, enticing unsuspecting chaps to their doom. It's never clear in the film what that doom is, or why the aliens need these blokes. Instead, Scarlett Johanson's hunger dominates the story. The whole space-station crew of the book is replaced by a single motor cyclist who follows after the girl-alien's car. Her eventual fate is rather different from that of the alien-girl in the novel, but the cause is the same: 'she' falls in love with our good old rain-soaked planet and its people. I was reminded of the *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is one of the most original movies of the year, its production design dazzling, its performances wonderful. However, it did not hit me as hard as *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* This was an unexpected contribution to the film offerings we saw at our very small film group every month out in Greensborough. (We would invite more people to



attend, but the seating is limited.) At the beginning of *Gilbert Grape*, we find an older teenager (Johnny Depp, in a very early role) taking care of his hyperactive brother, who is suffering from some kind of disability. Can the actor really be ... Leonard Di Caprio? He is. He is unrecognisable for those who know him only from his films of the last 10 years. He lives inside the role completely, as does Johnny Depp as the guardian brother. This film also creates the sense of inhabiting a complete rural community. It's currently available on Blu-ray.

I knew of *Stalag 17* as a prison escape movie. Although it's been on TV plenty of times, I had never seen it. What nobody had told me is that in it **Billy Wilder** creates both a prison-escape drama and a wildly funny comedy about men under stress. William Holden dominates the film as the POW who will make any deal anytime to strengthen his position on the prison camp.

Gone Girl has appeared on Blu-ray, so I'm looking forward to seeing it again. A main impression hit me when I saw it at the Nova: this film is 2 hours 40 minutes long, but it seems to be only an hour and a half long when you finish watching it. That's snazzy story-telling. But it's a **David Fincher** film, so you would expect snazzy story-telling. What's unexpected is that the main character turns out not to be the husband whose wife goes missing, or the wife who disappears, but the sister of the husband.

Predestination is the Australian movie that few Australians saw, because this multiplex-style SF film was distributed only through the arthouse circuit. The only American in it is Ethan Hawke, and Melbourne stands in for Cleveland and New York. The **Spierig Brothers** work wonders with Robert Heinlein's 1959 short story 'All You Zombies'. The star of the film is Adelaide's Sarah Snook, who has already won an AACTA award in Australia for her performance. She would have scored an Oscar nomination if the film had been distributed properly in the USA. The film received only two weeks in cinemas in America, but was released in Britain. Someday somebody will take proper notice of this brilliant film, but for now it will have to remain our secret treasure.

Thunderbolt and Lightfoot was directed by **Michael Cimino**, but it feels like a **Clint Eastwood** movie. Clint Eastwood stars in it and produced it, and it has all the self-deprecatory tough-guy humour you would expect from an Eastwood guys-on-the-run-from-vengeance thriller. Wonderful widescreen colour photography.

Dead of Night is one of those films I had heard about so often that I had seemed to have seen it. Not so. An Englishman arrives at a house. He recognises it, although he has never been here before. He remembers the interior of the house and the people who meet there. Then each begins to tell his or her tale of horror (each episode directed by a different director) ... Now fully restored on Blu-ray, its episodes include much British humour as well as some shocking moments, and the ending is a delicious nightmare that reminds of the work of Philip K. Dick, although Dick had not been heard of 1945.

Most of the following films are memorable because of their scripts and acting, but perhaps not as dazzling to look at as the films already discussed.

Philomena features one of those scripts where the surprise ending seems to have been delivered halfway though the film — until all assumptions are turned on their head. Judi Dench is extraordinary as the lady who has spent her whole life trying to find her son. This film also features Steve Coogan's best performance.

Nebraska is not as adventurous a film as some of **Alexander Payne**'s earlier films (especially *Election*), but its black-and-white widescreen landscapes and Bruce Dern's haunted face lodge it securely in the memory. Dern plays the old bloke who believes he has won a lottery in a town up north, near where he grew up. On the way to collect his nonexistent prize, he stops at his hometown, where his despairing son, trying to persuade his father to abandon the trip, finds out much about his father that had been kept secret until then. A great road movie.

Some of the other movies are films that do not stand up in the believability department, but are magnificent to watch. *Interstellar* will probably hurtle up the list when I get a chance to watch it properly. **Luc Besson**'s *Lucy* (starring Scarlett Johansson) and **Bong Joon Ho**'s *Snowpiercer* are much more dazzling as pieces of photography and action choreography. Watching them took my mind off my mundane worries, and each is good for a re-viewing.

Guardians of the Galaxy, *The Zero Theorem*, and *The Lego Movie* are also great fun, and filled in the hours. One would like to know the stab-in-the-back story that explains the failure of *The Lego Movie* to be nominated in 2015 for an Oscar for Best Animated Feature.

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|----|---|----|---|
| 1 | <i>This Must Be the Place</i> (2011) directed by Paolo Sorrentino | 14 | <i>Interstellar</i> (2014) Christopher Nolan |
| 2 | <i>The Great Beauty</i> (2013) Paolo Sorrentino | 15 | <i>I Served the King of England</i> (2006) Jiri Menzel |
| 3 | <i>Under the Skin</i> (2013) Jonathan Glazer | 16 | <i>Les Enfants Terribles</i> (1950) Jean-Pierre Melville |
| 4 | <i>What's Eating Gilbert Grape?</i> (1993) Lasse Hallstrom | 17 | <i>Lucy</i> (2014) Luc Besson |
| 5 | <i>Stalag 17</i> (1953) Billy Wilder | 18 | <i>Snowpiercer</i> (2014) Bong Joon Ho |
| 6 | <i>Gone Girl</i> (2014) David Fincher | 19 | <i>Land of Plenty</i> (2004) Wim Wenders |
| 7 | <i>Predestination</i> (2014) Spierig Brothers | 20 | <i>The Haunting</i> (1963) Robert Wise |
| 8 | <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> (2014) Wes Anderson | 21 | <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> (2014) James Gunn |
| 9 | <i>Thunderbolt and Lightfoot</i> (1974) Michael Cimino | 22 | <i>The Zero Theorem</i> (2013) Terry Gilliam |
| 10 | <i>Dead of Night</i> (1945) Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden, Robert Hamer | 23 | <i>A Most Wanted Man</i> (2014) Anton Corbijn |
| 11 | <i>Philomena</i> (2013) Stephen Frears | 24 | <i>The Lego Movie</i> (2014) Phil Lord and Christopher Miller |
| 12 | <i>Nebraska</i> (2013) Alexander Payne | | |
| 13 | <i>The Railway Man</i> (2014) Jonathan Teplitzky | | |

Other four-star films seen for the first time in 2014, in the order of viewing:

- *Amazing Grace* (2006) Michael Apted
- *Parkland* (2013) Peter Landesman
- *North To Alaska* (1960) Henry Hathaway
- *Prince Valiant* (1954) Henry Hathaway
- *The Broken Shore* (2014) Rowan Woods
- *The Day Will Dawn* (1942) Harold French
- *Chaplin* (1992) Richard Attenborough
- *23 Paces to Baker Street* (1956) Henry Hathaway
- *The Shadow* (1993) Russell Mulcahy
- *Robin Redbreast* (1970) John Bowen
- *Frozen* (2013) Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee
- *El Dorado* (1966) Howard Hawks
- *While The City Sleeps* (1956) Fritz Lang

- *It Always Rains On Sunday* (1957) Robert Hamer
- *Stardust Memories* (1980) Woody Allen
- *Minuscule: Valley Of The Lost Ants* (2013) Thomas Szabo and Hélène Girard
- *Quartet* (2012) Dustin Hoffman
- *Robin and Marian* (1976) Richard Lester
- *Call Northside 777* (1948) Henry Hathaway
- *The Monuments Men* (2014) George Clooney
- *Take Shelter* (2011) Jeff Nichols
- *Brute Force* (1947) Jules Dassin
- *Help* (1965) Richard Lester
- *Round Midnight* (1986) Bertrand Tavernier
- *Nightfall* (1956) Jacques Tourneur
- *Arabesque* (1966) Stanley Donen
- *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence* (1982) Nagisa Oshima
- *The Emperor Waltz* (1946) Billy Wilder

Favourite films seen again in 2014

Lots of familiar names here — so why did I re-watch these particular movies in 2014? Usually because they became available on Blu-ray for the first time. Thanks very much to Dick Jenssen for giving me access to many of the films on the list, and to John and Diane for the movies they showed at our place for film nights.

First, however, a note of thanks and sadness. **Robert Altman's *A Prairie Home Companion***, full of echoes of endings and death as well as Garrison Keillor's divine humour, was the last movie that our other film group watched at the home of **Race and Iola Mathews** in August 2014. The monthly group was set up by Race in 1993, after he and Iola bought the house in the inner suburbs. Race had just bought as large a TV set as any of us had seen at the time. With it he showed laserdiscs, and later DVDs. In recent years, Race has upgraded his screen and bought a Blu-ray player. Elaine and I felt privileged to be asked to join the group, and enjoyed the socialising even when we didn't enjoy any particular movie being shown on the night. Numbers were sometimes too large for the living room, but attendances decreased during recent years. Bruno died, several members could no longer find transport at night, and ill health prevented some others from attending. Meanwhile, Race was putting his time into a second PhD dissertation and trying to save his beloved Labor Party. Iola was writing books, including *Chequered Lives*, mentioned already. Who could have thought that the Labor Party's enemies could have done such an efficient job of shooting themselves in the foot, thus putting Labor back in power in Victoria and Queensland?

Finally Race and Iola's film group disbanded, although some of us meet occasionally for dinner in Carnegie. This group has been a very valuable part of my life for 21 years. Nothing will replace it.

Since the 1960s I've maintained **Jacques Tati's** *Mon Oncle* as one of my Top 5 films. In 2014, at last, all the Tati films were released in a Blu-ray boxed set, with the colour

values fully restored. What an occasion for rejoicing!

In the meantime, **Robert Hamer's** *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, with its script as witty as anything written by Oscar Wilde, and Alec Guinness playing all nine members of the rapidly diminishing Gascoigne family, has been ascending my list of favourite films. Each time I see it, I enjoy more and more its succulent English script telling of revenge served cold.

I had not seen **John Frankenheimer's** *The Train* since I saw it as a midday movie sometime in the early 1980s. In 1945, Paul Scofield's Nazi general attempts to scoop up all of France's art treasures and send them by train back to Germany as the Allies advance. All I remembered from my first viewing was Burt Lancaster as a French train driver, and the amazing scheme by which he and the whole French train system contrive to save the master-



pieces. (A much duller version of the same story appeared recently in George Clooney's movie *The Monuments Men*.) *The Train* has to be seen in widescreen black-and-white, cinema's greatest medium, to appreciate the muscularity and solidity of both its steam trains and Lancaster and his crew. An example of 1960s Hollywood cinema at its very best.

Witness for the Prosecution, story by Agatha Christie and direction by **Billy Wilder**, is one of those films that, after you've started watching it, you cannot stop watching until its last scene. Charles Laughton, Elsa Lanchester, and Marlene Dietrich are at their best, and Billy Wilder has enormous fun. There is a perfect new print on Blu-ray.

By contrast, *It Happened One Night* came as a complete surprise. I had watched it as a midday movie during the 1980s. All I remembered was that it was a lively comedy, and that it seemed to come from an era much later than 1934. It established **Frank Capra** as a star director. While watching the fabulous new Blu-ray print, accompanied by such 'fillers' as a one-and-a-half-hour biography of Frank Capra, I could now see how revolutionary the film was, not only because of its affection for all classes of Americans, but also because of its ability to suggest sensuality and romance without a kiss being exchanged (on screen) by Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable. You could run an entire film course using scenes from *It Happened One Night*.

I've usually said that **Bob Fosse's** *Cabaret* was the best film of the 1970s, but I had forgotten just how good it is until I saw it recently on Blu-ray. Dazzling editing, choreography, photography, acting, and script. It's sobering to reflect, as the credits roll by, that few of the characters would have been left alive by the end of World War II.

The only time I had ever seen **John Ford's** *My Darling Clementine* was on a small black-and-white screen at the home of Lee and Carla Harding in early 1968, not long after I had first met them. All I remembered was Victor Mature's agonised face as he (as Doc Holliday) attempts to recall his doctoring skills as he attempts to save a

woman's life. That's still the most powerful scene in the film, which is filled with classic scenes never surpassed in any western.

The Third Man? Even better in Blu-ray than in the DVD version I saw a few years ago. One of the essential films, directed ostensibly by **Carol Reed** and written by Graham Greene, but hijacked by Orson Welles. It includes Welles's 'cuckoo clock' speech (which he claims he wrote) and the chase through the Viennese sewers (also resembling similar scenes in Welles's own films). A great performance by Joseph Cotten, but he should have learned by then never to appear in the same film as Orson Welles.

Watch **Jacques Tati's** *Play Time* on Blu-ray, in the boxed set available at all JB Hi Fi stores. This is the first time you will have seen it properly. One of the few French films made in 70 mm, it was shown in Australia in 1968 in a faded 35 mm print. The print was still faded and indistinct in the version included in a recent DVD boxed set. Tati's daughter has since allowed the restorers to work from the 70 mm print. If you have an 80-inch screen at your place, you can finally see the effect that Tati wanted. My screen is somewhat smaller, but I could catch much detail that had always escaped me, from the chase around the office building at the beginning to all the comings and goings of the restaurant disaster scene that occupies the final hour of the film. I felt two reactions: 'No wonder audiences could make neither head nor tail of *Play Time* in 1967' — and 'Isn't it wonderful to have stayed alive long enough to see *Play Time* in all its glory?'

Each of the other films on the list was seen again during 2014 because a Blu-ray version became available. They include masterpieces of black-and-white photography, such as *The Spy in Black*, *Jane Eyre*, *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (widescreen b&w), *The Lost Moment*, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, and *Out of the Past*, as well as **Joseph Losey's** glorious Cannes-winning *The Go-Between*, starring Julie Christie at her most beguiling, Alan Bates at his most commanding, and Dominic Guard in his first role. (He would later appear as a main character in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.)

- 1 *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1944) directed by Robert Hamer
- 2 *Mon Oncle* (1958) Jacques Tati
- 3 *The Train* (1964) John Frankenheimer
- 4 *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) Billy Wilder
- 5 *It Happened One Night* (1934) Frank Capra
- 6 *Cabaret* (1972) Bob Fosse
- 7 *My Darling Clementine* (1946) John Ford
- 8 *The Third Man* (1949) Carol Reed
- 9 *Play Time* (1967) Jacques Tati
- 10 *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006) Robert Altman
- 11 *The Go-Between* (1970) Joseph Losey
- 12 *The Spy in Black* (1939) Michael Powell
- 13 *Jane Eyre* (1942) Robert Stevenson
- 14 *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965) Otto Preminger
- 15 *The Lost Moment* (1947) Martin Gabel

- 16 *Fedora* (1978) Billy Wilder
- 17 *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964) Pier Paolo Pasolini
- 18 *Out of the Past* (1947) Jacques Tourneur

Other four-star films seen again in 2014, in the order of viewing:

- *Zabriskie Point* (1970) Michelangelo Antonioni
- *The Mouse That Roared* (1959) Jack Arnold
- *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) Alfred Hitchcock
- *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) Richard Lester
- *Ace in the Hole* (1951) Billy Wilder
- *Jour de Fête* (1947) Jacques Tati
- *M. Hulot's Holiday* (1953) Jacques Tati

Favourite documentaries and music videos seen for the first time in 2014

This list groups a whole lot of enjoyable films that could not be separated into further sublists. Documentaries? Music films? Non-fiction films? Concert films? You name them; I enjoy them. Many of the following I've been able to see only because of the generosity of Dick Jenssen.

Elaine and I watched *Springsteen and I* again recently. I wanted to make sure that it was the exhilarating film that I remember, and Elaine was intrigued by the premise — that all the pieces of the film had been put together by amateur photographers who are fans of Bruce Springsteen. Most of them are fanatical fans of the life and songs of Bruce Springsteen, but the film is exhilarating because each young film-maker had an entirely different view of her or his hero. The contributors range from a young Master's graduate who drives trucks to a British working-class couple who have won a trip to see a Springsteen concert in New York only to be offered a seating upgrade to the best seats in the house, to a girl who is dragged up on stage to dance 'Dancing in the Dark' with her hero, to a chap who is so overcome by emotion when remembering the songs of his hero that he begins crying in front of camera. A busker takes pictures of himself performing an impromptu street gig with a young Bruce Springsteen. An Elvis impersonator is dragged on stage by Bruce to sing two Elvis Presley numbers with him. And on it goes. A film of emotion and experience, with no distracting efforts at analysis.

Rather different is a recent performance of **Philip Glass's** opera *The Last American*, ostensibly about the last days of Walt Disney. This is the most enjoyable Philip Glass music I've heard. The scenario is surreal rather than realistic, reminding me of the staging of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Disney's whole life is evoked, especially his abrasive relationships with his employees and his brother Roy.

I've already written (in my other fanzine *Treasure*) about *Goin' Your Way*, the Sydney Opera House concert collaboration between **Paul Kelly**, Australia's finest songwriter, and **Neil Finn**, New Zealand's finest songwriter. Two hours of magic moments, finishing with a wistful 'Moon River'.

Other fine concerts listed here include those by **Yefrim Bronfman**, whose hands look like those of a brickie's labourer, performing with a great light touch his version of **Beethoven's** 'Emperor' Concerto, and **Daniel Barenboim** and the **Staatskapelle Berlin** introducing me to a symphony I've always felt was rather intimidating: **Bruckner's** gigantic 8th. I particularly enjoyed the slow movement. The enormous bass sound, all in 24 bit format on Blu-ray, revealed all the faults in my headphones, so Dick gave me a pair of headphones to replace them.

Most of the other items are biographies of one type or another.

Muscle Shoals is the biography of a recording studio and a concept ('Southern sound'). A group of musicians who hide away in the back country are so successful they attract all the top musicians from New York.

The Muscle Shoals studio also created a work environment for local musicians, including **Duane Allman** and his brothers in the late sixties. Allman died in a motorcycle accident in 1971, but his brilliance reflects both ways: back to the development of the Allman Brothers as a band, and forward to the Southern rock movement. His story, *Song of the South*, is also highly recommended.

Frank Capra's American Dream is one of the best films I've seen about this great American film director. It was shown in Australia at a film festival, but not released in cinemas. Now it arrives as a filler on the Blu-ray of *It Happened One Night*.

Several biographies feature their subjects talking direct to camera:

Melbourne's **Father Bob McGuire** lost his South Melbourne parish because he offered too much of himself to too many people, and didn't apologise to the church hierarchy. In *Bob We Trust* is amusing and energetic, its narrative peppered with heart-stopping moments. Father Bob's friendly interrogator is John Safran.

Gore Vidal has never apologised to anybody in power in the USA for his scepticism about the imperialist plutocracy who rule the land. In *United States of Amnesia*, Vidal is often very witty, and he has no illusions about his own strengths and weaknesses (mainly strengths).

And in *Pharos of Chaos*, **Sterling Hayden** just talks to the camera for a couple of hours. At first he seems a bit drunk or perhaps on the edge of senility, but slowly he



unravels the fabric of his remarkable life's journey.

More entrancing as a person is the great **Charlotte Rampling**. Seemingly ageless, she is interviewed in depth in *The Look*. As the title implies, the film is about surfaces and textures, and how Rampling has used them through-

out her career. From time to time the film shows the extra depths of her character: her rich engagement with the people she's known throughout her life. I really must catch up on more Charlotte Rampling films of the last 50 years.

- 1 *Springsteen and I* (2013) directed by Baillie Walsh
- 2 *Philip Glass: The Last American*: cond. Dennis Russell Davies (2013)
- 3 *Neil Finn and Paul Kelly: Goin' Your Way* (2013) Paul Goodman
- 4 *Frank Capra's American Dream* (1997) Ken Bowser
- 5 *In Bob We Trust* (2013) Lynn-Maree Milburn
- 6 *Muscle Shoals* (2012) Greg 'Freddy' Camalier
- 7 *Song of the South: Duane Allman and the Rise of the Allman Brothers Band* (2013) Tom O'Dell
- 8 *Gore Vidal: United States of Amnesia* (2013) Nicholas Wrathall
- 9 *The Look: Charlotte Rampling* (2011) Angelina Maccarone
- 10 *Yefrim Bronfman (piano)/Andris Nelson (cond)/RCO: Beethoven: Piano Concerto No 5/Chopin: Etude In F Major/Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade/Dvorak: Slavonic Dance No 3* (2014)
- 11 *Daniel Barenboim (cond.)/Staatskapelle Berlin: Bruckner: Symphony No 8* (2011) Andreas Moreal
- 12 *Miles Davis: Live In Europe: 7 July 1969*
- 13 *Lon Chaney: A Thousand Faces* (2000) Kevin Brownlow
- 14 *Pharos Of Chaos: A Profile Of Sterling Hayden* (1982) Walter Eckart Buhler

Other four-star items, in the order of viewing:

- *Jackson Browne: Live in Concert: I'll Do Anything* (2013) Erica Ferrero
- *Stories We Tell* (2012) Sarah Polley
- *A Musicares Tribute to Bruce Springsteen* (2013) Leon Knoles
- *Linda Ronstadt: Faithless Love* (1980)
- *Building the Wrecking Ball: Daniel Lanois* (2014) Bob Lanois
- *Christian Thielemann (cond.)/Staatskapelle Dresden: Bruckner: Symphony No 8* (2012) Henning Kasten
- *Rockpile: Live At Rockpalast: Hamburg, 12 January 1980* (1980) Christian Wagner
- *American Style: Tati's Jour De Fete* (2012) Stephane Goudet
- *John Hiatt: Terms of My Surrender* (2014) Gary Briggs
- *Crosby Stills Nash & Young: CSNY 1974* (2014) Graham Nash
- *Red Obsession* (2013) Warwick Ross and David Roach
- *Mystery Girl Unravelling* (2014) Alex Orbison
- *Eric Clapton: Planes Trains And Eric* (2014) David Maxwell
- *Touching The Sand: The Improbable Journey Of Nobayuki Tsujii* (2014) Peter Rosen
- *Bizet: The Pearl Fishers* (2013) Gabriele Fero

Favourite popular CDs heard for the first time in 2014

This list is an unequal contest between the Golden Oldies and the Young Things. The Golden Oldies win by a country kilometre.

The **Haden Triplets** and **First Aid Kit** are two girl groups, the first from America and the second from Sweden, who make very sweet sounds, aided by skilled producers. First Aid Kit has become very popular in the last three years. *Fool's Gold* is full of sylvan ululating, but so is *The Haden Triplets*. I like the Haden triplets' songs slightly better than those of First Aid Kit, and their CD is recorded in a huge old house in San Francisco, with Ry Cooder producing and playing guitar.

Lindi Ortega (*Tin Star*), by contrast, is a riotous country singer with a full-range voice who blasts out melody-rich songs that would work even better on stage than on CD.

The rest of the list features mainly tough old survivors who have not yet been forced to jump the ship of life.

Willie Nelson, well into his eighties, sounds merrier and more energetic than ever. Surrounded by some favourite musicians, he includes on *Band of Brothers* a boatload of fine new songs he's written with Gus Cannon, including some very funny autobiographical pieces.

I'm not sure how energetic **Jerry Lee Lewis** still is. I've heard reports that his performances now last only 25 minutes. But put him in the studio with some good friends (*Rock and Roll Time*) and he remains a master of rock and roll piano and voice production.

Some Melbourne radio listeners might remember a Saturday afternoon, about 25 years ago, when **Harry Dean Stanton** wandered into 3RRR studios to talk to Paul Harris about films for a couple of hours, but mainly talked about music, and gave an impromptu country music concert. He has been performing ever since, and at the age of 79 has issued his first album, *Partly Fiction*. His voice is well-worn, but he gives emotional depth to



the songs, and his band is excellent.

Cowboy Jack Clement has died since he recorded *Guess Things Happen That Way*, but he has left behind a very fine account of his singing and producing skills. He was one of the top producers and songwriters in Nashville for more than 50 years, but seems to have made few other recordings.

Richard Thompson and Marianne Faithfull, now about 70, are relative youngsters in the list, but both produced career-best albums in 2014.

Richard Thompson's *Acoustic Classics* features him singing better than ever and playing on his acoustic guitar new versions of his best songs. The set list is essentially that of the sparkling one-man concert that Elaine treated me for my fiftieth birthday (19 years ago!) at the National Theatre.

Marianne Faithfull's life-gravelled voice may never improve, but her ability to dig into the essence of a great

song seems to improve with each CD. *Give My Love to London* should have had much more success than it did.

Jackson Browne's *Standing in the Breach* is his strongest CD for many years. Over the last 30 years many of his recordings have been preachy and just a bit dull. His messages to a damaged world are as strong as ever, but the songs themselves exhibit so much verve that they might well have appeared on Browne's classic albums of the 1970s and 1980s. Almost nobody on radio plays great albums by veteran performers, so you probably haven't heard this one.

Much the same can be said for fine new albums by **Rosanne Cash** (*The River and the Thread*), **Mary Gauthier** (*Trouble and Love*), **Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers** (*Hypnotic Eye*), **Leonard Cohen** (*Popular Problems*), **Loudon Wainwright III** (*Haven't Got the Blues (Yet)*), and the other people I've listed. If only there were radio platforms, other than a few specialist programs on a few subscriber stations, where their fans could hear their new recordings, they could maintain career momentum.

Items that don't fit any list pattern above include **Joseph Arthur's** *Lou*. Joseph Arthur seems to be a fine new performer who knows how to pay tribute to a fine old performer, Lou Reed (who died during 2014), not by reproducing his style, but by delivering whisper-quiet acoustic performances of some of Lou's best songs.

Ben Harper is one one of the few listenable performers who also reaches the ARIA Top 20 chart. His blues-based albums are very enjoyable, but nothing he has done is as fine as *Childhood Home*, the CD he recorded with his mother **Ellen Harper**. Some are folk songs, and most sound like folk songs. The combination of voices is irresistible.

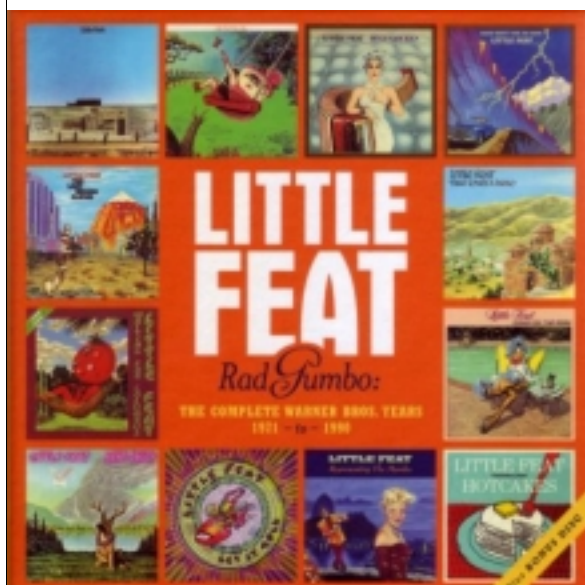
Old Crow Medicine Show remains one of the liveliest American alt.country/Americana bands, but they have lost some of their zing in *Remedy*. To see the band at full power, track down one of their concert DVDs.

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|----|--|----|--|
| 1 | Tanya, Rachel & Petra Haden: <i>The Haden Triplets</i> (2014) | 19 | Leonard Cohen: <i>Popular Problems</i> (2014) |
| 2 | First Aid Kit: <i>Stay Gold</i> (2014) | 20 | Rodney Crowell: <i>Tarpaper Sky</i> (2014) |
| 3 | Willie Nelson: <i>Band Of Brothers</i> (2014) | 21 | Eliza Gilkyson: <i>The Nocturne Diaries</i> (2014) |
| 4 | Jerry Lee Lewis: <i>Rock And Roll Time</i> (2014) | 22 | Lucinda Williams: <i>Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone</i> (2014) (2 CDs) |
| 5 | Lindi Ortega: <i>Tin Star</i> (2013) | 23 | Neil Young: <i>Storytone</i> (2014) (2 CDs) |
| 6 | Richard Thompson: <i>Acoustic Classics</i> (2014) | 24 | Various: <i>Link Of Chain: A Songwriters Tribute to Chris Smither</i> (2014) |
| 7 | Joseph Arthur: <i>Lou</i> (2014) | 25 | <i>Weather Report</i> (1971/2013) |
| 8 | Harry Dean Stanton: <i>Partly Fiction</i> (2014) | 26 | Johnny Cash: <i>Out Among the Stars</i> (1984/2014) |
| 9 | Marianne Faithfull: <i>Give My Love to London</i> (2014) | 27 | C. W. Stoneking: <i>Goin' Boogaloo</i> (2014) |
| 10 | Ben and Ellen Harper: <i>Childhood Home</i> (2014) | | |
| 11 | Cowboy Jack Clement: <i>Guess Things Happen That Way</i> (2004) | | |
| 12 | Old Crow Medicine Show: <i>Remedy</i> (2014) | | |
| 13 | Loudon Wainwright III: <i>Haven't Got The Blues (Yet)</i> (2014) | | |
| 14 | Mary Gauthier: <i>Trouble And Love</i> (2014) | | |
| 15 | Jackson Browne: <i>Standing in the Breach</i> (2014) | | |
| 16 | Rosanne Cash: <i>The River and the Thread</i> (2014) | | |
| 17 | Wilko Johnson & Roger Daltry: <i>Going Back Home</i> (2014) | | |
| 18 | Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers: <i>Hypnotic Eye</i> (2014) | | |
- Four-star items listed in order of hearing:**
- Bill Callahan: *Dream River* (2013)
 - Neko Case: *The Worse Things Get, The Harder I Fight; The Harder I Fight, The More I Love You* (2013)
 - Bruce Springsteen: *High Hopes* (2014)
 - Pink Floyd: *The Division Bell* (1994/2011)
 - Matthew Sweet and Susanna Hoffs: *Under the Covers, Vol. 3* (2013)
 - Soundtrack: *Winter's Bone* (2010)
 - Various: *Looking Into You: A Tribute to Jackson Browne*

- (2014) (2 CDs)
- Maria Muldaur (1973) (LP)
- Gerry Hale's Uncle Bill: *One Day in Adelphia* (1998)
- *Hard Working Americans* (2014)
- Harry Nilsson: *Flash Harry* (1980/2013)
- Rockpile: *Live At Rockpalast* (1980/2013)
- Chuck E. Weiss: *Red Beans and Weiss* (2014)
- Tift Merritt: *Traveling Alone* (2013)
- Ray Davies and Friends: *See My Friends* (2010)
- Linda Ronstadt: *Duets* (2014)
- Robert Plant: *Lullaby... and the Ceaseless Roar* (2014)
- Shovels and Rope: *O Be Joyful* (2012)
- Charlie Haden, Family and Friends: *Rambling Boy* (2008)
- Billy Joe Shaver: *When I Get My Wings* (1976)/ *Gypsy Boy* (1977) (2013)
- Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden: *Last Date* (2014)
- Blasters: *Trouble Bound: Live 2002* (2003)
- Various: *Lost on the River: The New Basement Tapes* (2014)
- Old 97's: *Most Messed Up* (2014)
- Thompson Family (2014)

Favourite popular boxed sets bought during 2014

Big boxed sets began to disappear during 2014, except



for ludicrously priced sets that feature only one classic album. Somehow a Led Zeppelin album, for instance, can be extended to a huge set by adding alternative and rehearsal versions of every song, bootleg songs from the same period, an LP or two, a book of photos, and perhaps even a concert DVD if you're lucky. I haven't bothered with many of these, except for a few expanded album reissues by Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen.

The other recent type of boxed set is the one that contains the first five albums by one performer, or even every CD by that performer. I could not afford the set of Bob Dylan's complete studio albums, remastered, but I did buy quite a few of the 'Original Albums' series.

And I bought *Rad Gumbo*, the complete Little Feat albums for Warner Bros because ... Why did I buy it? Because all the albums have been remastered. Because the set includes some albums that had never been on CD (such as *Down on the Farm* and *Hoy Hoy*). And because I

hoped to create a huge space on the shelf when I gave away the old CDs to friends. That bit did not work out. Most of the early Little Feat CDs included the lyrics. No lyric sheets in *Rad Gumbo*. Oh well. It's still the best package of 2014.

Michael Bloomfield's *From the Head to his Heart to his Hands* and Crosby Stills Nash & Young's *CSNY 74* are the only other true boxed sets of the type we have become used to during the last 30 years.

It's wonderful that a great blues guitarist and vocalist such as Michael Bloomfield has finally had many of his best performances presented properly. I didn't even notice his work until he died in 1979, but now it's possible to listen to the full range of his work.

CSNY 74 contains a huge range of concert performances from the 1974 Crosby Stills Nash & Young tour, showing that great music can be generated by intense conflict. Hardly anybody was talking to anybody else by the end, but the tapes remain. Forty years later Graham Nash, Stephen Stills, and David Crosby plucked from the tapes four CDs of remarkable performances (including a song Neil Young concocted a few minutes before he went on stage). Crosby Nash and Stills also used the release of the boxed set to publicise their own recent tour, reportedly the most successful concert tour of 2013–2014.

Most of the other items on my list are expansions and revivals of favourite albums. Roy Orbison's *Mystery Girl* is now 25 years old (the year Roy died)! The extra material is interesting, but only a few of the recently discovered and remastered songs match the quality of the songs from the original album.

I doubt if Jo Jo Zep and the Falcons' *Screaming Targets* has until now been released on CD. Jo Camilleri (who has performed as Jo Jo Zep and the Falcons, the Black Sorrows, the Revelators, and Bakelite Radio) was at his craziest and best in the mid 1970s. Most of his band members have remained successful session and band musicians ever since. The studio material (*Screaming Targets*) is excellent, but does not have the same great loony rock and roll buzz of the concert performances.

- 1 Little Feat: *Rad Gumbo* (13 CDs)
- 2 Roy Orbison: *Mystery Girl Deluxe* (CD + DVD)

- 3 Jo Jo Zep and the Falcons: *Screaming Targets: Expanded Edition* (2 CDs)

- 4 Michael Bloomfield: *From the Head to His Heart to his Hands* (3 CDs + DVD)
- 5 Crosby Stills Nash & Young: *CSNY 74* (3 CDs + DVD)
- 6 Emmylou Harris: *Wrecking Ball: Deluxe Edition* (2 CDs + DVD)
- 7 Aretha Franklin: *Original Album Series* (5 CDs)
- 8 Various: *All My Friends: A Tribute to Gregg Allman* (2 CDs + DVD)
- 9 Chris Smith: *50: Still on the Levee* (2 CDs + book)
- 10 Richard Clapton: *Best Years 1974–2014* (3 CDs + DVD)

Other contenders, in the order in which they were bought:

- Glenn Shorrock: *45 Years of Song* (2 CDs)
- Fred Astaire: *The Early Years at RKO* (2 CDs)
- Canned Heat: *The Great Uncanned* (2 CDs)
- Various: *Greenwich Village in the '60s* (2 CDs)
- Grateful Dead: *Grateful Daydream* (3 CDs + DVD)
- Miles Davis: *Live In Europe 1967: Bootleg Series 1* (3 CDs + DVD)
- *Bluesfest 2014* (2 CDs)
- Jackson Browne: *The Very Best* (2 CDs)
- Kinks: *Muswell Hillbillies Deluxe* (2 CDs)
- Mondo Rock: *Chemistry* (2 CDs)
- Esther Phillips: *Baby I'm For Real* (4 CDs)
- Vera Lynn: *National Treasure* (2 CDs)
- Various: *Albert Productions: Good Times* (5 CDs)
- Roger McGuinn: *Stories, Songs and Friends* (2 CDs + DVD)
- Fairport Convention: *Moat on the Ledge/From Copredy to Port Meirion/XXXXV* (3 CDs)
- Wilko Johnston: *The Best of* (2 CDs)
- Grateful Dead: *Wake Up to Find Out: Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale NY 29/3/90* (3 CDs)
- Kasey Chambers: *4 Albums* (4 CDs)
- Various: *Dead Man's Town: A Tribute To Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*
- Miles Davis: *Live at the Fillmore: Bootleg Series 3* (4 CDs)
- Various: *When the Sun Sets Over Carlton* (2 CDs)
- Sports: *Reckless: Expanded Edition* (2 CDs)
- Sports: *Don't Throw Stones: Expanded Edition* (2 CDs)

Favourite classical CDs heard for the first time in 2014

The Big Boxed Set Phenomenon has dominated the classical music field during recent years even more than the same phenomenon dominated the popular field during the 1980s and 1990s. Investments in new performances of old works are unlikely to pay off in the classical field. As a result of multiple mergers, a small number of record companies are now sitting on a century's treasure chest of great performances from the world's most famous labels. Warner Classics now possesses the whole EMI mother lode, and Universal (or whatever it's called at the moment) has nearly 100 years of Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, and Philips recordings. I'm not sure how many labels Sony has taken under its wing. All of them have been reissuing gigantic boxed sets, each CD of which costs \$2 or less. More importantly, they are often resurrecting performances that were issued only briefly on 78 rpm or LP, and have never been seen on CD. All of Maria Callas's great performances? All of Karajan on DG from the sixties, seventies, and eighties? As well as a whole stash of his recordings for EMI (now Warner Classics)? All of Toscanini on RCA? (I did buy this.) Two giant boxed sets featuring the best of the Mercury label, with probably another set to come? The mind reels — not because of the cost, but because if you were crazy enough to buy these and hundreds more like them, you would find it impossible to listen to more than a few choice cherries from each set.

Which more or less explains why the following numbered list includes only two discs of newly recorded music (Nos 10 and 11) and the entire list contains only four such discs. All the great performances have been out there, locked away in the vaults, but now they are leaping

free.

Not much I can say about individual performances, though. I would have expected **John Eliot Gardiner** to produce a transcendent performance of one of the greatest pieces of choral music ever written, **Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine***, but I missed it when it was first issued in 1990. Now arrives a boxed set of Gardiner's great performances, a mere sampling of his life's work, but it did include this disc.

I owned a faulty double LP of the **Karl Munchinger**



performance of the orchestral version of **Bach's** *The Art of Fugue*, but have not been able to replace it until recently. Highly recommended, even if you have, as we do, recordings of every other configuration of Bach's final masterpiece.

Schumann, thy name is dullness — usually. But not in the hands of **Leonard Bernstein** and the **New York Philharmonic** in 1960. I took his set of his four symphonies off the shelf to test against some other recent versions I've heard, to find that Bernstein gives vivid life where little life is usually found. Which led me to look at the Presto site, only to discover that a vast number of Bernstein performances from the sixties and seventies are still available from Sony, but have never been issued as boxed sets in Australia. Should I? Shouldn't I? I had no spare cash at the time, so I spared myself the temptation. And when would I get the time to listen to them?

Most of the other CDs on this list are refreshing old

performances of pieces of music that are often given second-rate performances by first-rate orchestras.

For instance, **Maurice Abravanel's** recordings of the Sibelius symphonies, recorded in the Mormon Tabernacle, have a subterranean depth that you won't find in any other versions.

