

# SF COMMENTARY 95

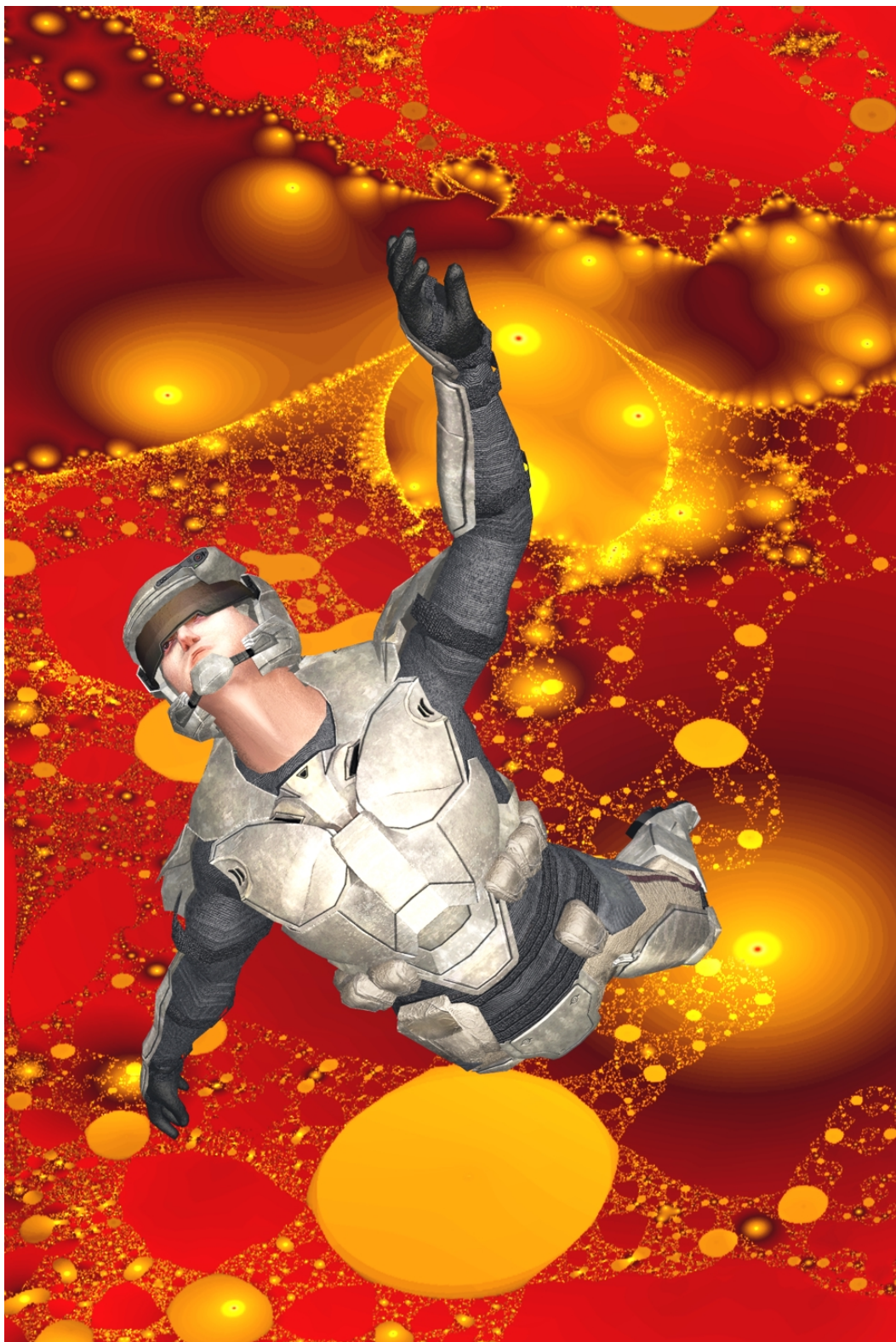
December 2017

96 pages

## IN THIS ISSUE:

**JOHN LITCHEN**  
**COLIN STEELE**

JAMES 'JOCKO' ALLEN  
GEOFF ALLSHORN  
DOUG BARBOUR  
LARRY BIGMAN  
SHERYL BIRKHEAD  
MICHAEL BISHOP  
RICHARD BLAIR  
WILLIAM BREIDING  
DAMIEN BRODERICK  
STEPHEN CAMPBELL  
PEGGYANN CHEVALIER  
KEVIN CHEEK  
PAUL COLLINS  
GIAMPAOLO COSSATO  
MATTHEW DAVIS  
ROBERT DAY  
DITMAR (DICK JENSSEN)  
MICHAEL DOBSON  
LEIGH EDMONDS  
BRUCE GILLESPIE  
JOHN HERTZ  
JERRY KAUFMAN  
RICK KENNETT  
DANIEL KING  
DAVID LANGFORD  
ROBERT LICHTMAN  
LYNC  
PATRICK MCGUIRE  
ANDREW MACRAE  
IAN MOND  
MURRAY MOORE  
GERALD MURNANE  
LLOYD PENNEY  
ANDY ROBSON  
YVONNE ROUSSEAU  
SANJAR SIRCAR  
PAUL SKELTON  
STEVE SNEYD  
MILT STEVENS  
TIM TRAIN  
JACK WODHAMS  
CASEY WOLF  
RAY WOOD  
MARTIN MORSE  
WOOSTER  
BILL WRIGHT  
and many others



Cover: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Adrift in the Klimt Universe'.

# Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)

## Adrift in the Klimt Universe

Some films engage me almost from the start — most often it is the music, sometimes the image. And so it was that when Nicolas Roeg's film *Bad Timing* began with the protagonist (Art Garfunkel) in an art gallery gazing at paintings by Gustav Klimt, I was immediately captivated, as I am a great admirer of his work. Perhaps because of that opening, I class the movie as in my 'top 100 list', but closer to number 100 than number one; although even with a different opening, I'd still have *Bad Timing* in that personal (idiosyncratic) list.

One of the best films I saw during the last year was *Woman in Gold*, which told the story of how the rightful owner of Klimt's portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer was finally able to wrest possession of it from the Austrian government. It had been stolen by the Nazis during the Second World War and was exhibited in the gallery seen in *Bad Timing*. The Austrian government was, in effect, a receiver of stolen goods, and because the painting was regarded as a national *Mona Lisa*, refused proper restoration. In essence, they held the painting to ransom — an exorbitant ransom. I found the film, thanks to Helen Mirren's wonderful performance, intensely moving at times.

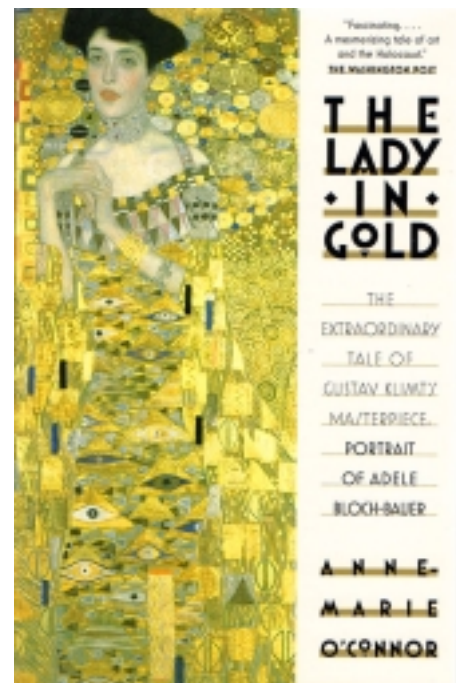
The looting and recovery of stolen works of art also featured in a film of the previous year, *The Monuments*

*Men*, which, although featuring a stellar cast, was, at least in my opinion, very much inferior. The process of the theft, and the efforts of the French during the war to subvert the larceny is extremely well told in John Frankenheimer's film *The Train*. In fact if, like me, you occasionally indulge in a double-feature home viewing night, then *The Train* followed by *Woman in Gold* would make an excellent few hours' gratification.

For those of you who share my enthusiasm for Gustav Klimt, I would recommend the book *Gustav Klimt* by Rachel Barnes, published by Quercus. It's a huge book — 14 by 17 inches in size, thereby opening to 28 by 17 inches — with many pages displaying just a single painting in colour: and it's beautifully printed. Now such a book could be quite expensive, but it is still available, as I write, at the Book Depository () for US\$40.41, and there's no shipping charge to overseas locations.

All of the above means that when I was fiddling with my fractal-generating program djFractals and came across an image which had vague evocations of Klimt I decided to use it, coloured appropriately of course, as a background to a graphic, placing an explorer into the frame immediately led to the cover. As simple as that.

— Ditmar (Dick Jenssen), December 2015



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FRONT COVER: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Inside the Klimt Universe'.

ARTWORK: Stephen Campbell (p. 58).

PHOTOGRAPHS: Christopher Priest (pp. 6, 7); Mark Gerson (p. 7); Edward McArdle (p. 15); Gillian Polack (p. 16); Gary Mason (p. 17); Dick Jenssen (p. 17); Jeri Bishop (p. 63); David Lake (p. 76); Paul Collins (p. 77); Leigh Edmonds (p. 85).

3 **COVER STORY:**  
**ADRIFT IN THE KLIMT UNIVERSE**  
Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)

20 **FASCINATING MARS, PART 2**  
John Litchen

40 **THE FIELD**  
Colin Steele

4 **I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS**

6 **MEMORIES OF BRIAN ALDISS**  
6 **IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE A LIFE WITHOUT BRIAN ALDISS**  
Bruce Gillespie

8 **A VALEDICTION FORBIDDING MELANCHOLY: ALDISS AND THE FAR FUTURE**  
Bruce Gillespie

13 **THOUGHTS ON READING A NEW OLD BOOK BY BRIAN ALDISS**  
Tim Train

15 **BILL WRIGHT RECEIVES THE A. BERTRAM CHANDLER AWARD 2017**  
LynC  
Bill Wright  
Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)

58 **LETTERS OF COMMENT ON SF COMMENTARY 91-93**  
Stephen Campbell :: Geoff Allshorn :: Murray Moore :: James 'Jocko' Allen ::

Daniel King :: Michael Bishop :: Robert Lichtman :: Damien Broderick :: David Langford :: Steve Sneyd :: Jerry Kaufman :: Matthew Davis :: Rick Kennett :: Sheryl Birkhead :: Milt Stevens :: Martin Morse Wooster :: Doug Barbour :: Richard Blair :: William Breiding :: Giampaolo Cossato  
Peggyann Chevalier :: Ian Mond :: Andy Robson

75 **FEATURE LETTERS REMEMBERING DAVID J. LAKE AND JACK WODHAMS**  
Sanjay Sircar :: Andrew Macrae :: Jack Wodhams :: Paul Collins :: Yvonne Rousseau

77 **BEYOND KNOWN WORLDS: AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW, APRIL 1983**  
Yvonne Rousseau

80 **FEATURE LETTERS**  
Patrick McGuire :: Leigh Edmonds :: Robert Day :: Bruce Gillespie :: Paul Skelton

88 **LETTERS OF COMMENT ON SF COMMENTARY 94**  
Gerald Murnane :: Michael Dobson :: Larry Bigman :: John Litchen :: Ray Wood :: Casey Wolf :: Kevin Cheek :: Lloyd Penney :: Robert Day :: John Hertz

95 **WE ALSO HEARD FROM ...**



# End of an era

## Gillespie fanzines go all-electronic

Ever since postage prices, especially overseas postage, began rising steeply ten years ago, I've had increasing difficulty in supporting the print publication of *SF Commentary*, *Treasure*, and my other magazines, such as *Steam Engine Time*. However, I have received regular freelance indexing work during the last five years, so have been able to print a small number of copies for major contributors, subscribers, and fanzine publishers who sent me paper magazines or books.

Suddenly at the end of February this flow of regular work stopped, for reasons I may never discover, so I find myself with no spare income to print and post any fanzines other than a few copies of my ANZAPazine *\*brg\**. This is embarrassing, because some people have sent me \$100 subscriptions in the expectation of receiving print copies. If I receive any unexpected income over the next year or so, I will meet those expectations. Your names are in my card index. The trouble with miracles, however (as Tom Disch once said) is that, although they happen, they cannot be relied upon.

Please do not send me further subscriptions. I can't meet your expectations.

The same goes for those people who have no way of downloading *SF Commentary* from Bill Burns' eFanzines.com. I also know their names, and will print copies for these few people if a miracle turns up. (Miracles have been in short supply during 2017.)

Those people who send me print fanzines and do not themselves post to eFanzines.com will have to decide whether they still want to keep me on their files. I certainly don't want to miss out on such eminent fanzines as *Banana Wings* and *Trap Door*.

'Always look on the bright side of life,' sang the Monty Pythons in similar circumstances. I am forcibly retired at last. If most people on the mailing list are willing to download and read *SFC* and *Treasure* from eFanzines.com, this gives me much greater freedom to produce smaller issues more frequently. It's only the oddities of the postage system that have forced me to limit the size of issues to between 64 and 72 pages. My ideal would be a fanzine produced fortnightly or monthly containing all the great stuff that I've received, whether it amounts to 10 pages or 100 pages.

If I have to say goodbye to valued old friends, I will grieve. But many such friends have disappeared over the years, and new friends are always getting in touch. So long — and thanks for all the fish to come.

**Bruce Gillespie, May 2017**

**Randy Byers:  
'Cannon Beach'**



# I must be talking to my friends

## Who knows where 2017 goes?

When last I wrote, it seemed that I had at last retired, because I had received no paying work for three months. This left me with a rapidly declining bank account, and no hope of printing my magazines and sending them out by mail, especially not by airmail. (Australia's airmail rate will be exactly three times that of America's, as of 1 October 2017.) Hence I've told everybody that I will be merely posting my magazines as files on efanazines.com.

### Lost time

At the beginning of June I received the offer of two indexing jobs from my usual client. I protested that I thought I had fallen off the end of the twig. 'No,' she said. 'It's just that authors have been doing their own indexes.' How dare they! In my experience, authors of textbooks would rather commit seppuku than prepare their own indexes.

As soon as I had finished the indexes for that client, I received a commission from a new client. He is an academic at a major Australian university, but has written a history textbook to be published in America. He more or less told me that I could charge him whatever I asked, and that he could pay me immediately. (I still don't know who recommended me.) The book itself is very interesting, but I won't discuss it until it appears. I wore myself out with that one, especially as it took 10 hours long than I had quoted for. Warning: don't do freelance work for independent academics, only for well-stashed large companies. I knew that; I have known that since the seventies. Suddenly I discovered that he did not have the cash sitting there to pay me; he was depending on a research grant from the university. In the end, I escaped lightly. The university took more than 30 days to pay, but less than 60 days.

While I was finishing the academic index, I received an email from a client from whom I had not heard for three years. Just out of the blue. No explanation for the silence or the unexpected call. 'Please index a Chemistry textbook.' A week after that, the same client emailed that one of her indexers had dropped out, and would I like three more in a row? 'Er, yes please.' 'Could you do four indexes in the time allowed for three?'

When I had finished that stretch of work, I hadn't looked at *SFC* 95 for over three months.

In March it looked as if I had been forced to retire, but on very little income. I asked to be paid per month from my super-annuation kitty three times the amount I had been drawing. 'You'd better inform CentreLink,' said my superannuation manager. This I did. We then discovered that we should have been sending our tax returns for the previous five years to CentreLink! We had not

### Stop press: Randy Byers, d. 20 Nov. 2017, age 57

One of the best people I have ever met, Randy Byers, has succumbed to brain cancer at the age of 57, in Seattle. There have been much sad news over recent years, but this is the saddest day of all. I particularly remember Randy's extreme kindness to me when I visited Seattle in 2005, and his achievements in fandom are many. Most amazing was his courage during the last year and a half of his life as he has kept posting on Facebook and publishing fanzines.

known this. Our tax accountant had told us that CentreLink monitored all our bank accounts, and would make any adjustments annually based on those bank accounts. He was wrong. My fortnightly pension had been based on our tax returns of five years before — a year in which my taxable income had been the vast sum of \$5000. Elaine dredged up the old accounts and submitted them. The result is that I have had to pay back \$12,000 of pension money sent to me over the last five years, and my total pension amount per month has suddenly been reduced quite sharply. I couldn't have paid back the \$12,000, of course, except that Elaine has lent me the money against the unlikely day I might have a windfall. But the main business of CentreLink under the current government is persecuting pensioners and other welfare recipients, so a month or so later my monthly pension was reduced even further.

Despite having hit the age of 70, no retirement for me. I need to keep working as long and often as possible. Fortunately I don't feel any less able to generate indexes than I ever did, but I have managed to retire from book editing (which Elaine still does).

So financially it's been a kick-in-the-teeth year, but my health has held up, and so has Elaine's. I can still go for a long walk every day, and read the books, watch the films, and listen to the music that I enjoy, but I'm not writing or publishing much.

Elaine has had plenty of work over the year, with some relaxation time in which she can do a lot of embroidery and knitting and gardening and cat cuddling.

### Lost friends

There have been awful lot of deaths this year, including

innumerable people killed by guns and bombs fired by their fellow human beings. There are some people whose loss can persuade you that the human race is worth continuing with.

Various rock stars have dropped off the twig during the year. Most missed is a recent casualty: **Tom Petty**. I remember hearing his wonderful ballad ‘Magnolia’ in 1977 or 1978 on 3RMIT (as 3RRR was then) or 3CR. He and his group the Heartbreakers sounded a lot like Roger McGuinn and the Byrds, at a time when I was just discovering the Byrds for the first time and buying all their albums on American cutout pressings as they appeared in local stores such as Discurio. Tom Petty’s first two albums had a punk swagger to them, but he was definitely a rock-and-roller. And there was very little rock and roll on the radio in 1977 and 1978.

His third album, *Damn the Torpedos*, was something else altogether: luminous West Coast rock from a powerful band, and a voice you just knew could fill stadiums. It sold millions. Its best track was ‘Louisiana Rain’, one of the greatest ballads ever recorded. *Hard Promises* followed, with Tom Petty’s famous duet with Stevie Nicks, ‘Stop Dragging My Heart Around’. Then followed a double live album, *Pack Up the Plantation*, which has never been re-released on CD. It featured Tom Petty’s version of the Byrds’ ‘So You Want to be a Rock and Roll Star’. By now, Tom Petty had done what nobody could have thought possible in the late seventies: made good solid tuneful rock and roll fashionable again. Then he nearly ruined his career by making a great rock and roll record: *Let Me Up (I’ve Had Enough)*. The main influence here was the Rolling Stones rather than the Byrds.

After that one failure, Tom Petty had learned his lesson. Rock and roll was all right in its place, but it had

to sound good on commercial radio. Guided by Jeff Lynne (from ELO) he fashioned a slightly softer sound. From then on, even his less interesting LPs were rescued by the quality of the songs themselves. Every album since then has been graced, or even rescued, by at least three or four classic songs. He went solo for awhile, rejoined the Heartbreakers, and even (for two albums) re-assembled his original band, Mudcrutch. Both *Mudcrutch* and *Mudcrutch II* are superb albums, showing off Petty’s song-writing skills.

Two of Tom Petty’s most successful singles, though, were those he contributed to the *Travelin’ Wilburys* albums thirty years ago. In the last ten years I have seen Peter Bodgdanovich’s four-hour documentary *Runnin’ Down a Dream*, about the band, and *The Live Anthology*, a four-CD set of classic live performances. A few weeks ago Tom and the Heartbreakers finished what they expected to be their final huge American tour. And it was.

Veteran pioneering Australian SF writers **Jack Wodhams** and **David J. Lake** have left us recently. See various tributes on pages 75–79.

Milt Stevens, my *SF Commentary* correspondent for some years, and all-round fannish good guy, died the same day as Tom Petty. His last three letters of comment appear in this issue of *SFC*.

My greatest personal loss, though, has been one of my few favourite SF writers, **Brian Aldiss**. The following pages pay tribute to his life and work.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 4 October/6 November 2017

## Favourite books read so far this year

These books are listed in the order in which I read them. Thanks to **David Russell**, for sending me the Harry Harrison auto-biography; **John Litchen**, for his book of collected memoirs (six sections of which have already appeared in *Treasure*); **Jenny Blackford**, for her superb book of poems; **William Breiding**, for his wonderful book of essays, **Race Mathews**, for his illuminating history of Distributism and Labor in Australia; and **David Grigg**, for giving me the two books of George Orwell essays.