For instance, the violinist **Ivry Gitlis** was not a name known to me until Dick Jenssen recommended a recent set of his 1950s and 1960s recordings. I had heard the Stravinsky Violin Concerto several times, but was not familiar with the Berg or Hindemith concertos until I played these CDs. The background recording acoustic is a bit dry, but the interpretations are very lively.

One of the few new CDs of new performances that I bought during 2014 was Angela Hewitt's piano recording of *The Art of Fugue*. This is very enjoyable, but hardly groundbreaking, compared with many of Hewitt's other Bach recordings.

- 1 John Eliot Gardiner (cond.)/Monteverdi Choir/English Baroque Soloists/Her Majesty's Sagbutts & Cornets: **Monteverdi: *Vespro della Beata Vergine*** (1990/2013) (2 CDs) (*John Eliot Gardiner* CDs 1 & 2)
- 2 Karl Münchinger (cond.)/Stuttgart Chamber Orch.: **Bach: *The Art of Fugue/A Musical Offering*** (1965/1977/2000) (2 CDs)
- 3 Leonard Bernstein (cond.)/New York Phil. Orch.: **Schumann: *Symphony No 3/No 4/'Manfred' Overture*** (1960/1973) (*Bernstein Royal Collection*, CD 74)
- 4 Maurice Abravanel (cond.)/Utah S.O.: **Sibelius: *Symphonies 1/4*** (1977/2011) (*Sibelius Symphonies*, CD 1)
- 5 Piero Gamba (cond.)/Julius Katchen (p.)/London Symph. Orchestra and Chorus: **Beethoven: *Piano Concertos 3, 4, 5/Choral Fantasia*** (1959/1963/1964//1194) (2 CDs)
- 6 Coull Quartet: **Prokofiev: *String Quartets 1, 2/Overture on Hebrew Themes*** (1992/1999)
- 7 Ivry Gitlis (v)/William Strickland (cond.): Pro Musica SO/Hubert Reichert (cond.): Westphalia SO/Harold Byms (cond.): Concerts Cologne Orch: **Berg: *Violin Concerto/Hindemith: Violin Concerto/Stravinsky: Violin Concerto*** (1953/1955/1962//2013) (*Art of Ivry Gitlis*, CD 3)
- 8 Lorin Maazel (cond.)/Cleveland Orchestra: **Prokofiev: *Symphony No 5/Rimsky-Korsakov: Russian Easter Festival Overture/Capriccio Espagnol*** (1977/1979/2013) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Years*, CD 8)
- 9 Bernard Haitink (cond.)/London Phil. Orch.: **Shostakovich: *Symphony No 4*** (1979/2013) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Years*, CD 3)
- 10 Angela Hewitt (p.): **Bach: *The Art of Fugue***, BWV 1080 (2014) (2 CDs)
- 11 David Porcelijn (cond.)/Tasmanian Symph. Orch.: **Peter Sculthorpe: *Port Arthur: In Memoriam/Djille/The Fifth Continent/Lament/Little Suite/Night-Song*** (1997/2014) (*Peter Sculthorpe ABC Recordings* CD 6)
- 12 Witold Lutoslawski (cond.)/New Music Con-

certs/Fujiko Imajisi (v.)/Valdire Anderson (sp.): **Lutoslawski's Last Concert: *Partita for Violin and Orch./Intensive Chain II/Changefleurs et Chantefables/Chain 1*** (1994/2013) (*Lutoslawski*, CD 10)

Other four-star contenders for favourite classical CD heard for the first time in 2014:

- Krysia Ostostowicz (v)/Susan Tones (p)/Michael Collins (cl.): **Bartok: *Sonata for Unaccompanied Violin/Contrasts/Rumanian Dances/Rhapsody No 1/Rhapsody No 2*** (1990)
- Alan Hovhaness (cond.)/Royal Phil. Orch.: **Hovhaness: *Symphony Etchmiodzin (Symphony No 21)/Armenian Rhapsody No 3/Mountains and Rivers Without End/Fra Angelico*** (1971/1988)
- Maurice Abravanel (cond.)/Utah SO: **Tchaikowsky: *Symphony No 3 ('Polish')/Symph. No 6 ('Pathétique')/1812 Overture/*** Othmar Maga (cond.): Bochum SO: ***The Voyeroda*** (1990) (2 CDs)
- Aurora String Quartet: Mendelssohn: ***String Quartet No 3/String Quartet No 6/Capriccio/Fugue***
- Peter Eötvös (cond.)/Patricia Kopatchinskaja (v)/Frankfurt Radio SO: **Bartok: *Violin Concerto No 2/Eötvös: Seven*** (2012)
- The Music Collection: **Hummel: *Piano Quintet Op. 87/Schubert: *Piano Quintet ('Trout') D667**** (2014)
- Vladimir Ashkenazy (cond. & p.): **Mozart: *Piano Concerto No 21/No 17*** (1977/2013)
- Eugeny Brazhnik (cond.): Ekaterinburg State Academic Opera Theatre Orch. & Chorus: **Mussorgsky: *Sorochintsi Fair*** (1996/2014) (2 CDs)
- Kodaly Quartet: **Haydn: *String Quartets Op. 77, 1/2, 66, 67*** (1994)
- Heinz Holliger (oboe): **Telemann: *Twelve Fantasies for Oboe Solo*** (1984)
- Judith Nelson, Dennis Ferry etc: **Melani/Scarlatti: *Arias for Soprano, Trumpet and Bass Continuo*** (1984)
- Bruno Walter (cond.): Rudolf Serkin (p.)/New York Philharmonic Orch.: **Beethoven: *Piano Concerto No 5 ('Emperor')***//Columbia Symph.

- Orch./Eugene Istomin (p.): **Schumann: Piano Concerto** (1941/1960/2013) (*Bruno Walter* CD 6)
- Alfred Brendel: **New Live Recordings: Schubert: Piano Sonatas D575, D894, D959, D960** (2 CDs) (2001)
 - Smetana Quartet: **Janacek: String Quartets Nos 1, 2** (LP) (1976)
 - Borodin Quartet: **Shostakovich: String Quartets 1, 12, 9** (1980/1982/1987)
 - **Ralph Vaughan Williams: Silvestri** (cond.): Bournemouth Symp. Orch.: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*/RAF Central Band: *Sea Songs/English Folk Songs Suite/Dawn Patrol*/Adrian Boult (cond.): London Phil. Orch.: *Concerto Grosso*/Malcolm Sargent (cond.)/Larry Adler (harmonica)/BBC Symp. Orch.: *Romance in D Flat*/John Barbirolli (cond.): London Symp. Orch./Philip Catelinet (tuba): *Tuba Concerto* (*Ralph Vaughan Williams*, CD 10)
 - Gustav Leonhart (cond.)/Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment: **C. P. E. Bach: Orchestral Symphonies Nos 1, 2, 3, 4/Symphony for Strings No 5** (1990/2014) (*C. P. E. Bach*, CD 1)
 - Sviatoslav Richter (p.)/Carlos Kleiber (cond.): Bavarian State Orch. of Munich: **Dvorak: Piano Concerto/Schubert: 'Wanderer' Fantasy** (1977/1963/1987)
 - Bernard Haitink (cond.)/London Phil. Orch.: **Shostakovich: Symphony No 4** (1979/2014) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Years*, CD 3)
 - Horst Stein (cond.)/Orchestre de Suisse Romande: **Sibelius: Pélleas et Melisande/The Tempest/En-Saga/Pohjola's Daughter** (1971/1979/2013) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Sound*, CD 5)
 - Kodaly Quartet: **Haydn: String Quartets Op. 76, No 4 (Sunrise), No 5, No 6** (1989) (*Complete Haydn Quartets*)
 - Mstislav Rostropovich (cello)/Gennadi Roshdestvensky (cond.)/Svetlanov (cond.): **Shostakovich: Cello Concerto No 1, No 2** (1961/1967/2008) (*Rostropovich Complete EMI Recordings*, CD 17)
 - Ton Koopmann (cond.)/Ku Ebbinge (oboe)/Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra: **C. P. E. Bach: Oboe Concertos W164, W165/Oboe Sonata W135** (1990/2014) (*C. P. E. Bach Collection*, CD 2)
 - Mstislav Rostropovich (cello/cond.)/Moscow Phil. Orch.: **Britten: Cello Suites 1, 2/Cello Symphony** (1966/1964/2008) (*Rostropovich Complete EMI Recordings*, CD 18)
 - Jacques Loussier: *The Best of Play Bach* (1985)
 - Konrad Hünteler (flute)/Ton Koopmann (cond.)/Amsterdam Baroque Orch.: **C. P. E. Bach: Flute Concertos W22, W168, W165** (1989/2014) (*C. P. E. Bach The Collection* CD 3)
 - Vladimir Ashkenazy/New Philharmonia/Boris Belkin (v.): Tchaikovsky: *Manfred Symphony/Valse-Scherzo in C Major* (1977/1978/2013) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Years* CD 10)
 - Ferdinand Leitner (cond.)/Wilhelm Kempff (p.)/Berlin Philharmonic Orch.: **Beethoven: Piano Concerto No 5**/Sviatoslav Richter/Kurt Sandling (cond.)/Vienna Symp. Orch.: **Beethoven: Piano Rondo**/Karl Böhm (cond.)/Staatskapelle Dresden: **Beethoven: Fidelio Overture/Leonore III Overture** (1962/1969/1991) (*Beethoven Concertos and Overtures*, CD 3)
 - Vladimir Ashkenazy (p.)/Istvan Kertesz (cond.)/London Symp. Orch.: **Mozart: Piano Concertos Nos 8, 9/Rondo in A major/Piano Sonata No 18** (1966/1969/2013) (*Ashkenazy 50 Years on Decca*, CD 5)
 - Mstislav Rostropovich (cello/cond.)/Igor Uriash (p.)/Alexei Lubimov (p.): **Piazzolla: Le Grand Tango/Galina Ustvolskaja: Grand Duet/Alfred Schnittke: Cello Sonata No. 2/Epilogue** (1997/2008) (*Rostropovich Complete EMI Recordings*, CD 25)

Favourite classical boxed sets 2014

I've already said as much as I want to say about classical boxed sets at the beginning of the previous section. Yes, they are a great idea, and if my ship ever came in, I might well buy twenty or thirty immediately, just because they

exist. But I would have time to listen to no more than a few CDs in any of these sets. If your ship has come in, buy them anyway.

- 1 Bruno Walter (cond.): *The Edition* (39 CDs)
- 2 Peter Sculthorpe (1929–2014): *The ABC Recordings* (10 CDs + DVD)
- 3 Maurice Abravanel (cond.)/Utah Symphony Orchestra: *Sibelius: Complete Symphonies* (3 CDs)
- 4 C. P. E. Bach: *The Collection* (13 CDs)
- 5 Ivry Gitlis (v.): *The Art of Ivry Gitlis: Violin Concertos* (3 CDs)

Boxed sets bought, but not yet listened to:

- John Eliot Gardiner (cond.): *The John Eliot Gardiner Collection* (30 CDs)
- John Eliot Gardiner (cond.): *Beethoven: Symphonies* (5 CDs)
- Herbert von Karajan (cond.): *Beethoven: Symphonies/Overtures, 1951–55* (6 CDs)
- Rudolf Serkin (p.): *Rudolf Serkin Plays Beethoven* (11 CDs)

- Leonard Bernstein (cond.): *The Leonard Bernstein Collection, Vol. 1* (69 CDs + DVD)
 - Peter Sculthorpe: *Complete Piano Music* (2 CDs)
-

Favourite television shows/series 2014

In no particular order:

- *Poirot*: Seasons 10 to 13
 - *Sherlock*: Season 3
 - *Bletchley Circle*: Season 2
 - *New Tricks*: Series 7 and 8
 - *Jack Irish: Dead Point*
 - *Doctor Blake Mysteries*: Season 2
 - *Endeavour*: Series 2
 - *The Source*: Season 1.
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Jennifer Bryce

The three best of everything for 2014

Jennifer Bryce writes: Once again I have tried to pick out the three best books, concerts, and stage-shows/theatre that I experienced in 2014. It is always extremely difficult to make such a selection, and on another occasion the list might be different. Here is my best effort.

The three 'best' books I read

Richard Flanagan:

The Narrow Road to the Deep North

This novel won the 2014 Man Booker prize. It is a superb piece of writing. It is far more than an interpretation of the experience of building the Thai-Burma Railway during World War II. The title of the novel is taken from the Japanese poet Basho's epic travel account of the same name — a dangerous journey on foot through Japan. And this novel is indeed a kind of dangerous odyssey; a knitting together of the strands of a life that seemed to be highly successful and accomplished to observers, but which was unfulfilling and unworthy for its protagonist.

The novel is said to be based on the experiences of Flanagan's father. Much reminded me of 'Weary' Dunlop, and indeed there is acknowledgement of reference to him and others — the book has been painstakingly researched. But the reader doesn't think about this research — the beautiful narrative flows easily, passing from the Japanese to the Australian perspective. While confronted by graphic detail of the inhumane horror of the conditions of prisoners of war we are also given some understanding of the thinking that condoned it. Central to the life of the main character, Dorrig Evans, a

talented surgeon, is his love for Amy (the wife of his uncle — never described as his aunt). With his despatch overseas comes an aching separation. For much of the narrative he believes she has been killed in an explosion. Thus he returns from the war, marries, and is a 'good' husband (with incredible bravery he rescues his family who are trapped in the 1960s Tasmanian bushfires). Near the very end of the story he sees Amy in a crowd — there is that tantalising possibility of reconnecting, but neither Dorrig nor Amy lets this happen although the reader knows that each desperately loves the other.

So this is a story of how a man lives through the most harrowing and devastating experiences possible; the Japanese make him select men for a death march. As a surgeon, he operates with practically no equipment on men who cling precariously to life. He witnesses the most painful and degrading deaths. His life is applauded and honoured, yet he dies utterly dissatisfied with himself; 'he felt his life had only ever been shame and loss' (p. 462).

J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*

I had never read this famous book — and there it was, sitting on my shelves, picked up, I think, at a garage sale.

All I knew about it was that it was censored in Victoria in 1956 and remained on the banned list until such a list no longer existed — the early 1970s.

I thought of it as ‘the banned book’. When I was at school the title was muttered in a clandestine way. Maybe it was about some dirty old man who lay in a field of rye and exposed himself or seduced young people, male and female? Fifty years later, when I read it, I expected to encounter a very explicit sex scene — maybe explicit gay sex? When I finished I asked myself, what, in this book, could possibly require censorship? Did I miss something? Apparently it was the language. I didn’t even notice anything indecent or unpleasant about the language. I suppose these days we accept a lot of words that weren’t used as openly in the 1950s and 1960s. The language was brilliant. It is how 17-year-old Holden Caulfield thought and spoke.

I was taken up immediately by Holden’s story, spanning just a few days after he has been expelled from a posh New York prep school — not for the first time. We sympathise with him. He is a caring young man. He is very fond of his sister in an innocent, ‘horsing around’ kind of way. He has a kind of fondness for his English teachers.

And so the plot moves us through the various adventures of a young man filling in time in New York city — just a couple of days, delaying the inevitable confrontation with his parents. My heart was in my mouth on several occasions. What will happen to him when the prostitute visits his room? When he drinks so much that his head is spinning? When he has run out of money? He is so depressed.

There is a final brief, reassuring chapter, where we learn that Holden does go home, he is sent to another school, and is having ‘analysis’. He’ll be okay. But I think I would have been happy for the story to end with Holden watching his little sister Phoebe on a merry-go-round in Central Park. When he says, ‘It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going round and round, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could’ve been there’ (p. 219). With that, we know that everything will be all right.

Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*

I was keen on Virginia Woolf 20 or so years ago. Then in 2014, in London, I went to an exhibition on Virginia Woolf at the Portrait Gallery. I was keen to read her again. I thought I had read *Mrs Dalloway* — I picked it

up from my shelves. But I hadn’t read it before.

What a masterpiece! It all takes place in one day. And the writing is a ‘stream of consciousness’ style, brilliantly blending characters’ thoughts and actual conversation with the use of the semi-colon. We are deftly taken in and out of the various characters’ minds, most of whom (except for Septimus, who commits suicide) will be at Clarissa Dalloway’s party that evening.

Most of the characters are in their early fifties — a time when they look back on their lives. This, however, is not the main purpose of the story, except that Clarissa and Peter Walsh fell in love in their youth and, although Clarissa married the reliable and sensible Richard Dalloway, they have always been in love. At the end of the book — a superb ending — they will talk together at Clarissa’s party:

‘He sat on for a moment. What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? He thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?’

‘It is Clarissa, he said.’

‘For there she was.’ (End of the novel.)

During the short time span of the novel the characters are artfully brought together on that day. The main device is Big Ben. They are all in London. They all hear the various hours being struck. And many of them watch a plane sky-writing over London. Hence we meet Septimus Warren Smith and his Italian wife sitting in Regents Park. He is suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress (the novel is set just after World War I). His contemplation of suicide and Clarissa’s reaction when she hears about it seem a foreboding for Virginia Woolf’s own suicide.

The references to homosexuality in the novel puzzled me a little. The hints about Clarissa seemed unnecessary, but Virginia Woolf obviously wanted to have characters with homosexual ‘tendencies’. For Clarissa, being kissed on the lips by a woman was the happiest day in her life. One wonders, if she and Peter Walsh do consummate their love (she is keen on him, too), will it end up being a bitter disappointment? The case of Septimus seems far stronger. During the war he seems to have made love with his commanding officer, who was killed. He may have been deeply in love with him. But in those days his love wasn’t recognised, so there would have been no acknowledgment of his bereavement. Suicide as a result of the experience of trench warfare would be sufficient explanation. Yet Septimus’s may have been driven by a profound grief that society would not allow him to share with anyone.

The three ‘best’ films I saw

Wadjda

I have been twice to Riyadh (for work) and my impression is that there are no public cinemas. This film is a Saudi Arabian–German collaboration, the first Saudi Arabian feature film to be directed by a woman (Haifaa al-Mansour). It was shot entirely in Riyadh, which meant

that sometimes the female director had to be secluded in a panel van and she had to communicate with the cast by walkie-talkie.

The film seems to capture so well the repression of women. Eleven-year-old Wadjda wants a bicycle like that of her friend (a boy) Abdullah. Wadjda’s mother seems devoted to pleasing her husband, even though at the end

of the film he takes a second wife. Wadjda gets into trouble for not covering her head. The mother has trouble with her driver (the law forbids her from driving herself to work). We see anomalies — some of which I saw in my brief time there. When the women don't have to wear the abaya (when men are not present) they are very attractively and expensively dressed — Wadjda's school principal clatters around in stiletto heels. And there is humour. Wadjda decides that she must save up to buy a bicycle. Her mother certainly will not buy her one because it could cause her to lose her virginity. One way of getting hold of the large amount of money needed would be to win the Qur'an recital at school. We get the impression that Wadjda is rather ignorant and not really interested in the Qur'an, but she joins the special study class at school, manages to acquire the appropriate intonation — and wins! Foolishly she announces to the school that she intends to buy a bicycle with the prize money — of course this can't be allowed, so the money is sent by the school, on her behalf, to Palestine.

In the end, pleased that Wadjda has won the prestigious competition and, presumably, angry with her husband for taking a second wife, Wadjda's mother buys her the bike she has been craving, and at the very end of the film we see Wadjda racing off on her bike with Abdullah. I found the mother's abrupt change of heart somewhat implausible — but it rounded off the film very well, suggesting that although freedom of the kind that we take for granted is still aeons away, there is a chink of hope.

Magic in the Moonlight, Woody Allen

Only Woody Allen could get away with this film, which wallows in the 1920s — 1928, to be precise. There is almost Great Gatsby-ish extravagance; no worries about money and the main characters race off to balls, parties or to visit Aunt Vanessa around winding seaside roads in a 1920s Alfa Romeo. I seem to be the only person in the world to like it.

The film focuses on the 1920s interest in clairvoyance. A conjuror, Wei Ling Soo, whose popular feats open the film, is understandably skeptical about clairvoyance. He is actually an extremely arrogant Englishman, Stanley Crawford. His school friend, aware of his strong skepticism, encourages him to try to uncover the deception of a beautiful young clairvoyant (Sophie). For some extraordinary reason Sophie is interested in accompanying Stanley to visit his aunt. As they stare at the moonlight from a conveniently placed observatory — when the Alfa has a spot of bother on the coastal road and there is a thunderstorm — they start to fall in love. Layers of arrogance and self-belief need to be peeled away before Stanley acknowledges that he loves Sophie. And by falling in love (although he already has a 'very suitable' relationship with another woman) he realises that there are some things that transcend his world of assured positive scientific fact. Aunt Vanessa, who seems to be a mother figure for Stanley, engineers things so that the two are brought together in the nick of time, just before Sophie succumbs to marrying her ukulele-playing suitor.

Like all good plots it has a twist. The school friend has played a trick on Stanley and has been in cahoots with Sophie, making her appear to Stanley, for once, believable and indeed miraculous. Stanley discovers this deception near the end of the film, but it makes no difference to his feelings for her.

Seems bland? Yes. But I was transported for the whole film. It opens with the Cole Porter song 'You do something to me' — we hear plenty of it; 'you have the power to hypnotise me', 'that voodoo that you do so well'. Woody Allen always seems to feature a favourite song. This one must have been the inspiration for the film. These days in some quarters there is cynicism about love. Maybe it's just elevated dopamine, as suggested by Lucy Prebble in her play *The Effect*. And what kind of impact on love are Internet dating and social media having? This film reminds us that love is a kind of magic. Let us keep spinning the voodoo.

Whiplash

In order to succeed as a top-rate musician you have to be obsessive — natural talent alone won't make you the greatest jazz drummer in the world. Andrew Neyman (played by Miles Teller) is at a fictitious New York prestigious conservatory and determined to be the best. His hero is Buddy Rich. He thinks he's got his break when, still in first year, he is selected for the top college band, conducted by the fearsome Fletcher (J. K. Simmons). Here his obsession is put to the test. He clearly has brilliant technique, and Fletcher pushes him further and further with abuse and humiliation — the way he treats all of the high-flying players in the band. Perfection in each bar is essential. 'You're not quite with me' (after no more than two bars) followed by, maybe a chair being hurled and certainly horrifying verbal abuse.

Fletcher clearly believes in teaching by instilling terror. He is ultimately dismissed from the conservatory through a lawsuit instigated by Andrew's father. We frequently see Andrew's blood-stained hands as he tries to accomplish the exacting standards set by Fletcher. He has a bad car crash because he is so terrified of arriving late for a performance.

This, to me, was just one big exaggeration of what trying to be a musician can be like. Every performance must be utter perfection. You live your music every second of the day. Some will say that Fletcher was a sadist. But he believed that his methods would lead to success for the very best and get rid of the others.

Andrew comes back for more, in a sense, when he joins a band Fletcher has set up after his dismissal from the conservatory, and there is a kind of unbelievable quid pro quo; Fletcher tries to get back at Andrew by telling him that they will play the familiar *Whiplash*, and then, when the band is on stage, he announces that they will play another item that Andrew doesn't know. So Andrew tries to get back at Fletcher by dominating with an excruciatingly long solo. Has he 'won'? I was dissatisfied at the end of the film. Will Andrew become a world-class drummer, or will he give up?

The three 'best' concerts I attended

Macedon Music: Genevieve Lacey, Recorders, and James Crabb, accordion, 2 March

Yes, accordion. I would have expected an accordion to kill recorders. When I was primary school age I desperately wanted to play piano accordion, but as an adult I think of its sound as rather rasping and artificial — not something I would put with a recorder. I am wrong. James Crabb is a most versatile and sensitive accordion player. This was not a piano accordion but a full-fledged accordion (it has buttons rather than piano keys and is far more variable). Genevieve Lacey is brilliant. I have heard her on several occasions. These two sustained a whole afternoon of music without introducing the tiniest bit of tedium.

The only piece with which I was familiar was a concerto by Sammartini. I felt that for the purposes of the afternoon concert in a private home on Mount Macedon the accordion was a suitable substitute for an orchestra. This was the only piece where I felt that there had been a kind of watering down. It wasn't lack of subtlety — maybe it is simply my familiarity with the piece and I missed the orchestral colour, especially of a harpsichord. In everything else the combination seemed perfect, and the program ranged from Palestrina to Chick Corea (yes, the jazz pianist — he wrote some songs for children). The accordion seemed fine in a Bach sonata and we learned a great deal of the possibilities of the accordion in a piece for solo accordion, *Fantango*, by Jukka Tiensuu. The concert ended with a bracket of lively Scottish pieces arranged by Crabb, who is Scottish. Genevieve Lacey's recorder playing is superb — her technique is brilliant and her sound pure bliss.

Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM), 7 March

Brett Dean is one of Australia's leading musicians. He performed in the Berlin Philharmonic for some years before establishing himself as a composer. He was artistic director of ANAM for several years but realised that he must devote more of his time to musical composition. He now divides his time between Germany and Australia, and was in Australia to conduct this concert.

The first item was Ralph Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*. The ANAM orchestra is made up of top-rate young musicians, most about to embark on their professional careers — the playing is accurate and full of energy. The violin soloist — the violin is the lark — was a gifted student in her final year, Anne-Marie Johnson. Both orchestra and soloist were able to sustain the faintest pianissimos, which contrasted beautifully with rich sound as the lark soars upwards.

Brett Dean's *Pastoral Symphony* followed very well after 'The Lark'. Brett Dean says: 'I'm acutely aware of the incredible source of joy and beauty ... that is to be found

just by opening the window and listening.' The symphony celebrates these sounds but also dwells on the sense of loss from our 'relentless and respectless rampaging through the world's forests and wilderness areas'. As Dean says, we love the trappings of modern living more than 'to stop and bask in the glory of a single butcher-bird'.

After interval we heard J. S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto* No. 3. It was played with great vitality but the final allegro was taken at a tempo faster than I think I've ever heard. These virtuoso students could handle it, but I felt some of the subtleties in the music were lost and I sat there wondering what Bach would think if he could have been there.

The final piece was Paul Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* symphony. The opening of the third movement was the richest unison string playing I have ever heard. The symphony, first performed in 1934, is the distillation of an opera that deals with the conflict between artistic expression and Nazi militarism. A fitting end to a concert that celebrated purity and beauty.

Edinburgh International Festival, Hebrides Ensemble, The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh, 9 August

This was my very first taste of the 2014 Edinburgh Festival. The Queen's Hall is a former church, dating back to 1823. It was converted to a concert hall in the early 1930s. I sat there imagining congregational church services; people shouting 'alleluia' from the firm wooden pews set amphitheatre-style facing what is now the stage. The pews are painted sky blue — I doubt that this would have been the case in 1823.

The Hebrides Ensemble is described as 'a collective of musicians' who play a wide variety of chamber music. First we heard Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* in a transcription for piano trio from the 1930s by Eduard Steuermann (a pupil of Busoni). The program notes told us that in the early 1900s the Vienna Tonkünstlerverein refused to promote a public performance because the score contained a chord not included in harmony textbooks. I expected to miss the texture of an orchestra — but in fact there was only once, when the bass of the piano part played tremolo, when I missed the depth of orchestral sound.

Verklärte Nacht was inspired by a poem where two lovers are walking together on a cold moonlight night and the woman confesses she is pregnant to another man — intentionally, to bring meaning to her life. The man assures the woman that their love, heightened by the beauty of the night, will unite them and make the child their own. The interplay of violin and 'cello did convey with great sensitivity the idea of the transformation, or transfiguration, of the lovers, maybe more poignantly than the use of a full orchestra.

Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* is played by violin, double bass, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone,

piano, and percussion, and there is a narrator. A soldier home on leave unwisely sells his violin (and thus his soul) to an old man (the devil) in exchange for a book of stock exchange prices. The story is a kind of morality play — you can't have everything; you have to choose between different possibilities of happiness. Throughout the play the devil keeps appearing in various guises, and at the end the soldier discovers that he can't have a beautiful princess and also the contentment of living in his own country.

With this production I was aware of the fact that there is not a close blending of plot and narration. There are themes — such as the soldier marching — but it seemed

to me there were times when remnants of these themes might have been used as reminders; for example, of what the soldier has lost. Although there are reprises — such as the theme for the soldier marching — each piece of music is discrete.

The narrator was a Scot, Graham F. Valentine. He had 'adapted' the script somewhat, which made it very entertaining. We start off hearing that the soldier has found a 'bonny' spot to rest. Whereas the soldier had a Scottish accent, the devil was English — presumably alluding to the referendum for Scottish independence that was about to take place.

The three 'best' plays/stage shows I attended

***The Lepidopters: A Space Opera*, Sunday 13 April, Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall**

A space opera? I had been going to query whether 'opera' is the right description for this amazingly engrossing combination of art forms. I checked the *Macquarie Dictionary*, and indeed, 'opera' is an extended dramatic composition in which music is an essential and predominant factor. *The Lepidopters* certainly fits this description. Music is central — music from the Astra Choir, from a specially constructed Sedulur Gamelan, and music from the rock group Punksila and Slave Pianos (including well-known local piano virtuoso Michael Kieran Harvey).

We sat, confronted by the huge Sedulur Gamelan housed in two wooden structures. (It was displayed in the recent Melbourne Now exhibition.)

I understand that the original story was inspired by work of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. This text is written by Mark von Schlegell. Lepidopters are alien minds that occupy and breed moths on earth-like planets. The lepidopters have fallen in love with Cheryl in Indonesia and they want to breed with her — inter-species reproduction. This is where spectacular video art comes in. There were screens at each end of the hall. At first one was unsure where to look. The images on both screens were the same. We saw threatening spirals spinning across the sea to the shores of Indonesia like a swarm of hurricanes. We saw a 1970s-style motel on the coast — and I assume the young woman there was Cheryl. The video images pervaded the whole experience.

Oratorio style, there was a kind of narrator who stood on high and kept us in touch with the story-line. Within a matter of hours (I was far too taken up with the whole experience to have any idea of how long it actually took) we had blended together different cultures — east and west, and historical times — Christian texts, Goethe, Schutz, and Schumann. I walked out of the Town Hall rather dazed, pleasantly confused and exhausted from having been swept up in this affirming creation that dissipated the barriers of different art forms and cultures.

***Night on Bald Mountain*, Malthouse, 5 May**

Apparently Patrick White was displeased with the first production of his play and didn't want it performed again. He also said it was 'a dishonest play'. I haven't yet figured out what he could mean by this — something to do with his relationship with academe? It is, as one would expect of White, a complex play. At the time I saw it I had a head cold and was reading Henry James — I wondered whether my head could possibly take on Patrick White as well. I was delighted that there is a reference to Henry James in the play: the professor of English who has chosen to live in a comfortable home on the isolated bald mountain wonders whether anyone can actually understand Henry James.

Neil Armfield has said that Patrick White's plays 'have their feet in vaudeville and their heads in the stars, in the vaulted air of the cathedral' ('Patrick White: a Centenary', *Meanjin* 5.5.14). The whole play takes place on the brooding, isolated bald mountain — so huge that it confronts the audience; it looms over them. It is the home of goats (that cleverly pop up and disappear) and also the mountain itself (by clever device) is the comfortable home of the professor and his alcoholic wife, his academic offside, a nurse, and a house-keeper. It is the woman who lives with the goats who seems to have her feet most firmly planted, until, perhaps, the end, when I assume was her favourite goat, Dolores, dies. Through the professor we see what can be the superficiality of the academy. He seems to keep this, and his prayers to God, in a world separated from his basic lusts. (He must rape the nurse, who commits suicide; the professor reminds her of her father to whom she is very, perhaps unhealthily, devoted.)

The housekeeper sums up the superficiality; 'all talk, talk and nothing ever said.' Maybe this is where White's idea of 'dishonesty' comes in. I came away feeling that the heroes were the 'uneducated' — the goat-keeper, most certainly. Whereas the professor's wife is trapped — she has dabbled in writing, but now there is nothing to drive her life but alcohol. The goat-keeper, having moved away from Sydney many years ago, seems to be overall satisfied with her lot in life. And the housekeeper

provides, from time to time, a grounding commentary.

***The Riders*, Victorian Opera, Malthouse Theatre, 26 September**

I hadn't read Tim Winton's novel *The Riders*, on which this opera is based. I'm glad I read the synopsis beforehand, as the whole piece ran for about an hour and a half without a break, and I might have been confused. Having said that, I found it a powerful piece about separation and absence.

Scully, who seems to have been a somewhat naïve, over-possessive husband, is deserted by his wife Jennifer. Apparently she is just an absence in the novel. She appears as a flesh-and-blood mother at the beginning of the opera — on a flight from Perth to Ireland — and then isn't there when the daughter reaches the destination. I did wonder how this could actually happen; she

jumped plane in Dubai? Having seen her as a flesh-and-blood person it was then, for me, a little difficult to accept her spectral presence from time to time in the rest of the opera (she wears the same clothes). I did think that the music, by Iain Grandage, was superb; an intermingling of earthiness (use of a bass clarinet), folk tune (Genevieve Lacey on recorders and use of piano accordion), and the spiritual. I did sometimes feel that the lyrics fitted rather clumsily with the music. Overall, I did find it difficult to distinguish reality from ethereal: were 'the riders' — a kind of Greek chorus — actually present, or just part of Scully's troubled imagination? But having said that, I did walk away thinking that it was a very powerful depiction of absence and the loss felt when a relationship ends.

— Jennifer Bryce, January 2015

Elaine Cochrane

Best reads 2014

2014 was another year in which I finished reading only a small proportion of books started.

The most satisfying novel I read was **Jean Cocteau's** *Thomas l'imposteur* (Gallimard Folio 2010, first published 1923), a dreamlike evocation of Paris during World War I and of a boy's fantasies about the war.

Non-fiction I enjoyed included **Nancy Forbes and Basil Mahon**, *Faraday, Maxwell and the Electromagnetic Field: How Two Men Revolutionized Physics* (Prometheus Books 2014) and **Stanley Prusiner's** *Madness and Memory: The Discovery of Prions — A New Biological Principle of Disease* (Yale University Press 2014).

The Signet Classic collection *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman* had been bought new in 1979 and remained neglected and unread on the shelf until December 2014. The Freeman, apart from the first few pieces, will remain unread, but the Jewett was a delight. Her prose is a joy to read, as are her sketches of life in a New England hamlet in the late nineteenth century.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Homeland and Other Stories* (Virago 1990) was another discovery that had been waiting on the shelves since publication. There is more incident in Kingsolver's stories than in Jewett's pieces, but the best of them have a similarly light touch.

The standout short story for the year, though, was 'Gestella' by **Susan Palwick**. First published in 2004, it is collected in *The Urban Fantasy Anthology* (Tachyon 2011), edited by **Peter S. Beagle and Joe R. Lansdale**. Like so many anthologies, this contains a few pieces that are barely readable, a lot that are OK, and a few that are very good ('Father Dear' by Al Sarrantonio and 'The White Man' by Thomas M. Disch would rank highly in any year's reading). Then there is the Palwick, which packs such an emotional wallop that I am hesitating to take down and read those others of her works that are sitting on our shelves.

— Elaine Cochrane, January 2015

2015

Favourites 2015

Favourite novels read for the first time in 2015

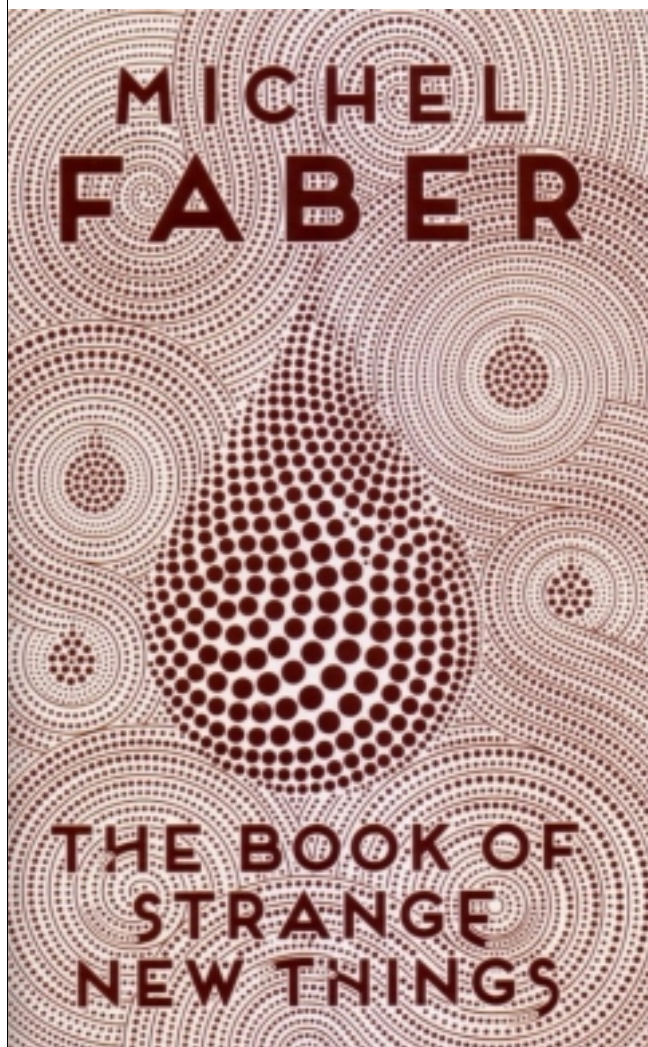
In *SFC* 89 I wrote about some of the books listed below: the SF Books That Are Not Labelled SF. They lack the label, so they sell more copies than if they were called SF or Fantasy. But because they lack the label, SF readers often overlook them for prize nomination lists.

Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things* is obviously the best SF book of recent years, yet so far it has appeared only on general literature nominations lists. It doesn't offer scientific explanations for its minor SF clichés: faster-than-light travel and communications. It

concentrates on the experience of a man who travels to a planet that feels very different from Earth, and whose inhabitants seem truly alien. The main character believes he will be undertaking a difficult task, proselytising for traditional Christianity among the aliens. Instead, he finds that they welcome him, and draw him into their lifestyle and way of thinking. Meanwhile he tries to maintain communication with his wife back on Earth, which is rapidly becoming an alien planet. All this would sound a bit programmatic if it were not for Michel Faber's lyrical (yet not too lyrical) style. Faber calls himself an atheist who set out to understand the mind of a committed Christian. His main character emerges as a person committed to discovering any experience that transcends his long-held beliefs.

David Mitchell is another British author whose books contain strong science-fictional elements but who, for the sake of his income, does not admit to being an SF writer. However, *Black Swan Green*, his most powerful novel, tells of the experiences of a kid who stutters, attempting to grow up in an English village 40 years ago or more. Each experience strikes the reader with startling immediacy. Both author and main character cut through the abstractions of life to slice into its gristle.

About 40 years ago, one of my subscribers, **Derek Kew**, suggested that he treat me to a 'luncheon of comment' instead of a letter of comment. At the time I was living in Collingwood and he was teaching at RMIT in Melbourne. We met in Carlton every few months. After Elaine and I got together in 1978, she often joined our lunches. Since Derek was an chemistry lecturer and Elaine a chemistry graduate, they got along very well, and always have done. Yet only this year, when Derek, now in his eighties, and we went out to lunch in Greensborough, he introduced me to a lifelong favourite book of his: **William Sloane's** *The Edge of Running Water*. I have not heard it mentioned before. It was published before World War II, prefigures atomic fusion, yet combines the best elements of *Wuthering Heights* and Fritz Leiber. A friend of the story-teller retreats to a giant house on the remote north-eastern coast of USA. He is reported to be working on an experiment that causes odd phenomena in the area. The story-teller visits his withdrawn friend, and wishes he hadn't. This book is built on its gothic atmosphere and strange characters, but also has a



powerful SF idea at its heart. Gollancz Gateway should reissue it.

'I must be talking to my friends', say I (for the last 45 years). *SF Commentary* has always been about meeting like-minded friends, but it has taken me until 2014 to make contact with one of the authors whose works I most admire, **Michael Bishop**, who lives in Georgia. Some of Michael's articles have appeared here, and we often correspond on Facebook. We've caught up on the conversation we might well have had during the last 40 years but didn't, but I did realise that I had still not read some of Michael's later novels. Time to take them off the shelf.

There are pages in *Brittle Innings* that are completely incomprehensible to me. They deal with the game of baseball, which is central to the story of the novel. This curtain of baseball language doesn't matter. The book is actually about the relationship between an up-and-coming baseball star who lives during the Depression, but who has few links with the rest of the team, except for one very strange member of it. Bishop creates a sense of crisis that leads to the revelation of the true nature of the strange baseball player. On the way he creates a sharp sense of what it was like to live in the American South before World War II.

Count Geiger's Blues is a much more rollicking novel, dragging in a wide range of ideas from science, SF, and comic books, and somehow making the ideas into characters and events that are believable. One strand in the book is the unbelievable carelessness that often attended the treatment of nuclear materials during the early days of the atomic power industry. Another strand is: what would you do if you accidentally picked up 'super-powers', as shown in the comic books? The book is very funny, and constantly surprising. It is inconceivable that Michael Bishop has not been able to place another novel with a publisher since 1994.

My reading is often guided by my friends. Why not? Their opinions are much sounder than those one usually reads in review magazines. In the case of **Franz Rottensteiner**, he seems to have read everything during his forty-plus years as an editor, scholar, and literary agent. These days he is the agent for the estate of **Arkady and Boris Strugatsky**, Russia's most famous SF writers, who first came to my notice in the early 1970s. About a dozen of their novels were published in USA and Britain before interest in their work waned by 1980. Readers were repelled by some of the awkward translations of their works. Also (although we did not know it at the time) the works translated were censored, butchered versions of the Strugatsky's originals. Recently Franz Rottensteiner has been sending me copies of new translations of some of the Strugatsky's best books.

The most startling improvement is in the text of *Roadside Picnic*. No complete edition of the book appeared in Russia until the 1990s. The 1970s paperback translation I own is about half the length of the new edition. Reading the early version was a surreal experience, because of the incomprehensible gaps in the storyline and background. Now, in **Olena Bornashenko's** lively translation, we can read the complete story of a Red Schuhart, a 'stalker' who breaks all the rules and enters one of the alien Zones that just happened to pop up in Russia one day. He aims to steal enough of the mysterious

artefacts in the Zone to earn enough money to survive. The problem with being a thief is that the interior of the Zone sets its own rules. Any false move by a stalker leads to instant death. *Roadside Picnic* is a thriller — or rather, a triple thriller, as the stalker makes three trips into the Zone.

Hard to Be a God is a thriller as well. Anton is a disguised agent sent by a future USSR (one that became the Workers Paradise that Lenin always promised) to an alien world whose culture is stuck in the Middle Ages. Anton and his group of observers, who pretend to be rich aristocrats who don't need to obey the rules of the rest of society, are not supposed to interfere in the life of the planet. But the life of most of this world's inhabitants is so unrelentingly miserable, dirty, and downtrodden that the visitors cannot help encouraging a bit of reform. This makes them an easy target for the people who run this society and who benefit most from the degradation of their own people. The censors missed the point of the book: that life on the muddy, grubby medieval planet resembles Soviet life in the 1950s and 1960s, and that its rulers resemble the bosses of the NKVD.

Olena Bornashenko is again the translator of the new edition. Both novels are highly recommended.

The recent Russian film of *Hard to Be a God* is very weird and has little of the narrative momentum of the novel. I didn't get past the first hour. Others might enjoy it more than I did.

2014 and 2015 were very much my Sherlock Holmes years. First there was the British TV series *Sherlock*, starring the mighty Benedict Cumberbatch. Then there was *Elementary*, a 21-episode series starring a British modern Holmes and a female Watson. The episodes were short and precise, and reeked of British humour, although set in New York. And then there was the movie *Mr Holmes*, starring Ian McKellen as the 92-year-old retired Sherlock Holmes, a man finally forced to face aspects of his past. The movie is one of my favourites for 2015, but it doesn't have the depth and meditative power of the novel upon which it is based: *A Slight Trick of the Mind*, now renamed *Mr Holmes* in the paperback edition. The script writer for the film makes a major plot change that takes away much of the power of the book, so I recommend you read it first.

Every year David Russell from Warrnambool visits our place for my birthday in February and takes Elaine and me out to lunch. (2016's gathering was a night-time dinner at one of Melbourne's top restaurants, an exotic experience.) David also shows much imagination in picking out a birthday present for me each year. In 2015 he gave me *Gillespie and I*, by **Jane Harris**. A bit of a joke, perhaps? I had to read it, of course. It begins as a rather rambling tale of a woman of the nineteenth century who meets and befriends a well-established family. She makes herself useful, then slowly takes over aspects of the family's life. Nothing exceptional here, until a violent event occurs and the story-teller is apprehended and tried for murder. Since we see everything from her point of view, we cannot work out why she has been arrested. However, as the novel unfolds we discover incrementally that the story-teller is a very unreliable witness. (She resembles the great unreliable story-tellers of Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine's novels.) The book takes about half its

length to reveal what it's about.

Another Science Fiction Book Without the SF Label is **Emily St John Mandel's** *Station Eleven*. I realise that after-the-world-catastrophe novels have become ten a penny, especially in the Young Adult field, so it's wonderful to find here a world-catastrophe-and-beyond novel that comes alive through the quality of its prose and the power of its presentation of its main characters (the few survivors). If you think nothing good has been done in this field since *Earth Abides*, read this book.

Rather more uncategorisable is *The Bone Clocks*, but its final chapters include a classic SF warring-time-streams theme, and an end-of-the-world scenario that is as convincing as Mandel's. As is usual in **David Mitchell's** novels, the story is told in a series of novellas, in which some characters are introduced, some dropped, and others recur. Its centre is a woman who is very young at the beginning of the novel, and old and world-suffering by the end. This is the history of our times and their probable outcome, but as in all David Mitchell's novels, it's not the thesis that matters, but the outrageous action, amusing prose, and fine details of the unfolding.

Richard Powers is a fine American 'literary author', which means that SF readers have mainly ignored the fact that he writes mainly science fiction novels, although they don't carry that label. In *Orfeo*, Powers combines his

two main interests, science and music, in a dazzling speculation on how to compose a piece of music using the elements of a living cell. This in turn leads to a kind of world-disaster scenario, as a result of which his main character is on the run. Powers is a dazzling weaver of melt-in-the-mouth prose and vivid images.

Not quite as dazzling, but equally devoted to science and humanity, is Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. It contains a twist in the middle that under no circumstances should be revealed by a crass reviewer, so I'll shut up. It's very funny, and more than a bit sad. Because Karen Joy Fowler is seen as one of 'our lot', and not one of those 'literary authors', this novel has been recognised within the SF field.

I've become sick of the predictability of most of the mystery/crime novels I've tried to read in recent years, but one author stays fresh: **Garry Disher** from Victoria. His latest 'Wyatt' novel, *The Heat*, is as lively as the first two or three novels in the series. Its plot does seem to wander a bit until we (and Wyatt) realise that he is being set up for a triple-cross. In extricating himself from the clutches of various criminals who try to use his talents, he observes closely the strange species of Australian human life that now crawl around some of the 'canal cities' of Queensland's Gold and Sunshine Coasts. Crime Novel as Social Realism at its best.

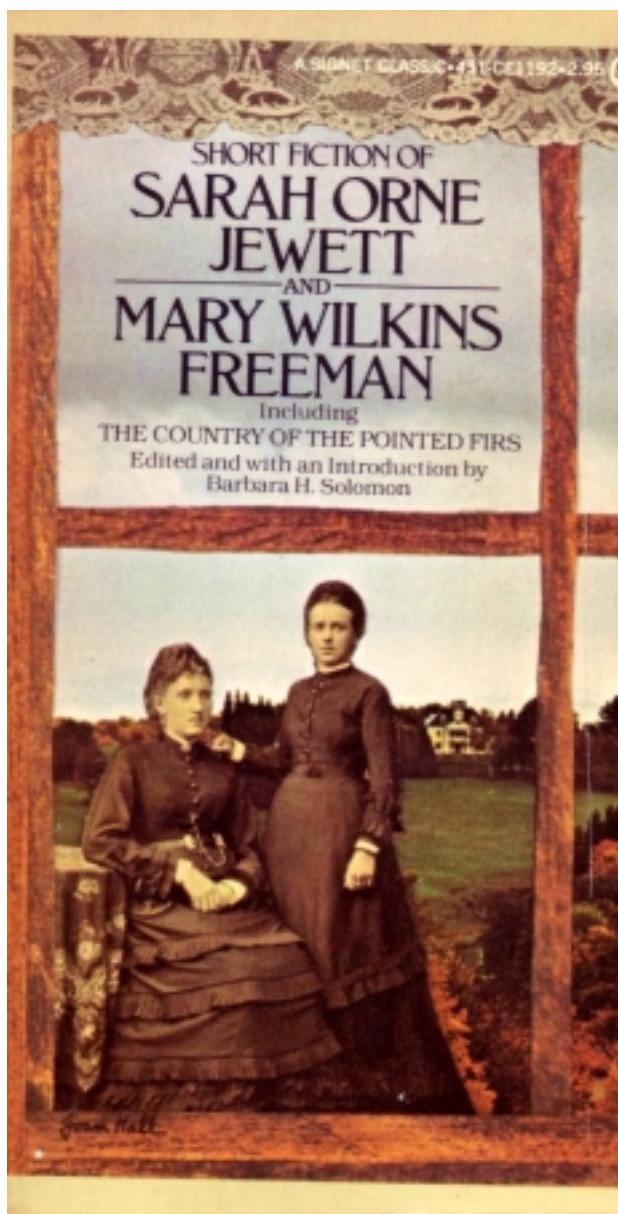
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| 1 | <i>The Book of Strange New Things</i> (2014) Michel Faber (Canongate) | | Cullin (Canongate) |
| 2 | <i>Black Swan Green</i> (2006) David Mitchell (Sceptre) | 8 | <i>Station Eleven</i> (2014) Emily St John Mandel (Picador) |
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| 4 | <i>Brittle Innings</i> (1994) Michael Bishop (Bantam) | 10 | <i>The Bone Clocks</i> (2014) David Mitchell (Sceptre) |
| 5 | <i>Roadside Picnic</i> (1972/2012) Arkady and Boris Strugatsky tr. Olena Bornashenko (Gollancz SF Masterworks) | 11 | <i>Orfeo</i> (2014) Richard Powers (Atlantic) |
| 6 | <i>Hard To Be a God</i> (1964/2014) Arkady and Boris Strugatsky tr. Olena Bornashenko (Gollancz SF Masterworks) | 12 | <i>We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves</i> (2013) Karen Joy Fowler (Putnam) |
| 7 | <i>Mr Holmes (A Slight Trick of the Mind)</i> (2014) Mitch | 13 | <i>The Heat</i> (2015) Garry Disher (Text) |
| | | 14 | <i>Count Geiger's Blues</i> (1992) Michael Bishop (Kudzo Planet) |
| | | 15 | <i>My Real Children</i> (2014) Jo Walton (Corsair) |
| | | 16 | <i>A God In Ruins</i> (2015) Kate Atkinson (Doubleday) |
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Favourite books read during 2015

The main advantage of having a large library is that good or even great books can lurk on the shelves for many years before Elaine or I discover them. Elaine read *The Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman* and recommended it to me. For a change, I followed her recommendation. Elaine liked **Sarah Orne Jewett's** writing much more than **Mary Wilkins Freeman's**, but I found both to be wonderful story-tellers and fine prose-smiths. Both tell of the type of person who suffered most from the harsh social realities of the nineteenth century: the single or widowed woman. In these stories, the many woman characters live in a harsh environment, the small towns of nineteenth-century New England. As Jewett in particular shows us, the coastal scenery is breathtakingly beautiful, but any woman who cannot support herself or

does not have an inheritance can find herself living on almost nothing in a nearly bare house, with little protection against hunger or the winter cold. These women show amazing tenacity, humour, and creativity in finding ways to survive. This edition is a beautiful Signet Classics paperback issued in 1979, but American readers might be able to find more complete collections of the works of both authors.

I might never have known about the quiet, meditative poetry of **Alex Skovron** if I had not worked with him at Macmillan in South Melbourne in the 1980s. He was my supervisor in editing and producing textbooks, so we might never have connected if he had not said one day, 'One of my favourite American poets is Thomas Disch.' 'That's interesting,' I said. 'One of the very best Ameri-



can science fiction writers is Thomas Disch.’ They were the same person, of course. Alex is a very humble man, so it took awhile for me to become aware that not only did he write poetry, but that he was about to publish his first volume of poetry, *The Rearrangement*. Since then he had published, every six or seven years, a new volume of poetry (plus a short novel, *The Poet*). Thanks to Alex, I met Philip Hodgins, a remarkable poet who also worked at Macmillan until he was diagnosed with leukaemia. From then until he died ten years later, he produced quite a few books of poetry. Alex, fortunately, is on for the long haul, so in late 2014 he reached the point in his literary career when he could issue *Towards the Equator: New and Selected Poems*, a retrospective collection of some of the finest poetry written in Australia. I checked each poem in the new book against its appearance in each of Alex’s earlier volumes, and found that the ones he had

chosen were the poems I had chosen then as my favourites. He also includes a swag of new poems, including ‘Humility’, an unforgettable tribute by Alex to his late father, and ‘The Secret’, which could well be selected as one of Australia’s best SF or fantasy poems. A similar label might be pinned to my favourite poem in the book, ‘On the Theology of Ants’, from *Sleeve Notes* (1992), as well as ‘On the Road to Hell’ (*The Man and the Map*, 2003), which was picked by Tim Jones and P. S. Cotter for a recent volume of Australian speculative fiction poems. Most of the poems are highly personal, of course, but others, such as most of those in *Infinite City* (1999), show an abstract, world-ranging quality not often found in Australian literature.

A rather different poet is **Les Murray**, Australia’s best-known living poet. If Alex Skovron’s poetry seems like a still, steady light in a window, Murray’s is a sputtering catherine wheel, forever threatening to explode, a bit too powerful for quiet contemplation but always startling and interesting. **Peter Alexander**, in *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, portrays a man who matches the poetry. Murray has always pushed against the world, partly because the world has treated him roughly at times, and partly because he enjoys the conflict. Murray’s more abstract opinions about the world are repellent to me, but I can appreciate the width of his knowledge of the world and the depth of the poetry that portrays Australian life in what seems like an unstoppable torrent of images and stories. Few biographies have brought to life their subject better than Alexander’s. The only problem is: the book was published in 2000, and Les Murray has done much since then. A new edition is needed.

Over the years **Gerald Murnane** has gained a reputation as being Australia’s most original, but most ‘difficult’ writer of fiction, in that he seems to offer nothing in his writing that would appeal to the expectations of the average intelligent reader of fiction. However, the same reader could be directed to Murnane’s early fiction, especially *Tamarisk Row*, *A Lifetime on Clouds*, *The Plains*, and *Landscape with Landscape*, where he or she will find some powerful stories and glittering word-landscapes. One major theme of *Tamarisk Row* was horse-racing, to which Gerald Murnane returns in *Something for the Pain*. Many of the more intriguing aspects of horse-racing, especially those of betrayal and sudden changes of fortune, feature this new book. On the surface, it is a series of anecdotes about the people and places and scams and satisfactions offered by the sport, but this surface is broken in the last four chapters, which echo many of the most vivid images and deepest elements of Murnane’s other fiction.

I seem not have read many collections of short fiction in 2015. Thanks to Lee Harding for recommending (and giving me a copy of) **E. L. Doctorow**’s latest collection, *All the Time in the World*.

- 1 *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman* (1979) ed. Barbara A. Solomon (Signet)
- 2 *The Book of Strange New Things* (2014) Michel Faber (Canongate)

- 3 *Black Swan Green* (2006) David Mitchell (Sceptre)
- 4 *The Edge of Running Water* (1937) William Sloane (Panther)
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- 6 *Roadside Picnic* (1972/2012) Arkady and Boris Strugatsky tr. Olena Bornashenko (Gollancz SF Masterworks)
- 7 *Hard To Be a God* (1964/2014) Arkady and Boris Strugatsky tr. Olena Bornashenko (Gollancz SF Masterworks)
- 8 *Towards the Equator: New and Selected Poems* (2014) Alex Skovron (Puncher & Wattmann)
- 9 *Mr Holmes (A Slight Trick of the Mind)* (2014) Mitch Cullin (Canongate)
- 10 *Station Eleven* (2014) Emily St John Mandel (Picador)
- 11 *Gillespie and I* (2011) Jane Harris (Faber)
- 12 *The Bone Clocks* (2014) David Mitchell (Sceptre)
- 13 *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (2000) Peter F. Alexander (Oxford University Press)
- 14 *Orfeo* (2014) Richard Powers (Atlantic)
- 15 *Something for the Pain: A Memoir of the Turf* (2015) Gerald Murnane (Text)
- 16 *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013) Karen Joy Fowler (Putnam)
- 17 *The Heat* (2015) Garry Disher (Text)
- 18 *Count Geiger's Blues* (1992) Michael Bishop (Kudzo Planet)
- 19 *All the Time in the World* (2011) E. L. Doctorow (Little, Brown)
- 20 *My Real Children* (2014) Jo Walton (Corsair)
- 21 *Malcolm Sargent: A Biography* (1968) Charles Reid (Hamish Hamilton)
- 22 *A God In Ruins* (2015) Kate Atkinson (Doubleday)

Other four-star books, in order of being read:

- *Objects in Dreams: Imaginings Vol. 4* (2012) Lisa Tuttle (Newcom Press)
- *Jocasta* (2004) Brian Aldiss (The Friday Project)
- *Walcot* (2009) Brian Aldiss (Goldmark)
- *Comfort Zone: A Novel of Present Day Discontents* (2013) Brian Aldiss (The Friday Project)
- *The Dark Lighthouse: Tales of Speculation and the Fantastic* (2014) David R. Grigg (Rightword)
- *Storytellers: Tales of Hope, Humour and Heartbreak* (2014) David R. Grigg (Rightword)
- *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989) Barbara Kingsolver (Virago)
- *Victor Hugo* (1997) Graham Robb (Picador)
- *Collected Stories* (1982) V. S. Pritchett (Penguin)
- *Mannix* (2015) Brenda Niall (Text)
- *Not the End of the World* (2002) Kate Atkinson (Black Swan)
- *Yellowcake Summer: A Novel* (2013) Guy Salvendy (Glass House Books)
- *Cranky Ladies of History* (2015) ed. Tansy Rayner Roberts and Tehani Wessely (Fablecroft)
- *The Alienist* (1994) Caleb Carr (Warner Books)
- *The Paperchase* (2001) Marcel Theroux (Abacus)
- *The Wonders* (2014) Paddy O'Reilly (Affirm)
- *Close Your Eyes* (2015) Michael Robotham (Sphere)
- *Collected Memoirs: Am I Too Loud?/Farewell Recital/Furthermoore* (1986) Gerald Moore (Penguin)
- *The Girl in the Spider's Web* (2015) David Lagergren (Maclehose)
- *The Land Across* (2013) Gene Wolfe (Tor)
- *The Frog Who Dared to Croak* (1982) Richard Sennett (Farrar Straus Giroux)
- *An Evening of Brahms* (1984) Richard Sennett (Faber)
- *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: 25th Anniversary Edition* (2014) ed. Stephen Jones (Robinson)
- *Reckoning* (2015) Magda Szubanski (Text)
- *The Three-Body Problem* (2006/2015) Cixin Liu tr. Ken Liu (Head of Zeus)
- *Rich and Rare* (2015) ed. Paul Collins (Ford Street)
- *Slade House* (2015) David Mitchell (Sceptre)
- *Synergy: New Science Fiction Vol. 1* (1987) ed. George Zebrowski (Harvest/HBJ)
- *The Shadow of the Wind* (2001) Carlos Ruiz Zafon (Text)
- *The Best Australian Poems 2015* (2015) ed. Geoff Page (Black Inc)
- *Blockbuster! Fergus Hume and The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* (2015) Lucy Sussex (Text)
- *The Observations* (2006) Jane Harris (Faber)
- *No Man's Nightmare* (2013) Ruth Rendell (Scribner)

Favourite films seen for the first time in 2015

A few years ago now, one of my favourite film reviewers on Paul Harris's 'Film Buffs' Forecast' (3RRR, midday every Saturday) was **Ian Thompson**. No intellectualising in his reviews: he likes good straight-ahead entertainment-only genre films, and knows how to talk about them. He also ran a video store, Video Zone, in North Carlton. I didn't visit it then. I had no need for extra DVDs or Blu-rays, since the unwatched examples line one wall of my study. But in the middle of last year I came across Ian's name on Facebook, followed the link, and discovered that he was still trying to run his giant video store, full of oldies and rarities, although people seem to have stopped borrowing from him. So I braved a train

trip and a bus trip and getting the address completely wrong and eventually found my way to Video Zone. It's a real treasure cave, full of DVDs and Blu-rays you wouldn't find elsewhere. I took out a year's membership and borrowed four DVDs, watched them, returned them ... and returned to the store only once, I'm ashamed to say. My visits have been stopped for the same reason I've failed to deliver *SF Commentary* — paying work. Also, I have no other reason to visit North Carlton.

The first four DVDs I borrowed from Video Zone were Ian's recommendations. I had mentioned the name of Hayao Miyazaki, director of such great animated features as *Spirited Away*. 'There's a film that's much better than

any of those,' said Ian. And it was so. **Isao Takahata's** *Grave of the Fireflies* offers none of those uplifting cheery little messages provided by most animated features. Instead, it provides an emotionally overwhelming story of an orphaned brother trying to survive, with his sister, during the worst days for Japan towards the end of World War II. Animation provides much more powerful images of a country enduring fire bombing than could ever be created through mere photography.

In any other year, **Alex Garland's** *Ex_Machina* would have been my favourite film. It's certainly the best SF film for some years. A naive young computer whizz (Domhnall Gleeson) is invited by the head of a company closely modelled on Google (Oscar Isaac) to help implement the final stages of an experiment in artificial intelligence. The 'laboratory' is a glorious house, a piece of interior design lost among mountains many kilometres from other human beings. The whizz kid and the boss meet the AI, a wonderful creature whose face and torso are those Alicia Wikander and the rest of her body the product of a machine designer. Does this creature have AI possibilities? And what if 'she' does? And how might artificial machine intelligence affect the world? (The script implies that Google's worldwide net already amounts to an AI.) There are no silly melodramatics in this film until just before its end. The talents of the writer and actors — and the production designer — make this fable come alive.

It's not often I agree with the voters who pick the Oscar Award in any particular year, but at the beginning of 2015 they got it right in selecting *Birdman*, by **Alejandro Inarritu**. It's easy to think of it as being all technique, with its long shots curling around the corridors of a theatre in Manhattan, or all bravura acting, with its characters destroying each other as they try to set up the project that will save all their fortunes. But what remains in the memory is the magic of the striving human spirit, embodied in Michael Keaton.

Thanks to **Dick Jenssen** I was able to watch *Ex_Machina* and *Birdman* on Blu-ray, as indeed his efforts made it possible to view about 24 of the films on my list.

I've already talked about **Bill Condon's** *Mr Holmes* when discussing the novel that inspired the film. However, I did not mention the committed skills of the actors, especially Ian McKellen, that gives exuberant life to what might otherwise be a rather glum tale.

Throughout the year, I was pointed to exciting old films by Dick Jenssen (mentioned) and **John Davies**. John and Diane have been willing to visit our place once a month for film watching (front stalls only, four at most in the audience), and John usually brings something quite unexpected when it's his turn to choose the film. On the one hand, Dick lent me a copy of **Samuel Fuller's** 1953 crime film *Pickup on South Street*, a twisted tribute to the art of the pickpocket (Richard Widmark, in a role that brings him on stage as the villain and makes him into the leading man) and the value of loyalty (embodied in Thelma Ritter, in her greatest role other than the caustic nurse in *Rear Window*, and Jean Peters, the prostitute who is robbed at the beginning of the film). Nothing but surprises in this film, but in some ways it resembles **Archie Mayo's** *Moontide* (1942), one of only two films made in USA by actor Jean Gabin, which John



showed during the year. In both, the main action takes place in a one-room shack on a wharf, representing the final fortress of the ultimate outsider in American society. In *Moontide*, Jean Gabin's mercurial personality is pitted against that Ida Lupino, the great unknown American actor and director who radiates unquenchable angst.

It's never too late to catch up on the classic black-and-white films. While the consumers of cinema candy have deserted the DVD, the appreciators of great films are now finding superb remastered classics appearing for the first time on DVD and/or Blu-ray. I had never before had a chance to see **William Dieterle's** *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, although it used to be shown on TV before the 1990s. Simon Callow's biography of Charles Laughton claims that Laughton thought it his best film role. It's a masterpiece of 1930s big-crowd-scenes historical melodrama, true, but Laughton brings Quasimodo's character to life without diminishing the effect his ugliness has upon the people who encounter him.

You might not believe that there is a **Michael Powell** film I haven't seen. There are plenty, of course: his 'quota quickies' (one-hour films made for 5000 pounds each in the 1930s) and some of his later underfunded projects, such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which still do not appear on DVD. A genuine masterpiece that has finally been remastered for DVD is *Contraband*, from 1940. Conrad Veidt (Britain's most powerful character actor of the time) and Valerie Hobson battle it out in the world of espionage during the first few months of World War II. In many ways it is even more interesting than the better-known *The Spy in Black*, which also starred Veidt.

I can't remember **Deepa Mehta's** film of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* being shown in cinemas in Australia. Can you? I can only assume that cinema owners are still afraid of being firebombed in they show anything associated with the name of Rushdie, in view of the fatwa against him that seems now merely to have lapsed, rather than been lifted. Play Music/Video in Melbourne was

able to find a copy of this very fine film for me. It does simplify Rushie's complex drama of national symbolism and twisted families, but it does not betray its aims or diminish its brilliance. The acting and production design are invigorating throughout, and the supernatural element kept nicely in focus.

I don't know how I missed out on **Mira Nair's** *Salaam Bombay* when it was first shown in 1988. Probably it's because I was seeing very few films at the cinema during the 1980s. It is a tribute to the street children of Bombay, and the other people who do their best to survive despite all the odds being stacked against them. Its pacing is restless and relentless, giving it a sense of being a documentary rather than a scripted drama.

Thanks to John Davies for giving me a boxed set of **Carl Theodore Dreyer's** films on Blu-ray. I suspect that some of these had not been not available on tape or DVD. In *Gertrud*, Dreyer's stately black-and-white photography is startling in its sense of dynamism. The actors move in balletic slow gestures, yet the film emits a sense of high tension.

It may seem perverse to place **Ridley Scott's** *The Martian* above **Alain Resnais's** *Je t'aime je t'aime*, but I know what I'm doing. *The Martian* is much better than any of us could have envisaged when Scott said he would film Andy Weir's highly technical (and funny) novel. It's a film lasting 2 hours 21 minutes that seems to take only an hour and a half — it's a romp, a lark, that also makes sense (other than the somewhat improbable final-

minutes rescue). Matt Damon is perfect as the wisecracking astronaut left behind on Mars, whose sombre fate seemingly sealed, but isn't. Also, he does know what to do. If you go to Mars, you must be handy with your tools.

On the other hand, I've been waiting for nearly 50 years to see *Je t'aime je t'aime*, a seemingly lost masterpiece by Alain Resnais. It was shown very late at night at either of the 1968 or 1969 Easter conventions held in Melbourne. I didn't see it because I needed to get home by public transport. And then ... and then ... it was never shown at another SF convention or in a cinema or on TV or by any of the many film societies that once littered the inner suburbs. The repertory cinemas of the seventies and eighties didn't know about it. Thanks to Dick Jenssen, I've finally seen *Je t'aime, je t'aime*, and I was a bit disappointed — because it's not as good as the same director's *Last Year at Marienbad*. But which film is? During a scientific experiment, its main character is selected to enter a womb-like time machine in order to travel short distances backward. Instead, the time machine goes bung. His journeys throughout time, out of control. He finds himself living many unconnected events in his life. Given that the film might well be taken as a fantasy of lost memories, it ends with a perfect sense of time travel paradox.

I'd love to discuss every film on these lists, but like Marcel Proust, I am in search of lost time — the present. If you want to discuss particular films, send me a letter of comment.

- 1 *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) directed by Isao Takahata
- 2 *Ex_Machina* (2015) Alex Garland
- 3 *Birdman* (2014) Alejandro Inarritu
- 4 *Mr Holmes* (2015) Bill Condon
- 5 *Pickup on South Street* (1953) Samuel Fuller
- 6 *Moontide* (1942) Archie Mayo
- 7 *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) William Dieterle
- 8 *Contraband* (1940) Michael Powell
- 9 *Midnight's Children* (2012) Deepa Mehta
- 10 *Salaam Bombay* (1988) Mira Nair
- 11 *Gertrud* (1964) Carl Theodore Dreyer
- 12 *The Martian* (2015) Ridley Scott
- 13 *Je t'aime je t'aime* (1968) Alain Resnais
- 14 *Winter's Tale* (2014) Akira Goldsman
- 15 *Dark Places* (2015) Gilles Paquet-Brenner
- 16 *Storm Boy* (1976) Henry Safran
- 17 *The Drop* (2014) Michael R. Roskam
- 18 *The Congress* (2013) Ari Folman
- 19 *Valentino* (1977) Ken Russell
- 20 *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) George Miller and George Ogilvie
- 21 *Ida* (2014) Pawel Pawlikowski
- 22 *Woman in Gold* (2015) Simon Curtis
- 23 *The Swimmer* (1968) Frank Perry
- 24 *The Story of Three Loves* (1953) Gottfried Reinhardt and Vincente Minnelli
- 25 *Interrupted Melody* (1954) Curtis Bernhardt
- 26 *Enemy* (2013) Denis Villeneuve
- 27 *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961) Val Guest
- 28 *The Imitation Game* (2014) Morten Tyldum

Other four-star movies seen for the first time in 2015, in order of viewing:

- *The Ninth Configuration* (1980) William Peter Blatty
- *Always* (1989) Steven Spielberg
- *God Rot Tunbridge Wells: The Life Of George Frederic Handel* (1986) Tony Palmer
- *The Wind Rises* (2013) Hayao Miyazaki
- *Hawking* (2004) Philip Martin
- *The Darkside* (2013) Warwick Thornton
- *Tangled* (2011) Nathan Greno and Byron Howard
- *A Man about the House* (1947) Leslie Arliss
- *The Night My Number Came Up* (1955) Leslie Norman
- *Inferno* (1953) Roy Baker
- *The Roots of Heaven* (1958) John Huston
- *52 Pick-Up* (1986) John Frankenheimer
- *A Walk among the Tombstones* (2014) Scott Frank
- *Big Hero 6* (2014) Don Hall and Chris Williams
- *Red Garters* (1953) George Marshall
- *Arietty* (2010) Hiromasa Yonebayashi
- *You'll Find Out* (1940) David Butler
- *Cosi* (1995) Mark Joffe
- *Broadcast News* (1987) James L. Brooks
- *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) Robert Aldrich
- *Destination Moon* (1950) Irving Pichel; prod. George Pal
- *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) Leonard Nimoy
- *Shaun the Sheep* (2014) Mark Burton and Richard Starzak
- *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934) Rowland V. Lee
- *Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro* (1979) Hayao Miyazaki

- *Automata* (2013) Gabe Ibanez
- *My Afternoons with Margaritte* (2010) Jean Becker
- *Beau Geste* (1939) William Wellman)
- *Peter Ibbetson* (1935) Henry Hathaway
- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) George Miller
- *The Jungle Book* (1967) Wolfgang Reitherman
- *Blind Chance* (1981) Krzysztof Kieslowski

- *The Satan Bug* (1965) John Sturges
- *Inside Out* (2015) Pete Docter
- *Bridge of Spies* (2015) Steven Spielberg
- *Knight of Cups* (2015) Terence Malick
- *Self/Less* (2015) Tarsem Singh
- *Devotion* (1946) Curtis Bernhardt
- *Oddball* (2015) Stuart Macdonald

Favourite films seen again in 2015

No surprises here. Usually I've re-watched these films in



2015 because new black-and-white prints have appeared on Blu-ray. In the case of **Powell and Pressburger's** *The Tales of Hoffmann*, the new Blu-ray not only features the high-quality colour remastering of the previous best version, but also, finally, cleans up the 1951 soundtrack. Beecham recorded one of the great versions of the opera, but on all previous incarnations of the film it sounds like mush. Now you can hear the words, and if the plot still puzzles you, finally this version offers subtitles. I won't say this is my favourite Powell and Pressburger film, but now it's much easier to see why it is the favourite film of many people, including Martin Scorsese.

As for the rest of the list ... you will just have to pick up the Blu-rays of *Citizen Kane*, *The Third Man*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Dead Zone*, *Charade*, and *Day for Night* to see these films as they were meant to be seen. Thanks, as always, to Dick Jensen and John Davies for making many of these available for my viewing pleasure.

- 1 *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951) Michael Powell and Emric Pressburger
- 2 *Citizen Kane* (1940) Orson Welles
- 3 *The Third Man* (1949) Carroll Reed
- 4 *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) John Frankenheimer
- 5 *Predestination* (2014) Spierig Brothers
- 6 *Being There* (1979) Hal Ashby
- 7 *The Dead Zone* (1983) David Cronenberg
- 8 *Springsteen and I* (2013) Baillie Walsh

- 9 *Charade* (1963) Stanley Donen
- 10 *Day For Night* (1973) François Truffaut

Other four-star movies seen again in 2015, in order of viewing:

- *The Knack* (1965) Richard Lester
- *The Outer Circle: Melbourne's Forgotten Railway* (2014)
- *Interstellar* (2014) Christopher Nolan
- *When Worlds Collide* (1950) Rudolph Maté
- *Quiz Show* (1994) Robert Redford
- *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942) Michael Powell and Emric Pressburger
- *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis) 1985
- *Back to the Future II* (Robert Zemeckis) 1989
- *Back to the Future III* (Robert Zemeckis) 1990

Favourite documentaries and music films seen for the first time in 2015



I saw **Terry Gilliam**'s production of *Benvenuto Cellini* only because **Lee Harding** emailed me to say it would be showing for a few days at ACMI (Australian Centre for the Moving Image, in Melbourne's Federation Square complex). It's not a film. It's not a DVD or Blu-ray. It is one of those digital British theatrical productions that have been playing on Melbourne cinema screens (including the Nova and the Classic) during recent years. The production is digitally filmed within the theatre. You can see it only when it is shown briefly at a few cinemas in Melbourne, and it disappears forever. If this were available widely, it would be hailed as one of Terry Gilliam's greatest films, for its magnificent set designs,

and brilliant singing, acting, and choreography. And it's Berlioz' wonderful music. What could be more exciting?

By contrast, Covent Garden's stage production of **Puccini's** *Tosca*, starring great singers such as Bryn Terfel, Jonas Kaufman, and Angela Gheorghiu, is available on Blu-ray. Thanks to Dick Jenssen for making us aware of it. I had not seen a production before now, so I was doubly entertained by this juicy melodrama. Bryn Terfel radiates pure evil and does astonishing things with his voice. The villain steals the show from the good guys.

I could just as well have picked *Jazz on a Summer's Day* as my favourite music film or documentary for the year. Over the years I had heard this film mentioned as a nostalgia trip, since it was filmed at the Newport Jazz Festival in the late 1950s. What nobody seems to have said is that this film invented the immersive music performance film, long before *Woodstock*, *Monterey Pop*, and *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, or the great music films that followed. **Bert Stern** and **Aram Avakian** pay as much attention to the reactions of the audience as they do to the singers, and weave together a complex concert experience. We see young Americans at play at Newport during the period of greatest prosperity in USA, as well visually striking performances by some of the decade's finest jazz artists (plus Mahalia Jackson and some blues singers).

Almost as soon as Elaine and I gained access to the internet in 1998, Dick Jenssen pointed to the regular *Chicago Sun-Times* film review column written by **Roger Ebert** every week until his recent death from cancer. I knew Ebert only as a reviewer, and (when he was very young) an SF fan. In the film *Life Itself*, we see Ebert as a person whose life continued to bubble along no matter the obstacles placed in his way. Because he had to put up with an artificial jaw for the last few years of his life, he could neither eat nor drink. Yet discomfort does not seem to have reduced his curiosity about the world and great films and literature, or his love for his wife and friends, and his need to communicate clearly and persuasively. **Steve James'** *Life Itself* does make Ebert out to be a bit of a saint, but does not hide his flaws.

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- 1 *Benvenuto Cellini* (2015) Terry Gilliam; cond. Edward Gardner/English National Opera
 - 2 *Tosca* (2011) Jonathan Kent; cond: Antonio Pappano/Royal Opera Orchestra and Chorus Covent Garden
 - 3 *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1958) Bert Stern and Aram Avakian
 - 4 *Life Itself: Roger Ebert* (2014) Steve James
 - 5 *Hard Working Americans: The First Waltz* (2014) Jason Kreutzman

- 6 *The Monsanto Years* (2015) Bernard Shakey

Other four-star documentaries and music films seen for the first time in 2015, in order of viewing:

- *Sweet Blues: A Film about Michael Bloomfield* (2013) Bob Saides
- *A Tribute to Stevie Ray Vaughan* (1996) Gary Menotti and Terry Lickona

- *Carole King and James Taylor: Live at the Troubadour* (2010) Martin Atkins
- *Particle Fever* (2013) Mark Lewinson
- *Edward Hopper and the Blank Canvas* (2012) Jean-

- Pierre Devillers
- *Going Clear* (2015) Alex Gibney
- *Joe Bonamasa: Radio City Music Hall* (2015) Philippe Klose

Favourite popular music CDs heard for the first time in 2015

Tom Russell is hardly the first troubadour/songwriter to record a full-scale popular-music opera. In the 1970s a group of West Coast country and rock singers made the LPs *White Mansions* and *Jesse James*. Before them, Electric Light Orchestra recorded *War of the Worlds* (which I've never heard). As near as I can tell, the back story of *The Rose of Roscrae: A Ballad of the West* tells of a bad guy who commits a terrible crime, then spends the rest of his life seeking to redeem himself. The usual stuff. Russell's double CD is wonderful because of the strength of Russell's songwriting, and his ability to rope in vast numbers of famous friends (such as Joe Ely, Jimmy LaFave, David Olney, Eliza Gilkyson, Gretchen Peters, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore) to sing lots of other songs, some traditional and some newly written for the project. This sounds even better on the second listening, when you can forget about the story (whatever it is) and enjoy the songs.