- Laura Thomson: TAKE SIX GIRLS! THE LIVES OF THE MITFORD SISTERS (2015)
- Tarjei Vesaas: THE ICE PALACE (1963)
- Karen Lamb: THEA ASTLEY: INVENTING HER OWN WEATHER (2015)
- Michael Dirda: AN OPEN BOOK (2003)
- John Litchen: EPHEMERON: A MEMOIR (2017)
- Nicholas Shakespeare: THE HIGH FLYER (1993)
- Cat Sparks: LOTUS BLUE (2017)
- Harry Harrison: HARRY HARRISON! HARRY HARRISON! (2014)
- Lawrence Block (ed): IN SUNLIGHT OR IN SHADOW: STORIES INSPIRED BY THE PAINT-

INGS OF EDWARD HOPPER (2016)

- Claire North: THE END OF THE DAY (2017)
- Jenny Blackford: THE LOYALTY OF CHICKENS: POETRY (2017)
- John Crowley: THE TRANSLATOR (2002)
- William M. Breiding: ROSE MOTEL: FANZINE PIECES 2080–2014 (2017)
- Diane Wynne Jones: REFLECTIONS ON THE MAGIC OF WRITING (2012)
- Nikolai Leskov: SELECTED TALES (1962)
- Race Mathews: OF LABOUR AND LIBERTY: DISTRIBUTISM IN VICTORIA 1891–1966 (2017)
- Frank M. Robinson: NOT SO GOOD A GAY MAN: A MEMOIR (2017)
- Virginia Woolf: MRS DALLOWAY (1925)
- Garry Disher: HER (2017)
- Virginia Woolf: NIGHT AND DAY (1919)
- George Orwell: INSIDE THE WHALE AND OTHER ESSAYS (1957)
- George Orwell: DEATH OF THE ENGLISH MURDER AND OTHER ESSAYS (1965)
- Ellen Datlow (ed): BLACK FEATHERS: DARK AVIAN TALES: AN ANTHOLOGY (2017)

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# Memories of Brian Aldiss (1925–2017)

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It's hard to imagine a life without Brian Aldiss

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Bruce Gillespie

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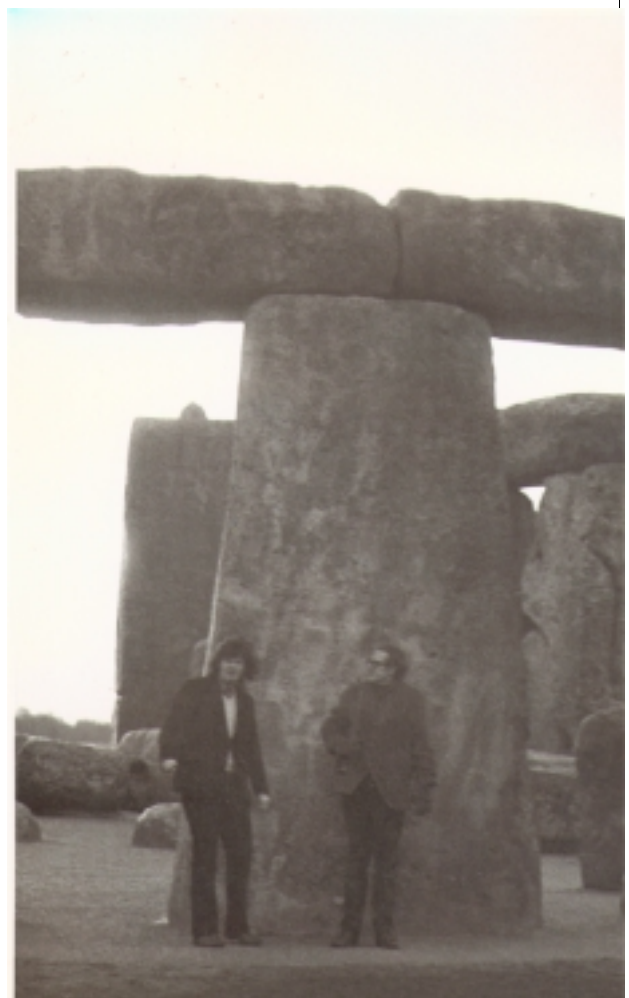
It's very hard to imagine life in a world without Brian Aldiss. I hadn't read anything much I'd liked of his when I first met Lee Harding and John Bangsund in late 1967, but Lee pointed me toward the *Saliva Tree* collection and the new hardback edition of *Hothouse* (renamed in USA as *The Long Afternoon of the Earth*). Both, of course, made me a lifelong fan of Brian's writing immediately. Then came the Colin Charteris 'Acid Head War' stories in the new quarto-sized *New Worlds*, eventually appearing as *Barefoot in the Head*. And *An Age* (*Cryptozoic!* in America), and ever onward, especially *The Malacia Tapestry* and *Frankenstein Unbound*, while I was seeking out all of Brian's earlier work, especially *Greybeard* and the great early short stories. *Hothouse* remains my favourite SF novel, reread several times in order to write reviews (most recently for Damien Broderick's *Earth Is But a Star* collection in 2000).

When I began publishing *SF Commentary* in 1969, I got in touch with Brian, and he sent a wonderful letter of comment. He kept sending them, every few years, until about 10 years ago.

In January 1974, when I was visiting London, I was invited to a dinner he had organised for Clive, his son from his first marriage, at an Indian restaurant. That was very enjoyable. On my last day in England, the last day of my five-month pilgrimage, he rang the home of Chris Priest, where I was staying. 'Is Bruce still there?' said Brian. 'Well, bring him up to Oxford for the day!' And off we went in Chris' mini-Cooper to Brian and Margaret's famous Heath House near Oxford. We transferred to Brian's somewhat larger car, then went on a pilgrimage to Stonehenge, via several pubs on the way. It was dry when we set out, but as we wandered around Stonehenge, as you were allowed to do in those days, a magnificent storm blew in, so we went back to Oxford, to a wonderful meal prepared by Margaret (the only time I met her), then back to London. One of the very best days of my life.

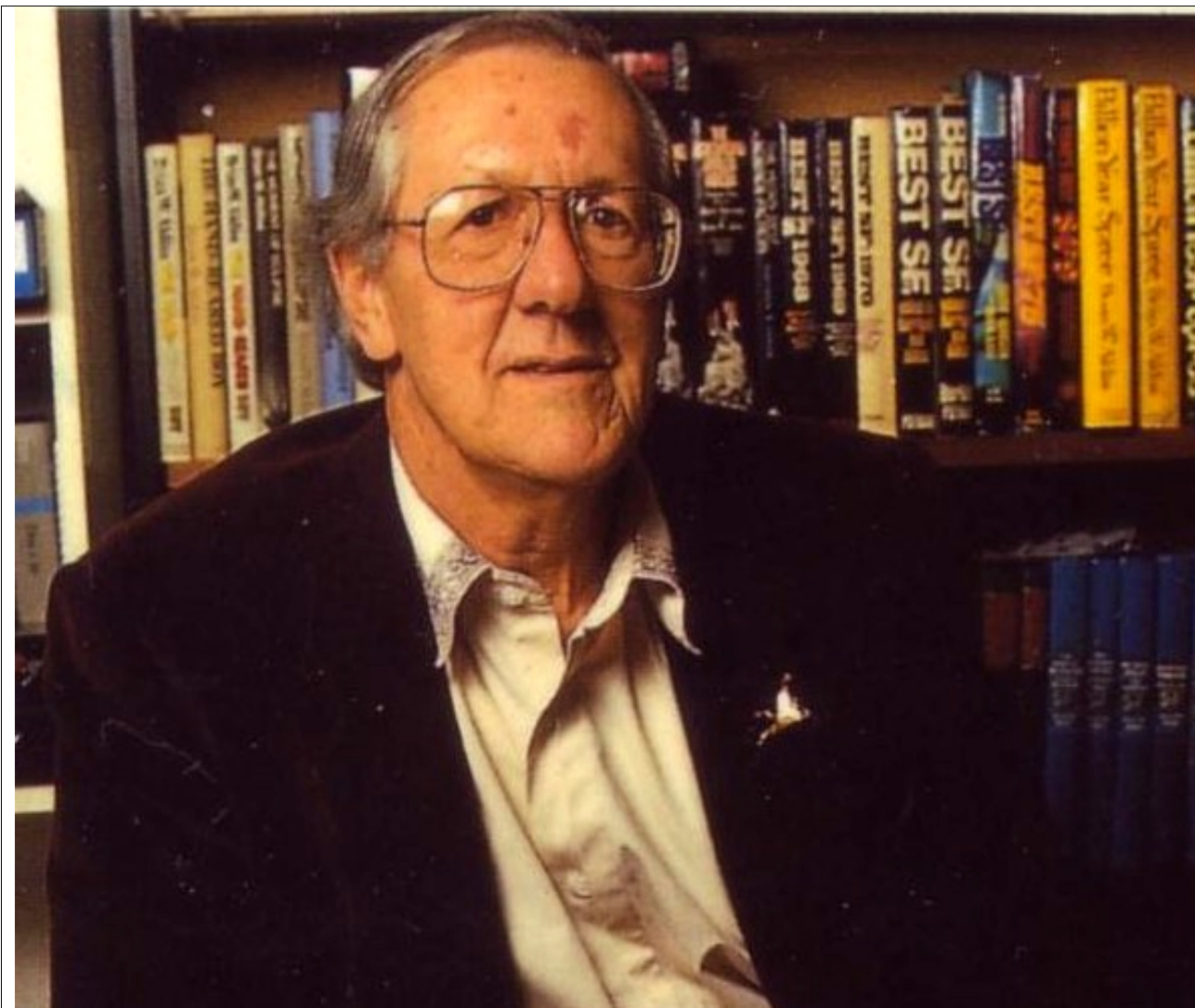
The next (and last) time we met was at the 1978 Melbourne Eastercon, in much more awkward circumstances. The convention organisers had managed to invite both Brian Aldiss and Roger Zelazny as guests of

honour to the same convention. They barely spoke to each other, and I suspect each was equally annoyed with the convention committee. However, we did all go off to King Wah on the Sunday morning for the first dim sum brunch I had ever been to. Later that day, Brian gave a magnificent guest of honour speech during the conven-



Bruce Gillespie and Brian Aldiss, Stonehenge, 1974.  
(Photo: Christopher Priest.)





Brian W. Aldiss (1925–2017). Above: Brian Aldiss 1990 (photo: Mark Gerson). Below: Brian and Margaret Aldiss, and Bruce Gillespie, Heath House, Oxford, January 1974. (Photo: Christopher Priest.)





tion. In the middle he began throwing out sheets from his script, as if he were sparing his audience unnecessary verbiage. When we picked up the sheets from the floor, they were, of course, empty.

It would have been wonderful to be in London for the celebration of Brian's 89th birthday at the 2014 Worldcon, but meanwhile (thanks mainly to John Litchen) I've been able to read all of Brian's later novels, many of which are very good. *Walcot* seems to have been published by Britain's tiniest, most obscure publisher, but a copy did reach Australia. *The Cretan Teat* was a return by Aldiss to his most exuberant style, but his two last SF

novels, especially *Finches of Mars*, were preachy and tedious. I was looking forward to Brian's proposed Tolstoyan novel, especially as I had rediscovered Tolstoy only the year before he announced this project.

What a wonderful way to go, and how pure Brian Aldiss! He enjoyed his 92nd birthday, then just disappeared from this world. Who's going to cheer us up now?

— **Bruce Gillespie**, Facebook, 23 August 2017; and the *Ansible Brian Aldiss Supplement*.

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## A valediction forbidding melancholy: Aldiss and the far future

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by Bruce Gillespie

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I

To peer into the far future points us back to science fiction's past. H. G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon, SF's two British pioneers, make most later writers seem redundant.

Join Wells's Time Traveller (*The Time Machine*, 1895) as he hurtles forward in time, covering hundreds, then thousands, then millions of years:

At last a steady twilight brooded over the earth, a twilight only broken now and then when a comet glared across the darkling sky. The band of light that had indicated the sun had long since disappeared; for the sun had ceased to set — it simply rose and fell in the west, and grew ever broader and more red ... At last, some time before I stopped, the sun, red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat ... The earth had come to rest with one face to the sun.<sup>1</sup>

On a beach many millions of years in future he encounters the world's last living creature and probably humanity's remote descendant: 'a monstrous crab-like creature ... as large as yonder table, with its many legs moving slowly and uncertainly, its big claws swaying, its long antennae ... and its stalked eyes gleaming at you on either side of its metallic front.'<sup>2</sup>

The beach itself shows few signs of life apart from its crab-like inhabitants: 'There were no breakers and no waves, for not a breath of wind was stirring. Only a slight oily swell rose and fell like a gentle breathing.'<sup>3</sup>

Here we see Wells's genius for destroying, with spectacular images and clear prose, pious nineteenth-century ideas of the Last Days, those potent Biblical images of spectacular retribution and reward that people had traditionally learned from the Book of Revelation. In the final pages of *The Time Machine*, he dramatises for his

1895 public new ideas about Earth's vastly elongated future, the expansion and decay of the dying sun, and the devolution and eventual disappearance of life itself.

The mood we derive from Wells's final days, however, is still Biblical: 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.'<sup>4</sup> It matches that mood of dying fall at the end of the nineteenth century, the failure of optimism that is most noticeable in the music of the time — Mahler's mocking *Landlers* and Vaughan Williams' revival of medieval modes — and culminates in World War I, Proust, and all that.

Thirty million years of future, however, offer us a good long time before all human endeavour, and life itself, expires on a cold beach under an immense red sun. In 1930, Olaf Stapledon takes up Wells's challenge in *Last and First Men*, lengthening the range of human life considerably, to two billion years.<sup>5</sup>

Like Wells, Stapledon faced the problem of sending back information from the future to we observers in the dim past. Wells solved the problem by allowing his Time Traveller to ride his time machine back from the far future to deliver his message. Stapledon's far-future inhabitant sends back the story of humanity's future as a message implanted directly in the mind of the writer. Convenient, but this hardly solves the problem that would bedevil all far-future fiction from 1930 onward: how can any information from the far future make any sense to a person from our own time?

Wells solved the problem by making it redundant. In *The Time Machine*, we only know that part of future events that his Time Traveller can observe or reasonably guess.

Stapledon's observer, transmits what he believes we make sense to the people of 1930. Stapledon pretends not to be writing fiction, but documented fact. So successful was his ploy that when in 1937 Penguin printed the first paperback edition of *Last and First Men*, the firm published it as a Pelican Book (reference book), not a Penguin Book (fiction).

Last and First Men follows the many stages of human existence, as humans try various social experiments, conduct disastrous wars, almost disappear from the earth, rebuild civilisation, then take off for Venus, then the outer planets, as the sun begins to cool and grow. Humanity's final stage is living on Neptune, just before the sun begins the final paroxysm that will destroy the solar system.

You would think that after two billion years, humanity would have grown a bit sick of life in general. But no, the urge to cling onto life remains at the end: 'Great are the stars, and man is of no account to them. But man is a fair spirit, whom a star conceived and a star kills. He is greater than those bright blind companies. For though in them there is incalculable potentiality, in him there is achievement, small, but actual.'<sup>6</sup> Brave words indeed, and melancholy, since at the beginning of *Last and First Men* Stapledon successfully predicts the pattern of human ignobility of humanity that would dominate the 1930s and 1940s.

## II

The scale and implications of Wells's and Stapledon's work are too immense to be taken on directly. From time to time, British SF writers return to elements of their work as sources of inspiration. Brian W. Aldiss was the next British SF writer to take up the challenges presented by Wells and Stapledon. He did this in several short stories published in the 1960s,<sup>7</sup> and in the series of novelettes that were collected and expanded into the novel *Hothouse* (1962, issued in the USA as *The Long Afternoon of Earth*).<sup>8</sup>

Most of the stories that Aldiss wrote within a few years of the *Hothouse* pieces share a deep poetic melancholy and pessimism that was to gradually dissipate in his later work. 'Old Hundredth'<sup>9</sup> is a condensed fable about humanity's failing itself. Having found a way to become immortal, humans abdicate from a never-quite-decaying world. The last conscious creature, a giant sloth, offers a small, but significant challenge to the assumptions of this world.

Much the same pattern can be found in 'The Source'<sup>10</sup> and 'The Worm That Flies',<sup>11</sup> in which one man seeks humanity's vital origins in far futures from which all vitality has been leached. The tone of these stories perhaps owes more to Don A. Stuart's (John W. Campbell's) 'Twilight' and 'Forgetfulness' (genre classics from the late 1930s) than Wells and Stapledon, but Aldiss adds many original notions and his own yearnings to the mood of late Victorian poetry.

At first glance, *Hothouse* seems to echo the melancholy sonority of stories like 'Old Hundredth' and the last pages of Wells's *Time Machine*. Several million years in the future, the sun is slowly expanding as it approaches the final stages of its life. The earth presents only one face to the sun, as the moon presents one face to earth: 'They were locked face to face, and so would be, until the sands of time ceased to run, or the sun ceased to shine.'<sup>12</sup> The side of earth that faces the sun is a fevered jungle dominated by one continent-covering tree, a distant descendant of the banyan. At the edges of this jungle, during the final sections of the novel, the sun

appears to slip below the horizon:

Just for a moment the sun still shone on them. They had a last glimpse of a world with gold in the dull air, a floor of black foliage ... the shoulder of the hill shrugged upwards, and down they jolted into the world of night. With one voice they gave forth a cry: a cry that echoed into the unseen wastes about them, dying as it fled.<sup>13</sup>

The overall impression of the decay of the earth and entropic loss of dynamism throughout the solar system is reinforced by the travels of the traversers, 'gross vegetable equivalent[s] of a spider', as they ply their way between earth and moon:

the multitudinous strands of cable floated across the gap between them, uniting the worlds. Back and forth the traversers could shuttle at will, vegetable astronauts huge and insensible, with Earth and Luna both enmeshed in their indifferent net.

With surprising suitability, the old age of the Earth was snared about with cobwebs.<sup>14</sup>

Much that we take for granted has changed radically. Animal life, including humanity, has almost disappeared from the world. Plants have changed greatly, becoming mobile vegetable hunters and hunted, weaving their way through the branches of the gigantic tree that dominates the world. They include the trappersnapper, a 'horny caselike affair, just a pair of square jaws',<sup>15</sup> and the leapy-creeper, whose 'roots and stems were also tongues and lashes'.<sup>16</sup>

Humanity is now reduced to a few isolated tribes of child-like people, resembling Wells's Eloi more than his Morlocks, but facing moment-to-moment difficulties that threaten at any moment to destroy the species:

A section of the bark gaped wide, revealing a pale deadly mouth. An oystermaw ... had dug itself into the tree. Jabbing swiftly, Flor thrust her stick into trap. As the jaws closed, she pulled with all her might, Lily-yo steadying her. The oystermaw, taken by surprise, was wrenched from its socket. Opening its maw in shock, it sailed outward through the air. A rayplane took it without trying.<sup>17</sup>

As with the Greene tribe in Aldiss's first novel, *Non-Stop*, these primitive people retain only fragments of earlier languages and culture. They try to retain a social organisation, despite staying constantly on the move. Other creatures met during the novel, such as the morel and the sodal, are scarcely recognisable remnants of creatures alive in our own time. In a Wellsian time stream, they would be the very last stage before Earth's history disintegrates and begins that inevitable decline that ends with that final crab on the last shore of the last ocean. In a Stapledonian time stream, Aldiss's people would be the merest footnotes to humanity's greater story, one flickering downturn in humanity's fortunes before its story begins again.

### III

In catching and grasping the baton of the long view handed on by Wells and Stapledon, what has Aldiss actually done with it? On the description of *Hothouse* I've given so far, he seems to be taking us on a journey that is at the tag end of all things, an era when everything we value from our own time is about to be extinguished. Yet as soon as we begin reading the book, the mood of melancholy disappears. Within the first few pages of the novel, the members of the child-like tribe defeat several of the jungle's dangerous creatures, lose several of their number or to a few others, and suffer a split in the group, as a result of which several members decide to take a ride on a traverser up one of the cables of the web towards the moon. The moon, we find, has become a paradise, a planet more congenial to humans than the banyan-covered earth. The members of the tribe who stay behind on earth, forever being caught by and escaping from the many creatures of the jungle, begin a pilgrimage that takes them out to sea and on a voyage towards the sun-bereft section of the planet.

All, then, is full of life, adventure, peril — and for the reader, a great deal of fun. *Hothouse* is one of Aldiss's 'comic infernoes', a series of pratfalls as well as adventures. Gren, the tribesman who becomes separated from the rest of the group, teams up with Yattmur, from one of the very few other groups of humans on Earth. They take with them the tummy-bellies, ridiculous fat little creatures who had been physically connected to a tree on the shore until Gren cut off their 'tails'. Aldiss makes them into the Fools of his adventure, like Lear's fool a way by which the author can express, in continual childish whingeing nonsense, truths that Gren will not acknowledge:

they came scampering forward, seizing Gren's and Yattmur's hands. 'O mighty master and sandwich-makers!' they cried. 'All this mighty watery world sailing is too much badness, too much badness, for we have sailed away and lost all the world. The world has gone by bad sailing and we must quickly good-sail to get it back.'<sup>18</sup>

Another memorable comic invention found in *Hothouse* is the 'heckler': a small flying machine, an artifact from the twenty-first century found in a cave. When the travellers activate it by accident, it can still bleat out its propaganda messages. They call it 'Beauty':

With scarcely a murmur, Beauty rose from the ground, hovered before their eyes, rose above their heads. They cried with astonishment, they fell backwards, breaking the yellow container. It made no difference to Beauty. Superb in powered flight, it wheeled above them, glowing richly in the sun.

When it had gained sufficient altitude, it spoke.

'Make the world safe for democracy!' it cried. Its voice was not loud but piercing ... 'Who rigged the disastrous dock strike of '31?' Beauty demanded rhetorically. 'The same men who would put a ring through your noses today. Think of yourselves, friends and vote for SRH — vote for freedom!'<sup>19</sup>

Aldiss makes Beauty into one of the most memorable 'characters' from the novel, and also takes a neat swipe at the pretensions of our own civilisation.

If *Hothouse* has grandeur and enormous verbal energy, what then gives it weight? And if most critics don't place it as highly as Wells's or Stapledon's best works, why would I want to claim Aldiss as their direct literary descendant?

What at first seems a great weakness of *Hothouse* is in fact one of its strengths. Aldiss makes no pretence to be writing a realistic novel. This is not a documentary sent back from the future. 'Nobody cared any more', writes Aldiss in the book's second paragraph, 'for the big questions that begin "How long ...?" or "Why ...?" It was no longer a place for mind. It was a place for growth, for vegetables. It was like a hothouse.'<sup>20</sup> None of the author's observations could have been made by anybody living in the era in which this book takes place. This is god's-view-point writing at its most unapologetic.

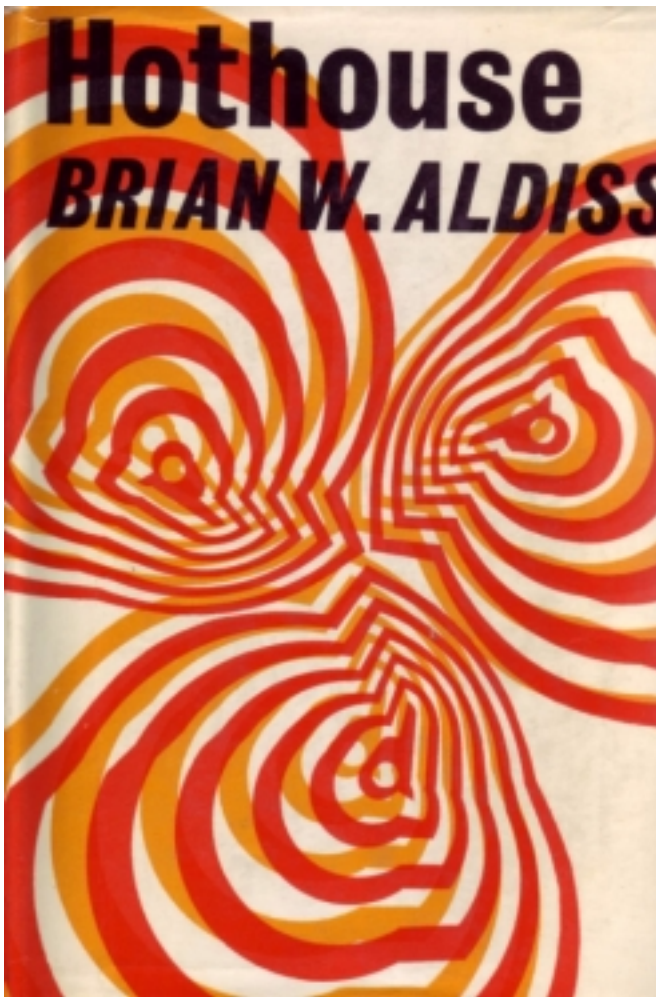
What literary powers, then, does Aldiss give his narrator that were unavailable to Wells's Time Traveller or Stapledon's Last Man? Characterisation, in a word. No matter how vast this future world, how teeming in life, that world can only become conscious in the minds of self-aware observers. In such a world, then, it becomes Aldiss's task to inject personal consciousness into his world, and show us the effect of that reintroduction.

In this whole vast world, two small humans, Gren and Yattmur, occupy our point of view. The threat to them comes not from outside monsters, but from a morel — an intelligent fungus that slides from a tree onto Gren's back and becomes a parasite of his mind and body. Aldiss's Jungian morel, who develops into the third main character of the novel, finds that Gren's mind contains the ancestral memory of all human history, including scenes from the world as it was before the earth became a hothouse. The morel invades Gren's nervous system and increasingly 'Like a dusty harp, it [the morel's voice] seemed to twang in some lost attic of his head'.<sup>21</sup> Gren becomes cut off from his surroundings by the experiences that the morel finds hidden in his mind. Yattmur is left to guide the action and feel anguish at the way Gren become detached from her and the tummy-bellies, for whom they have taken on responsibility. She follows Gren because she loves him and there is no one else left in the world for her. Twice during the novel, Gren and Yattmur find pleasant places where they could have settled and spent the rest of their lives. Each time, the morel drives Gren on, and Yattmur follows. The morel wants to reproduce itself, by attaching its new second half to Laren, the baby born to Gren and Yattmur. Gren is so befuddled that he becomes a willing partner of the morel's scheme to trick Yattmur into handing over the baby. The scene where the baby just manages to escape its fate is a masterpiece of horror, yet has a comic outcome, by which the morel finds a new host in a traverser, which sets off for the moon. Gren feels that he has woken from a dream:

It was over. The parasite was defeated. He would never again hear the inner voice of the morel twanging through his brain.

At that, loneliness more than triumph filled him.





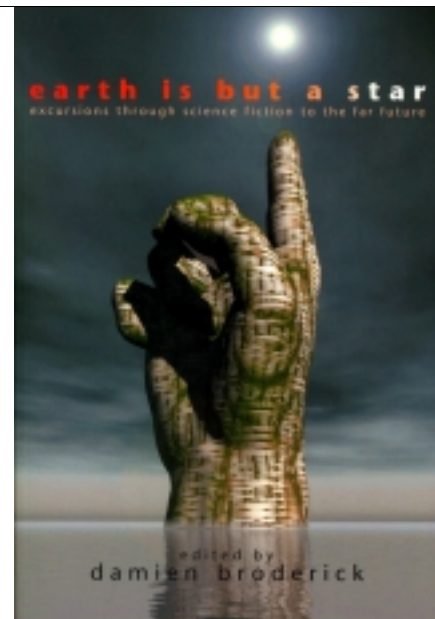
**Edition of *Hothouse* referred to in this article: London, Faber & Faber, 1962.**

But he searched wildly along the corridors of his memory and thought, He has left me something good: I can evaluate, I can order my mind, I can remember what he taught me — and he knew so much.<sup>22</sup>

The vastness of Aldiss's vision, then, is given poignancy because of his belief in the importance of individual characters. But this very richness, this capacity of Gren and Yattmur to grow in humanity and eventually take responsibility for a world that had seemed to be destroying them, makes us reevaluate the book's more obvious and extravagant ideas.

Aldiss, as godlike author, asserts that this world is hurtling towards devolution. During the book's last few pages, an unexpectedly bright burst of the sun's energy warns that the earth is about to undergo further great change. The sodal, a Lewis Carroll-like giant fish carried around by servants, the last creature to have direct memories of Earth's past, asserts:

'not only does nature have to be wound up to wind down, it has to wind down to be wound up ... So nature is devolving. Again the forms are blurring! They never ceased to be anything but inter-dependent — the one always living off the other — and now they merge together once more. Were the tummy-bellies vege-



**This article was first published in *Earth Is But a Star: Excursions through Science Fiction to the Far Future*, edited by Damien Broderick (University of Western Australia Press, 2001, 466 pp.), an anthology of science fiction stories and essays about SF literature.**

table or human? Are the sharp-furs human or animal?'<sup>23</sup>

Do we find here the sigh of melancholy that we find in Wells when his traveller was faced with the same process of devolution at the end of *The Time Machine*? Do we find here the 'vanity of vanities' feeling that overcomes us when we read in Stapledon of humanity's endless declines and falls and hollow triumphs? Not a bit of it.

Aldiss's tone is so mercurial, so committed to simultaneous joy, struggle, and ferocity, that I and other readers have often speculated about its origins. In his autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye*, Aldiss suggests the origin of a major element in the novel:

In those gardens, we came to the Biggest Tree in the World, an old banyan. It crept across the park in all directions, as if setting out to conquer the whole globe ... Thanks to its longevity — not least in the imagination — the Calcutta banyan eventually reached England, entered one of my books, and filled the whole globe.<sup>24</sup>

The Hothouse world itself is based more on Aldiss's experiences in Burma during World War II than on any fiction he had ever read. The first 200 pages of *The Twinkling of an Eye* are saturated in Aldiss's excitement at remembering his escape from Britain, being stripped down to bare essentials, including the shedding all of his childhood and teenage doubts and assumptions — and glorying in the tropical sunlight:

I would lie basking, a strange part-coloured fish, buttocks and legs white, torso deep brown, in the shallow water ... We could see nothing but the clear blue sky overhead, the clear water below, flowing over

its gravel bed, and the grassy banks of the canal ...<sup>25</sup>

This could be almost a quotation from a quiet moment in *Hothouse*.

If the emotional tone of *Hothouse* is given much of its sombre anchoring strength by its movement from light into darkness, so the book probably owes much to Aldiss's pilgrimage back from Burma and Sumatra to a sun-starved, ungrateful, joyless Britain in the years after World War II. He says little in his autobiography about his failed first marriage, but in a speech in 1978 in Melbourne Aldiss told of the circumstances under which *Hothouse* was written. Cut off from his first wife and his first two children, he lived a hand-to-mouth existence for some years, in a flat above a commercial bath house, from which the steam rose continually through his floor. What more appropriate inspiration for a novel called *Hothouse*?

The process of writing *Hothouse* gave Aldiss a new life, a vigorously independent spirit and the basis of his later success (his only Hugo Award). It allowed him to leap free from the limitations of post-war Britain. Irrepressible hope enlivens every line of *Hothouse*. While humanity remains, consciousness remains, and while consciousness remains, ferocious intellectual energy remains a possibility. Devolution is not something to be sighed about. Devolution is seen not as simplification, but merely the other side of evolution. Both are continuous adaptations to change. In *An Age*, five years later<sup>26</sup> (*Cryptozoic*! in all later editions), Aldiss takes the idea one step further, proposing that the vast sweep of our 'evolutionary' past is merely a prediction of our devolutionary future, and that what we think of as our future is in fact our constantly forgotten past. We adapt, not devolve; Aldiss celebrates life, not mourns its changes. The visions of Wells and Stapledon have not failed, but are constantly renewed.

## Notes

- 1 H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention, and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1946, pp. 90–1.
- 2 Ibid., p. 93.
- 3 Ibid., p. 92.
- 4 Ecclesiastes 1.2.
- 5 Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future*, London: Methuen, Fountain Library edition, 1934.
- 6 Ibid., p. 354.
- 7 Particularly 'Old Hundredth' (1960), 'The Source' (1965) and 'The Worm That Flies' (1968),

in Brian Aldiss, *A Romance of the Equator: Best Fantasy Stories*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1989.

- 8 Brian W. Aldiss, *Hothouse*, London, Faber & Faber, 1962; *The Long Afternoon of Earth*, New York: New American Library, 1962.
- 9 Aldiss, *A Romance of the Equator*, pp. 5–16.
- 10 Aldiss, *Hothouse*, pp. 31–44.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 56–78.
- 12 Ibid., p. 22.
- 13 Ibid., p. 185.
- 14 Ibid., p. 22.
- 15 Ibid., p. 11.
- 16 Ibid., p. 16.
- 17 Ibid., p. 18.
- 18 Ibid., p. 156.
- 19 Ibid., p. 170.
- 20 Ibid., p. 9.
- 21 Ibid., p. 86.
- 22 Ibid., p. 221.
- 23 Ibid., p. 251.
- 24 Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye: My Life as an Englishman*, Little, Brown, 1998, pp. 190–1.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 171–2
- 26 Brian W. Aldiss, *An Age*, London: Faber & Faber, 1967

## Editions used

- Brian W. Aldiss, *Hothouse*, London: Faber & Faber, 1962  
Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1934 Fountain Library edition of 1930 first edition  
H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1946

## Other items of interest

- Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye: My Life as an Englishman*, London: Little, Brown, 1998  
Brian W. Aldiss, *A Romance of the Equator: Best Fantasy Stories*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1989  
Brian W. Aldiss. Foreword to Robert Crossley, *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994  
Brian W. Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1986 (entries on H. G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon)

— Bruce Gillespie, 5 August 2000

# Thoughts on reading a new old book by Brian Aldiss

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Tim Train

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## Discussed:

***This World and Nearer Ones:  
Essays Exploring the Familiar*  
by Brian W. Aldiss  
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 1979; 261 pp.)**

The wise old owl sat in the court  
The less he knew, the more he thought,  
The more he knew he thought, the less he  
thought he knew —  
Why can't he think he knows it all like me and  
you?

— Myself

I recently bought a book of non-recent essays by Brian Aldiss, *This World and Nearer Ones: Essays Exploring the Familiar*. They're from the late 1970s or thereabouts, but they're new to me. Aldiss has written so much, and so much of it is so very different to all the other stuff that he writes, that this is a relatively common experience for people. Aldiss suffers from the predicament of the prolific author: not only will you never get to the end of what he writes, you sometimes hardly get to the begin-

ning of it, either. On the other hand, such is his ability to churn out new ideas, and make old ideas seem fresh, that every book you get a hold of is an adventure — so it all balances out nicely.

And most of what you'll find of Aldiss, too, in the bookshops, is from the 1960s and 50s, a time when he churned out a number of high-grade science-fiction novels, like *Hothouse* (think futuristic jungles where people are hunted by plants, and giant spiders spin vast webs between the planets) and *Non-Stop* (a weird pastiche novel involving dwarfs and Jungian archetypes on a interstellar ship somewhere in outer space). Oftentimes his publishers try to excuse his elaborate flights of science fantasy with cover blurbs that explain how he's been an editor of literary supplements, a film and art critic, a journalist, and a poet. Sometimes they'll even threaten to confront you with evidence of this. All I can say is I've never really seen it.

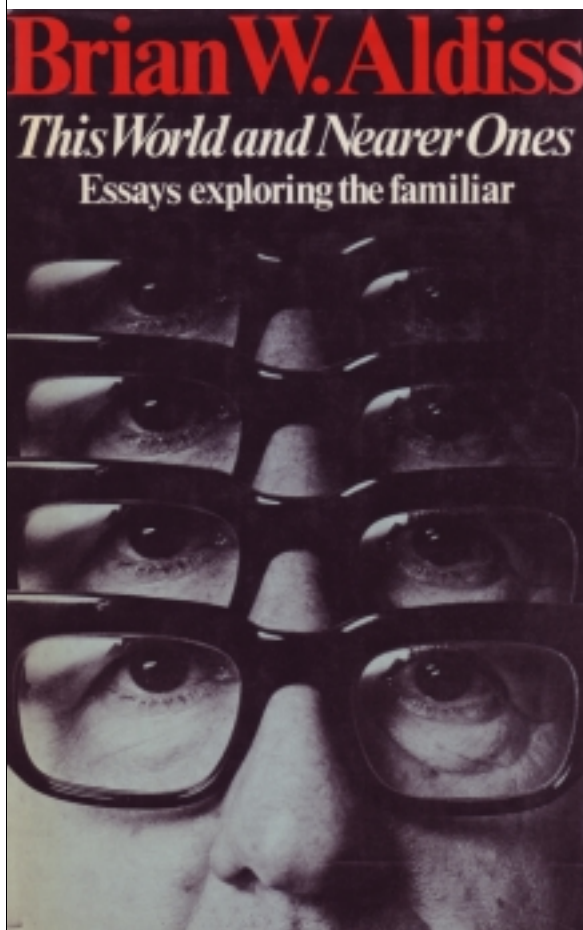
Aldiss, by contrast, doesn't even seem to be interested in excuses of this sort. What he's done in books like this is to write about science fiction as a critic. By this I mean, he hasn't just published a collection of reviews of science fiction books, or judged the rest of world literature by the extent to which it echoes or is influenced by science fiction — he seems, thankfully, entirely uninterested in this sort of self-justification. No, what he's done is write a collection of playful critical essays reflecting upon new themes that have arisen in science fiction, meditated upon the connections between science, art, and progress 'Since the Enlightenment' (the title of the introductory essay), written about encounters with fellow fantasy authors, looked at images of science and fantasy and surreal in the work of pulp artists, and even written one or two essays on ideas that would previously have only been the basis of science fiction stories or novels. What's good for the author is good for the critic as well, it seems:

Mr Chairman, Fellow Mortals I suppose you all know what death is. It's that last great MOT test in the skies, that undiscovered bun-fight from whose custard-pies no traveller revives. Undertakers used to charge £95 per head for it; this week it's gone up to £120 per head, and I daren't tell you how much for the body.

That's from 'Looking Forward to 2001', an address to the Oxford Union, and it's worth buying the book just for that piece alone.

Coming to think about his novels now, I suspect that he's approached a lot of his fiction like a critic. His novels will satirise or imitate the work of other authors, or he will argue with himself, or at his worst (a worst which is better than the best of some other science fiction writers) he will belabour a theme or idea in his writing so that it becomes slow-moving and pedantic.

So, too, I get a sense that he approaches criticism like





science fiction. He makes so much of it up; it is so full of fast-moving arguments and opinions that sometimes you are unable to stop and pin him down to an argument. He can rely on glib journalistic generalisations and his arguments can be designed to put people in their place. In 'California, Where They Drink Buck Rogers', he says 'on the whole, these are culture-free people'. Culture here could have several meanings, but this sentence is primarily designed to appeal to an English audience — it was written for the *Guardian*. So it's a putdown. Elsewhere, we get: 'that Man (rarely Woman) has various God-like abilities. In the knockabout farces of their pulp universe, Man always won through by force ...' But Man can have different definitions here, too: 'Humanity' or 'males'. He teases with one definition and then makes clear that it is the other, probably to imply his sympathy with a feminist readership.

Occasionally he attempts to clobber you with strange, unheard-of words from the depths of his home dictionary: 'The basic imaginative *donnée* of the pulps ...' In fact, according to both Dictionary.com and the Oxford Dictionary, this word is 'donnée'. If you tease the reader with obscure words then get the spelling wrong, you're unlikely to be caught out. But it means you're probably doing it more to impress than to make an argumentative point.

Elsewhere: he criticises the eminently criticisable original series of *Star Trek*, but in a strange way. He's picked the right show to tick off, but the wrong reasons. He says, 'The nice guys are of course all American, and, indeed, All-American.' Maybe the show did reflect an American ethos, but this is the ethos of an immigrant culture: the main characters number among them Russians, African-Americans, Scottish, and Chinese (and, of course, one Vulcan). In 'Looking Forward to 2001' he claims to be 'a firm admirer of America', but you get the sense that he wants to categorise it, too. The urge to categorise in this sense may be meant as critical — but it seems like a kind of social categorisation, too.