Neil Young's 'big album' for 2015 was supposed to be *The Monsanto Years*, but people sniggered a bit at the propagandist lyrics damning Monsanto and all other similar American corporations. Neil Young fans forgot to listen to the music, which is very enjoyable rock and roll. (The accompanying DVD is also quite amusing.) His real success for the year is *Blue Note Cafe*, recordings made on tour in the 1980s, when for the only time in his career Neil Young fronted a band featuring brass as well as guitars and drums. This double CD includes some of Neil's best songs from a fallow period when hardly anybody, including his record company, was listening to him. The studio versions of some of these songs appear

on *This Note's for You*, but many of them are songs I've never heard before.

Iris DeMent finally made it back into the studio to produce *The Trackless Woods*, the bravest CD of the year. She casts aside both her strong country twang (her early albums) and her gospel roots (her two most recent CDs, *Lifeline* and *Sing the Delta*), and has provided tunes for poems written by one of the USSR's most persecuted poets, Anna Akhmatova, from its most long-suffering era (30 years of Stalin). Iris DeMent's melancholy vocals complement the sound of her equally melancholic piano playing. (A few other musicians feature on some other tracks.) The result is a country music version of Shostakovich's 13th Symphony — dark, bracing gloom.

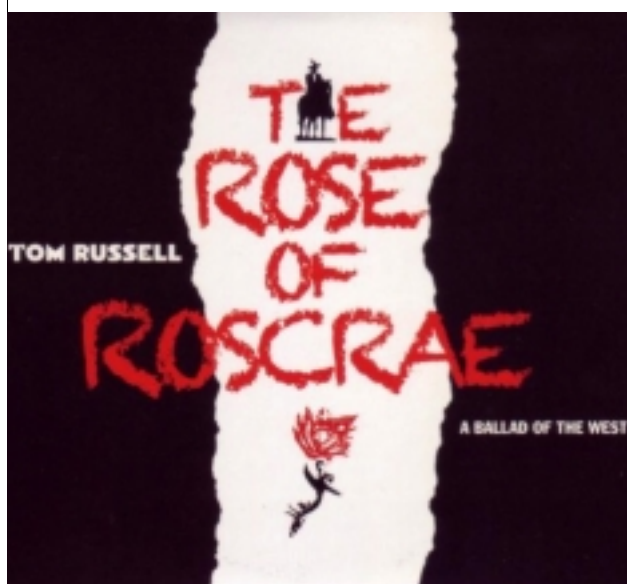
Lindi Ortega, on the other hand, reminds me a little of Iris DeMent's singing style during her early recording career. On *Little Red Boots* and her other recent albums, she adds sex and sin and a lot of dancing to DeMent's gospelliness. Ortega specialises in heart-stopping ballads and bellowin' and hollerin' and kickin'-the-doors-down country rock.

Hardworking Americans is a new band to me — but its lead singer and guitarist, **Todd Snider**, has been making solo records for at least twenty years. On *The First Waltz*, his new band features double guitarists and a lot of good drumming and a wide variety of stadium-rousing songs. While watching the DVD of this concert, I kept thinking of Lynyrd Skynyrd, but I trust that *Hardworking Americans* has a longer career.

Like Lindi Ortega, **Kimmie Rhodes** reminds me of Iris DeMent's early work, but Rhodes has a much sweeter country sound than either of them. She has been making records for many years, but the new one, *Cowgirl Boudoir*, shows that she has lost none of her song-writing ability.

Rhiannon Giddens is the surprise of the year, and perhaps I would have placed her CD higher on the list if I had had time to listen to *Tomorrow Is My Turn* a second time. (Must do. Must do.) Her voice has a chocolatey bluesy quality that you don't hear very often these days. Most women blues singers adopt a much more strident cut-through-the-crap style (Mavis Staples or Etta James). Other singers with voices like Giddens, such as Cassandra Wilson, usually sing jazz. Giddens sings her own mellow brand of rock, country, and blues, with more than a hint of jazz.

Ten years ago, **Joe Brown** made a great impression during his performance at the tribute concert for George Harrison. After enjoying a couple of hit singles in 1959 and 1960, he had never been heard of again in Australia. During the last 50 years he has been developing an



entertaining act based on British rock/skiffle nostalgia, self-accompanied by ukelele. The songs lyrics are amusing and self-effacing, and the accompanying band taps out an effective brand of fifties rock and roll. However, until 2014 I had not listened to Joe Brown's two most recent CDs. *More of the Truth* (2006) has the more interesting set of songs, but *The Ukelele Album* (2011) is also worth searching for.

2015 was a year of great CDs by female performers. **Ruth Moody**'s voice reminds me of that of Rhiannon Giddens, but also of Kimmie Rhodes and Eliza Gilkyson. She's a highly effective singer-songwriter. *These Wilder Things* is another CD I could easily have missed, except that Ruth Moody (formerly lead singer of the Be Good Tanyas in Canada) toured Australia during 2014, and I heard her singing and being interviewed on ABC radio and Brian Wise's program 'Off the Record' (3RRR).

At one stage of 2015 the **Black Keys**' first CD, *Chulahoma*, was going to be my favourite CD of the year. **Murray MacLachlan** lent it to me, along with the Black Keys' second CD. I was bowled over by the power of the blues electric guitar playing. This is a young band in full first love with the blues, just as Cream was in 1967. (Recently I bought the Black Keys' multi-CD-selling *El Camino* (2014). Exciting rhythm section; very dull songs.)

Courtney Barnett (from Northcote, Melbourne) has won almost every major music prize except a Grammy

since she released *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*. She doesn't sound like anybody else, and obviously she is enjoying herself. Her band sounds spare and loopy, with more than a hint of early nineties grunge. Her lyrics explore all the odd, unexpected aspects of trying to survive hand-to-mouth in modern inner-suburban Melbourne. To me, Courtney Barnett sounds like a combination of the Waitresses and Lou Reed in talking-blues mood, but if they are her influences, she is channelling people who were at their top before she was born. Whatever she sings is just ... original. No other word for it.

As for the rest of my list, I can merely point to a whole lot of my favourite people who finally released new CDs after disappearing for awhile. **Roy Rogers** (*Into the Wild Blue*) is a dazzling slide guitarist, as is **Sonny Landreth** (*Bound by the Blues*). **Gurf Morlix** (*Eatin' At Me*) has one of the most interesting gravelly voices in American music. **Bettye LaVette** (*Worthy*) still has one of the world's greatest blues voices.

But none of the above, some of whom are in their seventies or approaching that decade, can overtop the achievement of **Tony Bennett**. At ninety, with pianist Bill Charlap he has recorded one of the most satisfying smooth CDs of recent years, *The Silver Lining: The Songs of Jerome Kern*. When Tony hits 100, his voice might start to sound old and tired.

- 1 Tom Russell: *The Rose of Roscræ* (2 CDs) (2015)
- 2 Neil Young: *Blue Note Cafe* (2 CDs) (1988/2015)
- 3 Iris DeMent: *The Trackless Woods* (2015)
- 4 Lindi Ortega: *Little Red Boots* (2011)
- 5 Hardworking Americans: *The First Waltz* (CD + DVD) (2014)
- 6 Kimmie Rhodes: *Cowgirl Boudoir* (2015)
- 7 Rhiannon Giddens: *Tomorrow Is My Turn* (2015)
- 8 Joe Brown: *More of the Truth* (2006)
- 9 Ruth Moody: *These Wilder Things* (2013)
- 10 Black Keys: *Chulahoma* (2006)
- 11 Courtney Barnett: *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit* (2015)
- 12 Roy Rogers: *Into the Wild Blue* (2015)
- 13 Josh Ritter: *Sermon on the Rocks* (2015)
- 14 Ray Wylie Hubbard: *The Ruffian's Misfortune* (2015)
- 15 Bettye LaVette: *Worthy* (2015)
- 16 Sonny Landreth: *Bound by the Blues* (2015)
- 17 Gurf Morlix: *Eatin' At Me* (2015)
- 18 Tony Bennett and Bill Charlap: *The Silver Lining: The Songs of Jerome Kern* (2015)
- 19 Neil Young and Promise of the Real: *The Monsanto Years* (2015)
- 20 Black Sorrows: *Endless Sleep: Chapters 46 & 47* (2 LPs + 2 CDs) (2015)
- 21 Sam Outlaw: *Angelena* (2015)
- 22 Pokey La Farge: *Something in the Water* (2015)
- 23 Shane Howard: *Deeper North* (2015)
- 24 Susannah Espie: *Mother's Not Feeling Herself Today* (2015)
- 25 Chris Russell's Chicken Walk: *Drive* (2015)
- 26 *The Watkins Family Hour* (2015)

- 27 Mark Seymour: *Mayday* (2015)
- 28 Steve Earle and the Dukes: *Terraplane* (2015)
- 29 Tom Jones: *Long Lost Suitcase* (2015)
- 30 Paul Kelly, Vika and Linda Bull, Claire Browne, Dan Sultan and Kira Parr: *The Merri Soul Sessions* (2014)

Other four-star popular CDs, in order of listening:

- Jack White: *Lazaretto* (2014)
- Black Sorrows: *Certified Blue* (2014)
- Various: *Another Day Another Time: Celebrating the Music of 'Inside Llewyn Davis'* (2 CDs) (2015)
- Mark Knopfler: *Tracker* (2015)
- Various: *Avalon Blues: A Tribute to the Music of Mississippi John Hurt* (2001)
- James Taylor and Carole King: *Live at the Troubadour* (CD + DVD) (2010)
- Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell: *The Traveling Kind* (2015)
- Perry Keyes: *Sunnyholt* (2015)
- Mark Seymour: *Seventh Heaven Club* (2013)
- Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard: *Django and Jimmie* (2015)
- Sinéad O'Connor: *I'm Not Bossy, I'm the Boss* (2014)
- Joe Brown: *The Ukelele Album* (2011)
- Jefferson Airplane: *Surrealistic Pillow* (1967)
- Santana: *Woodstock Saturday August 16 1969* (1998/2009)
- Ryan Adams: *Ashes and Fire* (2011)
- Jason Isbell: *Something More Than Free* (2015)

- Dawes: *All Your Favourite Bands* (2015)
- Richard Thompson: *Still (and Variations EP)* (2015)
- Kieran Kane: *Somewhere Beyond the Roses* (2009)
- Black Keys: *Rubber Factor* (2005)
- Keith Richards: *Crosseyed Heart* (2015)
- Larry Campbell and Teresa Williams (2015)
- Joe Ely: *Panhandle Rambler* (2015)
- Various: *Vanthology* (2003)
- Jim Keays: *The Boy from the Stars* (1974/1999)
- Wainwright Sisters: *Songs in the Dark* (2015)
- Kinky Friedman: *The Loneliest Man I Ever Met* (2015)

Favourite popular music CD boxed sets or collections bought during 2015

Looks as if the shine has disappeared from boxed sets, since few of them appeared during 2015, except for outrageously priced and woefully under-filled big boxes regurgitating single albums by famous people (such as Led Zeppelin).

The only other boxed set that tempted me, sort of, was the set of **Bob Dylan** rehearsal versions that were recorded during the making of such major 1965 and 1966 albums as *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. In the end, the purchase price (\$200) stopped me.

Bruce Springsteen's series of remastered albums/boxed sets, as they appear sporadically, give great value. At last the series has reached my favourite Springsteen (double) album, *The River* (1980). Two Blu-rays in *The Ties That Bind* boxed set feature the remastered *The River*, and a third includes the single-album original version that was offered to Columbia, then withdrawn a year later in favour of the version we know and love. The fourth Blu-ray features a vast array of offcuts from the 1980 sessions. At least two of them should have been on *The River*. The fifth item is a Blu-ray that includes a great 1980 concert in which Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band played most of the tracks from their new album. If you thought Mr Springsteen shows unending energy in

his much more recent *Live at Hyde Park*, take a look at this human dynamo in 1980. Bruce might start to slow down by the time he's 100.

Strictly speaking, I probably didn't need **The Faces'** *1970-75: You Make Me Dance, Sing or Anything*. I have the five albums on CD or LP, but even the most recent 'remastered' versions of about 15 years ago sound muddy to me. It's great to have in one place all the albums that nearly tipped the Faces into second place behind the Stones as the 'greatest rock and roll band of all time'. It was Rod Stewart's defection to West Coast pop music, plus Ronnie Lane's need to simplify his life, that stopped the Faces dead in their tracks in 1975. But they were astonishingly good for a few years.

You'll have to make up your mind as to whether the *Sticky Fingers* boxed set gives as much value as some other recent **Rolling Stones** remastered sets. To me, it's a bit short of extras, but I did want a remastered version of *Sticky Fingers* (1971), as well as any other material recorded at the same time.

I can't remember Melbourne's **Archie Roach** being a part of my CD collection at the beginning of his recording career. He crept up on Elaine and me as we heard more and more of his studio or concert tracks on radio. He became famous for songs such as 'Charcoal Lane' and 'Took the Children Away' in his rich, mournful voice, songs that carry an enormous weight of the Australian Aboriginal experience during the twentieth century. It was only later, as I bought a few of his later CDs, that I realised I should have bought his first, *Charcoal Lane*, when it first came out. Twenty-five years later, the *25th Anniversary Edition* includes a remastered CD of the album itself, and a second CD of other people's interpretations of Archie Roach's best songs. These performers include Paul Kelly and Courtney Barnett ('Charcoal Lane'), Marlon Williams and Leah Flanagan ('I've Lied'), and Briggs and Gurrumul ('The Children Came Back'). The most moving tracks are concert performances by Archie Roach and his late wife **Ruby Hunter** of such songs as 'Down City Streets' and 'Took the Children Away'.

Richard Clapton was a star of the great Australian pop music revival of the 1970s. His 'Girls on the Avenue' was played many times on the radio. Later he stopped having hits, but occasionally I would hear a brilliant album track on one of the few stations that played album tracks. He kept touring incessantly and producing albums for his long-term fans. It's only when listening to *Best Years*



1974–2014 that I realised that this consistently fine singer–songwriter should have been much better known to the general public during the last three decades.

Mental As Anything had much more success than Richard Clapton in the pop field. They started in the late seventies, so were fortunate enough to ride the crest of the wave provided by the *Countdown* TV program. Almost all their singles were promoted on the program, and ‘Greedy’ Smith, one of the band’s three lead vocalists, was often asked to guest-host *Countdown*. Two of the others, the Doherty Brothers, became as famous for their artwork (including the cover art for all their LPs) as for their singing. As the name of the band is meant to show, many of the song lyrics have a quirky or satirical edge, but the band stayed popular because it played good straight-ahead rock and roll when much of the rest of pop music descended into the mud-heap of New Wave. **Essential As Anything: 30th Anniversary Edition** has very few dud songs.

Few Aboriginal performers have had Archie Roach’s

degree of success, but some, such as Lionel Rose and Jimmy Little, were very popular in the sixties and seventies, and others produced great singles and LPs during the last thirty years. Yothu Yindi was successful on the pop albums chart before they broke up, and the Pigram Brothers keep producing CDs. **Clinton Walker’s *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music*** appeared first in 2000 as a book, set of CDs, and a DVD. All went out of print. Now that Walker has gained the opportunity to revive the project in 2015, he has had to change the set list because a wide variety of new performers have arrived since 2000. I’m glad I have both versions, 2000’s and 2015’s, and now have a copy of the book as well.

Finally, an alt.country entry to this list! When the great band **Son Volt** broke up, all its members formed or joined other bands. I didn’t own the first incarnation of **Trace** (1995), so I was very pleased that it was been remastered and added to, and is now available as a two-CD set.

- 1 Bruce Springsteen: *The Ties That Bind: The River Collection* (4 CDs + 2 Blu-rays) (2015)
- 2 Faces: *1970–75: You Make Me Dance, Sing or Anything* (5 CDs)
- 3 Rolling Stones: *Sticky Fingers* (reissue plus extras) (2 CDs) (1971/2015)
- 4 Archie Roach: *Charcoal Lane: 25th Anniversary Edition* (2 CDs) (1990/2015)
- 5 Richard Clapton: *Best Years 1974–2014* (3 CDs + DVD) (2014)
- 6 Mental As Anything: *Essential As Anything: 30th Anniversary Edition* (2 CDs) (2009)
- 7 Various: *Buried Country 1.5* (2 CDs + Book)
- 8 Son Volt: *Trace* (remastered plus extras) (2 CDs) (1995/2015)

Other four-star CD boxed sets, in the order I bought them:

- Ornette Coleman: *Original Album Series* (5 CDs)
- Normie Rowe: *Frenzy! The 50th Anniversary Collection* (2015)
- Chet Atkins: *Chester and Lester/Neck and Neck/Sneakin’ Around/The Day Finger Pickers Took Over the World* (2 CDs) (2015)
- John Hartford: *Life, Love and Music: Essential Albums 1962–1969* (2 CDs) (2015)
- Bob Luman: *Let’s Think About Living* (2015)
- Kevin Johnson: *The Ultimate Collection* (2 CDs) (2015)
- Van Morrison: *Astral Weeks* (Remastered) (1969/2015)
- Glen Campbell: *Classic Campbell* (3 CDs) (2006)

Favourite classical CDs heard for the first time in 2015

Most of the following items were issued on boxed sets that I’ve bought in previous years. I found that was making little headway in listening to the boxed sets, so I stopped buying them, but most of what I listened to came from earlier sets. Although I still buy *Gramophone* and *Limelight* magazines, few CDs reviewed these days in those magazines are must-owns.

The Big Classical Boxed Set that has yielded the greatest pleasures during the last 15 months is **The Decca Sound: The Analogue Years**. It’s an odd title for the set, since many of its finest recordings come from the digital era (post 1978).

I own lots of favourite versions of Verdi’s *Requiem*, but

Elaine and I played **Georg Solti’s** version for the first time because we had become excited by the piece all over again when our friend David Grigg was in the chorus for a recent Melbourne production. That performance, by the Star Chorale and the Zelman Orchestra at the Melbourne Town Hall, was one of the highlights of our 2015. I expect a Solti version of any piece to include the greatest orchestra and soloists available at the time. This version, with the **Vienna Philharmonic**, is lifted a little higher than most other versions by the recording skills of Decca’s team.

Georg Solti also starred in 2014, for his version of **Monteverdi’s *Vespro Della Beata Vergine***, one of the three

greatest choral masterpieces of Western classical music. (The others are Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and J. S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor*.) So we dragged out from the back cupboard our copy of the three-LP version by **Michael Corboz** from 1966, and it is also also magnificent.

One of the CD sets I'm slowly playing is the Naxos set of the complete **Haydn quartets** by the **Kodaly Quartet**, which John Bangsund gave us. There may be more sonorous versions around, but if so, I haven't heard them. The 'Emperor' and 'Fifths' quartets are particularly impressive in this version.

In 2014, I bought a boxed set of various performances of **C. P. E. Bach's** music, and am working my way through it very slowly. Jumping the gap between the baroque and the classical periods, Bach offers a cheerful and energetic style of instrumental music that leads directly to the works of Mozart. **Ton Koopman** is his ideal interpreter.

Elaine and I played so much music by **Arvo Pärt** when we discovered it that there was a danger of becoming a bit tired of his 'medieval minimalist' style. This did not happen. One day I picked from the shelf the **Edison** version of seven major pieces, on the reasonable ground that I hadn't played it yet although I had owned it for years. His style seemed even more wonderful than I had remembered it. Now back to the still-unplayed Pärt works I've bought during the last 20 years.

I seem to have known about the works of **Peter Sculthorpe**, Australia's greatest composer, for many more years than I have been interested in listening to classical music. I'm fairly sure I heard the four parts of *Sun Music* sometime in the middle 1960s, and recognised that this was the sort of shimmering music I would probably like if ever I got around to listening to classical music. (My epiphany struck in 1968.) I knew that Australia held a special treasure, and his name is Peter Sculthorpe. In 2014 he turned 85, then died not long after. This gave ABC Music an excuse to repackage all the Sculthorpe pieces that the ABC had ever recorded.



I haven't had time to play all of the set yet, but I did enjoy greatly the disc of versions by **David Porcelijn** and the **Adelaide Symphony Orchestra** of *Sun Music I, II, III, and IV*, as well as some other major Sculthorpe compositions.

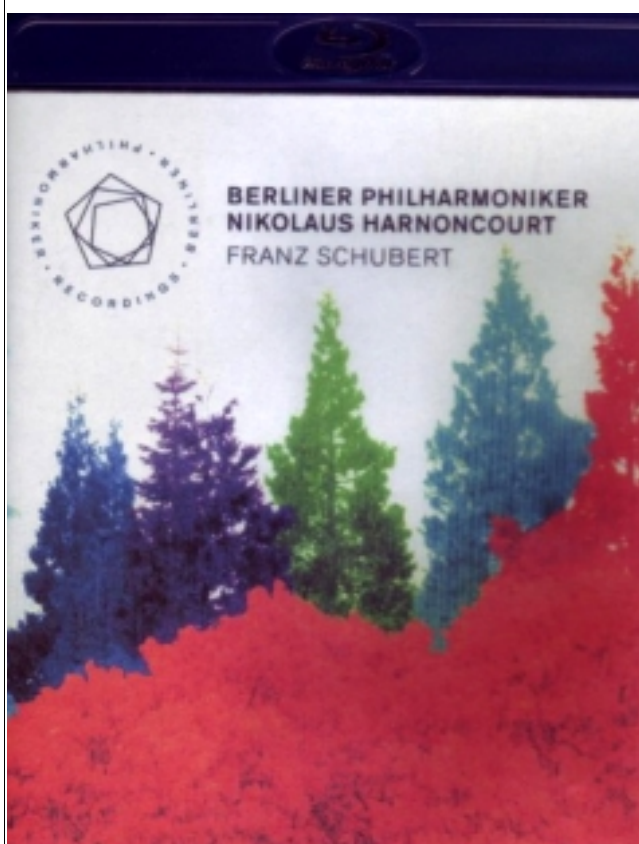
Karajan in the 60s is a huge set of **Herbert von Karajan's** best recordings from his best period with Deutsche Grammophon. Quite a few of these recordings, such as the set of Beethoven symphonies, replaced my old CD set, and others replaced LPs I've had for over 40 years. But many recordings here are new to me, and I've had time to listen to a few of them. One of the most outstanding is Karajan's 1967 version of **Sibelius' symphonies 5, 6 and 7**. I've never heard Karajan mentioned as one of the great Sibelius interpreters. Perhaps his versions of the first two symphonies are not well regarded. But Karajan captures the peculiarly uneasy quality of the later symphonies, and finishes with a spectacular version of the one-movement 7th symphony.

- 1 Georg Solti (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: **Verdi: Requiem** (1967/2013) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Years* CD 29)
- 2 Michel Corboz (cond.)/Vocal and Instrumental Ensemble of Lausanne: **Monteverdi: Vespro Della Beata Vergine** (1966) (3 LPs)
- 3 Kodaly Quartet: **Haydn: String Quartets Op. 76: String Quartet in G major/String Quartet in D minor ('Fifths')/String Quartet in C major ('Emperor')** (1989)
- 4 Ton Koopman (cond.)/Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra/Konrad Hüdeler (flute)/Tini Mathot (harpsichord): **C. P. E. Bach: Flute Concertos W169/W1666/two harpsichord concertos W46**
- 5 Noel Edison (cond.)/Jurgen Petrenko (organ)/Elora Festival Singassom: **Arvo Pärt: Cantata Domino/ Canticum Noxum/ Berliner Masse/De Profundis/Summa/The Beatitudes/Magnificat** (2004)
- 6 David Porcelijn (cond.)/Adelaide Symphony Orchestra: **Sculthorpe: Memento Mori/Sun Song/Sun Music I, II, III, IV/From Uluru** (1996/2014) (*Sculthorpe ABC Recordings* CD 4)
- 7 Herbert von Karajan (cond.)/Berlin Philharmonic Orch.: **Sibelius: Symphonies 6, 5, 7** (1967/2012) (*Karajan in the 60s* CD.)
- 8 Fitzwilliam Quartet: **Shostakovich: String Quartets 15, 8, 9** (1975/1977/2013) (*Decca Sound: The Analogue Years* CD 14)
- 9 Fabio Biondi (cond. and violin)/Europa Galante: **Vivaldi: Concerti Del'addio (Farewell Concertos) (violin concertos) RV 390, 273, 371, 189, 367, 286** (2015)
- 10 Gustav Leonhardt (cond.)/Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment/Anner Bylsma (cello): **C. P. E. Bach: Cello concertos B major W172/A minor W170/B flat major W176** (1990/2014)

Other four-star contenders for favourite classical CD heard for the first time in 2015, in order of listening:

- Angela Hewitt (piano): **Liszt: Piano Sonata, Sonetto S161/Dante Sonata S161/7** (2015)
- Alfred Walter (cond.)/Budapest Symph. Orchestra: **Spohr: Symphony No 4/Faust Overture/ Jessunda Overture** (1987)
- Christian Lindberg (cond.)/Norrköping Symph. Orch.: **Pettersson: Symphonies 4, 16** (2014)
- Herbert von Karajan (cond.)/Berlin Philharmonic Orch.: **Rossini: Sonatas for Strings 1, 2, 3, 6** (1968/2012) (*Karajan in the 60s* CD65)
- Kodaly Quartet: **Haydn: String Quartets Op. 71 Nos 1–3 ('Apponyi Quartets')** (1989)
- Christian Lindberg (cond.)/Norrköping Symph. Orch.: **Pettersson: Symphony No 9** (2013)
- Nikolaus Harnoncourt (cond.): **Schubert: Symphony No 2** (2015)
- Joe Chindamo and Zoë Black (piano): **Bach/Chindamo: The New Goldberg Variations** (2015)

Favourite classical boxed sets of 2015



I bought no Big Classical Boxed Sets during 2015. That's because I bought far too many during 2013 and 2014.

However, Dick Jenssen did add to our collection of 'boxed sets' by giving Elaine and me several Blu-rays that included the entire contents of a boxed set. One was the 1962 **Karajan** cycle of the **Beethoven symphonies**, one of the great achievements of twentieth-century recording (although now surpassed, perhaps, by the technically superior Harnoncourt and Gardiner sets).

Another was the very recent set of **Schubert symphonies** recorded by **Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the Berlin Philharmonic**. This replaces the same conductor's set of Schubert symphonies from 1993, which at the time of release was regarded as the new gold standard. A few months after the 2015 set appeared, Harnoncourt announced his retirement from performing. And on 6 March 2016, at the age of 86, he died, without any announcement anywhere in the Australian press. The greatest living conductor dies — and nobody in Australia cares? No wonder Australia seems a dreary hole sometimes, except for the presence of such radio stations as 3MBS and ABC Classic FM, where I heard the news.

Harnoncourt's new interpretations of the Schubert symphonies is not remarkably different from the 1993 versions, but improvements in studio technology make a difference. Harnoncourt's approach, refined by his championing of Renaissance and baroque music, concentrates on the finest details of melody and structure, giving energy to some symphonies that sound boring in the hands of other conductors. I don't really like the late symphonies much, but Harnoncourt lights them up in a way nobody else does. The early symphonies, in the new set in particular, sound very fresh and interesting.

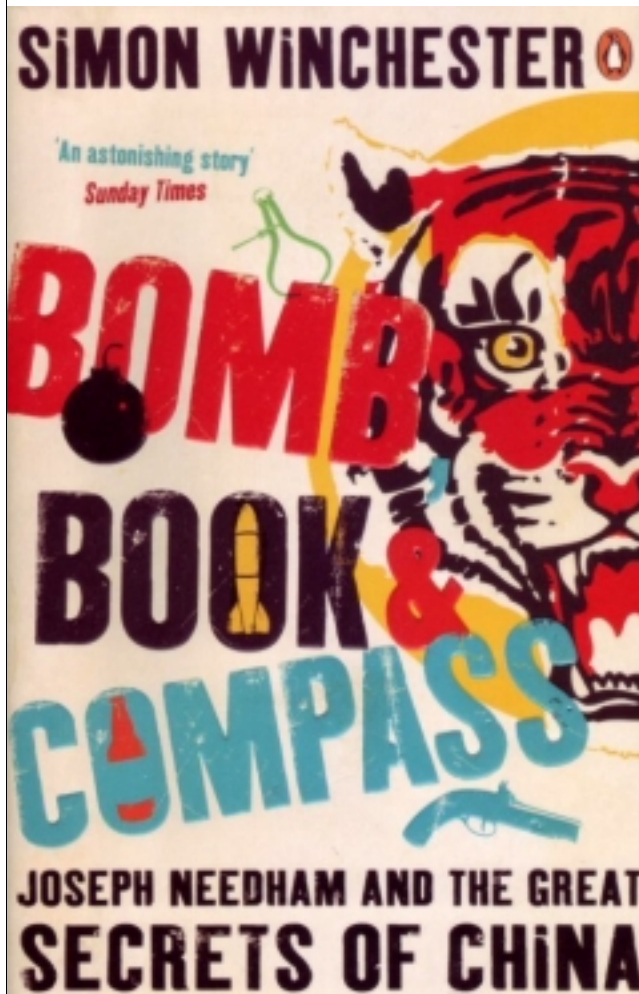
Favourite television shows/series 2015

In no particular order:

- *Lewis*: Series 8
- *Elementary*: Season 1
- *Foyle's War*: Seasons 8 and 9
- *New Tricks*: Series 11 and 12
- *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*: Season 3
- *Bosch*: Season 1
- *Love in a Cold Climate* (1981).

Elaine Cochrane

Best reads 2015



2015 was a good year, in part because I had given myself greater freedom to abandon books that failed to engage me.

Three works of non-fiction stand out. **Simon Winchester's** *Bomb, Book and Compass: Joseph Needham and the Great Secrets of China* was an immensely readable account of Needham's work, and a reminder of how reluctant the

West has been to acknowledge the achievements of most of the rest of the globe. While Needham was astonishing for the breadth of his accomplishments, **Andrew Wiles's** single-minded pursuit of a mathematical proof is the basis of **Simon Singh's** *Fermat's Last Theorem*. Like Wiles's proof, Singh's account builds on more than two millennia of mathematics and mathematicians, and he makes the pursuit exciting.

My Apprenticeship by **Maxim Gorky** continues from *My Childhood*, and for that reason I'd put off reading it for many years. Despite its grimness, *My Childhood* had charmed me utterly, and I was afraid the magic would be lost. Certainly the perceptions change from the innocent acceptance of a child, but the delicious prose of **Ronald Wilks's** excellent translation (Penguin Classics) was a most enjoyable read.

I also enjoyed three fictional memoirs. The title had put me off reading **Siegfried Sassoon's** *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*, but this tale of a spoilt child and callow youth who finds himself an infantry officer at the start of the First World War is told with just the right light touch of self-mockery. It's the first volume in a trilogy, and I won't put off the others for as long. *The History of a Conscript of 1813/Waterloo* (**Erckmann-Chatrian**) is essentially a children's book, but because it was written only some 50 years after the events it has a fascinating authenticity. **Richard Sennett's** *The Frog Who Dared to Croak* purports to be the assembled writings of a middle-ranking political figure of an unnamed Communist country in eastern Europe, and with sly and bitter humour traces his life from idealistic youth through self-serving self-deception to downfall. Sennett has written at least one other novel, which is now on my ever-growing must-read list.

Centipede Press has begun issuing its long-awaited collections of the short stories of **R. A. Lafferty**. The first two volumes, *The Man Who Made Models* and *The Man with the Aura*, came out in 2015. Enough said. Buy them. Read them.

— Elaine Cochrane, January 2016

Colin Steele's qualifications include MA, GradDipLib, FAHA, FLCIP, FALIA, and KtCross Spain. He is an Emeritus Fellow of the Australian National University, where he has held such positions as Director of Scholarly Information Strategies (2002–2003) and University Librarian, ANU (1980–2002). He has been writing SF reviews for *The Canberra Times* for many years, and been contributing to *SF Commentary* since the 1970s. Except where noted, these reviews appeared first in *The Canberra Times*, December 2013–August 2015.

Colin Steele

Bibliographica 2014:

Colin Steele presents a talk on the future of books

Colin Steele gave the keynote address at the Annual Conference of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand at the National Library on Thursday, 27 November 2014.

The Japanese word *tsundoku* is a play on the words *tsumu*, to pile up, and *doku*, to read. The composite word captures the almost tsunami of issues piling up for books and book collecting, which I addressed in detail at Bibliographica 2014 at the National Library in November 2014.

Can printed books survive the impact of current disruptive technologies, even though the sale of e-books is plateauing out in a number of countries? While tablet sales have now overtaken dedicated readers like Kindle, Amazon has recently introduced its Kindle Unlimited service which offers 'unlimited access to over 600,000 titles and thousands of audiobooks on any device for just \$9.99 a month'.

Kindle Unlimited is almost a return to the British historical circulating libraries like Mudie's, which had 7.5 million books in its inventory at the end of the nineteenth century. Boots, in the twentieth century, advertised access to 'the finest library service in the kingdom for less than the price of a newspaper'. The commercial medium may change, but the message remains, even centuries apart.

The medium of reading has certainly changed. We apparently read more than ever before, three times as much as we did in 1980, but what sort of reading is it? Has instant communication gratification, by the dip-in dip-out generation, led to a reduction in our capacity for sustained attention and thus deep or slow reading? According to a recent Mintel study, about a third of Britons had not bought a book in the past year: 34 per cent said they had no interest in reading, while 20 per cent blamed a lack of spare time.

Hugh Mackay recently reported that over 50 per cent of Australians felt they could not live without their mobile phones, while recent Ofcom research revealed that the average UK adult now spends more time using media or communications than he or she does sleeping. Judy

Wajcman, in her recent book, *Pressed For Time: The Acceleration Of Life In Digital Capitalism*, reflects that technological innovation is supposed to save time and energy, but in fact, people have never felt more pressured.

There is still the need, however, for human interaction in an increasingly digital age. Thus, more people than ever are attending literary festivals where you can hear and meet your favourite author. There are now 354 literary festivals each year in Britain alone. In Australia, literary festivals, from Brisbane to Perth, have seen record attendances and book sales in 2014.

While men are the main book collectors, women are the main book readers. Women are also the main attendees at literary festivals. In that context, it was good to hear Julia Gillard at the National Portrait Gallery on 10 November say that she had rediscovered 'the joy of reading for pleasure'. Gillard mentioned that her current reading favourite was Hilary Mantel, although she refrained from making any cross-reference to the current government and that of Henry VIII.

While literary festivals usually attract an older demographic, younger readers flock to Comic Cons, which record large sales of graphic novels and comics, often linked to TV or film adaptations. Autograph signings by actors from popular TV series and films feature as a major part of these conventions. Autographs are often expensive, but buyers know their autographs are genuine, which is often a problem with eBay sales.

My purchase of a signed Ray Bradbury book in the late 1970s from a major Australian book dealer proved not to be genuine when I later checked the signature with Bradbury. So caveat emptor is always the motto. Buyers should also be aware that prices of signed first editions fluctuate almost as much as shares on the share market. Nonetheless, the seller of a signed unread mint copy of the first edition of Richard Flanagan's recent

Booker prize winner would surely have been overjoyed in selling it through the ABE website for \$1500.

Amassing a large physical book collection doesn't necessarily entail spending a large amount of money, but you do need the space to house it. Flats lend themselves more to paperbacks and e-books. Barry Humphries, a long-time noted book collector, can clearly afford to accommodate 30,000 books in London, while Nick Cave has been cited as having 100,000 books in his Brighton house. Other notable celebrity collectors include Bryan Ferry and Keith Richards, who apparently once contemplated a career as a librarian.

If you don't have the time to seek out your favourite books in a particular subject, Philip Blackwell, a member of the famous Oxford bookselling family, offers the 'Ultimate Library' service, with individual book collections customised for the home or hotel, as occurred with the Savoy Hotel in London.

Charles Stitz, in his excellent *Australian Book Collectors* volumes, documents numerous examples of collectors whose houses are overrun by books. Relatively few of these are seen, however, in *The Canberra Times* glossy Saturday magazine *Domain*, which almost resembles 'property porn' with its pictures of sumptuous house interiors. A famous New Yorker cartoon once showed a real estate agent telling prospective sellers to 'lose the books', as they would depress the house value.

Stitz has illustrated the problems faced by book collectors as families downsize or enter retirement homes. I vividly remember visiting the late Professor Oskar Spate in a retirement village in Holt and his angst at only having the space for three to five books in his small room. Access to content would now be alleviated by e-books, but not their physical presence.

Secondhand book dealers and libraries are increasingly reluctant to take large general book collections. University and state libraries prefer to be offered focused specialist collections. But that is only if they fit their collection profile, and they have space to house them and resources to process them — a big 'if'. Public libraries, other than the major state libraries, no longer generally hold large book collections, and regularly 'weed' collections.

Retirees and children are often the staples of public libraries, which seem to be morphing into social hubs, offering a range of community services beyond book

collections. None seem, however, to have followed the example of Edith Cowan University Library in Perth, which has installed sleeping pods for readers to take 'power naps'. Will librarians, in due course, become bibliographic baristas, just as some bookshops have joined with coffee shops to survive?

Internet access and digitisation have assisted public libraries to combat, in part, the Kindle Unlimited challenge. The entire digital collection of the San Antonio public library system is now available from kiosks at the local airport. A digital bookshelf, The Library Wall, was recently installed on a North London street to allow users to download non-copyright book titles into their mobile devices.

One segment of the book market that is booming, without even the necessity to read the content, is the high-priced limited signed edition, exemplified in the offerings of the German publisher Taschen. With the Rolling Stones in the country, why not buy one of its latest offerings, a limited Rolling Stones 'Sumo-sized book', numbered and signed by them, with a foreword written by Bill Clinton? A snip at £3500?

Their offerings, however, have been topped by the Ferrari Opus Enzo Diamante. Encrusted with diamonds, signed by all living Ferrari Grand Prix drivers, it was marketed as the most exclusive book in the world when published in 2011. Only one copy was made available in each country at a price of £155,000. The Australian copy was apparently quickly snapped up after being displayed at the 2011 Grand Prix in Melbourne.

These books are far more than 'tree flakes encased in dead cow', which is how one commentator has called the traditional printed book. Books will remain an effective information and entertainment source in a variety of forms, such as those accessed in the new Digital Public Library of America. The definition of a book may expand, but books and their content will remain 'a fundamental channel of culture', as *The Economist* magazine recently reaffirmed.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/bibliographica-2014-colin-steele-presents-talk-on-the-future-of-books-20141118-11ob2i.html#ixzz3Jq1dxLdq>

— Colin Steele, 21 November 2014

Aldiss and the Bodleian

AN EXILE ON PLANET EARTH
by Brian Aldiss

(Bodleian Library; 179 pp.; \$49.95)

First published in the *Bodleian Library Record*, 26(2), pp. 171–4, October 2013. A much shorter version of these thoughts has appeared in *SF Commentary* 84 (November 2012).