More strange and wondrous are various misspellings and slips of the fingers. He mentions horror writer L. P. Lovecraft. (A confusion of L. P. Hartley and H. P. Lovecraft, perhaps?) In an essay on French writer Jules Verne, Aldiss compares him to the 'two great English writers Henrik Ibsen and Leo Tolstoy'. Has Aldiss arranged some kind of posthumous English-Russian writerly exchange program? I would love to see a novel by the English author Leo Tolstoy. Or, for that matter, a play by the Russian writer Oscar Wilde. These Aldissian Slips are signs of the speed and prolixity with which the author is able to rattle off cultural references and names and are quite tantalising in their own way: by not saying what their writer means, they mean more than they should.

He is good on mistakes and misappropriations of others; his piece 'SF Art: Strangeness with Beauty' is affectionate criticism. Talking of an early twentieth-century astronomer who looked through his telescope and concluded that the planet Venus was in the midst of 'a

Carboniferous age, with luxuriant vegetation growing in hot cloudy conditions', Aldiss deduces 'From this inspired — and totally incorrect — guess have sprung a thousand *Planet Stories* scenarios'. And then there is this:

When the technophile Gustave Eiffel erected his great iron tower in Paris in 1889 ... it was an inspiration to technophiles everywhere — so much so that the tower appeared truncated on a *Wonder Stories* cover some years later as mining equipment on Pluto.

Also of interest is the way this book as a whole prefigures and echoes themes that occur in other Aldiss books. The various travels that Aldiss takes to the Soviet Union, Sumatra, the USA, and the Balkans have obvious parallels elsewhere in his oeuvre, including the short stories and *A Tupolev Too Far*, his *Life in the West* quartet, and (a book I'd love to get) his traveller's guide to the Balkans. He mentions in his essay on SF art a project by enlightenment artist Philip James de Loutherbourg to create 'moving pictures, ingenious optical effects, and, again, striking effects of light': a forerunner of the cinema. Something like this appears in his alternative-history fantasy *A Malacia Tapestry*. Also appearing in that novel are hot air balloons as a form of air transport, which he mentions (follow me here) in his book, in passing, in an essay on Mary Shelley's little-known book *The Lost Man*, which contains fantastic passages about voyages across a plague-ridden Europe in hot air balloons and dirigibles.

*This World and Nearer Ones* is an oxymoron in more ways than one — it is big for its size; it is a single book that contains multitudes. Aldiss is always evenhanded, and where he sometimes has a habit of contradicting history, as noted above, he also has a way of contradicting himself. The self, for him, is as much a matter of opinion as is history. These contradictions are splendidly obvious in 'Looking Forward to 2001', though there is another in 'From History to Timelessness', a standard (for Aldiss) exposition of the right-brain/left-brain dichotomy. Aldiss has always been banging on about the person as two-in-one — body against flesh, mind against soul. In *The Detached Retina*, however, almost on a whim, he speculates that maybe inside people there are seven separate and distinct persons who emerge at different times in one's life. I'd like to think that this endless capacity for contradiction demonstrates Aldiss' ongoing vigour of mind and creativity.

Now, after speaking of another writer's contradictions, I have to admit to doing a bit of an Aldiss myself: on reading his essay 'Burroughs: Less Lucid than Lucian', I had to pull myself up halfway through when I realised he was writing about E. R. Burroughs, not William Burroughs.

Doing an Aldiss Slip. Is there room in the Oxford Dictionary for that, do you think?

— Tim Train, 6 September 2008

# Bill Wright receives the A. Bertram Chandler Award 2017

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## LynC: Chandler Award presentation speech, Continuum 13, 11 June 2017

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Scientist and graphic artist Dick ‘Ditmar’ Jenssen (after whom these awards tonight are named) describes what it is to be a fan in the following words:

A science fiction fan is someone who lives slightly askew from those who inhabit the drab everyday world, someone who sees things from a modified perspective. Someone who can perceive the *extra-ordinary* in the *ordinary*, the *ultra-mundane* in the *mundane*, and the *wonder* which resides in the ubiquity of the quotidian.

This year’s winner is certainly that. At the age of 77 he was still finding things to ponder and write about. Still publishing with his usual wit and humour. The above quote comes from his recent DUFF trip WOOF publication *The Wright Stuff*.

Last year this award went to someone [James ‘Jocko’ Allen] who had selflessly been working in the background to assist Australian fandom for over 30 years. Think on it. That’s longer than some of the people in this room have been alive.

This year’s winner joined fandom almost twice that long ago! 59 years. I wasn’t even born when this gentle person first started helping the people in fandom.

If it weren’t for a bad period in his life around the time I joined fandom, I would never have known a time when his humour and wit and kindness hadn’t graced my Fannish experience. I am so glad he found his way back to us.

I remember one Relaxacon up at Airlie Beach in Queensland. It was a Relaxacon: the days held wonderful excursions to the Barrier Reef and other things, but not much was scheduled for the evenings. My kids were still smallish and they were getting bored one evening. Bill pulled out some novelties he’d picked up during the day — Ghu knows where. Rocket-shaped pens. He shared his treasure with us. Estelle, of course, immediately found something to draw on and was immersed for the rest of the evening, while Roger zoomed around the room playing with his. This is just one typical example of the generosity and kindness of the man.

In his time in fandom he has:

- run one convention
- helped run one Worldcon
- starred in one fannish film
- was instrumental in founding one literary discussion group
- was instrumental in founding one fan fund
- was instrumental in founding and was a major contributor to one incorporated company, set up for the preservation of SF
- founded one literary award
- won one fan fund
- was a long time member of one SF Club
- was a founding member of one APA



LynC giving Chandler Award presentation speech, 11 June 2017. (Photo: Edward McArdle.)



**Bill Wright (r.) with the A Bertram Chandler award trophy after Bruce Gillespie (middle) gives it to him after LynC (l.) has made her Presentation Speech. (Photo: Gillian Polack.)**

- until 2013 had published one fanzine.

That's a long list of 'ones', you might think. But let's actually dissect some of those 'ones'.

The Club he was a member of is the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. While there is some dispute as to when it could be said to have actually started, there is no denying it has been around for a very long time, and Bill is one of the few people graced with a lifetime membership.

The Worldcon was the *first* World SF convention to be held here in Australia. Just getting it out of America was a feat in itself in those days.

The apa? That was the Australian New Zealand apa (ANZAPA), coming up for its 50th birthday and still

going strong.

The fanzine? *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop*. Started in 1969, did not cease publication till February 2014, when ill health forced him to stop.

And that's just some of those 'ones'.

Not everything he does turns to gold, but one could definitely be forgiven for thinking so.

The Australian Science Fiction Foundation has great pleasure in finally being able to thank him for everything he has done for all of us in fandom, and for just being him.

I give you the 2017 Chandler winner — Bill Wright!

— ©LynC, June 2017

## LynC: A. Bertram Chandler Award 2017 winner: Bill Wright: The official citation

Born in 1937 in Sydney, Bill remained on the fringes of fandom (in his own words) till after he turned twenty. In 1958 he joined the Melbourne Science Fiction Club

(MSFC), then operating out of a warehouse in Somerset Place. The rest, as they say, is history, although it was another ten years before he became *really* active.





**Bill Wright, 1972, at Adventon 1. (Photo: Gary Mason.)**

1969 appears to have been a pivotal year. Not only was he significant in the running and administration of Australia's 8th National Science Fiction Convention (Natcon) — held in the MSFC Club rooms at the top of that warehouse — but in December 1968 he joined the fledgling 'Australia and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association' (ANZAPA). He was an active contributor until 1979, and again from 1996 to 2012; publishing the long running *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop (IRS)*.<sup>1</sup>

In 1970 he became a founding member of the Nova Mob, a Melbourne-based SF literary discussion group originally convened by John Foyster. Nova Mob still holds monthly meetings, at which he continues to be a regular.

In the late 1960s a group of fans joined together to bid for an Australian city to host the 33rd Worldcon in 1975, and Bill was appointed secretary of the bid committee with a brief to manage the correspondence. Bruce Gillespie, who received boxes of the correspondence from Ain75's New York agent Andy Porter, remains impressed with the excellent job he did.

In 1971 he (in his own words) was given a highly visible bit part in John Litchen's hugely successful bid movie *AussieFan*, starring Paul J. Stevens as Anti-Fan. His main contribution, though, was to finance the second of two prints which were taken overseas to promote Australia in 1975. *AussieFan* premiered at Syncon 72, the 11th Aussie Natcon in 1972. In August that year, he and Robin Johnson took the film over to the Worldcon, where it played continuously for four days. American fans of the day still talk about the impact the film had. It continued to be shown all over America until Torcon 2 (the 31st Worldcon in Toronto in August 1973), which decided that the location of the 1975 Worldcon would indeed be here, in Australia. Aussiecon, the first Australian Worldcon, was held in Melbourne in August 1975, with Bill continuing his role as Secretary.

It is significant that when Bill writes about his own achievements from that era that he remembers not his own contributions, but the people he met, such as Susan Wood (founding member of Wiscon) and Ursula Le Guin.

Then came a dark period in his life.

*IRS* ceased publication in 1979 and Bill was barely heard from until he emerged chrysalis-like in 1996 with a new revamped and now colourful *IRS* featuring Ditmar covers, poetry, humour, and intellectual dissertations.

In the early 1990s, whilst still gaffiating,<sup>2</sup> he donated his entire fanzine (fannish publications) collection to the MSFC, where it became known as the 'Bill Wright Collection'. It is now housed in the Monash University Library's Rare Books Collection — a truly priceless set of historical written ephemera.

In 2002, after retiring, he stepped up his involvement yet again, by joining the Australian Science Fiction Foundation (ASFF), where he continued as valuable, but 'ordinary' Committee Member for five years.

During this time he organised the Australian effort of the 'Bring Bruce Bayside' fan fund (2004–2005) to send Bruce Gillespie to America to visit with the many fans he had been communicating with for years.

In 2007, the Western Australian Science Fiction Foundation proposed an award for excellence in the exploration of themes of race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability in a speculative fiction work, in honour of Norma K. Hemming,<sup>3</sup> and asked the ASFF to implement it. Bill stepped up. For the last nine years he has put in an extraordinary number of hours and phone calls administering this award.

The inaugural Norma K. Hemming Award was presented in 2010 at the 67th Worldcon, Aussiecon 4, and has subsequently been awarded at Australian Natcons.

He also took on the administration of the A. Bertram Chandler Award for outstanding achievement in science fiction (Australia's highest fan award), named after acclaimed mid-twentieth century Australian SF author Arthur Bertram Chandler.

Since travelling overseas to drum up support for the first Aussiecon and encountering the LASFS club rooms, Bill and others have long held a dream of having a central gathering place for fans and a properly administered SF library. In August 2007 a small group of Aussie-

**Bill Wright, 1999. (Photo: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen).)**



con attendees, Bill among them, set up Meteor Incorporated: an incorporated association formed to gather funds for acquiring premises and hiring qualified staff for a science fiction institution and research archive under the ownership and control of the science fiction community. The initial seeding money came almost entirely from Bill's retirement fund, in the form of thousands of shares. He and Carey Handfield then worked tirelessly to obtain deductible gift recipient status from the Australian Taxation Office and to set up a process for fans to register their intention to remember the Meteor Fund in their Will. While Meteor Inc was severely hit by the GFC, it still continues to house fans' collections in storage places around Australia pending the fulfilment of the dream for a proper place.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013 he successfully stood for DUFF (Down Under Fan Fund) and travelled to LoneStarCon 3, the Worldcon in Texas that year. While over there, did he sit back and just enjoy himself? No. He did a study tour of the fannish premises of several American SF Clubs, with a view to determining if their experience could be transferred to Australia.

Unfortunately, since 2013 he has been plagued with ill health. He has struggled on, and is still attending

MSFC meetings and until very recently has continued to administer the awards under the ASFF aegis.

A lifetime of exemplary and selfless service to the Australian SF fannish community makes Bill a very worthy recipient of the 2017 A. Bertram Chandler Award.

Let's all raise a glass to this wonderful gentleman.

— © **LynC**, 2017 (with a lot of help from *Aussie Transpacific April 2013*)

#### Notes

- 1 IRS can still be found on efanzines.com — efanzines.com/IRS
- 2 'GAFIATE': a science fiction fandom term to indicate a person who has left fandom by 'Getting Away From It All'.
- 3 Norma Kathleen Hemming: an Australian playwright and SF short story writer of the 1950s who was struck down by breast cancer at the age of 31.
- 4 The Meteor Fund continues to need regular small donations via its website: [www.meteor.org.au/new](http://www.meteor.org.au/new) from lots of fans.

## Bill Wright: Acceptance speech I would have made if I had known about the Award beforehand

I am in illustrious company with the twenty previous Chandler Award winners since 1992. The A. Bertram Chandler Award given by the Australian Science Fiction Foundation is Australia's premier fan award for lifetime achievement in science fiction and is no small thing to have won.

The Citation, as written and read by LynC, sounded surreal and sent my mind spinning into remembrance of things long buried in the distant past.

It all started when I joined the Melbourne Science Fiction Club in 1956. Under the benevolent oversight of Mervyn Binns, MSFC was a haven for damaged people struggling to establish an identity with which they could survive in a hostile world.

MSFC members in that post-World War II era through to the 1970s were an inspiration. They looked at life askew from others, but that was because they challenged accepted societal prejudices. Much more importantly, they provided a wonderfully healing group therapy. They had imagination, humour and acceptance — virtues that, by and large, predominate in the science fiction community to this day.

Interaction with the wider science fiction community when I was secretary of the Bid Committee for the right to host Australia's first Worldcon in Melbourne in 1975 (Aussiecon) meant that I was not, and never have been, less of a human being for being passionate about SF.

In 2006, I was given the opportunity to join the Australian Science Fiction Foundation Committee. ASFF was set up in 1976 with the cash surplus from Aussiecon to carry on its good work. It has been active ever since in non-interventional support of key initiatives in the Australian speculative fiction community. During my stint as ASFF Awards Administrator in the decade from 2007 to 2016, my passion had been to promote positive images of categories of 'otherness' in the human condition in speculative fiction.

American science fiction writer Lois McMaster Bujold said in one of her Hugo Award winning novels

Reputation is what others think of you.

Honour is what you think about yourself.

Honour nestles serenely at the centre of my sensitive fannish psyche.

To paraphrase the immortal Cyril Kornbluth (1923–1958), the share of glory that comes to me with this Award is outward manifestation of an existential epiphany.

I acknowledge my debt to the global science fiction community that has given me the space to grow into a greater self.

— © **Bill Wright**, 2017

## Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): My Friend Bill Wright

There are times when time itself seems paradoxical. I have known Bill Wright for almost 60 years but it seems very much shorter than that. I have no doubt that this is because interacting with Bill, in conversation or prose, is almost inevitably a new and refreshing experience. Given almost any subject — or even just a passing reference — Bill will follow a train of thought up and down his mental landscape, in and out of the tunnels of his mind, down branch-lines and sub-branch-lines to termini far removed from the original impulse. Following Bill's ruminations may seem as though there's madness in his method, but that's not so: Bill believes (as Idries Shah points out in his book *The Sufis*) that all is connected, and (as Carl Jung posits in his concept of *sychronicity*) the connection is sometimes non-rational and acausal. One must be on one's toes near Bill.

Bill and I found each other in the Melbourne Science Fiction Club six decades ago, and realised that we shared an admiration for Doc Smith's *Lensman* series. Remember that in the 1950s science fiction was still a marginal literary genre and was almost confined to the pulps, and in Australia was virtually nonexistent. While our literary tastes have evolved since that time, I am positive that if pressed to name the 'best' SF he has read, Bill would nominate Eando Binder's *Spawn of Eternal Thought*. Some short time after we became friends, Bill brought into the Clubrooms a painting titled *The Galaxy Primed*, which I took to be a testament to his accomplishments. Some decades later Bill admitted that it was his brother who was the artist, but by that time his renaissance qualities were so evident it seemed but a minor mendacity.

Bill has always been extremely energetic — and in various modes. The photos below show Bill, on the left, acting as an auctioneer at *The 8th Australian Science Fiction Convention*, and, on the right, exhibiting athletic prowess in *Australian Rules football*. Unfortunately, Bill's enthusiasm for the sport has resulted in him being sent off the field by John Foyster — one of Australia's great SF icons. The reason for the expulsion is lying on the ground out of the frame of the photograph.



Pressure of work, and several extended trips overseas in connection with that work, meant that I lost contact with most of the SF world, and when I retired my re-connection was of a somewhat desultory nature. But here, again, Bill came to the rescue when he resurrected his fanzine *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* in December 1996, and asked me to generate cover graphics for succeeding issues. This meant that I had something to do as I slid down the razor-blade of life into senescence, and — *most importantly* — enabled me to repay a longstanding debt to SF. Bill has been brave and generous enough since then so that almost every subsequent cover has used my graphics. Many issues of *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* will be found on the Web site <http://efanzines.com/>. Reading these issues is a perfect a way to enter into the Wright Universe.

I believe that, as it has done for me, SF has made a difference, perhaps even an enormous difference, to Bill's life. Personally, I found that just being with, mingling with, the members of the *Melbourne Science Fiction Club* was probably the best group therapy sessions I could have wished for. Friendships forged then have lasted for decades. Unlike me, however, Bill's indefatigable energy has meant that he has repaid SF far more than I could ever have conceived. I will not detail those exploits here, since they may be found in Bill's publication *Aussie Transpacific April 2013* which is located on the *eFanzines* site. But I must point out that Bill has set up **Meteor Incorporated**, a site devoted to preserving SF, and which is designed to collect SF literature and fanzines (<http://meteor.org.au/new/>). As well, Bill initiated, and has been the driving force behind, the **Norma K. Hemming Award**, which promotes 'excellence in the exploration of the themes of race, gender, sexuality, class and disability in speculative fiction'.

Bill is a wonderful, and worthy, addition to the winners of the DUFF Award and the A. Bertram Chandler Award.

— Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)





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# John Litchen

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## Fascinating Mars: 120 years of fiction about Mars Part 2

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### 1984: Mars out of fashion; Shiner shines

1984 was a time when SF writers were extrapolating from the collapse of governments around the world and small wars known euphemistically as police actions rather than from global warming or anthropocentric interference with natural ecology via excessive carbon emissions. Those issues would come much later.

No one was particularly concerned about Mars in 1984. It seemed to be out of fashion. The planet no longer seemed as exciting to writers as it had in the past so they moved on to locales further out into the solar system and nearby star systems, or they re-examined Earth and its grungy polluted environment.

In 1984 a young novelist by the name of **Lewis Shiner** stunned everyone with *Frontera*, his debut novel.

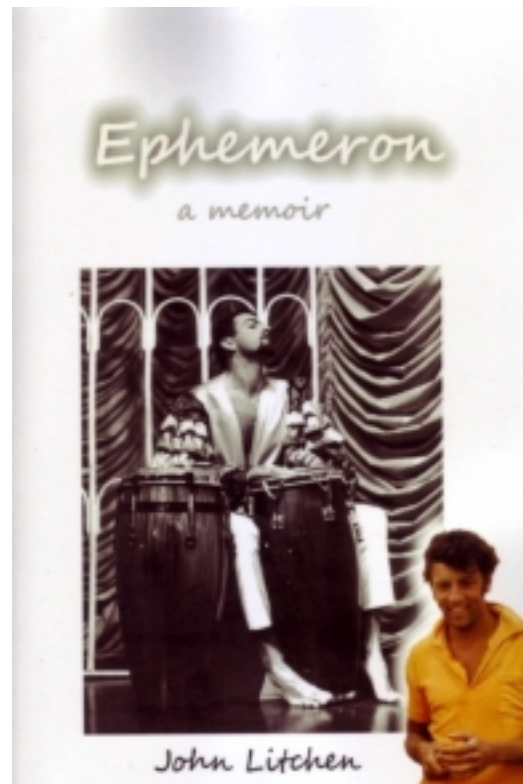
Twenty years before this novel takes happens, NASA had sent expeditions to Mars to establish a colony. Reece, one of the astronauts who had been instrumental in starting that colony, had returned to Earth but never gained the opportunity to go back to Mars. He left his daughter there along with all the other colonists. NASA gave up sending any help or even wanting to get into space. It ran out of funding, and one of the larger corporations in America bought all its assets at a very cheap price. Although the colony has been abandoned, information is regularly beamed back to Earth where the Houston facility records all the messages.

After most major world governments collapse because of increasing debts, leaving millions of people starving and out of work, there is a period of 10 years of constant riots and violence. The military forces disband, and many soldiers become mercenaries working for major corporations. These mercenaries quell the riots and act as policemen.

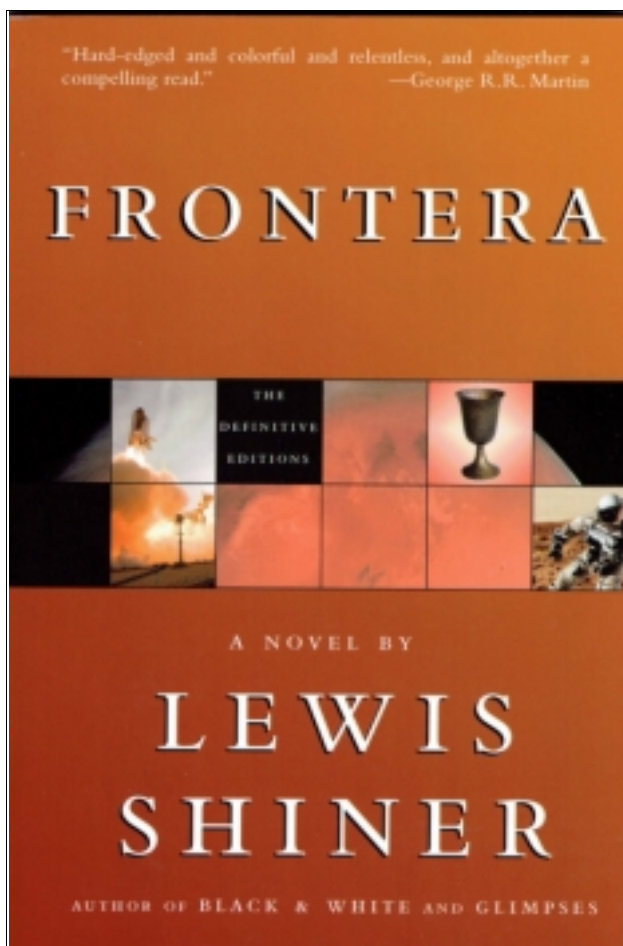
The major corporations also impose what they call a riot tax on anyone who is still working, and use this money to pay a basic pension to the millions of unemployed people, almost allowing them to live a frugal life. Things have settled down, but much rebuilding and consolidation remains to be done.

The American conglomerate that is also in partnership with the Japanese comes searching for Reece, who is almost an alcoholic living on past glories, and tries to

convince him to lead an expedition back to Mars. He is reluctant at first. He is now 20 years past his prime, and he believes that everyone in the abandoned colony is dead after 20 years. Eventually he is convinced to join the expedition, and training at Houston begins. Here he discovers that not only are the colonists still alive, but so is his daughter. The Martians have developed something that the corporations want. They only have six weeks to launch if they are to beat the Russians, who have also heard that something very special has been developed



**JOHN LITCHEN** has been a frequent contributor to my magazines over many years. His 'My Life and Science Fiction' columns (first published in *\*brg\**, *Scratch Pad*, and *Treasure*) have now been gathered into *EPHEMERON: A MEMOIR* (Yambu Press). Enquiries to: [jlitchen@bigpond.net.au](mailto:jlitchen@bigpond.net.au).



on Mars. The Japanese corporations contribute cash as well as a couple of astronauts.

They leave only two days ahead of the Russians. First they have to rendezvous at Deimos where a transfer base had been established but long abandoned. The lander there will enable them to go down to Mars.

The gritty grungy tone of the book can be seen as the astronauts walk across the surface of Deimos to the moribund station through a field of debris: discarded oxygen tanks, pieces of broken machinery, and other detritus simply tossed out of the station as rubbish.

The lander is still operational. Inside the station Reece recovers some data he will need when he is on the surface of Mars. He doesn't tell the other astronauts what he has gathered. He knows what it is that the corporations want so desperately, but the other members of his team remain ignorant. He worked it out while listening to the messages sent back to Houston.

When he reaches the surface of Mars, Reece reconnects with his daughter in a colony that is barely surviving. He discovers he has become a grandfather. Many of the other colonists have children.

They don't live much in the colony but occupy a cave nearby that they have turned into a laboratory. The cave was the original colony site until the domes and other pressurised buildings were constructed. The children are all mutations, their parents' DNA having been affected by the constant radiation that pours down onto the surface of Mars.

It is the children who have made the discoveries the world's governing corporations want. The children have

discovered a way to control anti-matter. The children using this energy source have also developed a form of matter transmission, yet to be perfected, which will enable the interstellar transmission of objects and information. Reece has retrieved from the station on Deimos a set of data giving the coordinates of all nearby star systems. With this data he can get the children to transmit him to another world.

Why he wants to do this isn't really explained.

The Russians arrive and land nearby. A confrontation with the Americans almost destroys the colony. The violence is eventually resolved by the children rather than the adults, and the colony barely survives. The Americans get what they want. Reece has been transmitted elsewhere, and the story ends on a positive note after all the grunge and violence.

Unlike most novelists who write about Mars, Lewis Shiner focuses his story on the characters and their motivations rather than on the hardware and the science. This is a more literary work with some depth to the writing. It focuses on the aging astronaut Reece and the younger Kane, his protégé, their motivations, desires, and the things that have affected them over the years to make them who they are, which in turn results in the outcomes achieved when they reach Mars. This book presents a very different perspective of what it could be like living on Mars, isolated from a world that is slowly falling apart.

This seems now to be the first book concentrating on an established Mars colony left to survive after some catastrophe has destroyed any hope of rescue, contact, or return to Earth.

It set a fine precedent that most of the recent Mars stories can match.

## 1990s: an explosion of interest

The 1990s saw an explosion of interest in Mars. In that decade more books, both fiction and non-fiction, appeared about Mars than in any other previous decade. In the 2000s and beyond we continue to see new books about Mars and about travelling to Mars, as preparations are actually being made for such a voyage. There are a large number of speculative non-fiction 'how we are going to do it?' books, which will probably outnumber the novels covering the same subject.

In his book *The Snows of Olympus: A Garden on Mars* (1994; p. 30), Arthur C. Clarke mentions three books that he considers outstanding.

- *Mission to Mars* by the *Apollo 11* Command Module pilot **Michael Collins** is a fictional as well as a non-fictional account of an expedition to Mars in 2004, making use of the technology available at the time it was written in 1990, *but it is not the only book with that name*. Since Collins speculated that the first mission to Mars would take place in 2004 he was way off the mark and far too optimistic, but I will still read it if I can find a copy.
- *Mars* by Ben Bova (1992)
- *Beachhead* by Jack Williamson (1992) is a novel I downloaded as an e-book.

Both Bova and Williamson have written stories using

only the facts known at the time (the 1990s) about Mars and the technology of the time. These are true novels that are speculative and quite enthralling. But these are not the only ones; the rest of the decade is replete with exciting, plausible, and often magnificent stories of going to Mars and establishing a colony or a foothold there.

## Ben Bova's *Mars* and Jack Williamson's *Beachhead*

*Mars* by Ben Bova and *Beachhead* by Jack Williamson can be compared, since they were both published in 1992.

In 1992 each author had decades of writing SF, Williamson with over 60 years, and Bova just over 40 years. Williamson was 83 when he wrote *Beachhead*.

Both had access to whatever was known about Mars in 1991, including thousands of colour photos of the surface as seen from space, and from the surface as seen by the Mars Rovers, as well as all technical information, detailed maps with all the features named, and much speculation or interpretation regarding the forces that shaped Mars into what we see today.

Both novels tell the story of a first expedition to Mars and the intention to establish a base of operations on the

surface for exploration and study.

Both have a character who is an alpha male who eventually becomes a dominant person in the expeditionary groups. In both cases this character has a strong will to live, and is determined to obtain a positive outcome for the expedition regardless of the odds. In *Mars*, Jamie Waterman is a Native American of Navajo descent who has been an alternate choice for the position of geologist. In *Beachhead*, Huston Kelligan is the son of a very wealthy Texan businessman who wants to escape his father's influence and doesn't care about his inheritance. All he's ever dreamed about is going to Mars.

In both stories the spaceships that take the expedition members to Mars rotate to generate artificial gravity via centrifugal force (which is a device not used by Arthur C. Clarke in 1951 or Ludek Pesek in 1970).

For both expeditions, ships begin with Earth-normal gravity and gradually slow down the spin over the long voyage until they are rotating with the equivalent of Mars's gravity.

In Bova's book, two spaceships are tethered together rotating around a common centre: the location of the fusion drive and the instruments for astronomical studies. Each ship has a crew of 12, and when each arrives and orbits Mars, six from each ship descend to establish an operational base, while the others remain in orbit as backup.

In Williamson's book, the spaceship is a rotating ring around a central elongated core, at the end of which is the fusion engine. It is a smaller ship and it carries only six people.

Both books have their Mars ships built in orbit, one around the Earth (*Mars*), the other around the Moon (*Beachhead*).

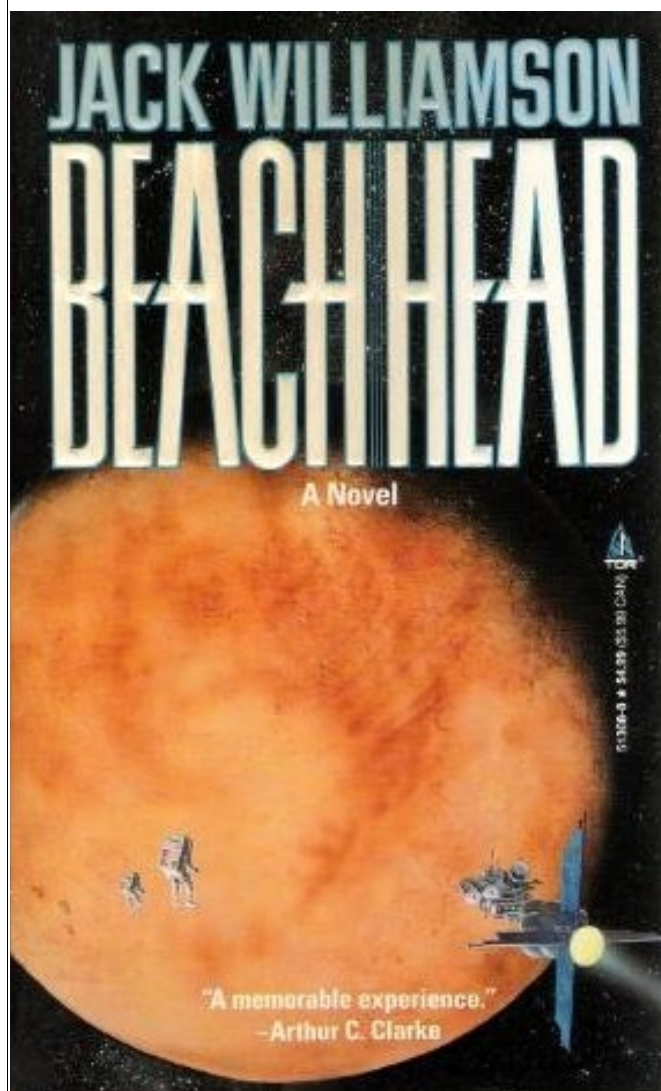
In both books the spaceships orbit Mars while the expedition members use landers or shuttles to go down to the surface and ferry equipment back and forth.

Both give some detail about the voyage out (which takes five months in *Beachhead*, but nine months in *Mars*) and the alignment of team members into pairs, since each group is made up equally of male and female team members. Also each book has team members from different countries and ethnic origins. This is more noticeable in Bova's book, because there are more people, and the whole expedition is international in membership and funding. Williamson's team is funded by NASA or some similar organisation and is basically American, although some team members are from other countries.

Both authors propose that Mars will have some kind of life or proto-life that affects part of the outcome of the explorers' activities.

In Williamson's book, it is a quasi-lifelike virus that lays dormant in the dust, infecting humans when the dust is breathed in and it enters their lungs and bloodstream. It makes their life more miserable than it needs to be — rather different from the life form in Watson's *The Martian Inca*, which transforms the person infected into a higher consciousness.

In Bova's book, a hardy lichen-like substance is discovered in the deeper parts of Valles Marineris growing in the cracks of ancient rocks where it draws moisture from the mists that form overnight deep in the canyon. This implies a kind of eco-system that the explorers wish





to find, since no single organism lives entirely alone but is part of an eco-system, no matter how primitive it seems. Both Bova and Williamson speculate within the bounds of reasonableness, and do not extrapolate ridiculous outcomes.

In both books, serious problems arise to threaten the teams on the surface, forcing them to be inventive and resourceful in order to survive.

Both books give brilliantly evocative descriptions of Mars: how it feels to be down there on the surface, how it feels to land or take off in one of the shuttles used, or how it is to solve the problems encountered while driving Rovers about on the surface. These passages are so well written that sometimes you can't put the book down; you have to keep reading.

With so much in common, you would expect the stories to be similar, but they aren't.

Williamson begins his story with a long lead-up to the arrival on Mars.

Bova begins his story as the first group lands and begins to set up the inflatable habitat that will be their home for 45 days.

Williamson's approach is old fashioned and linear, showing the origins of his style in the early SF magazines.

Bova's approach is modern — he continually cross cuts between the story's action and the selection and training of the crew and the voyage out. It also cross cuts to what is happening on the Earth simultaneously, making his book an intricate and engaging reading experience.

**Jack Williamson** spends too much time on the lead-up to the actual Mars mission. He concentrates on background detail, providing documentary detail rather than drama. None of the characters comes alive, and any event shown, such as the moon race to see how independently each potential astronaut can handle difficult situations, seems overly melodramatic.

The expedition does not reach Mars until just over halfway through the book, and only then does the book come alive. The problems he creates for his characters make sense, based on the information given in the first half. There are only six of them. Once they reach Mars, two of them decide they don't want to go down to spend a year and a half trying to establish a colony, but wish to return immediately while the orbital window to Earth is still open. One of them is terrified of contracting the Mars virus. They initiate the two landings to check for a suitable site to establish a base and do some on-the-spot scientific investigations, but the first lander crashes, and that's when all the problems begin.

The two who want to go back don't want to waste fuel searching for the first two. The other two want to go down and rescue their team mates. Once they have reached the surface of Mars, the two in the orbiting ship abandon them and take off for Earth, jettisoning all the supplies and livestock meant for the base in order to lighten the ship and conserve fuel.

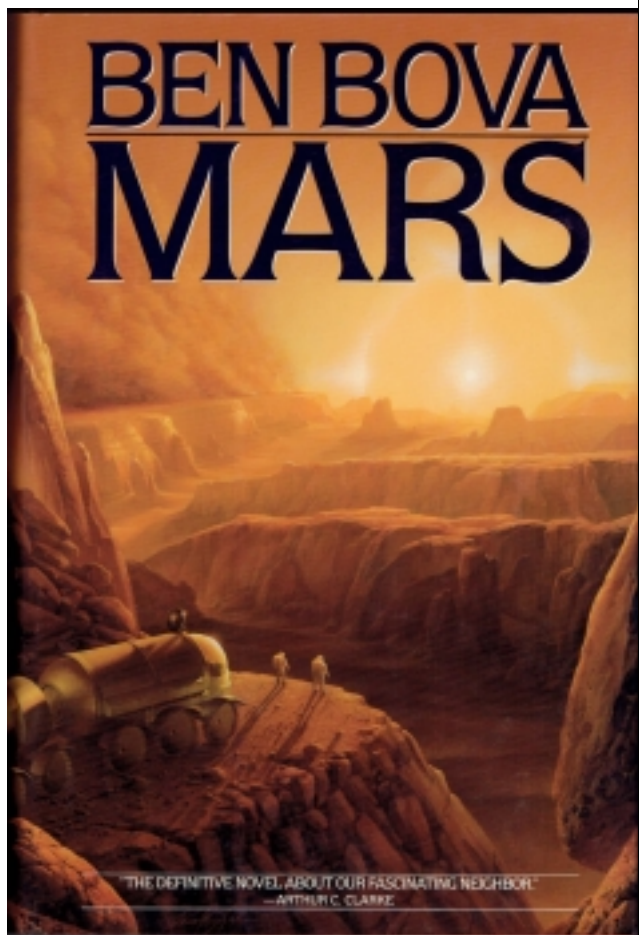
The four on the surface are forced to make the best of the site near where they crashed in order to survive until the next ship in orbit around the Moon is finished and can reach Mars to rescue them. Williamson now presents alternate chapters set on Earth, showing that

the public is being fed a lot of lies about how successful the mission is in order to keep up the flow of finances. And the ship in orbit around the Moon is not being finished, because the organisation building it is bankrupt.

In desperation, the stranded astronauts on Mars come up with a way for one of them to return in the only functioning landing shuttle. It must be the billionaire's son Huston Kelligan, because he is the only one who would be believed on Earth and who could organise the finances to return with a rescue mission. No one believes him when he arrives on Earth (off the coast of Chile) because of the lies being presented daily in the media, and he is arrested, and branded a conman by the Mars Corporation, which doesn't want the public to know the truth about what happened. Eventually the truth comes out, the ship in orbit around the Moon is completed, and our hero returns with a new crew to rescue his three remaining team mates and set up a permanent base on Mars.

True to his pulp origins, Williamson throws all sorts of obstacles to survival in the way of his astronauts. If I had read this book 25 years ago, I probably would have enjoyed it more than I do now. I don't like reading a book on a desktop computer screen, and this probably made the book less enjoyable than it could have been, especially during the first half. Fortunately, it isn't a very long book.

**Ben Bova's *Mars*** is much longer than Williamson's, with much more detail, and it is structured in a way that encourages continuous reading. He puts 12 people on





Mars's surface, setting up a more practical kind of base. Two different teams go exploring, and his descriptions of what they see and find are believable. His situations are not at all melodramatic, but arise from what the teams do while on the surface. Equally as interesting are the international politics and the back-room expectations on Earth about future funding and what is expected of the expedition. More is made of the differences in the crew's nationalities, probably because there are 12 of them, with another 12 as back-up in orbit. The focus story is Jamie Waterman's gradual bringing around of the others to his way of thinking. When a slow disaster (which cleverly hints at a possible unseen Martian cause) almost kills all of them, the reader is desperately hoping a solution will be found. Finally it is, but the solution is unexpected. When the 45 days are up, the base habitat is evacuated and the astronauts, cosmonauts, and scientists on the surface return to the orbiting ships in preparation for their trip back to Earth.

The big discovery of Bova's book is life: a hardy lichen type of organism that lives in the cracks in the rocks at the bottom of the deepest chasm on Mars. But something else is also there. Jamie sees it but cannot get close enough to confirm his observation. We are left pondering this mystery at the conclusion of the book.

Arthur C. Clarke provides a blurb for the front cover of Bova's book: 'the definitive novel about our fascinating neighbour'. I think he was right, at least until Kim Stanley Robinson hit the bookshelves with his huge trilogy a few years later. Michael Collins, the astronaut whose book *Mission to Mars* is also recommended by Clarke, also wrote a blurb for Bova's book: 'A fascinating story — a novel worthy of our sister planet.'

Arthur C. Clarke also wrote a foreword to Jack Williamson's book, *Beachhead*, praising it as well, so I guess he liked both of these books.

**Ben Bova's** story does not finish. *Mars* is in effect only the first half of a longer novel. The second half, published six years later in 1999, is quite rightly called *Return to Mars*.

This time Jamie Waterman is the leader of a smaller expedition (five men and three women) that is funded privately by a wealthy corporation looking to make a profit out of what they find and subscriptions to virtual reality broadcasts of the expedition members going about their work on the planet.

Again we begin on Mars, with the new expedition members entering the habitat established by the first expedition. Although there are flashbacks to the events that led up to the establishment of the new voyage as well as crosscuts to manipulative events currently taking place on Earth, they do not detract from the drama of the main events taking place on Mars, but enhance it. Like *Mars*, this book is hard to put down.

Underlying the action is Jamie's obsession with what he saw but could not confirm during the first expedition. This desire gives the book an unstated tension apart from the tension generated between Jamie and the other alpha male, Dex Trumball, the son of the man behind the funding for this second expedition, who goads Jamie at every opportunity, constantly referring derisively to Jamie's Navajo heritage. As would be expected in a group

consisting of five men and three women, there is also some sexual tension, all of which combined makes the story more believable. Dex wants to recover the early Rovers sent to Mars because he believes they would be worth a fortune, enough to finance a third expedition. His father, the man behind the money, wants to open Mars to tourism in the near future, much to Jamie's horror, because he believes tourism would destroy the planet and whatever they may find. He equates it to the coming of the white man to America and the subsequent destruction of Native American culture and heritage. Jamie slowly loses control over the expedition's goals until he is forced to resign and place one of the others in charge.