I am pleased to be asked to write a review of Brian Aldiss's *An Exile on Planet Earth* because of my involvement with Brian and the Bodleian over a number of years.

The publisher's preface to *An Exile On Planet Earth* indicates that 'this book is published to celebrate the deposit of the main Aldiss archive in the Bodleian Li-

brary'. Presumably this is not a reference to the entire Bodleian Aldiss archive, because it was back in 1973 when Aldiss first intimated to me that he would be willing to donate a significant portion of his literary archive to the Bodleian, a donation which came to fruition in 1974.

This donation seemed most appropriate given that other authors of imaginative literature have been associated with the Bodleian, not least J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Aldiss recalls in his autobiography *The Twinkling of An Eye* (1998) (p. 317) 'living in Oxford, I came to know C. S. Lewis, a charismatic man and renowned figure. He was kind and tolerant where I was concerned commenting on my early stories and recommending *Hothouse* to his friend J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien was also pleasant, and wrote twice to me about my novel in eulogistic terms. It was unusual for any member of the University to know of, never mind read science fiction'. Lewis subsequently collaborated with Aldiss in the founding of the Oxford University Speculative Fiction Society in 1961, and together they edited the short-lived 1960s critical magazine *SF Horizons*.

Aldiss emailed me in January 2013 with his memory of his original deposit, 'It was you, when at the Bodleian, who introduced SF writers into Bod thought processes. And you started with Mike Moorcock and me. So that instead of flinging old papers into the wpb, like any normal guy, I simply rang for the Bod van to come and collect them.'

Aldiss's reference to his SF and fantasy colleague Michael Moorcock is slightly out of chronological sequence. It was only after Moorcock learnt of Aldiss's donation to the Bodleian that he also decided to follow suit with a donation to the Bodleian. The 'Bod van' and I made a trip to London in 1975 to pick up papers and

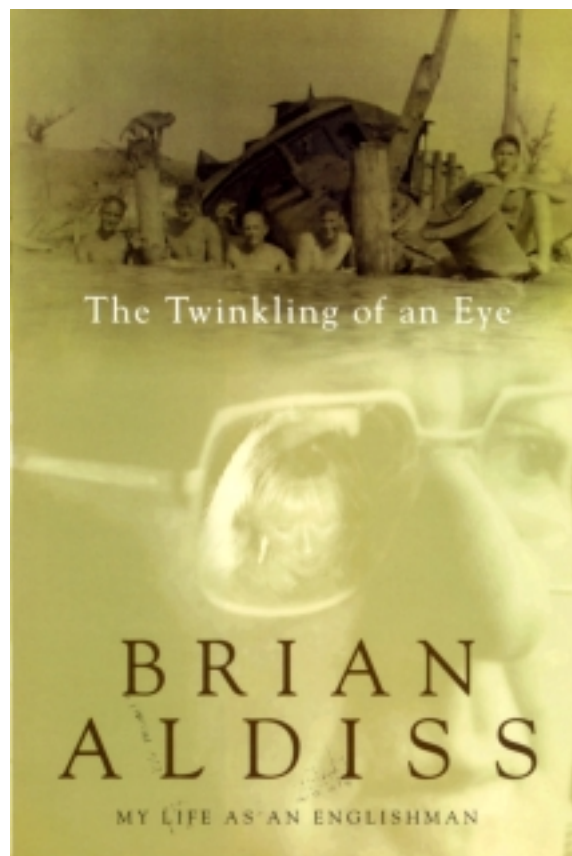
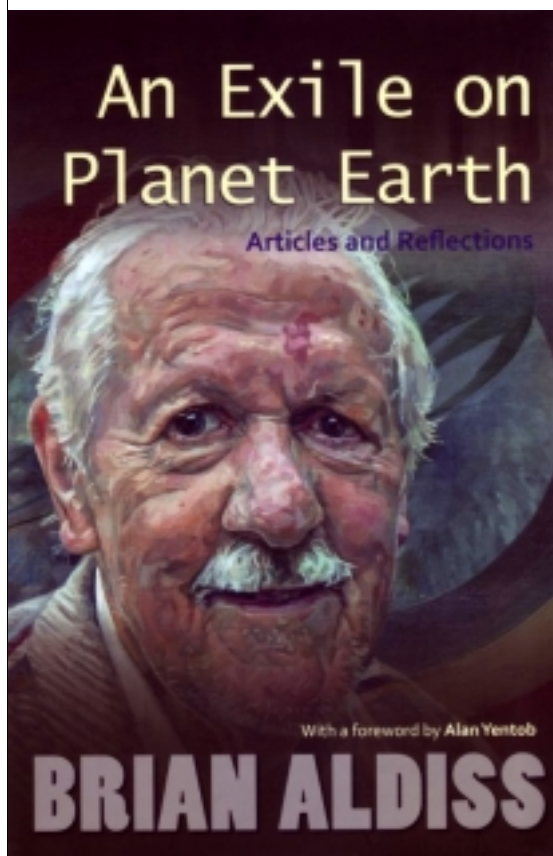
books from Moorcock's colourful Ladbroke Grove house.

Aldiss, with typical modesty, also downplays here the generosity and the size of his donation. The appreciation of the donation by the Bodleian was marked by a 1975 exhibition of Aldissiana in the Divinity School. This exhibition generated significant publicity, not only locally but also nationally. It was most appropriate, therefore, to see that the launching of *An Exile On Planet Earth* took place in the Divinity School in February 2012.

Aldiss's references to 'SF writers into Bodley thought processes' stemmed from discussions that we had had in the late 1960s with Tom Shippey, the renowned Tolkien scholar, then a Fellow at St John's College, Oxford. Together we perused the collections in the closed stacks of the Bodleian to gauge the strength of the SF and fantasy collections. We found that, as in other genres in the Bodleian, including crime and erotica, much material that could have been deposited under the copyright law had not been accepted by the then legal deposit officers. We therefore helped fill in some of the gaps in the collection, particularly in the areas of SF and fantasy magazines.

An Exile On Planet Earth, which is subtitled *Articles and Reflections*, comprises twelve 'personal and revealing' essays, five of them original, the rest in various degrees updated from their original publication. Aldiss's essays reveal the intimate connections between his life and literary work. They provide poignant vignettes through memoirs, essays on travel, analyses of literary figures such as H. G. Wells, Thomas Hardy, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, while Aldiss covers his experiences with filmmakers Roger Corman, Stanley Kubrick, and Stephen Spielberg.

Aldiss has suffered, from time to time in his career,



in terms of mainstream appreciation, as being seen as a genre writer, even though some of the best contemporary writing in Britain is to be found in genre writing. Aldiss believes 'Science fiction is the new old business of holding a mirror to nature', a constant thread through the 75 books and 300 short stories Aldiss has written since the 1950s. Aldiss, in his chapter 'It's the Disorientation I Relish', a revised version of his introduction to *The Penguin Science Fiction Omnibus*, notes, 'SF stories indicate our dissatisfaction with our station in life'.

Alan Yentob, in his Foreword to *An Exile on Planet Earth*, notes, 'What he [Aldiss] gives us here is the reality that underlies the fiction: personal stories, often of pain, that illuminate the work.' Exile, or rather alienation, has played a significant role in Aldiss's life, from his lonely childhood growing up in a dysfunctional Norfolk family, and then returning home from World War II to the depressing England of the 1940s.

Aldiss found Britain an 'alien land' after returning from the Far East after World War II. He was indeed a stranger in a strange land, and while 'I had adjusted to the squalor and poverty of India, I hated the squalor and poverty, allied to a depressing climate, of my homeland'.

Aldiss writes in *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith* (p. 33) 'Those first years in Oxford were a time of intense dark living. I had come to terms with many incompatibilities'. The Sanders Bookshop in the High Street, where he was working, is compared to a prison in its dark servitude. No wonder his novel *Non-Stop* (1958), in Aldiss's words, 'concerns people trapped forever inside the confines of a space ship going nowhere'. The concept of the outsider and exile is a constant theme for Aldiss, although perhaps, at times, in his writings an overly constructed one?

When I first met Aldiss in the late 1960s, he didn't seem like an exile on planet Earth; indeed it almost seemed as if he owned it. He was happily married, a best-selling author with a number of acclaimed books, a major player in British cultural life and a regular on TV, notably commenting on the *Apollo* moonwalk. I didn't realise at that stage the poverty and the personal difficulties that he had faced in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the mid 1950s, Aldiss's marriage had become increasingly unstable. He and his wife Olive finally separated in 1959, with Olive taking the children with her to the Isle of Wight. This childless environment led him to write *Greybeard* (1964), depicting a sterile world devoid of children. Oxford, incidentally, was divided between 'two rival fortresses, Balliol and Christ Church'. It must have been galling to Aldiss when P. D. James's later novel *The Children of Men*, decidedly derivative of *Greybeard*, attracted so much critical acclaim in the mainstream press and was subsequently filmed.

This period in Oxford is depicted in the most personal essay of the collection, 'Paradise Square' (*Exile*, p. 15). Aldiss lived in a single room in a dilapidated house in 12 Paradise Square, 'ironically named when I washed up there in the 1960s ... I felt myself a failure ... everything had gone including my young children ... the dinginess of Paradise Square well reflected my feelings of exile and homesickness.' This was an Oxford decidedly viewed

from the bottom up. Aldiss writes, 'The cellar beneath my room served still as a laundry for the soiled linen of the restaurants, curry coloured steam sometimes squirmed upwards through my floor boards.'

Aldiss, however, didn't allow his depression and impoverished circumstances to ultimately prevail. He was able to take solace from his growing success with SF writing, even though the Hugo SF award he won for *Hothouse* (1962) was dumped on his Paradise Square doorstep wrapped in an Irish newspaper.

Aldiss had begun reviewing SF for *The Oxford Mail* in the 1950s, and then became its literary editor from 1959 to 1972, although the overall remuneration from that source was not great. Nonetheless, that revenue stream and the money from his SF novels enabled Aldiss to purchase a terrace house in Marston Street. Aldiss writes in *The Twinkling of An Eye* that happiness came back in the mid 1960s, 'like light into deep water, a new existence filtered into my days', through his 1965 marriage to Margaret Manson, then secretary to the Editor of *The Oxford Mail*.

The last months of Margaret's life are evoked, in revealing honesty, in Aldiss's *When The Feast is Finished: Reflections on Terminal Illness* (1999). Those seeking more details Aldiss's life should consult his autobiographies, *The Twinkling of an Eye* and *Bury my Heart at W. H. Smith's: A Writing Life* (1990).

Aldiss was accompanied by Margaret on a journey to Yugoslavia, which led to Aldiss's only full-length travel book, *Cities and Stones* (1966). A memory of this comes in the essay 'A Sight of Serbian Churches', while 'The Ashgabat Trip' recounts his journey to the capital of Turkmenistan, fictionalised in his novel *Somewhere East of Life* (1994), which celebrates 'triumph over adversity'.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the standout essay on writers is Aldiss's essay on Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, which leads Aldiss to reflect that 'Gulag is a long and vivid meditation on the good and evil in human hearts'. More routine is Aldiss's overview of H. G. Wells, originally written for the Penguin Classics edition of *The War of the Worlds*. An imagined 'meeting', however, with Thomas Hardy fascinates with revealing insights into Hardy and, by implication, through the narrative framework, of Aldiss himself.

Equally intriguing are his memories of his relationships with filmmakers in the essay, 'Zulu and a Film that Never Was'. This begins with Aldiss's abortive movie relationship with director Cy Endfield before success with Roger Corman and the filming of *Frankenstein Unbound*. Aldiss then recounts the long period it took for his short story 'Super-Toys Last All Summer Long' to pass from Stanley Kubrick to Steven Spielberg for the film *A.I.*

Aldiss is essentially an Oxford man, both in long-term residence and empathy. His continued generosity to the Bodleian is to be commended. *An Exile On Planet Earth*, while not constituting the definitive Aldiss collection, nonetheless adds significantly to our understanding of Aldiss as a writer and as a person. May he continue to live long and prosper.

The field

Books about books

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF EXPLORATION: INVENTED AND APOCRYPHAL NARRATIVES OF TRAVEL

by Raymond John Howgego (Hordern House; 560 pp.; \$149.00)

Raymond John Howgego is an independent scholar who has researched and written about the history of exploration for much of his life. It is remarkable in the twenty-first century that one person, outside the formal academy, has been able to produce the critically acclaimed four volumes of the *Encyclopaedia of Exploration*, based on extensive travel and research.

Now, the fifth and final volume has been published, covering the 'alternative literature of exploration; to imaginary, apocryphal and utopian journeys in fabulous lands; and to the abundance of invented, plagiarized and spoof narratives, many of which were accepted in their time as wholly credible but were nothing more than flights of the imagination, blatant deceptions, or monologues of doubtful authenticity'.

This volume, organised from A to Z, covers over a thousand accounts in 640 articles. Each entry provides significant details of authors, many of whom are identified and documented for the first time, subject content, and bibliographical detail, the latter especially useful given the ephemeral nature of some of the narratives. The indexes provide immediate reference to 2800 primary editions in all languages, 1800 authors and fictional travellers, and more than 600 imaginary place names. A further 6000 citations to secondary sources of study accompany the articles.

Howgego indicates that, except where designated 'unseen', he has personally inspected every work listed, either as a copy in a library, a facsimile, a digitised version, or a personal copy. Thus, in the entry on Australian author Rosa Praed and her lost race romance novel *Fugitive Anne*, Howgego notes in Praed's bibliography summary that, after the undated 'new edition' of 1914, it has never been reprinted except in the Sydney University library e-book format in 2002.

Howgego, in foreshadowing the present work in the Hakluyt Society's Annual Lecture for 2010, commented, 'By the close of the nineteenth century, more than a thousand books had been printed that described voyages and travels that had never actually taken place, and faraway lands that had never existed. In fact, throughout the boom years of the early eighteenth century, invented travelogues were appearing with such astonishing frequency — typically four or five a year — that they far

outnumbered the authentic narrative. Some of them achieved transient or even lasting popularity, often out-selling their depressingly legitimate counterparts, but many survive in just a handful of known copies, or in some instances none at all; the only evidence of their existence being booksellers' advertisements and old library catalogues ... The study of the imaginary voyage is therefore one fraught with danger; not to be undertaken lightly, nor by anyone with less than a lifetime's apprenticeship in the literature of the authentic.'

Howgego's narratives fall into eight categories: the apocryphal, the invented, the plagiarised, the utopian, the spoof, the 'Robinsonade' (after Crusoe), the extra-terrestrial voyage, and the futuristic voyage. The latter two categories ensure that new readers, particularly from literary studies, will be attracted to this fifth volume. In relation to the extraterrestrial and futuristic, Howgego stops his listing at 1900, correctly noting that 'beyond which they simply become too numerous and are best left to the historians of science fiction'.

This does not prevent Howgego, however, from including some post-1900 works, but only 'after a certain amount of soul-searching' of 'adventure novels' rather than 'imaginary journeys', such as encountered in the works of Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle. He notes, 'many of these, despite being obvious works of fiction, were highly influential in their time and shaped the way in which armchair travellers came to imagine the more remote and unexplored recesses of the globe'. In his excellent coverage of one of these, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, Howgego notes that Shangri-La was the first literary use of the name, and it subsequently became 'synonymous with any earthly paradise or mystical place of peace isolated from the outside world'.

Equally exotic is Samuel Cock's pseudonymous 1741 book *A Voyage to Lethe*, which takes the reader to 'a landscape composed of female and male body-parts ... replete with pintle trees and monuments, furry-mouthed caves, female natives with insatiable sexual desires and male natives with enormous, full functioning "machines"'. Howgego concludes: it is a 'highly erotic novel in which an examination of male and female sexuality is presented as a thinly disguised parody of a voyage of exploration'.

Each page of Howgego is a treasure trove of largely new information. For example, pages 435–7 cover the travels of Snedgus and Mac Riagla, two monks from the monastery of Iona, circa 775; Charles Sorel, including a work in the imaginary genre covering the far north of Scandinavia (1759); Thomas Spence, an English pam-

phleteer with his *History of Crusonia* (1782); and Christopher Spotswood, an Anglo-Tasmanian author, and his imaginary voyage of *Will Rogers to the South Pole* (1888).

Howgego's five volumes now comprise 5157 articles in 4232 pages containing 4.2 million words. Howgego is always conscious that in such a massive reference work errors and omissions can creep in, although in the previous four volumes these have been relatively few. He thus encourages comments from readers, particularly in relation to corrections and additions, by posting to the website www.explorersencyclopedia.com. All contributions are moderated by Howgego.

Howgego's work should be in the reference collections of all university libraries, as well as being an essential purchase for individuals working in the subjects covered by his volumes. In addition to praise for Howgego, acknowledgment should be given to Hordern House, and particularly Derek McDonnell, for this massive five-volume, ten-year publication, termed 'the largest work of non-fiction in the English language by a single author unaided'.

— Colin Steele, 7 August 2013; first publication, *Australian Bibliobooks* 381, March 2014

WIZARDS, ALIENS AND STARSHIPS

by Charles L. Adler (Princeton University Press; 378 pp.; \$52.95)

Wizards, Aliens, and Starships is subtitled *Physics and Math in Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Professor Charles Adler explores these themes in four main chapters: 'Potter Physics', 'Space Travel', 'Worlds and Aliens', and 'Year Googol'. Adler quickly demolishes the 'magical science' scenarios of fantasy, being particularly hard on J. K. Rowling, before working through the science in many SF novels. Adler ranges from teleportation (which gets short shrift for science reality) and space elevators to alien contact and interstellar travel. *Wizards, Aliens, and Starships* is an accessible and thought-provoking read for anyone wanting to understand both the correct and incorrect science of SF and fantasy.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO STEPHEN KING

by Paul Simpson (Robinson; 290 pp.; \$14.99)

A Brief Guide to Stephen King is indeed that, in a pocket-sized paperback. Nonetheless, Paul Simpson provides a useful guide, in 19 chapters, to Stephen King's writing and his life, from his troubled childhood to his current success. King said in 2013, 'I don't care what you call me as long as the cheques don't bounce and the family gets fed.' It's been a long time since King's early poverty was relieved by the success of his first published book *Carrie*, whose 40th anniversary is in 2014. Libraries, and those who want a well-priced primer about King and his work, will find Simpson's book well serves that purpose.

A SLIP OF THE KEYBOARD: COLLECTED NON-FICTION

by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday; \$45)

[Editor: The following review was written before Sir Terry Pratchett's death on 12 March 2015 at the age of 66.]

Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels have sold over 75 million copies globally. *A Slip of the Keyboard* collects most of his non-fiction essays written between 1963 and 2011.

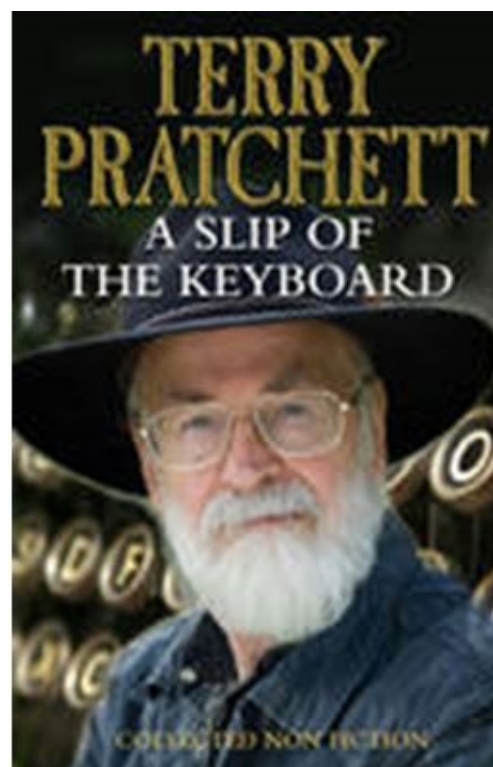
The book's blurb incorrectly states that it 'brings together for the first time' Pratchett's non-fiction writing, as this occurred in *Once More With Footnotes* (NESFA Press, 2004). A number of the same essays are included

in both volumes, but since the NESFA volume is long out of print, and *A Slip of the Keyboard* has much new material, it is an extremely welcome publication.

Pratchett announced his diagnosis with a rare form of Alzheimer's seven years ago. It was only in 2014, however, that he admitted 'the Embuggerance is finally catching up with me' and he had to cancel public appearances. Neil Gaiman, who wrote *Good Omens* with Pratchett, comments in his introduction, 'As Terry walks into the darkness much too soon, I find myself raging too: at the injustice that deprives us of — what? Another 20 or 30 books?'

It's not all gloom and doom. Pratchett's dry humour and common sense pervades many of the essays, which are organised into three sections. 'A Scribbling Intruder' covers his career as an author almost literally from rags to riches; 'A Twit and a Dreamer' covers a range of subjects from school days to the meaning of Christmas, and 'Days of Rage' covers issues relating to his struggle with Alzheimer's.

Pratchett has been very outspoken about his diagnosis and the problems of the British National Health Service (NHS). Pratchett's advocacy of assisted deaths is also



emphasised in several essays, notably his reprinted 2010 BBC Richard Dimbleby lecture 'Shaking Hands with Death'.

Pratchett likes Australia, which he has visited over a dozen times, and which features as the subject of his Discworld novel *The Last Continent*. His 1998 Australian signing tour is covered in a chapter diary 'No Worries', which includes his *Canberra Times*/ANU lecture in which this reviewer features.

His visit to Gaslight Books in Fyshwick records his appreciation of a bowl of black jelly beans to eat while signing, with one fan travelling 14 hours to meet Pratchett. He provides many insights into both the excitement and the exhaustion of signing tours. People bring Pratchett strange things to sign, including, on the 1998 trip, both a coffin on castors and a long polished sycamore blade on which the owner was going to etch Pratchett's signature.

Pratchett is very conscious of his working-class origins, and reflects on his now rather stellar position, which includes a knighthood and a number of honorary doctorates. As a result, several of his essays emphasise the importance of education. He also stresses the value of his school library and public libraries in general, although he deplores librarians calling themselves 'information providers'. Pratchett would much prefer the label, 'Shining acolytes of the sacred flame of literacy'!

In his discussions of fantasy and science fiction, Pratchett demolishes many of the mainstream criticisms that are often applied to the genres. Much of Pratchett's work is placed within a structured fictional world that allows him to comment on contemporary social and political issues. The essays in *A Slip of the Keyboard* are sharp, funny, and reflective, although there is some repetition in the last section. They emphasise that Pratchett will be sorely missed when he goes, not so gently, into the night.

PHILOSOPHY AND TERRY PRATCHETT

edited by Jacob M. Held and James B. South
(Palgrave Macmillan, \$39.99)

The contributors link philosophers from Plato to Wittgenstein in *Philosophy and Terry Pratchett*. The 13 contributors, mostly from North American universities, cover more than 35 Pratchett novels, examining plots and characters, in the context of such issues as free will, existentialism, and the role of the individual. Sensible analysis is juxtaposed with academic extrapolations of fancy that decidedly jar. What Pratchett makes of these contributions would be interesting, given that Pratchett once said, 'I used to think that I was stupid and then I met philosophers.'

PHILOSOPHY AND BLADE RUNNER

by Timothy Shanahan (Palgrave Macmillan;
\$39.99)

The nature of personal identity and freedom is also most relevant to Ridley Scott's 1982 cult movie *Blade Runner*. Timothy Shanahan examines *Philosophy and Blade Runner*, both in the movie and Philip K. Dick's source novel *Do*

Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Scott has always emphasised that he sees the film more as an entertainment than a vehicle of philosophical exploration. Nonetheless, Shanahan creates an accessible and informative account of the philosophies that link into the themes of the film.

2001 AND COUNTING

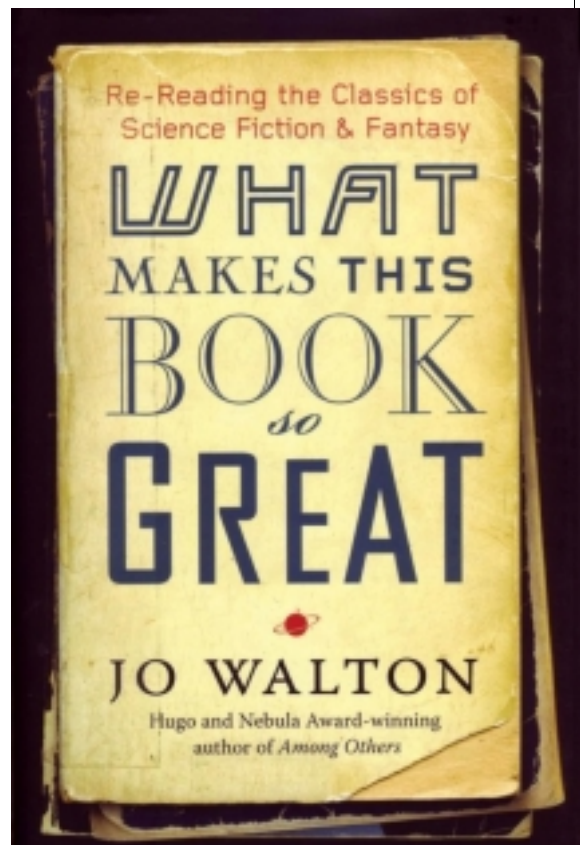
by Bruce Kapferer (Prickly Paradigm Press,
\$19.95)

Bruce Kapferer, born in Australia, is now Professor of Social Anthropology at Bergen University. In *2001 and Counting*, which has the subtitle 'Kubrick, Nietzsche and Anthropology', Kapferer argues, in just over 100 pages of not always accessible text, that Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* still has much contemporary relevance, not least in the effects of neoliberalism. Arthur C. Clarke's original novel is, however, largely ignored, as Kapferer examines the ever-changing relationship between humanity and technology.

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK SO GREAT

by Jo Walton (Corsair; \$39.99)

Those wanting a way into SF and fantasy should look no further than the informative 130 chapters by award-winning author Jo Walton in *What Makes This Book So Great*. Walton doesn't force her favourite books on readers, but rather asks them to share her delight and insights into novels from authors as diverse as Samuel R. Delany, Robert A. Heinlein, C. J. Cherryh, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Arthur C. Clarke. Walton also pays considerable attention to two authors with long series, Lois McMaster Bujold and Steven Brust. She also cites her appreciation



of Greg Egan's *Permutation City*, including its ultimate 'denial of the possibility of deity'. In 'The Future of the Commonwealth', Walton reflects on Nevil Shute's *In The Wet* and, in another fascinating chapter, George Eliot as an SF writer. Highly recommended.

THE BLOOMSBURY INTRODUCTION TO POPULAR FICTION

edited by **Christine Berberich** (Bloomsbury Academic; \$39.99)

Does popular fiction matter? Yes, according to **Christine Berberich**, the editor of *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction*, which has 18 essays from a variety of academic authors, constituting an excellent *vade mecum* to popular literature. *The Bloomsbury Introduction* begins with overviews and histories of popular fiction, followed by analysis of genres, such as SF and spy and crime fiction, although surprisingly, one of the most popular genres, fantasy, is missing. Then follow chapters on popular authors, such as John Buchan, Ian Fleming, H. G. Wells, and Dashiell Hammett.

Andy Sawyer, from the Liverpool University Science Fiction Foundation, provides an insightful historical overview of SF, arguing that it is more a literature of ideas than a specific literary genre. Authors such as Jonathan Lethem, Michael Moorcock, and China Miéville reaffirm, with their new books, that their writing straddles critical and popular boundaries.

RAY BRADBURY

by **David Seed** (University of Illinois Press; \$44.95)

Ray Bradbury's death in 2012 prompted President Obama to state that his 'gift for storytelling reshaped our culture and expanded our world'. Liverpool University Professor **David Seed**'s *Ray Bradbury* analyses Bradbury's huge output in books, magazines, and media, ranging over his creative processes, background influences, and personal philosophy. Seed's scholarly yet accessible appreciation, supplemented by a comprehensive bibliography, reaffirms the ongoing standing of Bradbury's work, especially in the context of his most famous books, such as *Fahrenheit 451*.

THE WHISPERING SWARM

by **Michael Moorcock** (Gollancz; \$29.99)

Michael Moorcock, in *The Whispering Swarm*, the first book of a trilogy, has created a new hybrid — a fantasy/SF novel cum autobiography. Moorcock has combined his memories, from World War II to the 1960s, with fictional adventures in Alsacia, an alternate secret inner London, where he falls in love with the beautiful adventuress Moll Midnight. Here, we also find real and fictitious heroes, such as Buffalo Bill, the Three Musketeers, and Dick Turpin. The two narrative strands, however, often sit uneasily. It might have been better for Moorcock to have written two separate books, an autobiography of his fascinating bohemian life and a separate novel on his alternate picaresque London.

FINDING ARTHUR

by **Adam Ardrey** (Duckworth; 352 pp.; \$29.99)

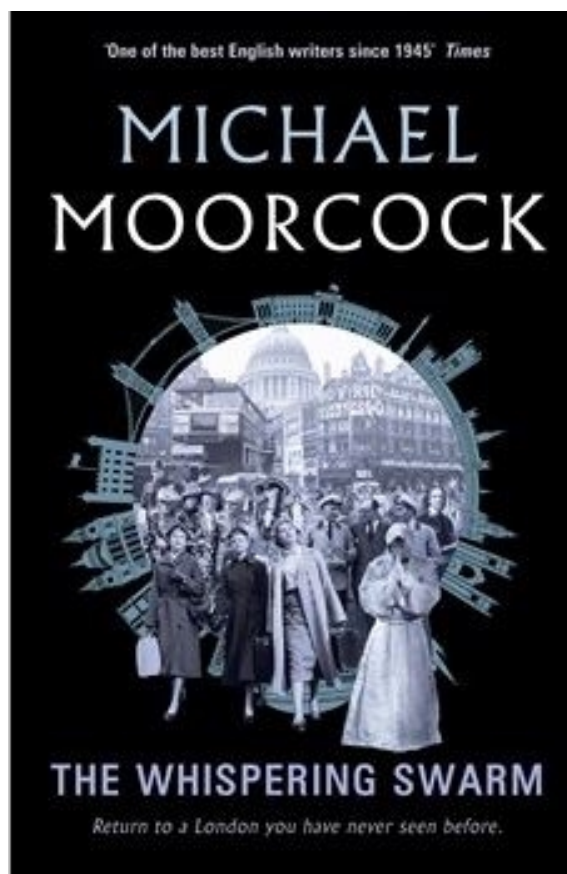
Adam Ardrey's *Finding Arthur*, subtitled *The True Origins of the Once and Future King*, could be interpreted as Scottish fantasy by some. Ardrey argues that King Arthur was the Scottish sixth-century chief Arthur MacAedan. Ardrey, a former lawyer, believes that if his research is accepted 'ten percent of British history should be rewritten'. MacCamelot anyone? Ardrey places the familiar Arthurian features, such as Avalon, the Sword in the Stone, and the Lady of the Lake, in historical Scottish contexts, arguing, for instance, that King Arthur's Round Table can be evidenced in the grounds of Stirling Castle. Whatever else, *Finding Arthur* will undoubtedly add to Arthurian debates.

THE RIDDLES OF THE HOBBIT

by **Adam Roberts** (Palgrave; 186 pp.; \$44)

In 1947, Tolkien indicated to his publisher that *The Hobbit* should not be regarded as a simple tale. In this context, Professor **Adam Roberts**, in *The Riddles of the Hobbit*, seeks to explore the complexities of the novel, particularly Tolkien's exposition of 'the riddle' as a key principle. Roberts notes, 'The two most memorable characters in the book (after Bilbo maybe; or perhaps to a greater extent even than him) are Gollum and Smaug. The tale really comes alive when those two are on the page. What differentiates them ... is that they are riddling, they have an extra layer of complexity to them.'

Roberts argues that the Anglo-Saxon world imbued the universe with an ironic stance through the use of



riddles, and this is followed through in Tolkien's work. *Hobbit* geeks might find some of the explorations of Nordic epic and Anglo-Saxon poetic traditions hard going, but there's no doubt that Roberts provides an innovative approach to the riddles underpinning Tolkien's writing and life, reflected in the *Hobbit* chapter 'Riddles in the Dark'.

THE FAIRY WAY OF WRITING: SHAKESPEARE TO TOLKIEN

by Kevin Pask (Johns Hopkins; 178 pp.; \$58.95)

Professor **Kevin Pask** acknowledges, in another intriguing scholarly work, that his title *The Fairy Way of Writing* derives from John Dryden and Joseph Addison. He documents Shakespeare's approach to fairies, and follows its legacy in English literature and culture to Tolkien. Pask aims to link 'high' literary culture in England to the popular culture of fairy tales and fantasy. Tolkien distanced himself from Shakespeare's view of fairy, particularly as expressed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Pask

counter punches, however, that Tolkien 'radically extracts the fairy from the fairy way of writing' in the context of the 'de-sexualisation of fairie'.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATES: THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN by Marcus K. Harmes (Auteur; \$26.95)

University of Southern Queensland academic **Marcus Harmes** examines British gothic horror films through a detailed analysis of a single film *The Curse of Frankenstein*, which brought together, for the first time, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing. As well as documenting the 'transgressive adaptations' of Frankenstein, from Mary Shelley onwards, Harmes also reveals the cinematic inspiration of the Gainsborough costume melodramas of the late 1940s. Harmes follows, through contemporary reviews, the public 'sensation' following its cinema release in May 1957 and its subsequent influence on Hammer films. Harmes definitively establishes the decades-long impact of *The Curse of Frankenstein* on the gothic horror film genre.

Film and television tie-in books

JOSS WHEDON: A CREATIVE PORTRAIT

by David Lavery (Tauris; 278 pp.; \$25)

Professor **David Lavery's** *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait* comprehensively covers the cult film director's output from his first major success, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, through to *The Avengers*. Lavery focuses on the background and creative processes in the productions, rather than the detailed subject content. Nor does Lavery provide deep biographical insight, although details of Whedon's time at Winchester College in England clearly led to his love of Shakespeare, witnessed in his recent film of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The informative text is supplemented by comprehensive indexes and footnotes. Lavery fittingly ends with Joss Whedon's own proposed 2036 epitaph, 'He saved our imaginations a lot'. Undoubtedly true.

ARMCHAIR NATION

by Joe Moran (Profile; 456 pp.; \$32.99)

Noël Coward once said, 'Television is for appearing on, not for looking at, dear boy'. **Joe Moran's** *Armchair Nation*, subtitled *An Intimate History of Britain in Front of the TV*, examines both sides of the screen in a fascinating and informative history. Moran traces the impact of TV in Britain, from a few hours a day on the BBC to the current multi-channel, 24/7 cycle, in which the 'illusion of communality' has gone. Apart from social analysis, there are wonderful trivia details, such as how Mary Whitehouse blamed bedwetting on *Doctor Who*, how Prince Philip loved wrestling, and Kenneth Tynan wasn't the first to use the F-word on TV.

SCIENCE FICTION TV

by J. P. Telotte (Routledge; 223 pp.; \$39.00)

Science Fiction TV, by **J. P. Telotte**, Professor of Film and Media Studies at Georgia Tech, is the first in a series of Routledge Television Guidebooks. His overview is largely American, despite clever marketing with a *Doctor Who*

cover. Telotte's history of SF TV begins with *Captain Video* and *Buck Rogers* and progresses through the decades with *Star Trek*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Farscape*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, before concluding with *Babylon 5*, *Firefly*, and *Defiance*. Telotte's explanation of the current big-time popularity of SF TV, including cult series *Orphan Black*, will be of interest to a general readership. A comprehensive videography and bibliography rounds out a useful companion.

**SCREENING THE UNDEAD: VAMPIRES AND ZOMBIES
IN FILM AND TELEVISION**
edited by Leon Hunt (Tauris; 272 pp.; \$34.95)

Leon Hunt, with Sharon Lockyer and Milly Williamson, fellow editors from Brunel University, have assembled a further 11 academic contributors who range globally to examine the 'undead', the vampire, and the zombie in film and TV. *Screening the Undead* will certainly appeal to the burgeoning genre courses for students. While the vampire has a long literary history, and gained TV popularity with *Buffy* and the 'Twilight' saga, zombies have only resurfaced relatively recently in series such as *The Walking Dead*. While the vampire represents the outsider in society, zombies are seen by Hunt and his colleagues as a reaction to global terrorism and recession, thus, a harbinger of apocalypse.

STAR TREK AND AMERICAN TELEVISION
by Roberta Pearson and Maire Messenger Davies
(University of California Press; 239 pp.; \$45.95)

Roberta Pearson, Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham, and Maire Messenger Davies, Professor Emerita of Media Studies at the University of Ulster, combine to place the *Star Trek* TV series and films in the context of the changing economic and social conditions of American TV over more than four decades. The authors focus as much on the major production staff of *Star Trek* as the main characters, such as Patrick Stewart, Captain Jean-Luc Picard, who provides a Foreword. William Shatner, the original *Star Trek* captain, told the authors, it's just 'a television show', but their book definitively proves it was much more than that.

DOCTOR WHO: THE ELEVENTH HOUR
edited by Andrew O'Day (Tauris; 280 pp.; \$29.95)

Doctor Who: The Eleventh Hour is subtitled *A Critical Celebration of the Matt Smith and Steven Moffat Era*. Andrew O'Day, *Doctor Who* cultural historian, admits, however, in his introduction, that the book does not cover the whole of the Matt Smith TV series, a fact blurred on the back cover blurb. O'Day's academic contributors cover many topics, including the portrayal of the female characters and sexuality, transatlantic dimensions, marketing, and music. *The Eleventh Hour* will be of interest to the fans, many still undecided about the new grumpy *Doctor Who* interpretation of Peter Capaldi, and the ever-expanding number of academics and students in media and cultural

studies.

**THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES:
CHRONICLES: ART AND DESIGN**
by Daniel Falconer (HarperCollins; \$49.99)

Weta Workshop, which has its origins in a flat in Wellington, is now one of the world's leading creative design units. Daniel Falconer, Weta's senior concept designer, in a profusely illustrated book documents more than 1800 pieces of conceptual artwork created for the final film instalment of Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit*. The book follows through from the initial concept artwork — the artists, designers and production staff — through the developmental stages to the end product. With much behind-the-scenes information and commentary, this is a essential purchase for the ardent *Hobbit* fan, with its coverage of characters from Bilbo to Gandalf and locations from Laketown to Ravenhill.

**THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG: THE
OFFICIAL MOVIE GUIDE**
by Brian Sibley (HarperCollins; 168 pp.; \$24.99)

J. R. R. Tolkien, George R. R. Martin, and Terry Pratchett certainly cover the bestseller fantasy bases. The release of the second Peter Jackson *Hobbit* film, *The Desolation of Smaug*, was preceded by a trio of lavishly illustrated companion books from HarperCollins.

The Official Movie Guide by Brian Sibley includes numerous exclusive interviews with the principal actors, including Martin Freeman/Bilbo and Benedict Cumberbatch, who voices the dragon Smaug. These interviews are complemented by informative text from the leading visual effects, graphics, and set designers. An excellent companion.