Free of responsibility for the expedition, Jaime can now concentrate on confirming what he saw six years earlier. He is coerced into taking Dex with him to Valles Marineris chasm and the cleft where he thought he saw ancient ruins. Over the course of this outward journey in a Rover, the two men reconcile their differences, and they do discover an ancient ruin, a building hidden inside the cleft and protected from the elements. Astounded, the other team members come out and set up another habitat so they can work there without having to travel back and forth. Meanwhile a series of accidents fuels the idea that one of them is trying to sabotage the mission with the intention of forcing them to return to Earth (where presumably they would all be safe).

With the help of archaeologists back on Earth, they come to the conclusion that the buildings are 65 million years old. This is an astonishing date, because it pinpoints the time of the destruction of Mars from a warm



inhabited planet into what it is today to the time of the event that occurred on Earth wiping out the dinosaurs and most of life on Earth. Earth was larger than Mars and could recover; Mars couldn't. Its life died, with only a few deeply buried bacteria and some primitive lichen-like mosses surviving and clinging to life.

Bova cleverly suggests that intelligent life once existed on Mars without speculating as to what it was or how it looked. There are no clues in the building other than some undecipherable writings on some of its walls. This understated foray into a fanciful possibility is so low key that it doesn't intrude into the realistic depiction of survival on Mars.

His speculation of finding primitive life somewhere on or under the surface is quite acceptable. As mentioned earlier, every author writing about Mars does this to some degree. It is the great hope of humankind that we will find evidence of life elsewhere in the universe, and the search for this proof underlies most of our explorations across the solar system, regardless of other stated reasons.

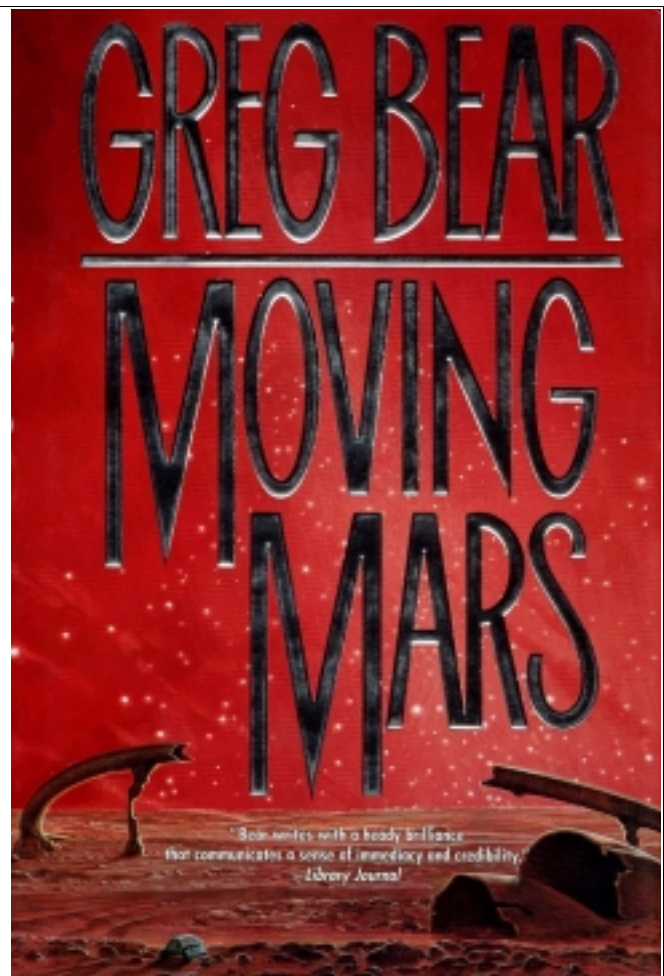
## Greg Bear and Paul McAuley

The Mars novels from 1992 and 1993 are based on increasingly up-to-date knowledge about Mars, and all include some speculation as to whether the planet held an earlier form of life. In some way or another they detail methods that might be used to transform Mars into a more benign place for human occupation. They are different from the earlier novels, which were concerned with the voyage out and initial establishment of a base on the surface. The exception is the first of Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, *Red Mars*, which describes the preparations and training for the voyage out and the establishment of a colony and plans for terraforming the planet.

*Moving Mars* (1992) by **Greg Bear** has a bold idea at its core: moving Mars. To my knowledge, no earlier writer had suggested moving Mars to another location.

Mars has been settled for over 150 years and has a population of just over four million. The people live in warrens tunnelled underground, safe from the radiation that bathes the surface. Settlements scattered over the planet provide accommodation for extended family groups called Binding Multiples (BMs). Each BM controls such activities as mining and food growing. Earth is the recipient of most of the produce from Mars, as well as that from the Moon and the asteroid colonies. Travel on Mars is by taking a monorail system between BM settlements, or by flying.

The story opens with a student rebellion which results in the Earth administrators of the university abandoning Mars. The students want more freedom for Mars. Mars itself wants to become independent of Earth. Earth's controlling governments do not want this newfound independence to blossom, so they do all they can to forestall it. Also, not all BMs want to be part of a central Mars government, so there is much political debate about becoming independent of Earth and forming a new government on Mars. Two of the students from the

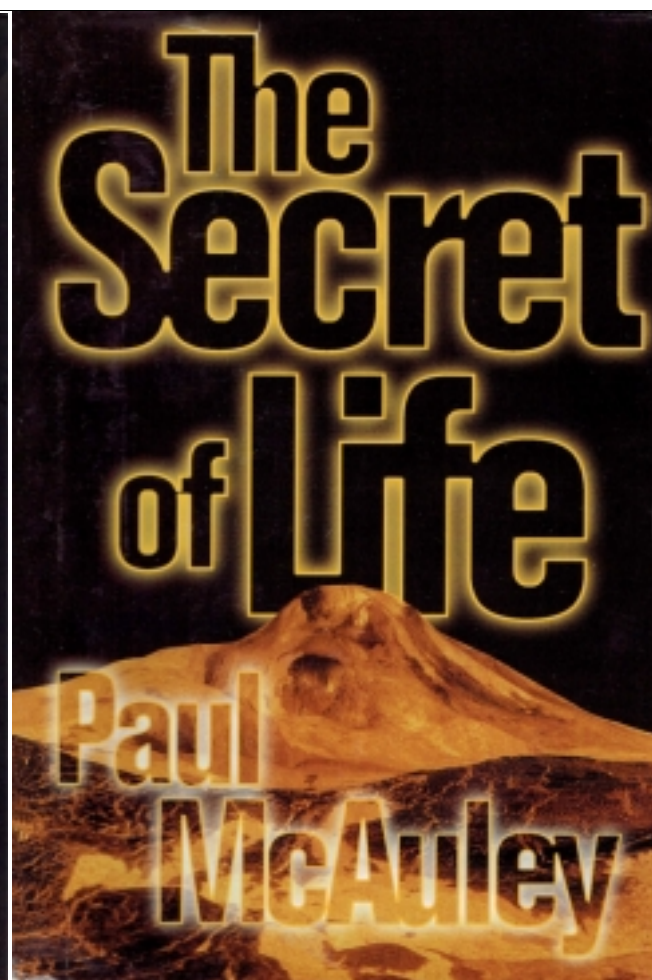
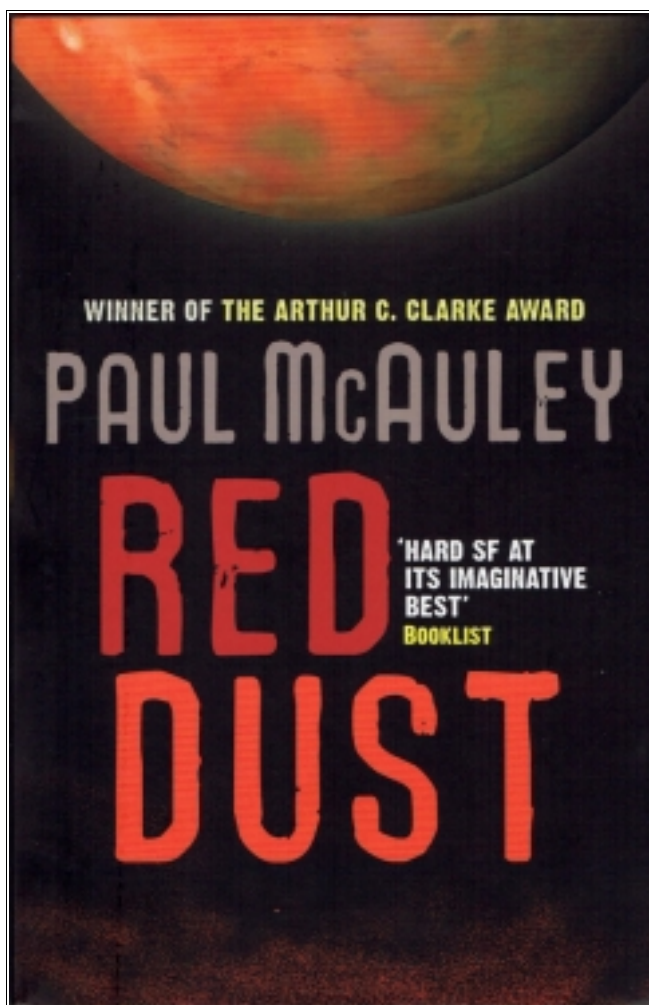


opening student rebellion are pivotal to the unfolding story; the story is told in first person by Casseia Majumdar, the daughter of a leading BM, who becomes politically involved, and her friend Charles Franklin, a physics genius who discovers how to generate antimatter from matter at a distance in order to create a formidable weapon.

Casseia goes to Earth as an ambassador while Charles works in secret. Earth suspects something is up, so the trip is wasted. Earth takes direct control of Mars, threatening to destroy the Martian political structure by bringing its citizens under control right at the moment when they are about to elect a President, Vice President and other government members.

In desperation, Charles uses his new knowledge of the underlying structure of the universe to shift Mars' moon Phobos into an orbit around Earth, with the implied threat that it could be dropped onto the planet to cause untold damage. Earth withdraws, but in secret works on the Moon to discover what Charles has done, so it can develop a weapon to use against Mars before Mars does something to Earth. Earth's governing groups are terrified. They back off, but once they discover how to turn matter into antimatter from a distance they again attack Mars. They destroy the new administrative centre and all those within. Rather than retaliate in kind by destroying major Earth cities, Casseia and Charles decide to move Mars. They don't have time to inform the people of Mars or to gain approval. Since their own destruction is imminent, they take it upon themselves to shift Mars, to move





it out of its orbit around the Sun and put it into orbit around another similar sun 10,000 light years away towards the galactic centre.

The story finishes with Mars taking an orbit around a new sun. It is closer to the new sun than it had been in the solar system, so it is warmer. A postscript tells us that Casseia and Charles had been considered to be traitors and the cause of all Mars's problems, so had been sentenced and imprisoned. Years later they are revered as saviours, because Mars now has a warmer climate and is slowly regenerating a biosphere with permafrost melting and releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Ancient Martian life, thought fossilised but now found to have been merely dormant, begins to revive, and Mars is becoming a very different planet to what it once was.

The major problem with this story is that too much political discussion takes place among rival families and between Mars and Earth. This becomes a turgid reading experience. I sometimes found myself falling asleep while reading these long sections. But when Bear writes action scenes they are absolutely riveting. You simply can't put the book down. These bits I remembered from my previous reading of 20 years ago, and not the longer political parts or the dissertation of essential background. Some people like stories with heaps of background detail, and in SF there must be some in order to establish the time, planetary locale, and background history, but often today's authors give us too much wordage, which either stops the story dead, side-tracks it

into oblique directions, or slows it down so much the reader (like me) falls asleep or tends to skip over the extended passages.

I said in Part 1 of this article (*SFC* 93, p. 27) that 'stories about Mars usually fall into three categories: fanciful, factual, and transformative.' Most of *Moving Mars* I would put in category 2. Only when Mars is moved as a dire consequence of unfolding events does it fall into the transformative category. I like to think of this as super science rather than science fantasy. Arthur C. Clarke once wrote: 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' This final part of the story is magical and entirely believable at the same time.

*Red Dust* by Paul McAuley (1993) stands out from the other contemporary books about Mars because it is a fantasy — not like those of Edgar Rice Burroughs and others of his time almost 100 years ago, but a modern science fantasy. It straddles both of my first and second categories, mostly staying within the second category. But at the very end it becomes transformative.

Mars is dying. Five hundred years earlier the Chinese arrived and took over the planet from the Americans who had set up a scientific base there. The Chinese imported millions of Tibetans to act as slaves in the terraforming of Mars. But this process has stopped and slowly the planet is reverting to what it once was. There are wild yaks, horses, and other animals roaming the plains, there are seas of dust that have ships sailing across

them, there is a unique ecosystem in the seas involving phytoplankton and entities like giant dust rays that sustain the remnants of the American scientific mission whose base sails endlessly over the seas, only coming ashore when they need to render down a giant dust ray. There are settlements scattered all across Mars called *Danwei*, where groups of Chinese settlers live. There are plainsmen called *cowboys* who are like bandits, herding the wild yaks, taking them to the larger cities for sale. The ruling Han Chinese have mostly elected to upload themselves into an electronic universe where they can live forever. When their Emperor physically dies a revolution begins between the ordinary folk and the armies controlled by the Emperor.

Wei Lee has a mission to bring back the rains and save Mars from slow death. Wei Lee is a clone. A number of them, both male and female, are inhabited by nanoviruses that alter their perception and give them extraordinary powers. Wei Lee is quite ordinary at the start, but when he rescues an anarchist pilot whose rocket crashes she infects him with the nanovirus that turns him into something more than human. The army want what she is carrying. It captures her and Wei Lee to interrogate them, but they escape during a dust storm. So begins a remarkable adventure as Wei Lee travels across Mars encountering many different people who have adapted to Mars in often extraordinary ways, while feeling compelled to go to the tallest mountain in the solar system where the Emperor lies wired up in the new Forbidden City inside the caldera of this giant extinct volcano. It is here that he finds answers and fulfils a mission he didn't know that he was programmed to carry out.

At times the detail in this remarkable book is very scientific, while at other times it borders on fantasy with a plausible scientific background. Sometimes you even think that an alternate historical reality has happened, because the Mars we know could never be like this Mars. Wei Lee gets into all kinds of trouble as he journeys to his destination across a very believable planet. McAuley so convincingly extrapolates the effects of the digital age that you accept whatever outrageous implausibility he offers as a possibility. This book sucks you in and shakes you up. When you get to the end, you give a sigh of relief that everything has been tied up and explained and you know life will go on.

**Paul McAuley's** other Mars book *The Secret of Life* (2001) is not entirely a Mars book, although a third of it takes place there. It is a story of industrial espionage and how governments and big business want to keep secret the most astonishing discovery in human history, yet Mars is always in the background.

The year is 2026. Something weird is growing in the Pacific Ocean, an organism that may threaten our entire ecosystem as well as the food chain we all depend upon, something the Chinese discovered deep under the southern polar ice cap and brought back from Mars. It has, through deliberate sabotage of a plane carrying a courier with a sample of the substance, been released into the ocean with disastrous consequences. Without telling the rest of the world, the Chinese send another expedition to Mars to the site where they discovered this

alien life. What their agenda is no one knows. Meanwhile scientists and marine biologists around the world are desperately trying to discover ways to stop the rapid spread of this alien organism.

An American combined international expedition is sent to Mars to find what the Chinese found so they can examine its DNA and come up with a way of stopping the spread of the organism through the oceans. It seems to be turning up everywhere. After much rivalry among scientists and political machinations between governments and big business, an expedition is finally organised and trained while the Chinese are already half way to Mars. The international expedition will use a faster ship to arrive there not long after the Chinese.

On Mars the members of the expedition make their way to south pole and wait for the Chinese to leave so they can find out what was discovered. The Chinese sabotage their campsite and destroy the drill sites where this organism was discovered deep under the ice. Of the three Chinese, two leave to head back to their lander for the return trip to Earth but die before they can reach it. They have been infected by the organism. The third one stays to try to stop the American international group from gaining any information. There is a shootout, during which the remaining Chinese member is killed along with one rather obnoxious American who it turns out was working with a private company to steal and monopolise the genetic secrets of the Martian lifeform. Eco-terrorists have their own agenda and cause no end of problems on Earth and on Mars. Finally, one of the scientists who has higher motives makes her way to the Chinese lander and takes off with some samples recovered from the dead Chinese astronaut to return in their ship orbiting Mars. When she gets back to Earth she is charged with piracy, eco-terrorism, and whatever else the Chinese and the international community can come up with. All she ever wanted was to discover the genetic code of Martian life, because it shares much similarity with early Earth life, and she wants to know how much it has changed and evolved after 4 billion years of separate evolution.

This book is very different from McAuley's other Mars book, but is just as exciting. McAuley writes action scenes that capture your attention, and his narrative is so well done you can't put the book down. His descriptions of Mars are up to date with how it looks and with what scientists think has happened on Mars over the last 4 billion years. His description of the small colony established by the Americans and the reasons its location was chosen is just what one would think it might be like, and his background details of Earth in the near future are believable because they are not really much different from the modern world we currently inhabit. He probably should have set the time at 2046 rather than 2026 and it would have been more believable than it is. I think McAuley was overly optimistic in choosing 2026 when he wrote this story back in 2000 or 2001.



## Travelling to Mars

It appears that some authors more or less got it right when speculating on what to do on arrival at Mars. Both Arthur C. Clarke and Luděk Pešek (in 1951 and 1970 respectively) had their space ships land on one or the other of Mars' moons, from where smaller vessels ferry crew members and equipment down to the surface.

Ben Bova and Jack Williamson have their ships orbiting Mars while the astronauts use small ferries to go to and from the surface.

Long gone are the authors who have their ships take off from Earth, fly to Mars and land, before reversing the process to return home again. Ships like that could never carry enough fuel to sustain landings and take-offs. E. C. Tubb in 1955 was probably the last to offer that as a method.

All the plans suggested in the non-fiction books and offered by the various organisations involve either establishing a base on one of the moons or working from a mother ship in orbit. In his non-fiction book *Mission to Mars*, Buzz Aldrin (the second man to walk on the Moon) suggests that the first astronauts should set up base on Phobos, which is only 9377 kilometres (5827 miles) above the surface. They would be able to study the planet and operate tele-controlled robots on the surface without the time delay that would occur if operations were attempted from Earth. Once a presence is established on Phobos, or Deimos, or in orbit, huge amounts of scientific work can be carried out before any serious attempt is made to go down to the surface.

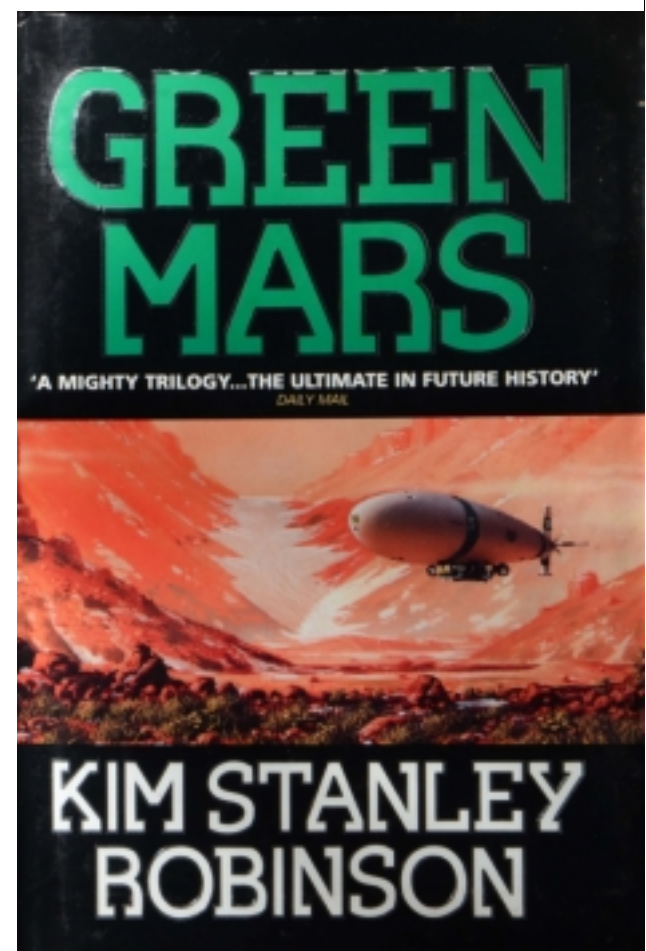
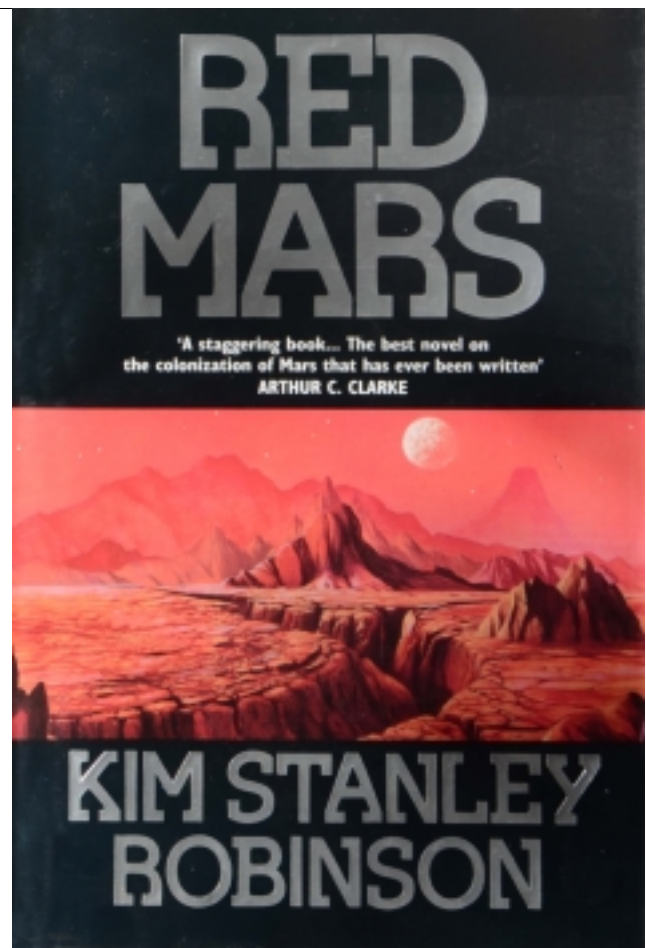
It is planned that landers will separate from the mother ship to land, then separate again to return to orbit, where they will dock with the mother ship for the return back to Earth.

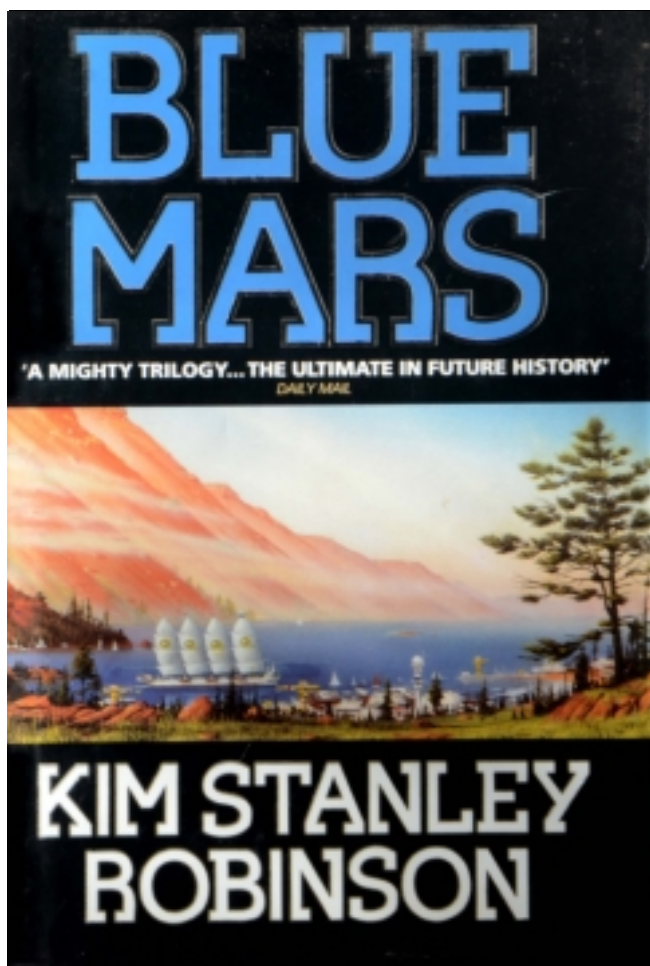
NASA plans to send an expedition to Phobos sometime after 2030.

They will surely be beaten by private enterprise. A private non-profit US group wants to send a married couple to make a half-orbit flyover of Mars in 2018 using Mars' gravity as a slingshot to hurl the ship into a trajectory that will return it to Earth. The Mars One organisation intends to send four colonists to Mars in 2023, where they will stay permanently. It has already narrowed the selection of volunteers from over 200,000 to a few hundred, whose activities will be followed by a TV reality show (to finance the whole endeavour) as Mars One decides who will be the first four people to colonise Mars. It has now reduced the number to fewer than 100 people, and is beginning to train teams of four (two men and two women) in preparation for the trip to Mars in the mid 2020s.

## The achievement of Kim Stanley Robinson

When **Kim Stanley Robinson**'s novel *Red Mars* appeared in 1992, it stunned science fiction readers. *The Times Literary Supplement* called it 'one of the finest works of American SF' while Arthur C. Clarke wrote that it was 'a staggering book; the best novel on the colonization of





Mars that has ever been written.' *Interzone* said: 'Red Mars may simply be the best novel ever written about Mars.' All this was said before anyone knew that *Red Mars* would be the first instalment of a trilogy that would become probably the longest novel ever written about Mars: just on 1698 pages plus several pages of acknowledgements and chronologies in my HarperCollins hardcover editions.

It is claimed that it took 17 years of research culminating in the writing of this trilogy, but I suspect that is a bit of hyperbole. Like most other SF fans, Robinson has probably been thinking about the possibilities of Mars for many years. Since Robinson was born in 1952 and presumably started reading SF at a young teenager it could easily be claimed he spent 17 years researching Mars for these books. He was 40 years old when *Red Mars* was published.

Obviously Robinson has been thinking deeply about Mars, how it could be terraformed, and how the establishment of a colony or colonies could take place. He also thought much about how personal rivalries and politics would play out over 200 years. The end result of this careful thought and research is a magnificently detailed epic trilogy that rings true. You can believe it is real. The first volume, *Red Mars*, won a Nebula award, and the following year *Green Mars* won the Hugo award. So much material was accumulated and side stories written that eventually Robinson collected them as separate volume featuring characters and events and background material used for the original trilogy. Simply called *The*

*Martians* (published in 1999), it is fragmentary and disjointed, only making sense if read alongside the original trilogy. The book also contains 27 poems under the heading, *If Wang Wei lived on Mars and Other Poems*.

Robinson creates a Martian mythology and a Martian Constitution, and fills his massive trilogy with a tremendous variety of people and ideas that reflect the vast diversity which exists on our own planet (Earth). Their interactions on Mars create a new society after settlement begins. To do these books justice would need another long article devoted entirely to them, but at my age I suspect time is short and as Henning Mankell said (in an article about his creation of Kurt Wallander when asked if there would be any more books about him or perhaps about his daughter Linda), 'I make increasingly definite decisions about what I shall not do.' I probably won't write another long article about Robinson's trilogy and fourth volume because I think my time is better spent on reading something new. I will leave that to others for a proper assessment.

## *Mars Underground*

In 1997 a book appeared that should have eclipsed most books written about Mars. Somehow this novel doesn't seem to be reprinted or to be very well known. *Mars Underground* was written between 1988 and 1996. Its author is well-known planetary scientist **William K. Hartmann**, whose work includes research into the origin of planets and other bodies in the solar system. He also had important roles in the NASA Mariner 9 mission,



which mapped in detail the surface of Mars, as well as other missions to Mars. His previous non-fiction (but speculative) work with co-author Ron Miller, *The Grand Tour*, won a Hugo award in 1988. He is an astronomer and a physicist, and also a brilliant writer of fiction, as *Mars Underground* testifies.

Is *Mars Underground* science fiction? Yes, by any definition, but it is also a literary mainstream novel that just happens to be set on Mars in the future. Arthur C. Clarke describes it as 'A realistic and exciting view of the future presence of humans on Mars'. At the time the book also garnered praise from the likes of Greg Bear and Gregory Benford, but it also received the nod from three other prominent authors who do not write science fiction. Mystery writer Tony Hillerman wrote: 'If you doubted science fiction and mystery would make a good mix, William Hartman proves you wrong in *Mars Underground*.' Christopher J. Koch, author of *The Year of Living Dangerously*, writes: 'Like H. G. Wells, William K. Hartman brings a scientific training to his fiction, and a serious concern with ideas. His portrayal of a colony on Mars is so convincing and real that I felt I'd been taken into the imminent future.'

Koch is right. Mars is so realistically portrayed that you immediately accept that settlers have gone there and established a reasonable foothold on the planet with a substantial city and outposts in two other areas including the South Polar region, that its dangers and beauties are well known to the inhabitants, and that it has become a background that informs action and determines how inhabitants need to react. The inhabitants take it for granted just as characters in a story set upon Earth don't need to wonder at their surrounds but simply accept them as they are. Its beauties are described but never explained; why would you? Everyone who lives on Mars knows about them. This frees the author to concentrate on the interaction between Annie, a female reporter, and two leading people on the planet, Philippe, an artist who has created a sculpture resembling Stonehenge, and Carter, a planetary administrator. She falls in love with both of them to differing degrees. The book also offers a comparison between the moral behaviour in the future compared with that of the present time (1997), and aims to solve a mystery that Annie has come to report on.

The mystery involves the disappearance of a prominent person, Alwyn Stafford (a planetary scientist, exobiologist, and explorer), who was there on Mars from the beginning of colonisation and who was famous for discovering the remains of ancient bacterial life. He never follows the rules and often goes off by himself. When he disappears in the remote desert area of Hellespontus, having left some enigmatic clues for his friend Carter to follow, everyone in the solar system wants to know what happened.

The clues that are followed are often scientific, such as using orbital imagery to find tracks left in the desert sands by Stafford's rover, but this doesn't intrude upon the story; it seems natural and appropriate. As Carter's search for his missing friend continues, more mysteries are uncovered, and obfuscation by military authorities becomes a further problem for Carter, Philippe, and Annie as an even deeper mystery unfolds at the South

Pole. So, apart from examining love and the relationships involved between a woman and two men, Hartman is examining the absurdity of secret services and the paranoia these people possess, as well as greater mysteries in the universe, such as the origin of life and our place as living intelligent beings in this universe.

What elevates this story is that it is about the people who live on Mars and how their lives are interconnected to each other and the place they live in. Like many other wonderful novels it could have been set anywhere reasonably remote, but this time the setting is Mars. Mars influences all that happens, but it doesn't override or dominate.

Buzz Aldrin (the second astronaut to walk on the Moon) wrote: '*Mars Underground* gives an exciting depiction of the coming decades not only on Mars but also on its moon Phobos — and some of the surprises that may await us.'

My only criticism is the date the story is set, 2031 to 2033. Even in 1997 it should have been obvious that this date was too close, and having an established colony with a city (Mars City) that has 4000 inhabitants and all the things a city of that size would contain, not to mention a secondary township called Hellas as well as a scientific base at the South Pole, with a university in a settlement on Phobos, simply couldn't happen within the 30 or so years from the time the book was finished. It seems very unlikely that we will have anyone on Mars by the date of the action of the book. Nonetheless, it remains one of the best books with a story set on Mars.

## The race to Mars: a realistic date line?

I often wonder why SF authors are conservative in setting a future time in which to place their story. Are they afraid that if they set it too far ahead of the current date, any predictions contained in the story will not come true?

Authors like Clarke, Pesek, and others looked ahead 70, 80, or 100 years, and some of the things they wrote about could still happen. Their minor technical predictions have often been sidetracked by other developments, sometimes making their stories seem old fashioned and quaint, but still readable because the main ideas developed in those stories are still some way off in the future.

In the works of recent authors, placing the story only 30 or 40 years ahead is hardly enough time to allow the events depicted in establishing a colony on Mars with a viable society to happen. A lot could happen in 100 years, but in a period of a mere 20 years, we will hardly get a single person to go to Mars, let alone thousands of people, plus the ships to carry them and the materials needed to establish a domed city or any kind of complex living quarters. I suspect that these authors think that if they set their story too far ahead readers will not accept the predictions as being realistic. They keep the setting as close as possible to our present time and remain cautious about their extrapolations of present trends in order to lend credibility to the story. Unfortunately this has the opposite effect. As a reader, when I see a date in



a novel uncomfortably close to the present I subconsciously add 100 years to it, and that makes the story more acceptable.

In the 1950s and 60s Mars stories were primarily about the journey out, how long people might stay on Mars before being able to return, and the establishment of a first base and the carrying out of scientific experiments — plus the problems incurred when something goes wrong.

In the later 1970s and 80s, much more information about Mars was becoming available, and stories set there began to assume an established human presence on the planet, with lots of people making a life for themselves. The range of the action depicted widened, allowing for stories featuring greater amounts of human interaction and drama.

In the 1990s realistic depictions of Mars were becoming combined with stories that involved either changing humans to fit the climate of Mars or alternatively changing Mars over decades and centuries, terraforming it, so that it would become more habitable for humans. The definitive work on this subject is Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Mars' trilogy (terraforming), and both Frederik Pohl and Kevin J Anderson.

But Mars has always remained the place that has dominated these novels, the one exception being *Mars Underground*.

The 1990s became the best decade for books of all kinds about Mars. Every permutation appeared, from straight adventures on the surface of Mars, updated stories about getting there, stories about genetic manipulation, of terraforming, some which were realistic in approach while others were more fantasy-like. All of them have been at the very least competently written and enjoyable, while a few have been outstanding.

And in the most recent decade the trend has been to Mars stories about extricating an exploration team from some kind of disaster that occurs after they have landed and set up their base.

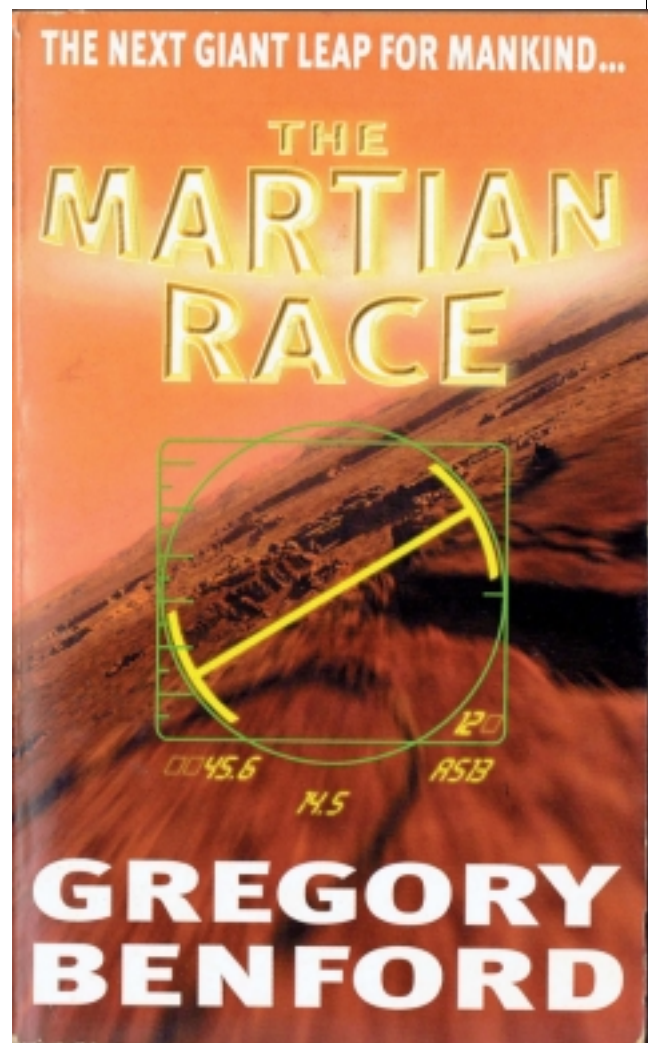
## Greg Benford's *Martian Race*

When NASA mothballed the space shuttles and started relying on Russia to propel their astronauts up to the International Space Station, it also instigated a prize to be offered to the first private business ventures that could deliver payloads and astronauts into orbit with a degree of regularity. A number of wealthy companies are developing rockets and launch systems either to deliver cargo and/or astronauts to orbit on a regular basis, or to take joy flights with tourists to the edge of space. These ventures are ongoing and still developing. There have already been several billionaires who have been tourists to the Mir space station and the International Space Station and who have paid tens of millions for the privilege. These people have already formed a space tourism business which will probably use Virgin Galactic with regularity once it starts taking passengers into near-Earth space. It is only natural that books about Mars since the new millennium begin to reflect this competitive private enterprise approach rather than the turgid bureaucratic government approach to exploration.

Capitalising on NASA's concept of a prize to the winner of a race to develop multiple-use delivery systems, **Gregory Benford** has written *The Martian Race* (1999), whose initial event takes place in 2015. Surely Benford could have seen in 1998, during the writing of this book, that such an event would be very unlikely to happen a decade and a half ahead? Forty or 50 years ahead would have been a better guess, but not 17 years. Nevertheless he writes a delightful book that begins with a disaster and keeps the reader hooked all the way through.

NASA's first manned voyage to Mars, launching in 2015, explodes while taking off, killing all on board. Unwilling to mount another ridiculously expensive expedition NASA offers a prize of \$30 billion to any enterprise that can launch an expedition to Mars during which the astronauts (marsnauts) will carry out scientific studies on the surface and return safely to Earth.

One business enterprise led by John Axelrod has every intention of winning the money, but the Chinese and the Europeans have combined to develop a similar expedition. The race has begun. Axelrod intends to finance his expedition by selling media rights to the highest bidder. The expedition in effect becomes a reality TV show that billions of people watch enthusiastically every day. Corners are cut and various dramatic incidents take place. Finally the marsnauts take off, and successfully land on Mars in 2018. The story uses alternating chapters, one chapter taking place on Mars while





the alternate chapter is a flashback to the development of the expedition. Eventually the two streams merge into the story of the current situation on Mars.

The Chinese-led consortium is building a nuclear-powered rocket system that can send its people to Mars quicker than the chemical system used by Axelrod's marsnauts. After five months on Mars the American-led expedition is about to return home when Julia, the only biologist in the team, discovers slime mould (*LIFE!*) in a volcanic vent that is sometimes active. She hardly has time to study this life because preparations are being made for the return.

Disaster strikes. The reserve vehicle, which has sat on Mars since NASA's failed attempt to send a group there, has deteriorated and malfunctions when tested. They try to effect repairs, but in the meantime the Chinese have arrived and are following in the footsteps of the original group. They use their information and their already published results and research to save doing their own work, which angers the American members, who have worked very hard while on Mars. The repairs fail, so the Americans are stuck there unless the Chinese can agree to take them home when they leave. Unfortunately there is only room for one extra person on the Chinese ship.

The Chinese, in an attempt to steal the glory of Julia's biological discoveries, lose two of their team who are inadvertently killed down in the vent where Julia discovered the slime mould. The vent contains much more than anyone had anticipated. This disaster means that the one Chinese member left can't fly the ship back alone and needs the Americans to help. Unfortunately, one would still have to stay behind. Julia decides she will stay so she can continue her studies. Her husband, who is the captain of the American team, decides to stay with her. Their hope is that with the two of them stranded on Mars, the American government will authorise NASA to make a rescue attempt. Otherwise all future expeditions to Mars would likely be cancelled.

The point of the story is that the astronauts decide their own fate and not the mission controllers back on Earth.

## Two more from Ben Bova

*Mars Life* by **Ben Bova** (2008) completes the story he began 16 years earlier in 1992 with *Mars* and continued in 1999 with *Return to Mars*.