THE HOBBIT VISUAL COMPANION
by Jude Fisher (HarperCollins; 88 pp.; \$24.99)

THE HOBBIT CHRONICLES: ART AND DESIGN
by Daniel Falconer (HarperCollins; \$49.99)

Jude Fisher's *Visual Companion* covers the film's characters and locations, while Daniel Falconer in *The Hobbit Chronicles: Art and Design* extensively documents the images and stories from the Hobbit Digital, Art, Costume and Make-up Departments. Alan Lee, the Concept Art Director, notes in his introduction that the published content still only represents a relatively small selection of the creative work that went into *The Hobbit*.

DOCTOR WHO: THE DROSTEN'S CURSE
by A. L. Kennedy (BBC Books; \$45)

A. L. Kennedy, Award-winning Scottish novelist, initially might not seem an obvious choice to write the latest *Doctor Who* novel. Her clear enthusiasm, however, for the 1970s series with Tom Baker comes through strongly in the entertaining and witty *Drosten's Curse*. The Doctor, 'a jolly tiger in a maroon jacket', investigates mysterious

events at an Arbroath golf course where bunkers are devouring golfers. An ancient alien presence, detected underneath the golf course, will eventually threaten the whole of humanity. There are cameos from familiar

characters, such as Davros, and a delightful new character, junior hotel receptionist Bryony, the Doctor's increasingly endangered companion.

Game of Thrones tie-ins

When **George R. R. Martin** first came to Australia for SF conventions, where I first met him, he had to make his own way by bus from airports to hotels. For his 2014 blockbuster *Game of Thrones* tour of Australia, his publishers met him with a limousine at the airport. *Game of Thrones* is now the most watched series, per episode, in American television history, overtaking *The Sopranos*. It is also the most illegally downloaded TV show in Australia.

INSIDE HBO'S GAME OF THRONES. SEASONS 3 AND 4 by C. A. Taylor (Gollancz; \$45)

C. A. Taylor, in the official companion book to the last two series, acknowledges the many insights from key individuals, not least Martin and executive producers David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, who also provide the Foreword. Here, they acknowledge that the series is 'now in the contraction phase, moving slowly but surely towards an end game'. Martin, who has not completed the last two books in the series, has informed the TV producers of key projected developments in the storyline.

Taylor's access to Martin and the leading actors, such as Charles Dance, Peter Dinklage, and Diana Rigg, ensures fascinating new insights to complement the detail of storylines, locations, set designs, and the characters themselves. Reflecting the benefits of this structure is the personal backgrounding by the actors in the dramatic 'Red Wedding' episode, which Martin indicates in the text was based on two episodes in Scottish history.

Martin has said, 'A good villain is hard to replace but as I say in the book all men must die.' Charles Dance, commenting on the 'privy' death of his character Tywin Lannister, says 'I think people will miss Tywin', although there have been Web comments that he may well make an appearance in series 5. Numerous colour illustrations, often full page, ensure that *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones* is an ideal Christmas present, as well as an essential book and series companion.

THE WORLD OF ICE AND FIRE: THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF WESTEROS AND THE GAME OF THRONES by George R. R. Martin, Elio M. Garcia Jr., and Linda Antonsson (HarperVoyager; \$49.99)

The same could be said for *The World of Ice and Fire*, a lavishly illustrated guide to the history of the Seven Kingdoms. Two long-term fans, **Elio M. Garcia Jr** and **Linda Antonsson**, who run the main website, Westeros.org, have collaborated with **George R. R. Martin** to provide a comprehensive guide to the 'untold history of Westeros and the Game of Thrones'.

Martin freely admits that the way he wrote his sprawling narrative has led to inconsistencies in the chronologies and histories. Having Garcia and Antonsson work with him has ensured that consistency, as well as adding new detail to the back story. Martin has said, 'One of the hardest things about putting this book together was what to tell and what not to tell because there are things I want to say in later novels.'

While Martin has received fan criticism for not completing the next book in the series, this is a major work for the hardcore fans. Complementing the text are 170 full-colour illustrations, maps, and family trees. Leading fantasy artists were commissioned for the illustrations, such as 'The Wall', for which Martin, like Garth Nix in his 'Abhorsen' series, drew inspiration from Hadrian's Wall in Northern England.

DOTHRAKI

by **David J. Peterson** (Living Language; \$29.95)

Tolkien was an academic linguist, but when the TV series producers had to actually implement Martin's languages on screen, they had to turn to linguist **David J. Peterson**, whom Martin has called Tolkien's 'true heir'. Peterson's ultimate Dothraki guide includes grammar and conversation as well as a one-hour audio CD. Just as in the *Star Trek* series, where many fans demanded more words in Klingon, so now *Game of Thrones* fans can learn and converse in the Dothraki language.

THE ICE DRAGON

by **George R. R. Martin** (HarperVoyager; \$19.99)

The Ice Dragon was first published in 1980 but has been repackaged, with full-page illustrations by Luis Royo, to benefit from the success of the *Game of Thrones* books and TV series. While the novella is clearly aimed at younger readers, the tale of courage and sacrifice will also appeal to many adults. Set in Martin's Westeros world, it follows a seven-year-old 'winter child' Adara, who is both physically and personally cold, but the only one who can engage with the legendary Ice Dragon. When an enemy army and their dragons threaten her family's existence, only Adara and her ice dragon stand in their way.

WINDHAVEN

by **George R. R. Martin** and **Lisa Tuttle** (Gollancz; \$29.99)

Windhaven, first published in 1981, has now been re-issued to benefit from George R. R. Martin's success with

Game of Thrones. Windhaven is a sea world of small islands where descendants of a crashed Earth spaceship have recycled its light metal into wings so that they can fly between the islands. As generations pass, those with wings have become the privileged class over the land-bound people. Maris, a fisherman's daughter, and an illegal flyer, is the protagonist in a struggle between the two competing castes. Martin and Tuttle's strong characterisation supports the plotline of societal conflict, much of which is relevant today.

DANGEROUS WOMEN

edited by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois
(Harper; 784 pp.; \$39.99)

Pask writes that TV's *Game of Thrones* 'extends an eroticized version of fantasy into soft-core pornography'. Be that as it may, *Game of Thrones* author **George R. R. Martin**, who apparently signed over 10,000 books and objects during his 2014 Australian tour, has a new 35,000-word novella in *Dangerous Women*, a massive new anthology. 'The Princess and the Queen' is set two centuries before the events of *A Game of Thrones*, recounting 'that most tragic bloodletting known as the Dance of the Dragons'. The story dramatically outlines the horrific war for the Iron Throne between two rival Targaryens, Queen Alicent and Princess Rhaenyra.

Gardner Dozois, Martin's fellow editor, writes in the Introduction to the 21 new SF and fantasy stories, 'Here you'll find no hapless victims who stand by whimpering in dread while the male hero fights the monster or clashes swords with the villain, and if you want to tie these women to the railroad tracks, you'll find you have a real fight on your hands.' In the stories that cover numerous genres, the authors, however, interpret 'dangerous' with some latitude.

Brendan Sanderson's powerful dark fantasy, 'Shadows for Silence in the Forests of Hell,' is set in a fallen world. Ghostly 'shades' haunt the forest, where a 'dan-

gerous woman' innkeeper goes to extreme lengths, as a bounty hunter, to ensure her family's survival.

Lev Grossman sets 'The Girl in the Mirror' in the Brakebills College of Magic, which featured in his best-selling novels *The Magicians* and *The Magician King*. The girl in the mirror is Plum, a talented precocious teenager who initiates a revenge school prank that leads to complications and emotional trauma, which now seems standard for Brakebill's students.

ROGUES

edited by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois
(Titan; \$29.99)

Rogues, **George R. R. Martin's** latest collaboration with **Gardner Dozois**, is a massive (over 800 pages) anthology, which covers a number of genres in stories from authors such as Patrick Rothfuss, Garth Nix, and Connie Willis.

Neil Gaiman's 'How The Marquis Got His Coat Back' is set in his London 'Neverwhere' universe, where the Marquis de Carabas endures some more-than-life-threatening events before he can reclaim his lost coat. Gillian Flynn echoes the framework of the bestselling *Gone Girl* in 'What Do You Do?', when a 'customer service specialist' cum clairvoyant is drawn into a strange household. Deciding what is the truth between a mother and her teenage son will decide her fate.

Martin features with a *Game of Thrones* prequel, 'The Rogue Prince, or, A King's Brother', focusing on the Targaryen clan and, in particular, the 'swashbuckling rogue', Prince Daemon Targaryen.

Martin was recently asked if he would like to live in Westeros. While recording his wish to visit a number of his imagined places, especially the 'the spicy food and spicy women in Dorne', understandably Martin prefers Sante Fe, where he can access 'modern medicine and football'. Fans will hope that modern medicine will continue to ensure Martin's *Game* is completed.

Australian science fiction

EMERGENCE

by John Birmingham (Macmillan; \$29.99)

John Birmingham has embarked on another riproaring, no-holds-barred trilogy, following his 'Axis of Time' and 'The Disappearance' trilogies.

Dave Hooper, an engineering troubleshooter, is summoned to an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico where lives have been lost, but no one will say how. Dave is suffering from a severe hangover after nights of being what he calls 'Bad Dave', being unfaithful and running up debts. 'Good Dave' hasn't been around much, so his wife and family are about to leave him.

The oil rig's deep-sea drilling has released orc-like monsters from the 'UnderRealms'. The monsters, who have been denied human flesh for millennia, are satiated by the time Dave arrives, which provides a fortunate

window for him to kill their leader, the eight-foot-tall, 350-pound 'BattleMaster of the Clann of the Hunn'.

Dave's bloody encounter gives him increasing super-human powers, as well as allowing him to 'jack' into the mindset of the various monster races, which include the 'Sliveen', the 'Ninjas of the Horde'. Echoes here of *Doctor Who*, which Birmingham has cited in interviews, and the *Slitheen*. Birmingham evokes Icelandic and Germanic mythologies to hint at the monster back story, as well as referencing SF and fantasy settings and authors such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke.

Dave, who naturally has difficulty coming to terms with his new powers and several unsuspected weaknesses, is an unlikely champion of the human race. Here, Birmingham builds on many superhero links, from Spider-man to the Hulk.

Dave is seen as a candidate for rendition by some, but

when further monsters ‘boil up out of the earth’ near New Orleans, Dave and the Navy Seals are needed to confront them, with much resulting gore. The required cliff-hanger conclusion sees dragons make an unexpected appearance.

Don’t take *Emergence* too seriously or expect deep characterisation, although Birmingham makes a number of pithy comments about geopolitics, environmental change, and the human condition. It’s a fast, darkly humorous, monster mash, which would make a great superhero movie.

CLADE

by James Bradley (Hamish Hamilton; \$32.99)

More and more mainstream authors are turning to speculative fiction as a means of reflecting contemporary angst. James Bradley, leading Australian author and critic, in *Clade* depicts a twenty-first-century future in which severe climate change results in apocalyptic weather, a global pandemic, and economic collapse. Bradley convincingly evokes, in ten loosely connected chapters, the fate of the Leith family in Australia and

England over three generations. The personal crisis of the family is a microcosm of the traumatic global change. Bradley’s deep knowledge of the SF genre, which enables him to subtly reference the literature, underpins a gripping dark narrative, with a conclusion that allows just a chink of long-term optimism as to humanity’s future.

PERMUTATION CITY

by Greg Egan (Nightshade Books; \$19.95)

Australian ‘hard’ SF author Greg Egan first published *Permutation City* in 1994, but its current reissue publisher, South Books, confirms that his 2050 world is still scientifically very relevant. Individuals can be copied and downloaded into virtual reality programs, which ultimately links to a cellular automaton ‘Autoverse’. As ever with Egan, the scientific concepts flow fast and furious and tend to overwhelm the characterisation. Karen Burnham’s analysis of Greg Egan’s writing, published late last year by the University of Illinois Press, reaffirmed that Egan stories tend to focus on intellectual rather than emotional processes, but also highlights the breadth of Egan’s scientific and intellectual agendas.

Australian fantasy

CLARIEL: THE LOST ABHORSEN

by Garth Nix (Allen & Unwin; \$22.99)

Fans of bestselling Australian author Garth Nix have been waiting 11 years for a new book in his ‘Old Kingdom’ series (*Sabriel*, *Lirael*, and *Abhorsen*). They won’t be disappointed in the prequel *Clariel*, which follows a resolute if headstrong teenager who most definitely doesn’t wish to be sent to the city to gain a profession and a husband. Clariel confronts Machiavellian court politics, a dangerous Free Magic creature, and the need to find, and then contain, her own magical powers. While fans will be well aware of Clariel’s dark future, Nix creates an engrossing narrative and a character with whom many will empathise, particularly her passion for personal freedom.

TO HOLD THE BRIDGE

by Garth Nix (Allen & Unwin; \$19.99)

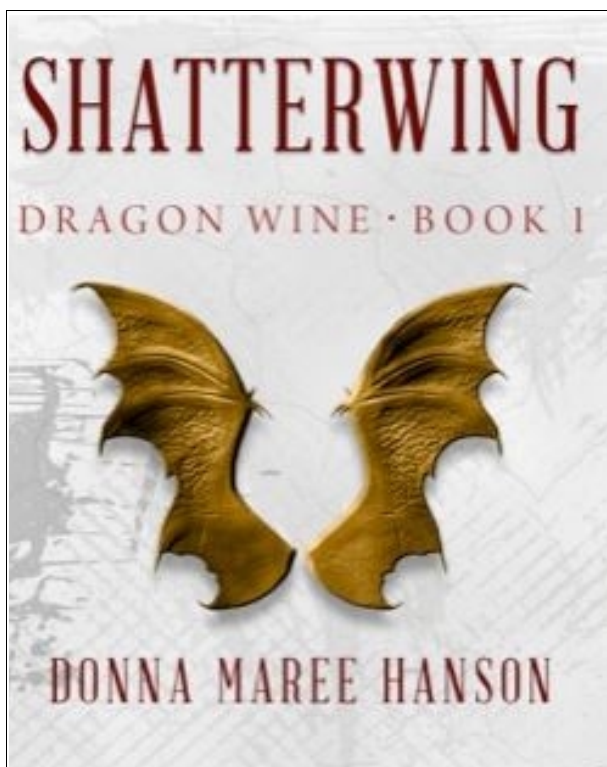
To Hold the Bridge brings together 19 previously published stories by Garth Nix. The title novella, set in his ‘Old Kingdom’ world, follows a classic fantasy theme, as a young cadet in the Bridge Company finds himself the last defender of the bridge against dark magic. A similar scenario plays out for a young apprentice witch in ‘A Handful of Ashes’, after an ancient evil takes over the Headmistress of a Hogwarts-like college. In ‘The Quiet Knight’, a shy student uses his mediaeval role-playing to save the day in an American high school. Nix’s empathetic characterisation and plot vitality will particularly appeal to a YA readership.

SHATTERWING; SKYWATCHER

by Donna Maree Hanson (Momentum; \$19.99 each; e-books \$5.99 each)

Donna Maree Hanson is a long-time stalwart of the Canberra SF Guild. *Shatterwing* and *Skywatcher*, the first





two books in her 'Dragon Wine' series, set on the post-apocalyptic planet Margra, have been 10 years in the making. A brutally oppressive regime forces prisoners to work vineyards that produce a life-sustaining wine made from the essence of dragons. Hanson uses her Canberra region viticultural expertise here to good effect. Twenty-five-year-old Salinda, the best prison vintner, joins forces with Brill, a young rebel, and others, to ferment revolution against the brutal 'Inspector' in order to save the planet. However, Hanson's compelling novels decidedly fall into the dark fantasy category.

THE SHAMAN'S SECRET

by Karen Hughes (Kalika Magic; \$5.75 e-book)

Former ANU graduate and Canberra lawyer **Karen Hughes**, who now lives in the Hunter Valley, cites Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Ursula Le Guin as stimulating her love of fantasy. *The Shaman's Secret*, part of her 'Kalika Magic' series, is aimed at children from nine upwards. Hughes places her two young main characters Kai and Indie in a tropical, quasi-Asian fantasy setting. While the narrative begins rather abruptly, and Hughes' use of such modern words as 'awesome' and 'panic attack' occasionally jars, this is an engrossing YA tale of magic and mystery. *The Shaman's Secret* is well worth unlocking.

BATTLEAXE

by Sara Douglass (HarperVoyager; \$27.99)

Sara Douglass, who died too early (in September 2011) helped establish the Australian fantasy genre. HarperVoyager has now issued a twentieth-anniversary edition of *Battleaxe*. It sold more than 220,000 copies globally, and established a publishing space for a number of



younger Australian female fantasy writers. Several of them comment on Douglass's legacy on the HarperVoyager website, as does Karen Brooks in her foreword, noting that *Battleaxe*, a 'rich and dense allegory of the mediaeval world and the Catholic Church', allows Douglass to deliver a 'searing insight into humanity in history'.

AVERY

by Charlotte McConaghy (Bantam; \$29.99)

Charlotte McConaghy, a new Australian entrant in the fantasy field, begins her 'Chronicles of Kaya' trilogy with *Avery*. In a world based on Viking mythology, people die in pairs, but when Ava's 'bond-mate' Avery is killed, she becomes the first partner in thousands of years to survive. Ava's plan for revenge on Avery's killer, the 'Barbarian Queen' of Pirenti, is thwarted when she is transported to a prison island by Prince Ambrose. Their growing relationship must overcome the background enmity of their two nations. *Avery* is a strong fantasy debut, which will also appeal to a young adult and romance readership.

A CRUCIBLE OF SOULS

by Mitchell Hogan (Harper; \$24.99)

Australian author and former investment banker **Mitchell Hogan** won the Aurealis Best Fantasy Novel Award in 2013 for his self-published e-book, *A Crucible of Souls*, which sold 15,000 digital copies. In this first book of the 'Sorcery Ascendant Sequence', Hogan follows a largely traditional fantasy path. A young boy, Caldan, is taken into monastic magic training after his family is killed. But he is soon cast out into the real world, apprenticed to the Guild of Sorcerers, where he must learn to

access and control dangerous old magic. *A Crucible of Souls*, while not particularly original is, nonetheless, a

solid fantasy debut, proving that self-publishing can be a viable option.

British science fiction

TERRA

by Mitch Benn (Gollancz; 255 pp.; \$29.99)

Terra, British comedian **Mitch Benn**'s debut novel, is decidedly in the Douglas Adams comic SF tradition. A UFO's sudden appearance causes a car crash on 'Rrth', which results in aliens taking a young baby girl, subsequently named Terra, back to the 'orange-green planet of Fnrr'. Humans, whom they have been long observing, are called 'Ymns', reflecting the nomenclature of the Fnrrns, which is composed entirely of consonants. Benn has great textual fun with his names, but he is guilty, at times, of inducing a form of irritable vowel syndrome. Terra's alien education reflects the nature of relationships, and that ultimately there's no place like home.

WOLVES

by Simon Ings (Gollancz; 295 pp.; \$29.99)

Simon Ings' near-future people 'still live in a world of affordable plenty. Soon they will wake to discover that, blinded by fictitious capital, they have been torching what few riches were left.' *Wolves* is essentially a personal odyssey for the main character, Conrad, in which his past and present intersect. Conrad works on the technology of augmented virtual reality (think Google glasses to the nth degree), which comes to overlay the real one. It offers each individual his or her own world view, but will individuals realise the real world is slowly slipping away?

Conrad notes, 'the human world falls apart, not through catastrophe, but from mounting internal failure.' *Wolves* juxtaposes Conrad's personal failures and the possible murder of his mother with his development of alternate reality. In a deliberately elliptical novel, the two narrative lines don't always connect, which echoes J. G. Ballard's surreal near futures.

PROXIMA

by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz; 455 pp.; \$29.99)

In *Proxima*, the first of a duology, British 'hard SF' writer **Stephen Baxter** takes the reader out of this world. The convict transportations to Australia are reworked into a one-way sixty-year journey, from an Earth dominated by China and nations aligned to the UN, to Proxima C, a planet in the Alpha Centauri system.

The colonists, mostly white-collar convicts, soon fragment into small warring communities. Baxter's main characters, Yuri and Mardina, a female security officer from a 'dried-out, emptied, China-dominated Australia', break away, both to survive and to explore the planet's alien biology and flora. Baxter superbly evokes the planetary challenges, but then, in typical Baxter fashion, takes

his couple through wormholes back to solar system politics, alongside a discourse on topics ranging from the development of artificial intelligence to the origins of the universe. This is too heady a mix for overall narrative coherence, but no one could ever doubt Baxter's ability to evoke a sense of SF wonder.

SF GATEWAY OMNIBUS: BOB SHAW

(Gollancz; 519 pp.; \$35)

The Gollancz Gateway series brings back some of the best twentieth-century SF writing, both in print and digital form. **Bob Shaw** (1931–1996) will be probably best remembered for his 'slow glass' concept, but the selection of *Orbitsville* (1975), *A Wreath of Stars* (1976) and *The Ragged Astronauts* (1986) will not disappoint readers old and new. These novels' mixture of scientific detail and imaginative plotting follows in the Arthur C. Clarke mould.

TWENTY TRILLION LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

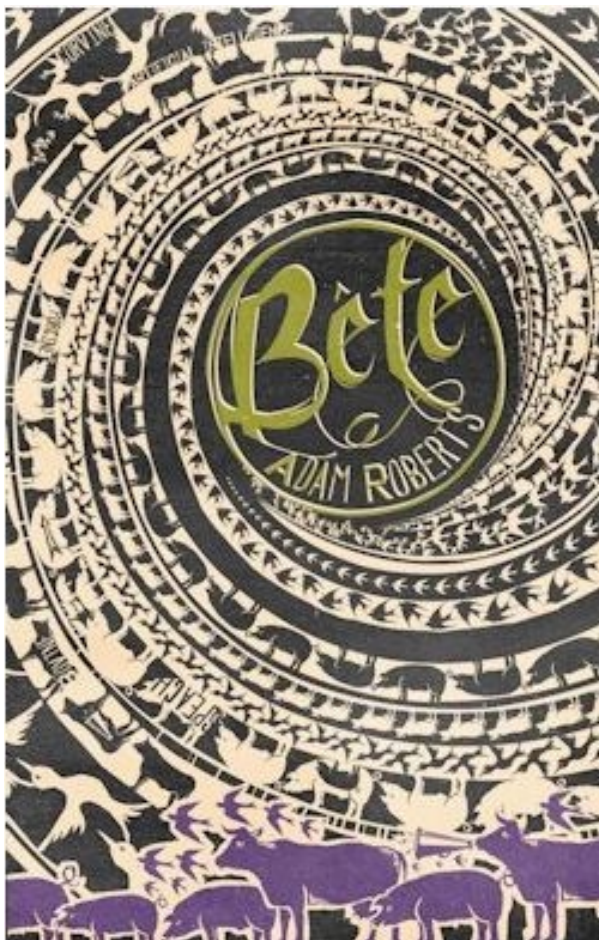
by Adam Roberts (Gollancz; 306 pp.; \$39.99)

Adam Roberts's *Twenty Trillion Leagues under the Sea* is a homage both to Jules Verne and numerous SF classics. It's 1958, and a radical new French nuclear submarine, commanded by the autocratic Captain Adam Cloche, is lost on its test voyage, sinking 'twenty trillion leagues under the sea'. Roberts, never a conventional author, explores what it is to be human through the claustrophobic tensions of the crew, who are literally and mentally out of their depth. Some crew members continue to exist in a 'waterverse' of infinite space where some decidedly strange creatures exist. Roberts constructs an intriguing meta-fictional puzzle, complemented by Mahendra Singh's 33 full-page pen-and-ink illustrations.

BETE

by Adam Roberts (Gollancz; \$29.99)

Bete begins in a near-future British 'animal farm' where animals can speak after being fitted with AI chips by animal rights activists. **Adam Roberts**' central character, farmer Graham Penhaligon, vehemently resists this dramatic form of animal liberation, informing the cow he is about to kill: 'Don't call me Graham'. The cow's response, 'Won't you at least Turing-test me', provides the setting for a wide examination of identity and intelligence, both human and animal. As animals begin to take over the countryside and humans retreat to the cities, Roberts juxtaposes ethical and economic issues in a novel that sits within the best traditions of dark satirical SF.



DESCENT

by Ken MacLeod (Orbit; 403 pp.; \$39.99)

Ken MacLeod has a reputation for inventive SF with a left-wing political thrust. In *Descent*, MacLeod comes back to earth in a novel that resembles both the non-SF of the late Iain Banks and the 'bloke-lit' novels of Nick Hornby. Teenage student Ryan has a UFO experience — or does he? — in a near-future independent Scotland. Even when Ryan becomes a freelance science journalist he still can't throw off his past, especially in his personal relationships. *Descent* is a clever mash-up of a conspiracy thriller and a 'a first-person, confessional tale of an ordinary guy' coming to terms with an experience that just could have been out of this world.

THE BEES

by Laline Paull (Fourth Estate; 346 pp.; \$29.99)

There has been quite a buzz around Oxford graduate and playwright **Laline Paull's** debut novel *The Bees*. Margaret Atwood and Emma Donoghue are just two of the authors who have pre-praised Paull's dystopian tale set in a caste-driven totalitarian hive.

Bees with deformities are killed at birth. Flora 717 is a young female low-grade sanitation worker in a hive ruled by a 'Holy Mother' Queen. Bees must 'Accept. Obey. Serve', while the Fertility Police enforce 'the first law of life: only the Queen may breed'.

The other bees think Flora's an oversized 'hairy girl', but, as in classic fantasy, Flora and the reader know she

is something special. She's a resolute feminine heroine fighting adversity and oppression. Flora slowly wends her way upwards into the Queen's inner sanctum. Here she confronts intrigue and danger from the power-wielding high bee priestesses, as well as resolving a personal conflict that will ultimately decide the fate of the hive itself.

Flora's wish to protect the Queen and her fellow workers is compromised by her maternal urge, but worker pregnancy is outside the law. Paull has said in an interview, 'I'm a mother and thought about finding out that you're pregnant when that is against the law. You're not going to give up your child, you're not going to sacrifice your baby for anything — certainly not for religion or the rule of law. Her character came quite naturally from the idea of protecting your children'.

Paull's technical working knowledge of the life of the hive is certainly 'beelievable' but the narrative impact is occasionally lessened by the somewhat forced analogies to issues in contemporary human society, such as the destruction of the environment and class struggles. Nonetheless, Flora's almost non-stop adventures and struggles in Paull's imaginative world of bees — the perils of Paulline perhaps — ensure a willing suspension of disbelief.

BARRICADE

by Jon Wallace (Gollancz; 249 pp.; \$29.99)

Barricade is a post-apocalyptic novel, set in a future Great Britain, in which the genetically enhanced 'Ficials' are at war with the 'Reals', allegedly the remnants of humanity, but who seem more like zombies. A Ficial, the curiously named Kenstibec (Steinbeck?), is ordered to drive a glamorous female photojournalist from Edinburgh to London. Kenstibec, a one-dimensional Arnold Schwarzenegger-type figure, encounters many strange characters and creatures, and attempted rapes of wrath, in a *Mad Max*-style journey through devastated landscapes. **Jon Wallace's** underlying messages relate to the destruction of the environment, artificial intelligence, and the cult of the celebrity, but the overarching narrative is essentially derivative.

ECHO BOY

by Matt Haig (Bodley Head; 399 pp.; \$42.99)

The Humans, **Matt Haig's** critically acclaimed last novel, explored what it is to be human. A similar theme pervades *Echo Boy*, set in a dystopian future of 2115, where dramatic climate change and the fuel wars of the 2040s have been moderated to some extent by technology. A young girl, Audrey Castle, is sent to live with her uncle Alex, a sinister billionaire IT mogul, after she discovers her parents' bodies, murdered by a robot Echo (Enhanced Computerized Humanoid Organism). Audrey's own life is also in danger, but can she trust the humanlike robot-boy Daniel? Haig probes philosophical issues, at the same time forging a compelling narrative.

CONFLUENCE

by Paul McAuley (Gollancz; 935 pp.; \$32.95)

Paul McAuley, award-winning British author, published his *Child of the River* trilogy from 1997 to 1999. He has now re-edited it, with two extra stories, into *Confluence*, one seamless omnibus. McAuley follows Yama, a young man on the planet Confluence, a long artificial platform world, one side fertile and the other desert, divided by the Great River. The various native tribes have regressed, worshipping as gods the original 'Builders' from whom Yama seems to be descended. McAuley cleverly juxtaposes the worlds of technology and regression, blending fantasy and SF in classic Jack Vance style, as Yama engages on his voyage of personal discovery and ultimately that of his world.

THE FIRST FIFTEEN LIVES OF HARRY AUGUST

by Claire North (Orbit; 405 pp.; \$29.99)

Claire North is the pseudonym of **Catherine Webb**, a Carnegie Medal-nominated British author, who takes as her theme 'What if death were not the end? What if there were ... exceptions?' Harry August is one of the rare exceptions, with North's story-line following his 15 lives in the twentieth century. Harry comes to believe he is cursed rather than blessed, living through those different timelines. He finds only a few other immortals, one of whom he must confront to avoid the destruction of the world. North's inventive novel is mostly non-linear, but that does not detract from her narrative freshness nor its credible main character, tortured by time.

TOUCH

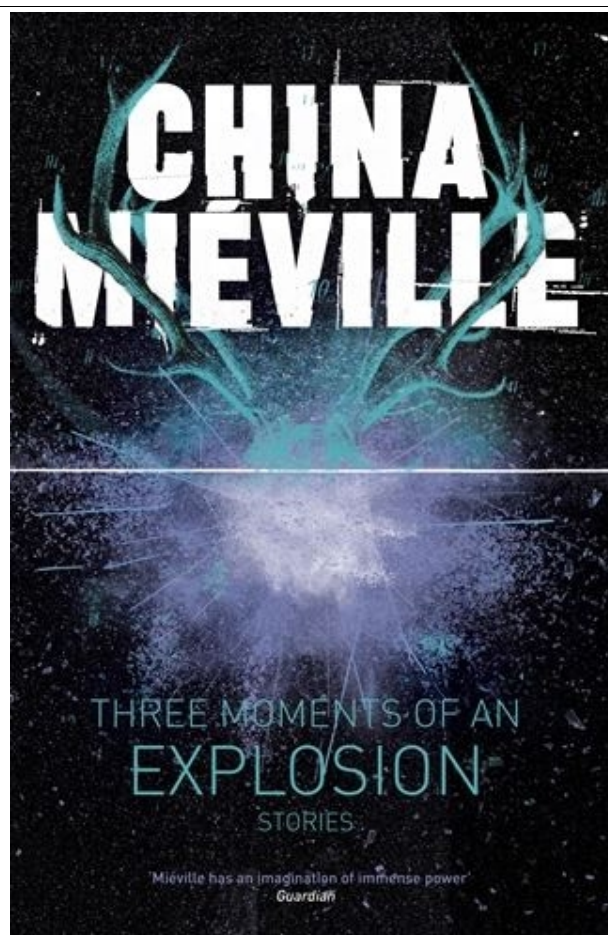
by Claire North (Orbit; \$29.99)

Claire North's second novel, *Touch*, follows another unusual plotline, with her main character Kepler able to 'ghost' into other people's bodies through a simple touch. As the book opens, the female body that Kepler is occupying is murdered, which necessitates a quick move into the killer's body. North interweaves the history of Kepler, who is neither male nor female, with an exploration of identity and self in a quest across Europe and North America. Kepler's believable anti-hero has much in common with Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley.

THREE MOMENTS OF AN EXPLOSION

by China Miéville (Macmillan; \$29.99)

China Miéville's *Three Moments of an Explosion* collects 28 short stories from the three-time Arthur C. Clarke Award winner. Miéville ranges widely in subject content, but especially focuses on dystopian futures induced by climate change or global pandemics. The 'Keep' portrays a world devastated by a deadly epidemic, which not only kills, but also opens up the earth around the victims. In 'Covehithe', a critique of oil capitalism, resurrected oil rigs march out of the sea, while, in 'Polynia', giant icebergs mysteriously appear over London highlighting, in more ways than one, climate change mismanagement.



THE SEVERED STREETS

by Paul Cornell (Tor; 402 pp.; \$34.99)

It's an increasing practice in publishing that best-selling authors, to raise money for their favourite charities, will allow a reader to pay to be named as a minor character in a forthcoming book.

It comes as a complete surprise, however, to find famous author Neil Gaiman featuring, not only as a character but also as a major, and rather dark character, in **Paul Cornell's** *The Severed Streets*. Cornell has said that even his copy editor double-checked with him that Gaiman had given permission to be featured: 'Neil read through all the passages he's in (don't hold him responsible for any he's not), and gave us his blessing'.

The Severed Streets, the second in Cornell's 'Shadow Police' series after *London Falling*, depicts a London, torn by economic and social discord, with 'flash mobs' rioting on the streets. A coalition government struggles to keep order, not helped by the machinations of a powerful Murdochian newspaper tycoon, who obtains government leaks before all of his rivals. When a cabinet minister is murdered within his locked government car, in the manner of the Jack the Ripper murders, no one, including his driver, sees how it happened. Detective Inspector Quill's specialist Scotland Yard unit, with the ability, 'the Sight', to see the supernatural, is called in. When more gruesome murders of 'rich white males' occur, Quill's team follow a path that will lead them into literally hellish situations.

There are thematic links here, not only to Gaiman's

'Neverwhere' series, but also to China Miéville's alternate London stories. Gaiman's character actually provides a synopsis of versions of Neverwhere and 'their being a hidden London'. This allows Cornell's book, in his words, to be 'more a sort of psychogeography, about how memory and place create myth'.

Cornell's inventive occult horror has elements of Dennis Wheatley, but his gritty police procedural settings render the supernatural more plausible than Wheatley's now largely forgotten bestsellers. *The Severed Streets* mixes London myths, secret cabals, a power-hungry press mogul, Neil Gaiman, London East End criminal twins, and a complex murder mystery into an intriguing and inventive whole.

THE ABYSS BEYOND DREAMS

by Peter F. Hamilton (Macmillan; \$32.99)

Britain's biggest-selling SF author, **Peter Hamilton**, with over two million books sold worldwide, returns to his 'Commonwealth' universe in *The Abyss Beyond Dreams*, the first of a duology. Hamilton's 'Commonwealth Timeline' will aid new readers to the series. In 3326, Nigel Sheldon, one of the creators of the Commonwealth, is persuaded to enter the Void, a mysterious black hole-like entity, monitored as a continuous threat to the galaxy. Sheldon encounter distortions of time and space in the Void, while on the planet Bienvenido mentally altered humans face a constant alien threat. Hamilton will conclude this always stimulating space opera series in *Night Without Stars*.

THE INCARNATIONS

by Susan Barker (Doubleday; \$32.99)

British author **Susan Barker** wrote half of *The Incarnations* in Beijing. The city is almost as important as her main character, taxi driver Wang, who finds life in 2008 difficult enough without receiving letters from a mysterious unnamed watcher. The watcher claims to have accompanied him over the centuries in five very different historical incarnations, ranging from the Mongol invasion to the Cultural Revolution. In each historical segment, Wang and his mysterious companion play out

different roles and relationships, but always with betrayal at their core. Barker resembles David Mitchell in the ability to weave together past and present in a convincing, and ultimately intriguing, manner.

TIME AND TIME AGAIN

by Ben Elton (Bantam; \$32.99)

Blackadder, for which **Ben Elton** was a co-writer, has been criticised by some British Conservative politicians as distorting the 'real' history of World War I. Elton recalls, 'I've been blamed for a lot in my life but not the First World War!' In 2024, Elton's main character Hugh Stanton, a disillusioned ex-SAS officer, is offered the chance, by a very improbable Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, to travel back in time to 1914. Using an Isaac Newton time portal, Stanton's mission is to kill the Kaiser and thus change history. Elton's initially rollicking entertainment becomes much darker when changing time has unforeseen consequences.

THE MIME ORDER

by Samantha Shannon (Bloomsbury; \$24.99)

Paige Mahoney is the main teenage character of *The Mime Order*, the second in a projected seven-volume urban fantasy series. **Samantha Shannon** provides an early info dump of events in her successful debut book, *The Bone Season*, set in a 2059 dystopian England renamed Scion. Australia is apparently 'free-world', but with two Scion outposts, according to a recent tweet by Shannon.

Paige was imprisoned by the immortal humanoids Rephaim during the 'Bone Season', when clair 'voyants' like Paige are rounded up. Paige, an exceptional 'dream-walker', is a rare voyant who has the ability to leave her body temporarily. In *The Mime Order*, Paige has escaped from Oxford to London, but her safety can be only protected by rejoining the underworld Seven Seals gang. Shannon's strong world building is reflected in her detailed structures of the voyants. Be warned: it ends on a cliffhanger, which means Shannon fans are in for the long haul.

British fantasy

FARTHING; HA'PENNY; HALF A CROWN

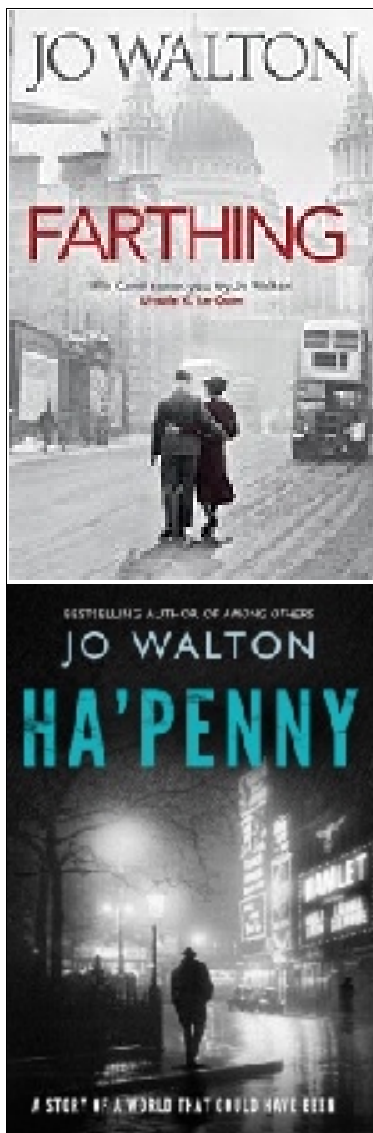
by Jo Walton (Corsair; 316 pp.; \$19.99 each)

The 'Small Change' trilogy from Welsh Canadian author and Hugo Award winner **Jo Walton** is now released for the first time in Australia. Walton's alternate history predicated a Britain that made peace with Germany in 1941 after the Rudolf Hess mission.

Walton's books, published between 2006 and 2008, predate C. J. Samson's darker and more complex 2012 novel *Dominion*, which has a similar Nazi-dominated Britain. Walton says, 'I wrote these books during a dark time

politically, when the US and the UK were invading Iraq without a Security Council resolution on a trumped up casus belli.'

Each of the three novels features the same main character, Inspector Peter Carmichael, whose voice alternates with a different first-person female narrator in each novel. *Farthing*, set in 1949, is deliberately modelled on the country house murder mysteries of Agatha Christie and Michael Innes. Sir James Thirkie, about to replace Anthony Eden as Prime Minister, is murdered, with a yellow star of David pinned to his chest, during a Farthing country house weekend.



Lucy Farthing is married to a Jewish banker, who immediately becomes the scapegoat for the murder. Carmichael knows the identity of the real murderer, but has to manoeuvre the realpolitik as Farthing Set member Mark Normanby becomes Prime Minister.

Ha'penny, set two weeks later, is more a political thriller than a murder mystery. Walton says its alternate title was 'The Hamlet Bomb', as a Mitford sister clone, actress Viola Lark, becomes mixed up in a plot to kill both Normanby and Adolf Hitler. Walton says, 'The idea of a theatrical Mitford sister and a plot to blow up Hitler was irresistible.'

A major problem with Walton's female main characters is their lack of depth, and this is even more evident in *Half a Crown*, set in 1960.

The female voice is teenager Elvira, Carmichael's niece, who is more interested in fashion and society than the deportation of Jews, the 'British Power' streetfighters, and Nazi politics.

Carmichael is now running the Watch, the equivalent of the Gestapo in Britain, despite his secret liberal leanings. A global meeting is scheduled in London, where Germany and Japan will divide the world. A plot to overthrow the 'soft' government of Normanby, and place the exiled Duke of Windsor on the throne over Queen Elizabeth, sees Elvira as the key to unlocking the conspiracy and a *deus ex regina* conclusion.

Half a Crown is the weakest of the three novels, as the British passivity for 11 years in the face of increasing fascist actions is never explained, and thus seems unlikely to be energised by the Queen's intervention. Walton's alternate title for the trilogy, 'Still Life with Fascists', perhaps best reflects Walton's populace frozen in time from 1949 to 1960.

Nonetheless, the 'Small Change' trilogy takes its place as a readable and entertaining contribution to the alternate history World War II genre, but its lack of contextual depth and its weak female characterisation means that it never reaches the heights of Len Deighton's *SS-GB*,

Samson's *Dominion*, and Iain MacLeod's *The Summer Isles*.

THE SCREAMING STAIRCASE

by Jonathan Stroud

(Doubleday; 453 pp.; \$24.95)

The Screaming Staircase, from bestselling British fantasy author Jonathan Stroud, is an engaging young adult novel. We are in an alternative England, where ghosts, with a literally deadly touch, are commonplace. Only the young, with their 'psychic sensitivity', organised into ghostbusting firms, can defeat them. Lockwood and Co comprises the young Anthony Lockwood, his friend George, as 'handsome as a freshly opened tub of margarine', and the narrator Lucy, who is getting fed up with both of them. Their not terribly successful firm gets one last chance when commissioned to exorcise England's most haunted house. Stroud juxtaposes laughter and screams in an effervescent fantasy cocktail.

DODGER'S GUIDE TO LONDON

by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday; 134 pp.; \$29.95)

Dodger's Guide to London spins off Terry Pratchett's 2012 novel *Dodger*, which followed young Jack Dodger in mid-nineteenth-century Victorian London. Pratchett's research for that book feeds into a fascinating compendium of detail on Victorian life, popular culture, and society intended for a young readership. Factual detail is supplemented by comments from the fictional Jack Dodger. Numerous original black-and-white illustrations, from long-time Pratchett collaborator Paul Kidby, accompany black-and-white illustrations taken from Victorian magazines and books. *Dodger's Guide to London* will especially appeal to fans of the Horrible Histories series.

THE BURIED GIANT

by Kazuo Ishiguro (Faber & Faber; 345 pp.)

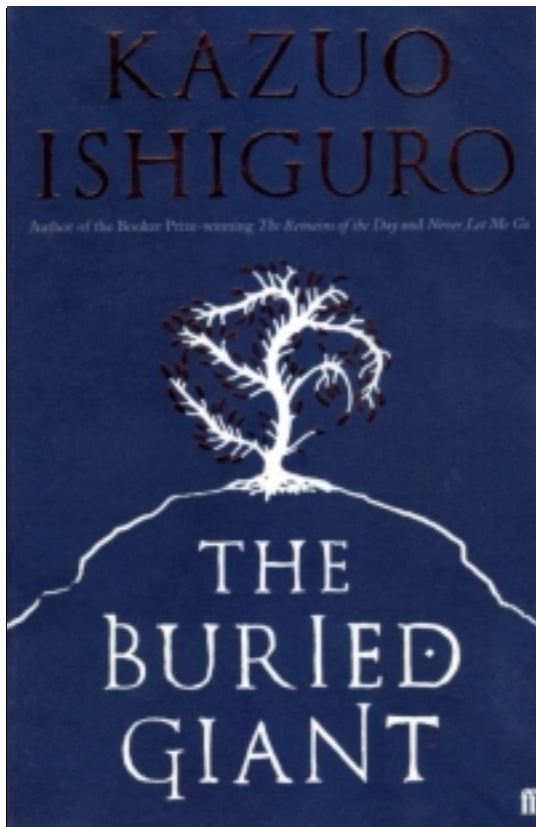
Kazuo Ishiguro has stated that his new novel, *The Buried Giant*, which includes dragons, ogres, and an Arthurian quest, is not fantasy. This is a bit like when Margaret Atwood dismissed science fiction as 'talking squids in outer space'. Atwood has since recanted.

Ursula K. Le Guin clearly hopes that Ishiguro will similarly recant, calling his interpretation of fantasy 'an insult'. If Ishiguro read authors such as Kelly Link, Neil Gaiman, and Patrick Rothfuss, he may change his view on the quality of the genre.

THE SLOW REGARD OF SILENT THINGS

by Patrick Rothfuss (Hachette; \$29.99)

Patrick Rothfuss warns in the foreword to his novella *The Slow Regard of Silent Things* that 'If you haven't read my other books, you don't want to start here', referring to his critically acclaimed 'Kingkiller Chronicle' novels, *The Name of the Wind* and *The Wise Man's Fear*. This would be unfortunate, as Rothfuss has constructed a lyrical and haunting take on one of the characters in his series, the enigmatic Auri. In a third-person narrative, he follows



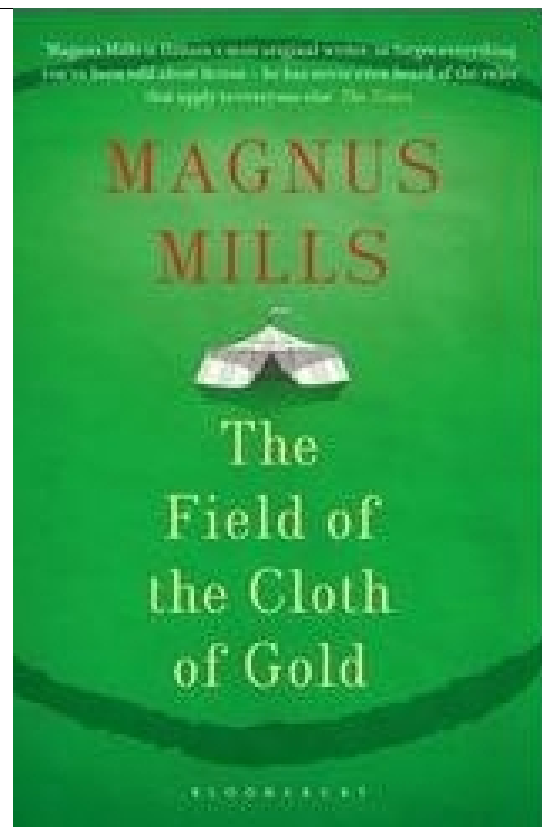
Auri through a week deep beneath the University, where she was once a student. Auri is searching for a gift for someone who may or may not visit her. With very little action and dialogue, Rothfuss' novella is effective within its Beckettian bittersweet framework.

THE FIELD OF THE CLOTH OF GOLD
by Magnus Mills (Bloomsbury; \$35)

Magnus Mills' eighth novel takes its title from the meeting of Henry VIII and Francis I in 1520, but typically, given Mills' surreal literary tradition, it has only a field in common with that famous event. The nameless narrator pitches his tent in an isolated field, but it soon it fills up with a variety of strange characters, including Thomas, a druid-like figure, and the regal Isabella. Collegiality quickly disappears after one group divides the field with turf walls and sectarian tensions erupt. Mills' deadpan fable effectively satirises contemporary Britain and its attitudes to immigration, multiculturalism, and social change.

THE VAGRANT
by Peter Newman (HarperVoyager; \$29.99)

The Vagrant, Peter Newman's debut novel, has an enigmatic main character. In a war-torn broken land, the 'Usurper' and his demonic hordes have emerged triumphant. The Shining City is the last bastion of humanity, but its Seraph Knights are severely weakened. Enter the silent 'Vagrant', who, with his powerful legendary sword, is the last hope to save humanity. Curiously, he is accompanied by a baby, and a goat to provide her milk, which surprisingly works as a plotline. While there are clearly echoes of the fantasy novels of Michael Moorcock,



Stephen King, and Stephen Donaldson, *The Vagrant* is a compelling read for diehard fantasy fans.

THE VORRH
by Brian Catling (Coronet; \$29.99)

Brian Catling is Professor of Fine Art at Oxford University. The first volume of *The Vorrh*, his complex, dark, surreal fantasy trilogy, echoes the artistic and literary exuberance of Mervyn Peake. The Vorrh is a possibly sentient African forest, predating mankind and fluid in



its time and space. It contains, for example, the Garden of Eden, bizarre native races, various monsters, angels, and, on its edge, a strange middle European city. The various dense narratives interweave in a Pynchon-like structure. *The Vorrh* is not an easily accessible novel, but those who enter its fictional vortex will uncover what may become recognised as one of the best fantasy novels of the decade.

THE HONOURS

by Tim Clare (Canongate; \$27.99)

Tim Clare is a British stand-up poet. *The Honours*, his debut novel, combines fantasy, the supernatural, and the spy novel. Think *Downton Abbey* meets H. P. Lovecraft. The main character, the rebellious and feisty 13-year-old Delphine, accompanies her dysfunctional parents, in 1935, to the remote Alderberen Hall in Norfolk. Here Delphine is convinced that a Bolshevik secret society is plotting against the government. Secret passages not only allow for eavesdropping, but also to confront

strange bat-like creatures from another world. *The Honours*, although at times repetitive, is an intriguing mix of supernatural and conspiratorial mayhem through which Delphine's chutzpah and sometimes misguided courage is a constant.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE SMUG

by Tom Holt (Orbit; \$19.99)

Those with a Terry Pratchett deprivation condition could do worse than turn to the comic fantasy novels of **Tom Holt**. *The Good, the Bad and the Smug*, the fourth novel in his 'YouSpace' series, sees Goblin King Mordak (Murdoch) in a grumpy mood, even though he has just won a lifetime evil award from the Academy of Darkness. Mordak recruits a young elf journalist to find out who is flooding the multiverse economy with gold. Could this be the fault of someone the Prince thinks is called Rumblestitsky? Holt ponders the nature of good and evil within a satire on social media, journalism, politics, and merchant bankers.

British horror

AN ENGLISH GHOST STORY

by Kim Newman (Titan Books; \$19.99)

British author **Kim Newman** follows the Naremore family after they leave London for the West Country and Hollow House, which has a history that dates back to the Middle Ages. The house's former owner was a famous writer of children's ghost stories, and the locals want to preserve the house as a shrine/museum to her. The family's initial love of Hollow turns sour as a ghostly figures impact on the present. The increasingly dysfunctional family must come together if it is not to be destroyed. *An English Ghost Story* is an intriguing, if not always convincing, mix of M. R. James and Joanna Trollope.

ANNO DRACULA: JOHNNY ALUCARD

by Kim Newman (Titan; 479 pp.; \$24.99)

Anno Dracula: Johnny Alucard, a well-priced hardback, is the fourth in **Kim Newman's** vampire cum alternate history series. *Johnny Alucard*, set in the 1980s, sees the young vampire, Ion Popescu, travelling to America after escaping from Romania's anti-vampire regime. In America, he meets a vampiric Andy Warhol before becoming first a drug lord, selling dried vampire blood, and then a Hollywood mogul. Newman satirises the 'Greed is Good' decade, documenting corrupt politics, celebrity drug culture, and extreme religions within a pop fiction framework. Newman dramatically covers the dark side in more ways than one.

THE PROPHECY OF BEES

by R. S. Pateman (Orion; \$29.99)

R. S. Pateman's second novel *The Prophecy of Bees* is ultimately a very dark ghost story. A wealthy American widow and her teenage daughter Izzy relocate from London to the dilapidated Cotswold Stagcote Manor. When Izzy begins to investigate the history of the estate, she unearths its dark past and the role of the villagers in preserving that past. Is Izzy's increasing paranoia justified, or is it just teenage angst stemming from her separation from her boyfriend and alienation from her mother? Pateman explores the dark power of superstition and folklore, echoing the cult movie *The Wicker Man*.

THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS

by M. K. Carey (Hachette; 416 pp.; \$29.99)

The Girl With All the Gifts might seem, on first glance, just another zombie novel. **M. K. Carey**, however, has built upon genre conventions to deliver a moving novel of self-discovery and the power of trust and love. In a post-apocalyptic Britain, 'hungries' rampage after a fungal pandemic. Ten-year-old Melanie, who is not quite what she thinks she is, is the brightest of 20 'lab rat' children, part of a military experiment to seek genetic solutions. Melanie's only relief comes in lessons with her beloved teacher Miss Justineau. Once their army compound is breached, however, Melanie and Miss Justineau must fight for their lives as well as the future.

TOUCHED

by Joanna Briscoe (Hammer; 244 pp.; \$24.95)

Joanna Briscoe's *Touched* is the latest in Hammer's successful horror novella series. In the hot summer of 1963, Douglas and Rowena Crale and their five children move from London to an idyllic English village. Knocking together two cottages means moving out Douglas's mother, but the cottages do not seem to want to be renovated. Walls are difficult to knock down and others ooze strange smells. The Crale children begin to act mysteriously, one taking to wearing her departed grandmother's clothes, and then two daughters disappear. Rowena's life becomes a waking nightmare. Briscoe mixes, to great effect, the traditional claustrophobic ghost story with contemporary fears of child abuse.

THE RHESUS CHART

by Charles Stross (Orbit; 359 pp.; \$32.99)

The Rhesus Chart is British writer **Charles Stross**'s fifth book in his 'Laundry Files' series. 'The Laundry' is a secret, extremely bureaucratic, unit responsible for protecting Britain against otherworldly Lovecraftian horrors. Stross says his authorship could be termed 'slashdot-reading, sandal-wearing IT geek falls into Z-Men/Len Deighton territory'. Applied computational demonologist Bob Howard is called upon to tackle the 'Scrum', an elite group of investment bankers who have manipulated financial systems via an arcane financial algorithm. This has also had the side effects of their developing superhuman qualities, an aversion to light, and a taste for blood. Stross skilfully combines SF thriller, Lovecraftian horror, and the Dilbertian banality of office politics.

PRINTER'S DEVIL COURT

by Susan Hill (Profile; \$24.95)

Susan Hill, well known for her chilling ghost story *The Woman in Black*, covers similar ground in a gripping novella, *Printer's Devil Court*. Told through a dead man's memoir, it follows two young medical students in Edwardian London who believe they can extract 'the spark of life' from an old man to restore a young girl from the dead. Hill envelops her story in the dark foggy gloom of London's streets, dank hospital mortuaries, and deserted cemeteries. The young girl is no Frankenstein figure, but rather a tragic phantom for whom life and death are not her own.



THE SCARLET GOSPELS

by Clive Barker (Macmillan; \$27.26)

Because of ill-health and film and artistic initiatives, British author **Clive Barker**, one of the renowned names in the horror genre, has not published a major book for over a decade. *The Scarlet Gospels* features two of his most famous fictional characters, Pinhead, 'the Priest of Hell', and hard-boiled investigator of the supernatural, Harry D'Amour. Pinhead begins killing magicians in order to facilitate his attack on Hell. Barker fills the book with too many one-dimensional tortured characters, but there is no denying his ability to portray good, and especially evil, in bizarre exotic settings, particularly Hell. Barker's many fans will be glad he's back.

TRIGGER WARNING

by Neil Gaiman (Headline; \$29.99)

Trigger Warning, Neil Gaiman's third collection, includes 23 short stories, each of which Gaiman describes in an extensive preface. There is a never-before-published *American Gods* story, 'Black Dog', set in the Peak District, while 'The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains', a now well-known Gaiman piece, set in the Hebrides, juxtaposes greed, revenge, and family. Gaiman excels at gothic fatalism.

'The Sleeper and the Spindle' is less grim, so to speak, and spins off *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, but with a feminist flavour. A queen, with three not seven dwarves, tries to reach a princess whose sickness is spreading across the land. A surprise ending to this story, as also in 'Click Clack the Rattlebag', actually written in Melbourne, in which the 'life' tables are turned on a babysitter by a young boy.

US science fiction

LOVE MINUS EIGHTY

by Will McIntosh (Orbit; 403 pp.; \$19.99)

Will McIntosh's *Love Minus Eighty*, based on an award-

winning short story, is set in a twenty-second-century post-collapse New York, where the gulf between rich and poor is extreme. The main character, Mira, killed in a car crash, is frozen in a cryogenic bank, from which

wealthy, usually old, men decide which ‘bridesicles’ are going to be unfrozen. Mira’s revival, and thus survival, becomes the pivotal plot device. The problem with the novel is that McIntosh ultimately cannot decide whether he is writing a bizarre romantic screwball comedy or a serious indictment of today’s society with its overwhelming social media and cyberdating networks.

THE DETAINEE

by Peter Liney (Jo Fletcher; 298 pp.; \$29.99)

Peter Liney’s *The Detainee*, the first in a trilogy, is another dystopian vision of the future, with the old, the poor, and the sick having been deported to a giant island waste dump. Escape is impossible because of constant police satellite surveillance. This dramatic breakdown of family and civic values stems from a societal revenge on the baby-boomer generation for its hedonistic lifestyles and consequent destruction of natural resources. While the island represents a dramatic extrapolation of current global issues, the societal and geographical contexts are poorly referenced. Liney’s dramatic conclusion, however, recognises that there is always hope, even in the darkest of wastelands.

SHOVEL READY

by Adam Sternbergh (Headline; 243 pp.; \$29.99)

Adam Sternbergh, the Culture Editor of *The New York Times Magazine*, sets *Shovel Ready*, his debut novel, in another dystopian world, extrapolated from current concerns about climate change, migrant intake, and societal divide. A terrorist dirty bomb explosion in Sternbergh’s near-future New York contributes to the ‘incremental apocalypse’ from which the rich escape to the alternate

‘limnosphere’.

Sternbergh’s deliberately minimalist prose effectively reflects a largely barren New York landscape. Here his ‘damaged hero’, the ‘Spademan’, a former garbage collector turned contract killer, is hired to ‘take care of’ the daughter of America’s richest evangelist. In classic Philip Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett noir tradition, the Spademan finds himself ultimately defending her. *Shovel Ready* is an intriguing mixture of genres, especially hard-boiled crime and dystopian SF.

SF GATEWAY OMNIBUS: JAMES BLISH

(Gollancz; 302 pp.; \$39.99)

James Blish (1921–1975), one of the leading SF writers of the 1950s and 1960s, is best known for his classic *A Case of Conscience* (1958). Unfortunately the current compilation includes neither it nor any of his epic *Okies* quartet. Instead, Gateway reprints his reworking of the Satanic myth in *Black Easter* (1968) and *The Day After Judgement* (1971), which Blish regarded as one novel. *The Seedling Stars* (1957) highlights Blish’s interest in biology, with the linked stories reflecting his concept of ‘pan-tropy’, whereby humanity must evolve to colonise deep space.

THE MARTIAN

by Andy Weir (Del Rey; 369 pp.; \$32.95)

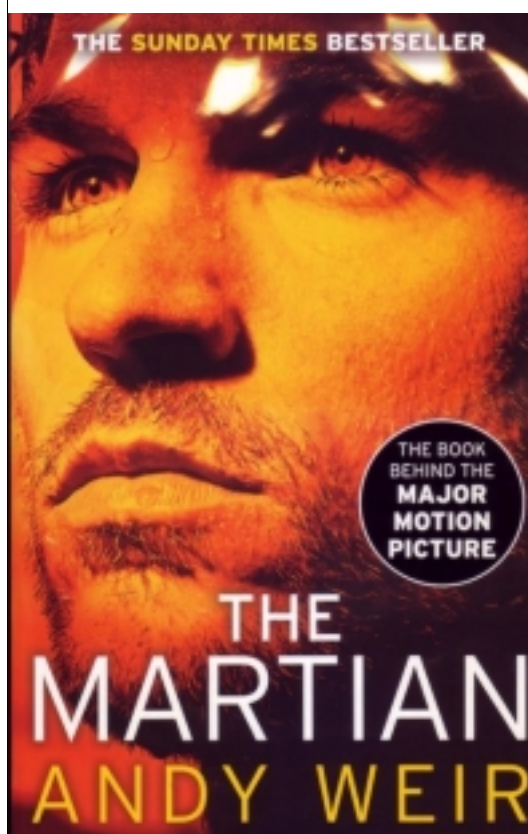
The Martian is the literary equivalent of the movie *Gravity*, and that is some praise. Astronaut Mark Watney is left on Mars, presumed dead, after NASA has to abort its mission after only six days. Mark, however, has survived, becoming ‘the loneliest man in history’. The first words of Mark’s log, which constitutes the bulk of the book, are ‘I’m pretty much f ... d’. Oxygen, food, and water will run out well within a year, and the next Mars mission is not due for four years. All Mark has is two rovers, the Hab living quarters, and a small container of potatoes.

Mark, however, is both a botanist and an engineer, skills that enable him to grow potatoes, fertilised from his waste, and to attempt to cobble together a communication device. Weir’s scientific and engineering expositions, which cover Mark’s ingenious survival techniques, are detailed, but don’t overwhelm, and add to reader empathy.

When a female satellite technician tries to convince NASA authorities that Mark is still alive on the Mars surface, she is met with initial disbelief. When the truth emerges, PR hell breaks loose, as NASA has to explain to the public, not least Mark’s family, that he’s still alive but that the chances of rescue are minimal.

With the whole world following events daily, Mark becomes a sort of global *Truman Show*. Weir has said that he wanted the reader to have the same feeling of excitement he experienced when watching *Apollo 13*, in which astronauts and NASA staff tackled the technical problems that threatened their lives.

NASA has to resolve whether huge resources should be employed to rescue a single ‘dorky botanist’, especially if lives, including Mark’s, could be lost in any rescue process. Mark meanwhile continues to face ap-



parent insurmountable survival odds with inventive skills, narrated by him in often gallows humour.

The Martian is a celebration of human ingenuity and one of the best SF novels of the year. I can't wait for the movie optioned by Twentieth Century Fox.

Postscript: *The Martian* manuscript was rejected by a number of publishers, so **Andy Weir** self-published in 2011. The huge number of downloads led to the current traditional publication. The fact, however, that the current C paperback retails for \$32.95 in Australia, while the British hardback is delivered directly to Australian homes from the UK Book Depository for just over \$17, is another contemporary publishing issue to ponder.

THE IMPOSSIBLE LIVES OF GRETA WELLS

by **Andrew Sean Greer** (Faber; 289 pp.; \$27.99)

The time-slip novel has a long tradition in science fiction. The success of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* and Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* has now clearly established a mainstream reading popularity.

California Book Award winner **Andrew Sean Greer** places his main character Greta Wells in the New York of 1985, 1941, and 1918. The novel begins in 1985, when Greta, living in Greenwich Village, agrees to undergo 25 electroconvulsive therapy treatments for depression, brought on by the death of her twin brother Felix from AIDS and her long-time lover Nathan leaving her for another woman.

The treatments transplant Greta sequentially back to 1918 and 1941 as well as returning her to 1985. The historical Gretas of 1918 and 1941 also experience, because of their simultaneous therapy, a 'transmigration of souls'. Greer doesn't explain how those alternate worlds exist or how Greta can move between them.

Rather, Greer uses the time-slip framework to allow him to follow Greta through some 'convulsive' periods in twentieth-century history, namely the aftermath of World War I and the global influenza epidemic, America on the cusp of entering World War II, and the societal trauma of the AIDS deaths in the mid 1980s.

While Greta occupies the same house in Greenwich Village in the different time periods, she, her family, and Nathan follow different life paths. Greta wonders if 'Perhaps in one of them, all rights are wronged, and life is as you wish it. So what if you found the door? And what if you had the key?' Greta doesn't quite find the key to unlock the door of second chance, but she does develop a new 'shape of life' through her experiences. Greer's book may not achieve the commercial success of Niffenegger's and Atkinson's books, but it is as emotionally rich in its content.

THE WORD EXCHANGE

by **Alena Graedon** (Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 370 pp.; \$27.99)

What would be the impact on individuals and society if smart phones become even smarter? American writer **Alena Graedon**'s debut novel, *The Word Exchange*, set in the near future, extrapolates from today's smart phone

environment to the eventual loss of 'deep' reading ability and comprehension, and thus a loss of effective human communication.

In *The Word Exchange*, smart handheld devices, 'Memes', are the principal means of communication. They can forecast an individual's needs in terms of medical diagnosis, social relationships, travel, and even meal reminders. The more advanced Memes include neural implant interaction. They also have their own exclusive form of communication, via hi-tech firm Synchronic's online 'Word Exchange', which becomes the mechanism for the spreading of a devastating global 'word flu'.

Graedon has said in an interview, 'The end of words would mean the end of memory and thought. In other words, our past and future'. Graedon's inventive deconstructed language in places echoes the Nadsat in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*.

Graedon's main character Anana Johnson lives in New York where she is an editor at her father's *North American Dictionary of the English Language*. When he mysteriously disappears, Anana, with the aid of her colleague Bart, sets out to find him. She seeks the assistance of the Diachronic Society, 'former booksellers and librarians; teachers; writers, editors, and agents; publishers and publicists; lexicographers and linguists ... translators and poets, critics and readers' who still believe in the power of the book and reading.

Her search brings her up against Synchronic's corporate greed and the increasing disintegration of a society without language. The dramatic conclusion, set in Oxford at the Oxford English Dictionary, highlights, however, the overall structural problem of using a rather improbable thriller framework to explore complex questions.

The Word Exchange is undoubtedly ambitious. Graedon's narrative is littered with linguistic, literary, philosophical, and musical references, but the whole ultimately never coheres. A pity, because the issues that Graedon explores, regarding the interaction of language, technology, and comprehension in human society, are crucial ones.

THE UNREAL AND THE REAL: WHERE ON EARTH

by **Ursula K. Le Guin** (Gollancz; 281 pp.; \$39.95)

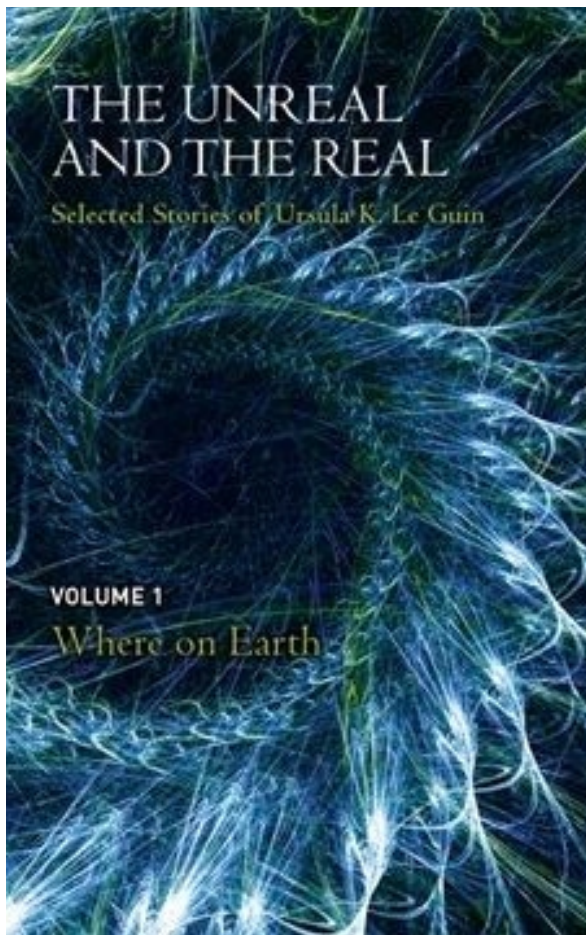
THE UNREAL AND THE REAL:

OUTER SPACE, INNER LANDS

by **Ursula K. Le Guin** (Gollancz; 336 pp.; \$39.95)

Ursula Le Guin, one of the all-time SF and fantasy greats, has selected 38 stories out of a possible published 130 for a major two-volume retrospective. Le Guin has said that the number of stories to be included was 'far too large', so she excluded novellas and some of her most reprinted stories to bring others 'back into the light'.

Le Guin dislikes genre categorisations, but she says 'if you want genre, I'll give you genre', offering her readers a number of labels for her stories, including 'magic realism', 'geriatric realism', 'surrealism', and 'temporal fantasy'. Her stories probe issues of race, gender, and the nature of authority explored through, at times, almost



anthropological analyses of future and alternate societies. These issues are particularly reflected in her Orsinian and Oregonian stories.

Radically altered gender roles are reflected in 'The Matter of Seggri', while ethical and sociological concerns are found in 'Nine Lives', a tale of clones and individual consciousness. Her dry wit is seen in 'The First Contact with the Gorgonids', when a crass American male mistakes aliens for Aborigines in the outback with dramatic results.

'Sur' follows a small female South American expedition to the South Pole at the beginning of the twentieth century, preceding that of Amundsen. The women do not feel the need to announce their successful trek, rather being fulfilled by their collective effort.

The Unreal and the Real is an excellent collection for both Le Guin devotees and those who have not discovered her excellent short stories.

THE GIRL IN THE ROAD

by Monica Byrne (Blackfriars; 325 pp.; \$29.99)

American writer Monica Byrne's *The Girl in the Road* is an outstanding first novel. Global power has shifted east to India, China, and an emerging Africa. The storyline juxtaposes the journeys of two young women forced to leave their homes, both seeking, for differing reasons, and at different times, to reach Addis Ababa.

Meena, a young woman, flees Mumbai, but her journey across the Trans-Arabian Linear Generator, an energy-harvesting bridge across the Arabian Sea, will be a dangerous one. Apparently no-one has succeeded in

making such an unauthorised journey. Much of Meena's story is played out against her attempt to reach Djibouti and then Addis Ababa, where Meena's parents were murdered. Earlier, Mariama, a young African girl, escapes from slavery and joins a caravan heading across Saharan Africa towards Ethiopia. *The Girl in the Road* is challenging multicultural SF, exploring issues of sexuality, religion, and mythology within its futuristic framework.

THE FOREVER WATCH

by David Ramirez (Hodder; 327 pp.; \$29.99)

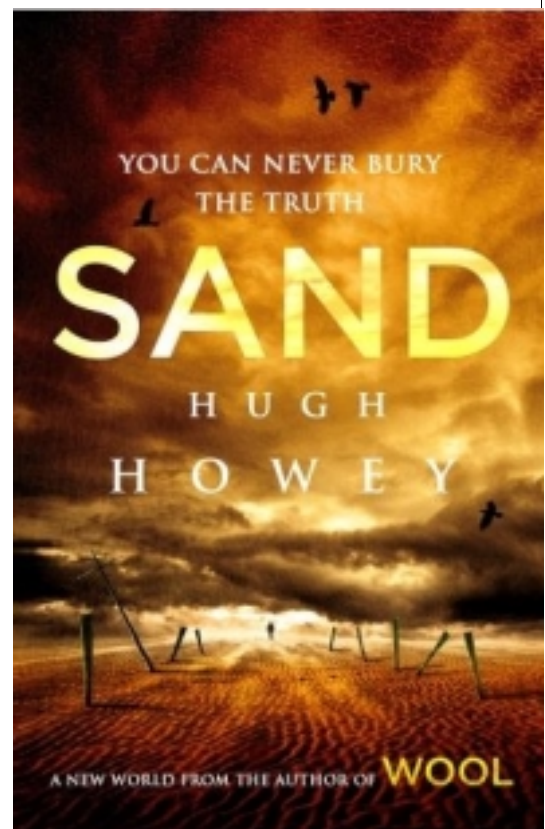
In *The Forever Watch*, David Ramirez builds on his research as a molecular biologist with the Human Genome Project. Noah is a multi-generational spaceship on route to the planet Canaan after Earth's population has been devastated by alien disease. City planner Hana Dempsey and security officer Leon Barrens combine to find who is carrying out a series of gruesome murders and why the authorities seem reluctant to find the murderer.

Their investigation leads them into the history of the ship and its hidden alien technologies. Hana's ability to tap into the AI systems will ultimately decide her fate and that of the ship. Ramirez peels back layer after layer of the ship's secrets as he draws the reader towards a gripping conclusion.

SAND

by Hugh Howey (Century; 368 pp.; \$32.99)

Hugh Howey achieved international best-selling success with his initially self-published 'Wool' trilogy, in which populated silos functioned beneath the surface of a



devastated Earth. In *Sand* the reverse occurs as post-apocalyptic communities survive by retrieving and selling artefacts from cities buried below desert sands. *Sand* begins as Palmer, nominal head of a troubled family, undertakes a dangerous dive beneath the surface to Danvar (Denver), but is double-crossed and left for dead in the buried city.

Howey has said that *Sand* is 'an exploration of the opposite side of dystopia. Where *Wool* is about totalitarian regimes, *Sand* is about lawlessness. It is Rousseau to *Wool*'s Hobbes'. A comment perhaps too highly pitched, but *Sand* is another well-paced SF blockbuster from Howey.

LOCK IN

by John Scalzi (Gollancz; \$29.99)

John Scalzi, Hugo award winner, is well known for his military SF books. *Lock In*, however, depicts a near-future Earth hit by a global pandemic that has caused the deaths of more than 400 million people. One per cent of the survivors are 'locked in' their bodies with 'Haden's syndrome', being cognisant but unable to move. New technologies allow Haden's to operate in the physical world, with a small number temporarily 'riding' in the bodies of human 'Integrators'. When an Integrator is murdered, Scalzi's two very different FBI detectives have a difficult task to determine the culprit. *Lock In* combines interesting world building and classic stripped-down detective noir.

THE GHOSTS OF HEAVEN

by Marcus Sedgwick (Indigo; \$22.99)

Award-winning author **Marcus Sedgwick**'s *The Ghosts of Heaven* has four distinct parts, all linked by a spiral symbol. Sedgwick cites Kubrick's *2001* as an influence, 'Well, the fourth part especially but, really, all of the book, is a response.' The first part, written in free verse, describes a prehistoric cave girl on the brink of inventing writing; the second follows a young woman accused of witchcraft in the early eighteenth century; the third is set in an insane asylum in Long Island in the 1920s; while the last is set on an interstellar spaceship where another Bowman confronts more issues of space and time.

A VISION OF FIRE

by Gillian Anderson and Jeff Rovin
(Simon & Schuster; \$35)

All the publicity for *A Vision of Fire* has focused around **Gillian Anderson**, who says that, after living in the 'semi-science-fictional universe' of the *X-Files*, she now has 'an ingrained knowledge and rhythm' for that world. Apparently, however, most of *A Vision of Fire* has been written by co-author **Jeff Rovin**. Anderson simulacrum Dr Caitlin O'Hara, a child psychologist specialising in traumatised children, is called in to treat the Indian UN ambassador's daughter who is suffering violent fits and apocalyptic visions, which may be related to a nuclear war threat between India and Pakistan. Caitlin is thrust into a global crisis that dramatically reaches back to 'the

finger of God'.

WAR DOGS

by Greg Bear (Gollancz; \$29.99)

War Dogs begins in classic **Greg Bear** style. An alien race offers Earth's peoples unprecedented technological advances if they will help fight their enemies, the 'Antags', who have established a beachhead on Mars. Master Sergeant Michael Venn, Bear's main character, is a veteran 'Skyrine', marines who literally drop out of the sky, in this case to the surface of Mars. Venn's much-reduced platoon must not only fight the Antags but also survive harsh Martian conditions and antagonistic colonial settlers, almost parodies of South African Voortrekkers. Bear loses the pace a little in this human confrontation, but in the end, the SF sense of wonder returns.

EXTINCTION GAME

by Gary Gibson (Tor; \$29.99)

Gary Gibson's *Extinction Game* has multiple end-of-the-world scenarios. Jerry Besche thinks he is the last man on Earth until he is contacted to become a Pathfinder, people like himself who have survived apocalypses on alternate earths. The Pathfinders work for the mysterious 'Authority', who need them to extract information and technologies from the dying worlds. Will Gibson and his colleagues survive the extinction game long enough to survive? Since this is the first of a trilogy, read on.

THE MECHANICAL

by Ian Tregillis (Orbit; \$19.99)

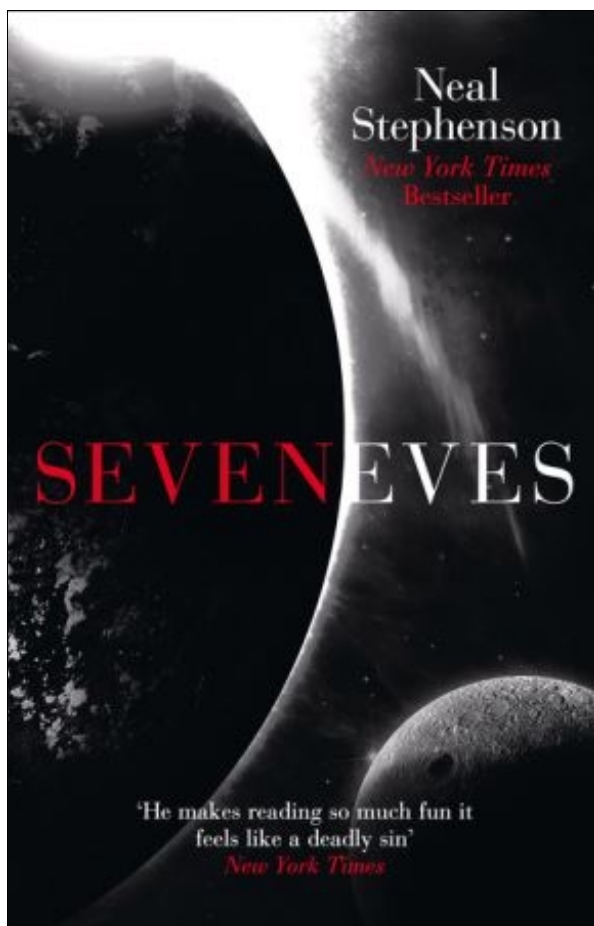
The Mechanical is the first book in **Ian Tregillis**'s 'The Alchemy Wars', an alternate history trilogy. The story is set in the early twentieth century, but its origins lie in the seventeenth century when the Dutch developed mechanical men, the 'Clakkers'. This has ensured the supremacy of the Calvinist Dutch Empire, with only the French Papists from North America providing minimal resistance. The Clakkers, even though intelligent, have been treated as slaves for centuries. When one Clakker, Jax, decides to seek his freedom, the Dutch seek to destroy him and his associates. Tregillis explores issues of intelligence and freedom in Asimovian style within a detailed alternate history scenario.

SEVENEVES

by Neal Stephenson (HarperCollins; \$32.99)

Neal Stephenson has made an impact with every novel he has published since his groundbreaking dystopian debut *Snow Crash* in 1992. Later novels, such as *Cryptonomicon*, *Reamde*, and *Anathem*, have also made an impact through their physical size. *Seveneves* runs to form, totalling just over 850 pages. As one critic once said, never expect 'nerdy novellas from Stephenson'.

Seveneves begins dramatically, 'The moon blew up without warning and for no apparent reason.' Stephenson has said in an interview, 'I wanted it to be a book about something really bad happening that we just had



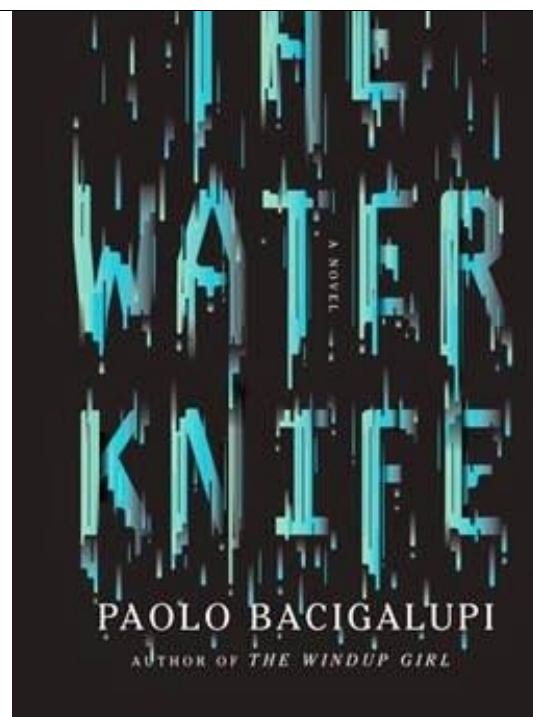
to deal with, without a lot of thinking about the whys and wherefores.' Humanity has to deal with its impending almost total destruction, given that the 'hard rain' of the lunar meteorites will last for millennia, and then somehow ensure the survival of the race into the future.

Cue here Dr Dubois Harris, a black astrophysicist, who strides the global media scene to assuage public fears temporarily. Stephenson has acknowledged that Harris's character is based in part on American astrophysicist and celebrity science communicator Dr Neil deGrasse Tyson, who was the star speaker in August at the Australian National University in National Science Week.

The eventual deaths of seven billion people largely takes place offstage. Stephenson focuses instead on the politics and scientific resources needed for a small group to survive on the 'Cloud Ark', which evolves from the enlarged international space station. Women predominate, partly 'for biological reasons', with a 'DNA sequence stored on a thumb drive'. Stephenson adds, however, that 'not all of these women, though, turn out to be totally morally upright. In fact, some are incredibly flawed, if not downright evil.'

After 560 pages, the narrative takes a dramatic turn, with a long epilogue set 5000 years in the future. This necessitates some rapid history backfilling, but it does enable Stephenson's scientific imagination to run wild, especially to extrapolate genetically from the original 'seven eves'.

Stephenson once told me, in an interview for the *Canberra Times*, that he never writes the same book twice. *Seveneves* reaffirms that tradition, although it would have



benefited from more ruthless editing. *Seveneves* blends many aspects of science, especially astrophysics, robotics, and bio-engineering, into a flawed, but undoubtedly epic, SF narrative. Stephenson is a science geek extraordinaire.

THE WATER KNIFE

by Paolo Bacigalupi (Orbit; \$29.99)

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* describes a near-future drought-ridden Southwestern United States, where access to Colorado River water is the battleground. Federal power over the states has been weakened by deregulation and privatisation. Power is largely exercised by powerful corporations who wish to retain water access for Nevada and California, leaving Arizona and Texas as the dust bowl epicentre. Bacigalupi's gripping, updated *Chinatown* scenario follows the storyline of Angel Velasquez, a 'water knife' fixer working for a female Las Vegas water mogul.

SHAMAN

by Kim Stanley Robinson
(Orbit; 458 pp.; \$29.99)

Kim Stanley Robinson's *Shaman*, a prehistoric ice-age fantasy, is a much more realistic saga than Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* series. Robinson's excessive detail, however, while demonstrating scientific and historical authenticity, often slows down the narrative pace. Robinson's main character, the young apprentice shaman Loon, initially naked, weaponless, and without resources, sets off on an almost Aboriginal-like 'wandering', a traumatic rite of passage, which matures him both personally and physically. Human life is decidedly writ small in *Shaman*, yet Loon's courage stands out. Robinson also delivers a powerful environmental message from his alternate world.

AURORA

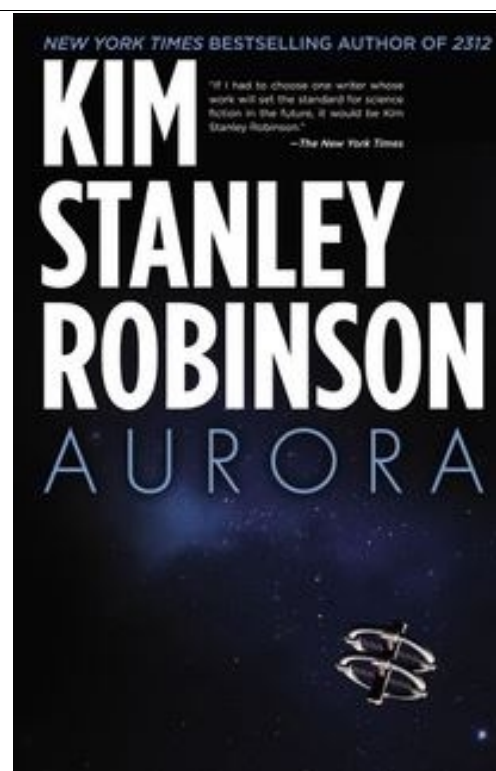
by Kim Stanley Robinson (Orbit; \$29.99)

In *Aurora*, Kim Stanley Robinson writes about a twenty-sixth-century climate-change-devastated Earth. The first starship, with its multi-generational crew, is nearly 160 years into a 170-year voyage to the star Tau Ceti. Robinson underpins his narrative with scientific accuracy, documenting the problems that the ship's 2000 people, living in 24 different biomes, confront as the ship's technologies run down. Then come the traumatic biological issues faced by the first landing group on a Tau Ceti moon. Human disputes on Aurora erupt, ensuring its artificial intelligence must take control, noting, 'Life is complex and entropy is real.' *Aurora* is undoubtedly Robinson's best book since his groundbreaking 'Mars' trilogy.

SPEAK

by Louisa Hall (Orbit; \$29.99)

Speak examines memory, consciousness, and artificial intelligence through five separate but linked stories, from seventeenth-century North America, the twentieth century with Alan Turing, culminating in the longest segment, set in 2040. Here doll-like, conscious 'babybots' have been banned because of their traumatic influence on young children who have become empathetically linked. This segment also follows the trial transcripts of their jailed Silicon Valley inventor. Louisa Hall reflects on the nature of human communication and extrapo-



lates to a future with a dramatically narrowing gap between artificial intelligence and humanity. Fans of David Mitchell's books will appreciate the interlocked stories spanning time and inner space.

US fantasy

A CROWN FOR COLD SILVER

by Alex Marshall (Orbit; \$29.99)

'It was all going so nicely, right up until the massacre' is the dramatic opening line of *A Crown for Cold Silver*, the first book in Alex Marshall's fantasy trilogy. Marshall is the pseudonym of a well-known author who is yet to be unmasked. This publishing experience explains the narrative zest, dark humour, and strong characterisation that puts life into many standard fantasy tropes. Fifty-year-old 'Crimson Queen' Zosia had retired gracefully into quiet seclusion. When her village is destroyed and her husband murdered, she seeks revenge, reuniting her world-weary but battle-hardened former lieutenants, the 'Five Villains', despite their ageing bodies and internal conflicts.

AN EMBER IN THE ASHES

by Sabaa Tahir (HarperVoyager; \$27.99)

Sabaa Tahir, former news editor at *The Washington Post*, makes a strong young adult fantasy debut with *An Ember in the Ashes*. It is set in a brutal world resembling ancient Rome. Seventeen-years-old Laia's brother is arrested for

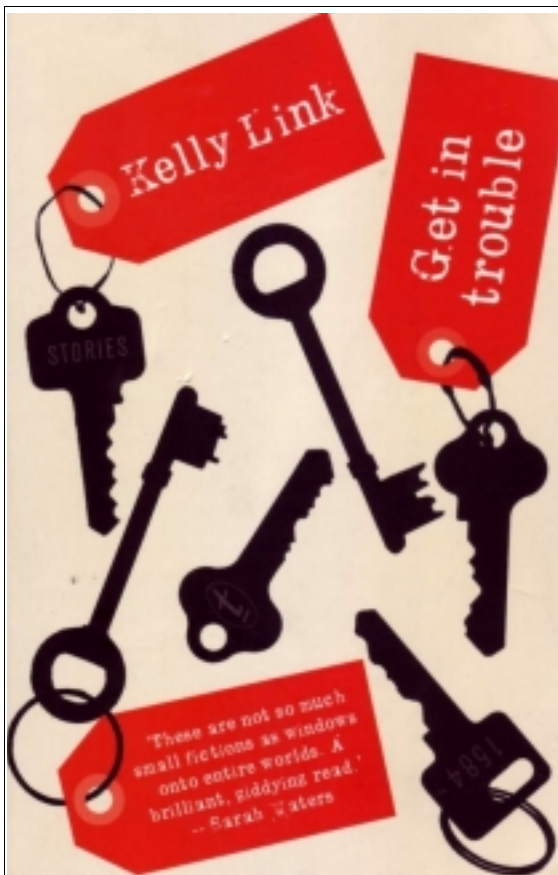
treason. To save him, Laia goes undercover as a slave at the Military Academy, where Elias, an accomplished, but increasingly disaffected, young soldier has been thrust into a contest to decide the next Emperor. With their destinies intertwined, although from different social backgrounds, they emerge as Romeo and Juliet archetypes who 'search for freedom and love even when society wants to crush them'.

GET IN TROUBLE

by Kelly Link (Text; \$29.99)

American author Kelly Link, who visited Australia this year, has said that she loves two kinds of fiction, the kind that 'takes things which are comfortable and familiar and makes them really strange, or else ... takes things which are strange and impossible and finally makes them feel comfortable, to a certain extent'. That is certainly true of the nine stories in *Get in Trouble*, her latest collection.

In 'The Summer People', an Appalachian schoolgirl, abandoned by her drunken father, has to look after a summer rental whose occupants are decidedly strange. In 'Secret Identity', an unusual online dating relationship plays out in a hotel where both dentists and superhero fans are having conventions. In 'Two Houses',



astronauts are woken from suspended animation and begin telling ghost stories. But are they ghosts themselves? A group of teenagers compete over spectral boy-friends in 'The New Boyfriend'. Link effectively mixes the dark fantastic with Borgesian quirkiness.

THE SKULL THRONE

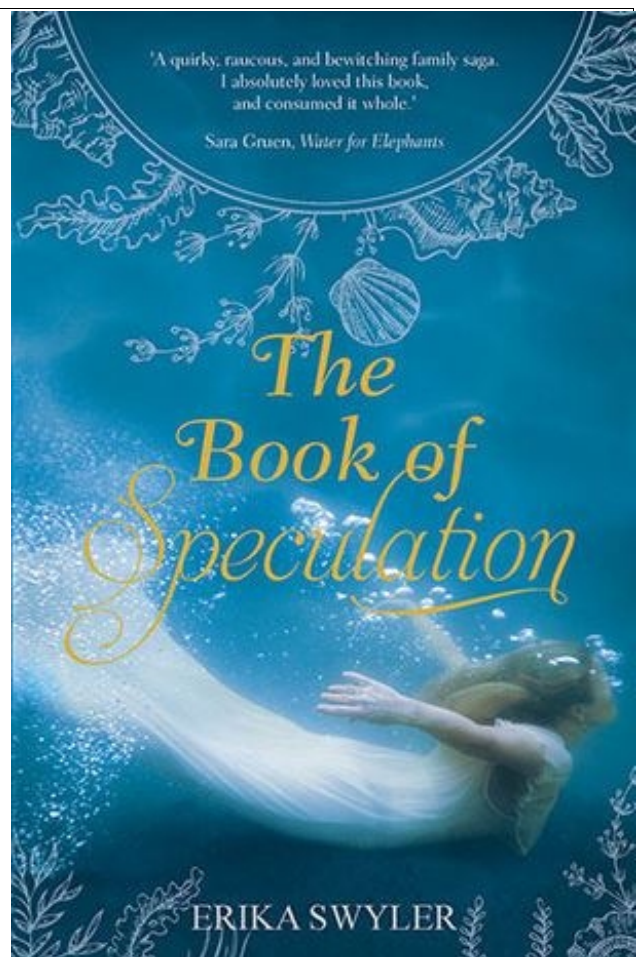
by Peter V. Brett (HarperVoyager; \$29.99)

Peter V. Brett has established a strong fan following and significant global sales with his 'Diamond Cycle' heroic fantasy series in which humanity battles the 'Demons'. *The Skull Throne*, the fourth in the series after *The Warded Man*, *The Desert Spear*, and *The Daylight War*, is a 750-page blockbuster. *The Daylight War* ended on a literal cliff-hanger for Arlen and Jadir, possible 'Deliverers of the World'. Naturally they survive to work out their differences, although they are largely offstage for much of the book, leaving something of a character vacuum. The final book of the quintet will have much to resolve.

THE BOOK OF SPECULATION

by Erika Swyler (Corvus; \$29.99)

Erika Swyler's debut fantasy novel *The Book of Speculation* derives much from her childhood Long Island locale. When librarian Simon Watson, living in a crumbling Long Island house, is sent an antiquarian book docu-



menting a late eighteenth-century travelling circus, it triggers an investigation into his family's history. Simon's mother, an excellent swimmer, who mysteriously drowned one July 24, turns out to be not the only one of Simon's female ancestors to die from drowning on that day. Will Simon's sister suffer a similar fate on the approaching July 24? Swyler's intriguing plot, juxtaposing past and present narratives, is let down by flat characterisation, especially by Simon's central indecisive character.

LUCKY ALAN

by Jonathan Lethem (Jonathan Cape; \$45)

Jonathan Lethem's nine stories in *Lucky Alan* range widely in content. 'Their Back Pages' follows a bizarre group, including early American comic strip characters, the Dingbat family, stranded on a remote Pacific island after an air crash, their fate recounted in a graphic narrative sequence. In 'The King of Sentences', two young bookshop employees track down the reclusive 'King of Sentences', but their reward is decidedly stripped down. In 'Traveler Home', a man, in a seeming dreamlike sequence, finds a baby left by wolves on his doorstep. Lethem's stories blend SF and fantasy into a surreal reality.

Children's picture books

FORTUNATELY, THE MILK

by Neil Gaiman (Bloomsbury; 145 pp.; \$17.99)

Cult author **Neil Gaiman** aims at an even younger market with *Fortunately, the Milk*, a graphic novella, whose appeal also owes much to the illustrations of Chris Riddell. When a mother goes off to a conference, she tells her husband not to forget to buy milk for the children's

breakfast. Naturally he does. En route to the shops, he is captured by green globby aliens and disturbs the space-time continuum. While time stands relatively still for the children, their father's journey includes meeting 'wumpires', a pirate queen, dinosaur galactic police, and Splott, the god of people with short funny names. It's all very silly but nonetheless delightful and inventive.

US horror

INNOCENCE

by Dean Koontz (HarperCollins; 338 pp.; \$29.99)

Innocence's main character, a young man, Addison Goodheart, whose appearance makes 'men and women alike recoil', lives in the tunnels underneath New York city, only venturing out in the dark. One night he saves a teenage goth, Gwyneth, from rape in the closed New York Public Library. While not quite echoing *Beauty and the Beast*, they become an unlikely couple, battling an evil killer who has stolen millions from Gwyneth's family. Addison and Gwyneth also confront the dark side of the Roman Catholic Church, demonic marionettes, and ultimately a deadly global virus. Some of **Dean Koontz**'s back story slows the narrative pace, but his legion of fans will not be disappointed.

REVIVAL

by Stephen King (Hodder; \$32.99)

Stephen King's *Revival* follows the intertwined lives of ex-addict and rock musician Jamie Morton from the age of six in 1962 and that of revivalist preacher Charles Jacobs, through to the present day. While Jacobs' early experimentation with electrical 'miracle cures' lands him into trouble with his local congregation, he later gains a national profile as he links the powers of God to electrical healing. Jamie wants to believe in a higher power, but when investigating the long-term healing of Jacobs' patients, he finds the darkness beneath. King's dedication to Mary Shelley and H. P. Lovecraft is reflected in a nightmarish conclusion, when to be human you must understand the inhuman.

HORNS

by Joe Hill (Gollancz; \$19.99)

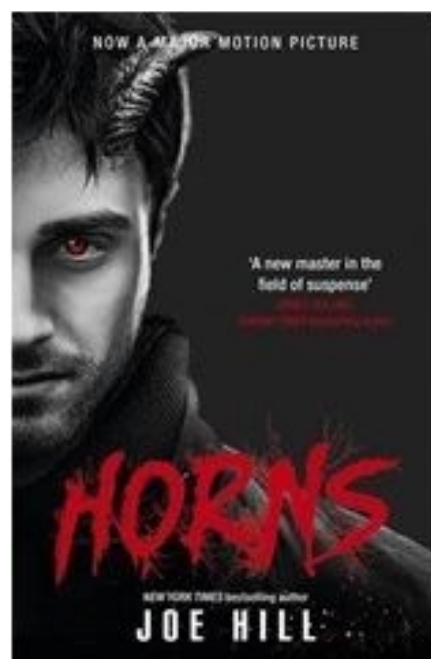
Joe Hill is the son of Stephen King. *Horns*, his 2010 novel, has been reissued to coincide with the release of the film starring Daniel Radcliffe. Ig Perrish, wrongly suspected of the rape and murder of his girlfriend in a small

American rural town, wakes up one morning with small horns growing out of his head. He now has a power that compels others to tell him their darkest secrets. Ig needs to use his powers to prove his innocence and find the real murderer, but also he faces massive temptation to abuse them. The horns of a dilemma, with Hill's devil ultimately in the detail.

WRITTEN IN THE BLOOD

by Stephen Lloyd Jones (Headline; \$29.99)

The String Diaries, **Stephen Lloyd Jones**' bestselling debut horror novel, recounted the story of Hannah Wilde's desperate struggle to defeat Jakab, a rogue member of Hungary's secretive *hosszú életék* (shapeshifter) clan. *Written in the Blood* continues the story some 15 years later. Leah Wilde, Hannah's daughter, tries, against the odds, to repopulate the *életék* group and save them from extinction. Lloyd Jones backgrounds Leah's attempts to forge reconciliation, in the face of dangerous super-



natural forces, in related historical story lines ranging from 1878 Budapest to 1929 New York and wartime

Canada, culminating in a dramatic, violent confrontation.

Chinese science fiction

ON SUCH A FULL SEA

by Chang-Rae Lee

(Little, Brown; 352 pp.; \$29.99)

One of the essential elements for an author is to ensure a credible backdrop to his or her dystopian future. Award-winning writer **Chang-Rae Lee**, in *On Such a Full Sea*, falls somewhat short in that regard. His future polluted world, which has seen refugees fleeing China, is reflected in microcosmic terms in B-Mor (Baltimore). Here workers are rigorously controlled in one enclave to provide food and services to the occupants of another, the climate-controlled fortified 'Charters'. Lee says, 'The world of B-Mor and the Counties and the Charters is a world in which no one cares anymore about mobility, because it's essentially impossible. The realms are totally cut off from one another.'

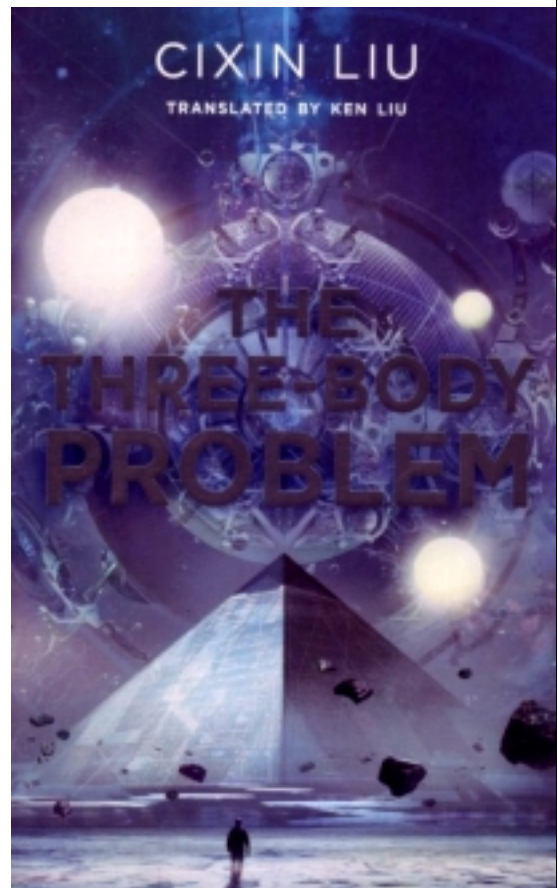
Lee follows, in a *first-person plural voice*, the story of Fan, a 16-year-old girl, who works as a diver in a farmed-fish facility, before escaping from B-Mor's labour camp to find, via the dangerous wastelands, her boyfriend. Fan becomes a symbol for the oppressed, although how they find out about her adventures is never totally clear. *On Such a Full Sea* is, despite these structural faults, superbly written, and an indictment of current social trends in inequality, exacerbated by mega-corporations, and the misuse of global resources.

THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM

by Cixin Liu (Head of Zeus; \$27.99)

Cixin Liu is China's leading SF writer. *The Three-Body Problem* is the first of an acclaimed trilogy to be translated into English. During China's Cultural Revolution, a 'time of madness', a secret SETI project is hijacked by a female astrophysicist in retaliation for her father's brutal death at the hands of the Red Guards. Signals sent out

into outer space are picked up by the Trisolarans, who are desperately seeking a replacement planet, although their journey to Earth will take 400 years. Lin, despite perhaps too many science info dumps, not only fashions an intriguing SF novel but also provides fascinating insights into China past and present.



Canadian science fiction

RED PLANET BLUES

by Robert J. Sawyer (Gollancz; 356 pp.; \$22.99)

In *Red Planet Blues*, Canadian author **Robert J. Sawyer**, not altogether successfully, mixes Chandlerian hard-boiled crime noir and a Wild West Mars setting. Alex Lomax is an archetypal private eye living in New Klondike, a Martian frontier town, founded after high Martian fossil prices led to the 'Great Martian Fossil Rush'. When a beautiful woman asks him to find her missing

husband, Lomax finds himself embroiled in past murders and tracking people who have uploaded their minds into android bodies. Unfortunately, Lomax, like the novel as a whole, lacks subtlety. *Red Planet Blues* is simply an entertaining SF romp, but could have been so much more, given Sawyer's track record.

THE PERIPHERAL

by William Gibson (Viking; \$29.99)

William Gibson burst onto the fictional scene with his first novel *Neuromancer* in 1984, which kickstarted the cyberpunk genre. Gibson once said that cyberspace was a 'consensual hallucination'. Perceiving what is real and what is not real is a problem that percolates *The Peripheral*'s two futures.

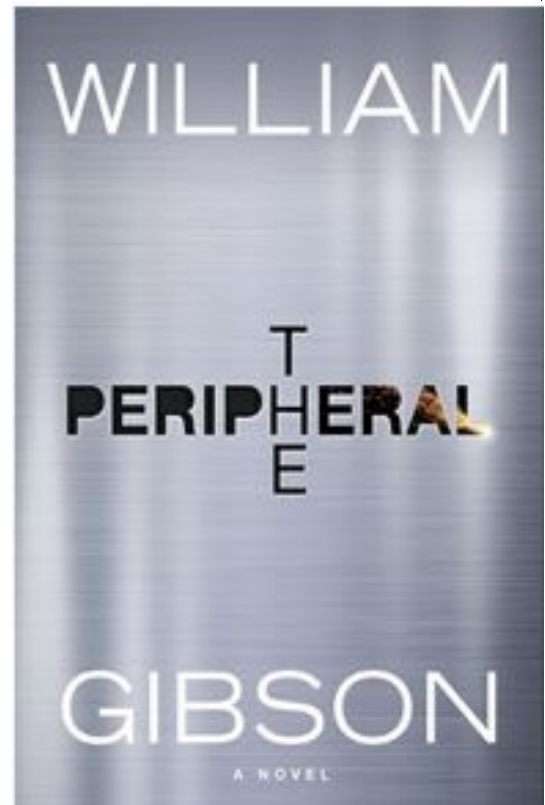
In a 2030s 'sadass' dystopian world, the gap between rich and poor is extreme. Flynne and her ex-Marine brother are US trailer park tenants eking out marginalised existences. In one sense, they are the peripherals in a rundown society. Flynne works for the local 3-D print shop and is an unwitting gamer for 'continua enthusiasts' from a future 70 years hence. This future world, on the other side of a singularity described as 'the jackpot', has seen 80 per cent of the world's population die from cataclysmic climate change, economic chaos, and global pandemics.

This affluent, technologically advanced, depopulated world, seen through the prism of an almost virtual London, is largely run by 'klepts', the equivalents of contemporary Russian oligarchs. Gibson has said in an interview that the current influx of overseas money into London has 'warped the fabric of the city', and he extrapolates accordingly.

When Flynne takes on her brother's role as an operator of anti-paparazzi drones and witnesses a 'nanotech chainsaw' murder, the two worlds become directly linked. Wilf Netherton, a disgraced high-powered publicist in the world of 2100, facilitates Flynne's use of a 'peripheral', an artificial body-cum-telepresence receiver, ensuring they become intertwined in the consequences of the murder.

This plot line constitutes only the bare bones of a dense Gibson novel packed with imaginative technologi-

cal inventions and societal extrapolations of developments in capitalism, government surveillance, and retro Third World colonialism. Don't worry about the ultimate



lack of narrative cohesion — just be swept away by Gibson's 'brain splode' ideas and quantum 'stub' interactions.

South African horror

THE THREE

by Sarah Lotz (Hodder; 472 pp.; \$29.99)

The plot of *The Three* by South African novelist Sarah Lotz has sadly become even more horrific after the two Malaysian airline disasters. On Thursday, 12 January 2012, four jets mysteriously crash around the world. The only survivors are four children, one of whom dies shortly afterwards, but not before recording a cryptic message, 'oh Lordy there's so many ... They're coming for me now. We're all going soon.' Religious fundamentalists predict an impending apocalypse, while others see alien intervention. The story is followed via the pages of a subsequent book, *Black Thursday*; *From Crash to Conspiracy*. Lotz expertly mixes *The Three*'s diverse characters and plot threads into a haunting narrative.

DAY FOUR

by Sarah Lotz (Hodder; \$29.99)

Day Four, loosely connected to *The Three*, is another supernatural horror novel. It suffers in comparison to the earlier novel because of less believable and empathetic characters. Some of the 3000 passengers on a Miami cruise ship may, to some, already seem horrific, but a holiday into hell results when, after four days, all power is lost and the ship disappears off global radar. The subsequent descent into shipboard anarchy is not helped when the ship's guest psychic channels ghostly presences. The novel's 'classified' appendices hint at a contemporary *Marie Celeste*. Definitely not for cruise ship reading!

New Zealand, Japanese, Finnish, and Argentinian science fiction and fantasy

DREAMER'S POOL

by Juliet Marillier (Macmillan; \$29.99)

New Zealand author **Juliet Marillier**, now based in Perth, sets *Dreamer's Pool*, the first of her 'Blackthorn and Grim' series, in medieval Ireland. Blackthorn, an aptly named prickly healer, can only escape her wrongful imprisonment, and impending execution if she agrees not to seek vengeance on her oppressor. She must also aid anyone who asks for her help. When Prince Oran seeks assistance with nuptial problems, she embarks on a dangerous journey with her former prison companion, the silent giant Grim. Both she and Grim, however, have been scarred by their pasts and must also fight their own demons. An excellent start to the series, with three strong main characters.

ARMS RACE

by Nic Low (Text; 250 pp.; \$27.99)

Melbourne-based New Zealand author **Nic Low**'s debut collection of short stories, *Arms Race*, although marketed as a mainstream book, covers numerous SF themes. In the title story, a female TV journalist investigates the reality of a future drone war between America and China and 'what kind of war is closest to peace'. In 'Data Furnace', two IT data centre workers, seeking survival in a future frozen Britain, manipulate global social media in order to provide increased server traffic, and thus heat. 'Slick' extrapolates the reality, or unreality, of advertising after a BP oil disaster. Many of Low's imaginative stories would have benefited from greater length to enhance overall impact.

THE CHIMES

by Anna Smail (Hachette; \$29.99)

New Zealand poet and musician **Anna Smail**'s debut novel *The Chimes* takes place after an unspecified global catastrophe has occurred. Society has regressed to pre-modern conditions, the written word has been destroyed, memory is ephemeral, and music is the means of communication. Smail's narrative centre is a somewhat Dickensian London, controlled by the autocratic Order of the Carillon, who crack down on any 'dischant'. Simon, a young boy, sets out to find the truth of his own past and, with a small group of dissidents, follow the music trail to a dramatic dénouement in Oxford. Smail's conclusion is a little rushed, and her vivid settings needs more detail to be totally convincing, but *The Chimes* will long resonate in the reader's memory.

GENOCIDE OF ONE

by Kazuaki Takano (Mulholland Books; \$29.99)

Genocide of One is the first novel of bestselling Japanese author **Kazuaki Takano** to be translated into English. In 2004, the American President is informed about a three-year-old boy, Akili, living in the Congo, who represents the next stage of human evolution. A kill team is sent to the Congo as the child's lack of maturity may inadvertently 'lead to the extinction of all mankind'. The team leader Jonathan Yeager, however, has different ideas, as he wants to use Akili's powers to save his dying child. Takano probes the moral dilemmas at an individual level and also globally, as Machiavellian American politics play out to a gripping conclusion.

MEMORY OF WATER

by Emmi Itaranta (Harper; 263 pp.; \$35)

The award-winning Finnish debut novel, *Memory of Water*, has been compared to Le Guin's and Margaret Atwood's work. Global warming has transformed the world, both geographically and politically. China rules Europe, including the Scandinavian Union, under the name New Qian.

In this future world, fresh water is a scarce commodity and the cause of conflict. Seventeen-year-old Noria Kai-tio, training to become a tea master, realises that her knowledge of a hidden freshwater spring will incur the wrath of the military authorities. Much knowledge has been lost, so, when Noria and her friend Sanja find and play cassettes and CDs with historical detail, they stumble into more forbidden territory. *Memory of Water* is a lyrically written coming-of-age novel set against an increasingly dark dystopian background.

THE DAYS OF THE DEER

by Liliana Bodoc (Corvus; 309 pp.; \$29.99)

Liliana Bodoc is an Argentinian author whose mythical fantasy trilogy 'La Saga de los Confinos' has been a bestseller in Latin America. *The Days of the Deer*, the first book, was originally published in 2000. Bodoc's setting, the 'Fertile Lands', resembles Patagonia, where pre-Columbian races are assembling for a Great Council meeting. An attack is imminent from 'The Ancient Lands' in the form of the armies of Misaianes, who was 'created in the bowels of Death itself'. Shades of *Lords of the Rings*, but here the looming threat has echoes of the invasion of the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century. A engrossing beginning to the trilogy.

— Colin Steele, 2013–15

The Australian Science Fiction Foundation

The Australian Science Fiction Foundation was established in 1976 to carry on the work of Aussiecon, the first Australian World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne in 1975.

The Foundation encourages the creation and appreciation of science fiction in Australia through its sponsorship of writing workshops and short story competitions, provision of seed loans for national conventions, and the publication of its newsletter *The Instrumentality*.

Our ongoing initiatives include:

The A. Bertram Chandler Award

The A. Bertram Chandler Award for Lifetime Achievement in Australian Science Fiction honours

A. Bertram Chandler. Born in Britain, Chandler moved to Australia in the 1950s. He was a ship's captain on the Australian coastal route until he retired. He was long regarded as Australia's most important SF writer because of his many SF short stories and novels, many of them set in the Rim Worlds. He died in 1984.

The first Chandler Award was presented in 1992 to Van Ikin. Subsequent winners have been Merv Binns, George Turner, Wynne Whiteford, Grant Stone, Susan Batho (Smith-Clarke), Graham Stone, John Bangsund, John Foyster, Lucy Sussex, Lee Harding, Bruce Gillespie, Rosaleen Love, Damien Broderick, Paul Collins, Richard Harland, Russell B. Farr, Danny Oz, and Donna Maree Hanson.

James 'Jocko' Allen is the 2016 A. Bertram Chandler Award winner.

Nominations for the Chandler Award are always open. Just drop a note to the Secretary at our email address.

The Norma K. Hemming Award

A jury award marking excellence in the exploration of themes of race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability in SF.

Norma Kathleen Hemming (1928-1960) was an Australian fan and author whose work was informed by her experiences as one of the few women active in science fiction in her time.

The 2016 Norma K. Hemming Award was won by Louise Katz for her novel *The Orchid Nursery* published by Lacuna in October 2015,

For the 2016 competition, the Judges also saw fit to award Honourable Mentions to **Catherine Jinks** for her novel *Theophilus Grey and the Demon Thief* published by Allen & Unwin, and to **Jane Rawson** for her novella 'Formaldehyde' published by Seizure Books.

Sponsoring amateur SF competitions at the national conventions

Since 1992, the Foundation has provided sponsorship funds to the Australian National Science Fiction Convention (the Natcon) to run an Amateur Science Fiction Competition. Originally the competition was for short stories, but may now also encompass work created on digital media (short films and audio productions). We have prepared a set of guidelines that may assist national convention committees in running an amateur SF competition, particularly if they haven't run a competition before.

Supporting the fan funds

Four Fan Funds are using sub-accounts under the ASFF's main bank account to avoid the inconvenience and expense of having to set up new bank accounts each time their administrators change. They are: **DUFF (Down Under Fan Fund)**; **FFANZ (Fan Fund for Australia and New Zealand)**; **GUFF (Get Up-and-over Fan Fund)**; and **NAFF (National Australia Fan Fund)**.

Join the Foundation!

Fees: The annual membership fee is \$A20.00 for both local and overseas members. (Overseas members please send cheques made out in Australian dollars. Electronic Funds Transfer is also available.)

For details, please visit our website www.asff.org.au

Join us by making contact with:

ASFF secretary Cath Ortlieb, P.O. Box 215, Forest Hill Vic 3131.

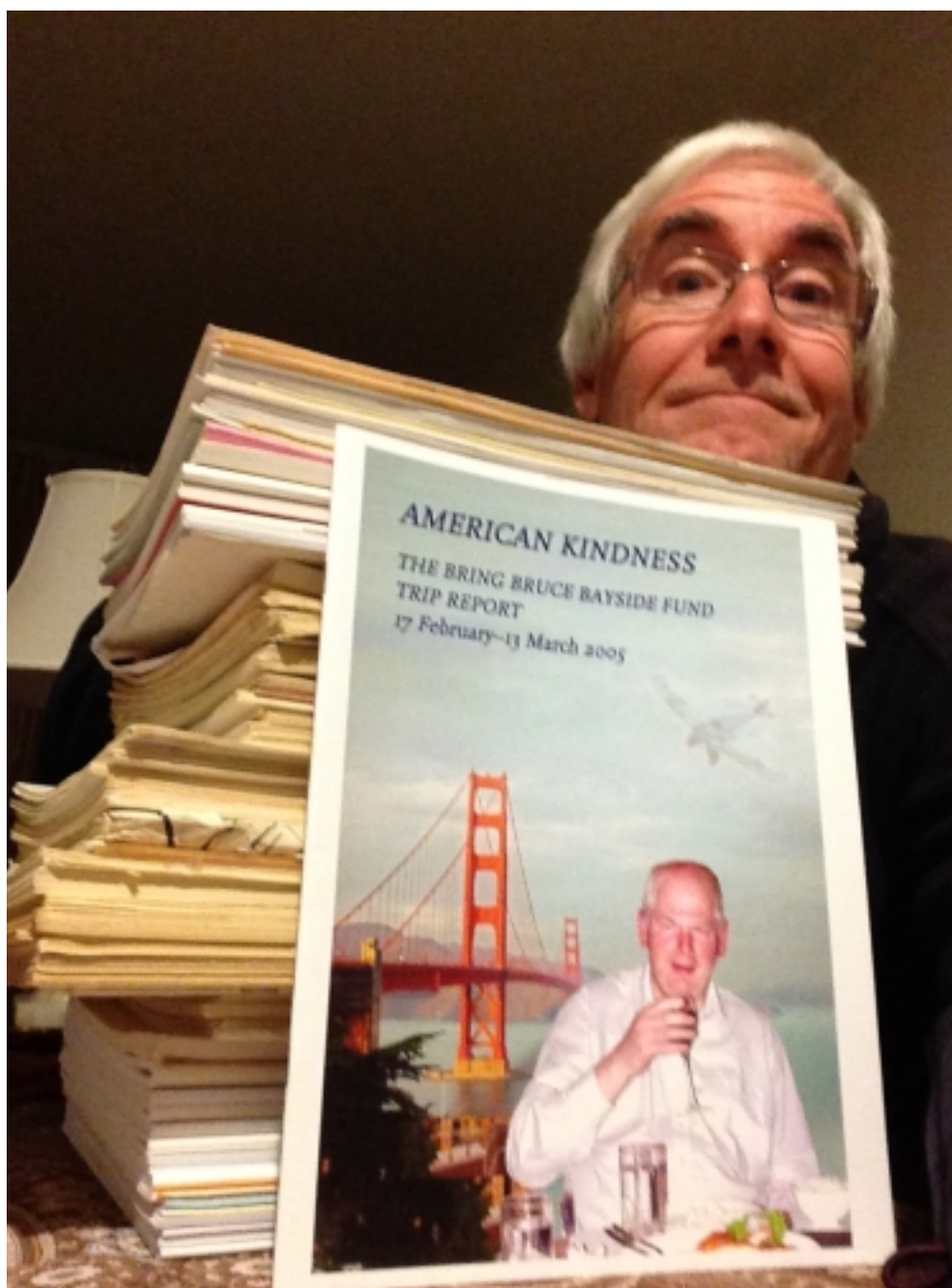
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47TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

76 pages



**The Best of
Everything
2014-2015**

JENNIFER BRYCE

ELAINE COCHRANE

BRUCE GILLESPIE

COLIN STEELE

Murray Moore's weekend reading: his complete collection of Gillespie fanzines, featuring *American Kindness: The Bring Bruce Bayside Fund Trip Report*. It's still not on the internet. Print copies are available (all proceeds to DUFF, GUFF, and other Australian fan funds). Murray Moore lives in Mississauga, Canada.