The final segment takes place some 20 years after Jamie Waterman discovered the cliff dwellings high up in the side of the Rift Valley Tithonium Chasma. By the end of the first two expeditions to Mars a permanent base has been established in the rift valley while scientists search for the remains of life. Nothing much has been discovered other than some lichen growing in cracks in rocks at the base of the chasm where the smallest amount of moisture, condensed out of the atmosphere during the freezing nights, sustains the lichen growing in the rocks.

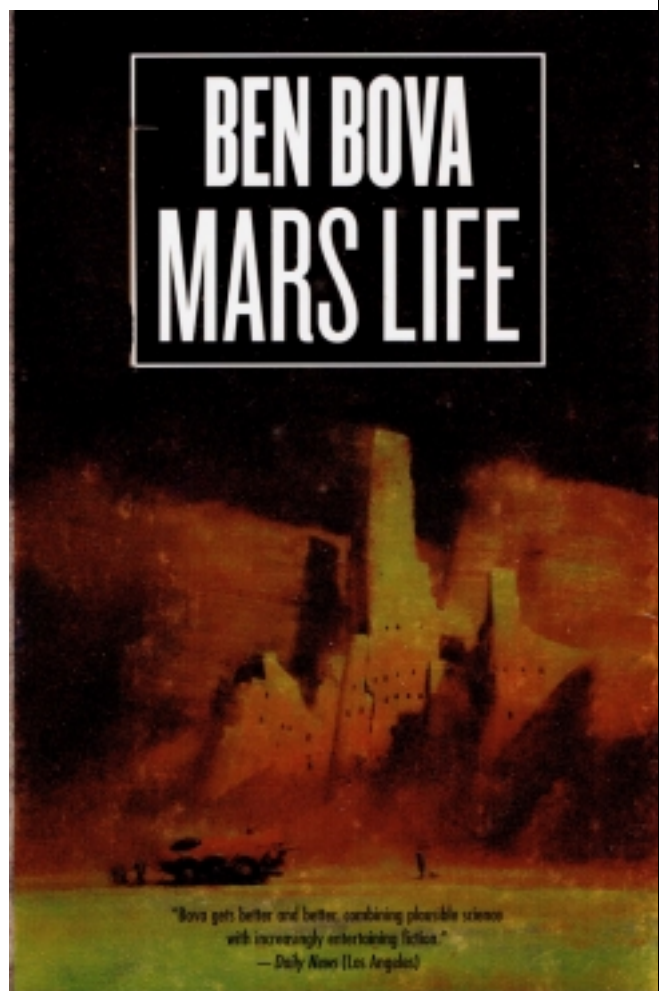
When the third book opens Jamie has been on Earth for just on 20 years. He has become the scientific head of the expedition, which now numbers around 200 people on Mars.

One of these people is anthropologist Carter Carleton, who discovers the remains of a village buried under 30 metres of detritus, which has collected during the 60 million years since the meteor bombardment that destroyed Mars and its planetary ecosystem (at the same time destroying Earth's habitat and wiping out the dinosaurs). Earth's ecosystem recovered but Mars, being much smaller, lost most of its atmosphere and never recovered. It has been slowly dying ever since.

Back on Earth, greenhouse effects are altering the climate, but religious fundamentalists are gradually taking control of the media, the universities, and even the government. They want to close down the Mars expeditions because they deny the possibility that there could have been intelligent Martians even 60 million years ago. They claim the village discovered and the fossils are all faked to make the government continue funding for the Mars explorations. The government hardly funds it anyway, since most of the money comes from private sources. As the new fundamentalism spreads across the country, even private organisations are no longer not willing to fund Mars exploration.

A new solution must be found. This solution is limited tourism. Wealthy people are willing to pay millions for the chance to make a trip to Mars, which is now accomplished by super-fast fusion-propelled rockets.

Jamie Waterman opposes any kind of tourism, since he believes it would ruin Mars forever. So the solution offered by his business partner and friend Dex (met on Mars 20 years earlier with Jamie in *Return to Mars*) is to





bring everyone back so he can fund a private expedition to claim Mars once the Navajo presence has been removed.

Jamie refuses to leave, and solicits limited help from Selene (the now independent Moon colony) so he can stay with a small number of people to maintain the Navajo presence on Mars and thus preserve it as it is forever.

He is finally convinced that this will not work. A compromise is reached whereby everyone benefits, and Jamie gets to stay on his beloved Mars.

Though not as vast as Kim Stanley Robinson's massive 'Mars' trilogy, Ben Bova's 'Mars' trilogy is certainly equal to it, and is engrossing. It is a more accessible story, because it covers in total only about 25 years, and most of the characters we met at the beginning stay to the end. Bova's character development is good enough to make you care about them and about what they are trying to achieve, while at the same time he paints a very accurate picture of what Mars is actually like and the difficulties of living there. His speculations about the way the world is being affected by climate change and the reactions of religious fundamentalists can be seen reflected in the news headlines at this very moment.

All in all, a brilliant series that is well worth taking the time to read.

Will deep space travel will be funded by private enterprise for profits or by government agencies? **Ben Bova** returns to a fictional Mars in a story called *Mars Inc.: The*

*Billionaires Club* (2013). A billionaire businessman Art Thrasher, who has been enthralled with Mars all his life, sees that no government agency will ever be able to afford to send an expedition there. Art decides to convince twenty of his billionaire compatriots to form a club to contribute 1 billion dollars each a year until launch capabilities and a space ship can be developed. The story is about the battles and petty jealousies of the members of this club as they try to outdo each other to gain the most profit from the venture they are financing. It finishes with the successful launching of a privately funded mission to Mars.

Written in a straightforward manner, *Mars Inc.* is full of wry comments on the way big business controlled by dominant males works. It is a quite funny and enjoyable read. For all his hardness and business acumen, Art Thrasher comes across as a lovable character, a boy who never grew up and who never gave up on his dream to go to Mars, even if he cannot go himself.

## Landis's Mars

**Geoffrey A. Landis** knows a lot about Mars, just as William K Hartman does. He also worked for NASA in 1997 on experiments on the *Pathfinder Sojourner* rover (measuring the amounts of dust that collected on the rover each day) and on images from *Mars Global Surveyor*. While writing this book he was working on advanced concepts for the NASA John Glenn Research Centre.

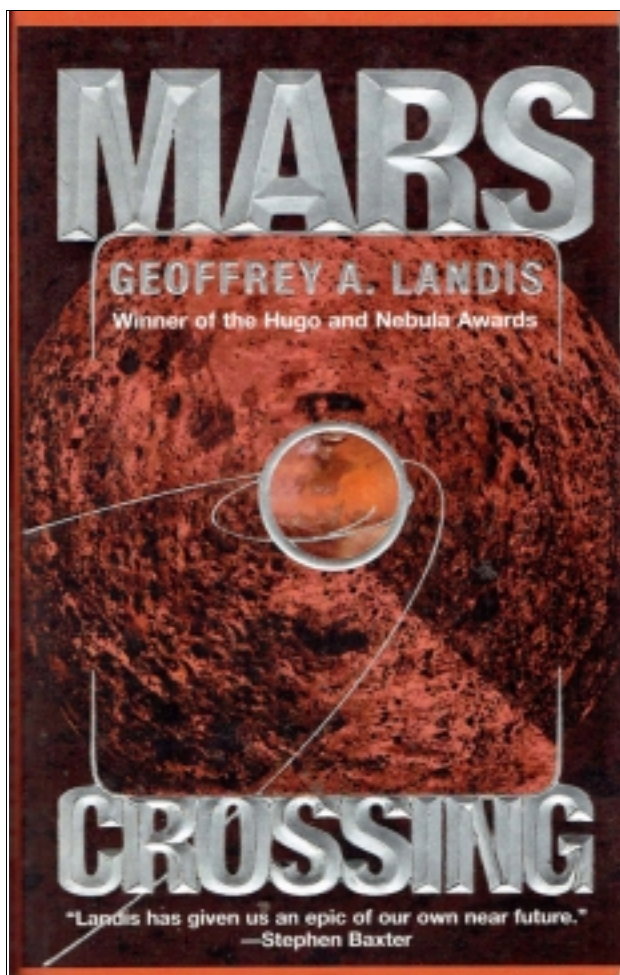
Landis also dates his story *Mars Crossing* (2000) in the middle of the twenty-first century (it says on the cover) by inserting some dates unobtrusively into the text. In 2018 an unmanned ship/habitat with supplies for an extended stay is sent to Mars so the crew of the first American expedition will be able to use it. While it sits on Mars it produces fuel by extracting oxygen and hydrogen from the atmosphere and storing it in tanks. The American crew were to go in 2022, but two Brazilians beat them to it by landing near the North Pole on the other side of the planet in 2020. They both die as the whole world watches on TV and no one knows what happened.

The second expedition (the first American one) arrives. During the flight the whole crew becomes infected with athlete's foot, a fungal infection that goes wild in the enclosed environment of the space ship because the astronauts had been sterilised of skin bacteria that normally control fungal infections. The infection invades everything, making the astronauts' lives intolerable, forcing them to leave almost as soon as they had land. They would have turned around mid flight if they could have. They abandon the habitat and all its supplies and take off immediately.

Their ship blows up as it makes a booster flight around Venus.

A second American expedition has been sent at the same time, but on a slower, longer orbit to arrive much later. It sits on the surface in a different location for six years waiting for the next expedition to land. This puts the second American group's arrival around 2034, hardly mid twenty-first century. Surely Landis could have pushed his dates an extra 10 or 20 years ahead?





This third expedition arrives with all six marsnauts knowing that the previous two expeditions finished disastrously. If they fail there will be no rescue or fourth mission. They really are on their own and must make certain they don't fail.

Unfortunately the second return ship's fuel storage explodes when two of the marsnauts try to check how much is there. Highly active sulphur in the dust has entered into everything over the six years the ship has been sitting there. It has corroded the fuel lines, measurement gauges, and seals, rendering the habitat unusable. One of the marsnauts is killed when the fuel tanks explode, dousing him in liquid oxygen.

The members of this expedition are stuck, with no way back and no possible rescue mission. They hatch a crazy plan to travel across Mars to the location of the Brazilian expedition to see if its ship is usable for a return to Earth. The problem with the Brazilian ship, however, is that it had been designed for two people, and there are five remaining in the American team. The Brazilian ship is 4000 miles (6000 kilometres) from their location, sitting on the polar ice cap.

Having no choice they set out, but only two of them know that the Brazilian ship can accommodate only two passengers.

This is where Landis' knowledge of Mars comes to the fore. His descriptions of surface features and colours, dust storms, and the kind of features the travellers encounter are superb and convincing in their detail. His knowledge of space suits and how they work too is

detailed and I would assume accurate. I certainly believed that they were real.

The rest of the story involves the difficulties of travelling across the unknown terrain of Mars with equipment that was designed for short excursions rather than long epic ones. Some things break down, with disastrous consequences.

They must cross the chasms leading to Valles Marineris. Finally they must cross that big one itself as they head north. The first major disaster occurs here, and one of them is killed. Equipment fails and they are reduced to walking. Too far from the North Pole they change plans, and walk to the first American expedition's supply habitat. There should be enough supplies there to last them more than a year. But more importantly, there is an aeroplane there: a flimsy gossamer-winged craft designed to fly in Mars' thin atmosphere. The remaining marsnauts want to use it to fly to the North Pole where the Brazilian ship sits on the ice. One of the four wanders off early one morning looking for fossils and gets lost. He is found later, dead from lack of oxygen, as his suit supply ran out. There are hints that the two deaths were not accidental but were deliberately caused.

The flight of the gossamer plane and what they see from above is beautiful. The story's final resolution, when the three reach the location of the Brazilian ship, is unexpected but seems perfectly natural, given the character development through flashback chapters throughout the book. It was a rather sudden finish, but overall this book rightly deserved to win the Locus Award for Best First Novel in 2000.

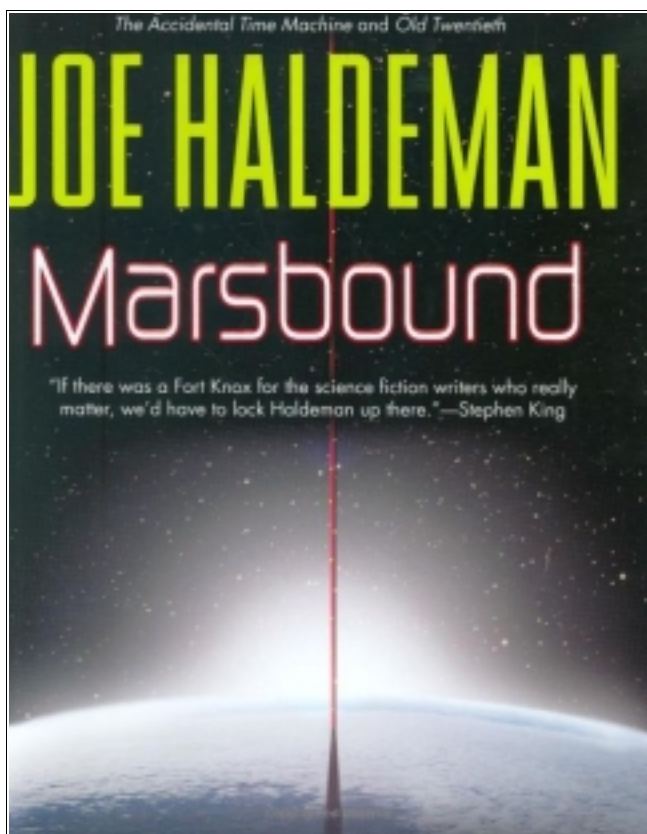
A prolific short story writer, Landis does not seem to have written any other novels, which is a pity.

## Joe Haldeman's *Marsbound*

**Joe Haldeman's *Marsbound*** (2013) is the first part of a trilogy by Joe Haldeman, but only the first volume is about Mars. It is a Young Adult novel, in that it follows the life of an 18-year-old girl whose family decides to move to Mars for five years. It is seen through her eyes. The book is set well into the future. Mars has been settled by humans, and commerce between the Earth and the Moon and Mars is ongoing. An adventure story in the old-fashioned style, *Marsbound* is an alien contact story that leads us into the second volume (*Starbound*) and eventually the third volume (*Earthbound*).

We follow the family's journey from their home to the space elevator which takes them into orbit and to the waiting ship that will take them to Mars. The daughter is unhappy about the shift to Mars, but tries to make the best of it by forming new friends. This part of the story is much like the stories that enthralled us when we were young readers back in the 1950s and 60s. Our young protagonist wanders off one day to explore. She falls through a lava tube and breaks an ankle. Unable to call for help, she waits to die either from the cold or when her oxygen runs out.

When she wakes up she finds she has been rescued by an alien being with four arms and four legs that seems to live underground. There are lots of them, and initially she thinks they are Martians. They explain to her that

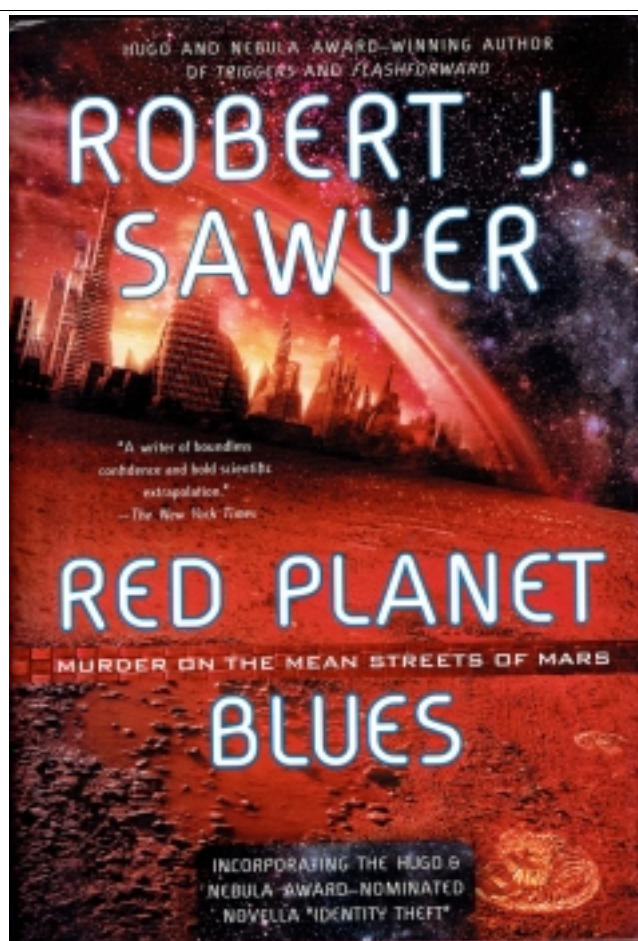


they have been on the planet for thousands of years waiting for humans to arrive. They are actually from a star system 24 light years away, and are emissaries of an alien race that breathes liquid nitrogen and has a paranoid fear of any new species that might develop in the universe to threaten them. These emissaries are to warn the others of any new species about to develop interstellar voyaging. This novel finishes with the eight-limbed aliens helping save the children of Mars from a lung disease caused by the ubiquitous dust.

The sequels are two radically different volumes detailing the voyage out to the star system, seen from multiple viewpoints, where the enigmatic nitrogen-breathing aliens live, with the third volume returning to the first-person viewpoint of our original character when she is much older.

## Sawyer's Old Mars

*Red Planet Blues* by **Robert J. Sawyer** (2013) is a return to 'Old Mars' of the pulp era, but updated and modernised. It has a 1940s feel to it. It is a *noir* murder mystery set in a lawless Mars colony called New Klondike, a Martian city set up 40 years before this story begins. The discovery of Martian fossils has started a 'fossil rush' much like an ancient gold rush. On Earth, where anything can be synthesised, Martian fossils have extraordinary value, and people will kill for them. Our protagonist is the only private eye on Mars. He makes his living tracking down killers and kidnappers among the failed prospectors who try other game when they fail to find the enigmatic fossils. Full of concepts such as live humans uploading their minds to android bodies so they can live forever, and a mystery involving the murder of one of these



almost immortal new beings (transfers) make this a sheer delight to read with lots of twists and turns and loads of skulduggery. It is an expansion of his Nebula Award-winning novella 'Identity Theft'.

## Aldiss's two views of Mars

*White Mars* by **Brian Aldiss** in collaboration with **Roger Penrose** (1999) is not so much a novel as a polemic disguised as a novel. Its full title is *White Mars, or, The Mind Set Free: A 21st-Century Utopia*.

Mars has been set aside as a place for scientific study and not a place to be colonised and terraformed for the benefit of humans, in much the same way as the decision was made to keep Antarctica pristine. Aldiss is in fact the president of APIUM: the Association for the Protection and Integrity of an Unspoiled Mars. He doesn't want to see Mars turned into a colony, or as an inferior version of Earth.

The first chapter tells of the decision by the UN to make Mars a White Mars, although a group of colonists already lives on the planet doing scientific studies, especially an experiment to investigate subatomic particles away from the disturbances of Earth and the Moon. After Chapter 1, the whole book forms a flashback of the events leading up to this decision. It consists of two memoirs, one by the leader of the group (about 5000 people) abandoned on Mars by the collapse of the organisation that sent them there, and the other by his adopted daughter, who sees a different perspective of



events. These two memoir streams alternate as the story progresses.

Not really a novel at all, *White Mars* allows Aldiss and Penrose to describe the establishment of a Utopia and the type of scientific studies people there should undertake. Their narrative method is slow-moving and inevitably boring, since all the characters do is talk and argue over what they should do and what their objectives should be. They never come alive as people. They are clearly only mouthpieces for Aldiss and Penrose to project their ideas of a *White Mars*, a Mars set aside for scientific study. There is a lot of discussion about the Higgs boson particle, which had not been discovered when the book was written. The novel has some exciting sections: some brief sexual encounters and the discovery that Olympus Mons is a living thing akin to a giant barnacle eating its way across the surface of Mars and heading slowly towards the colonists. There is no real explanation of this phenomenon, and no depiction of what might happen once it reaches the colony.

In the final chapter, set 20 years later, the UN sends a ship to Mars to rescue the remnants of the colony.

I was disappointed with this book. Its 233 pages took longer to read than the 1400 pages of books 1 and 2 of Peter Hamilton's 'Void' trilogy.

In a British SF magazine interview, **Brian Aldiss** claims that *Finches of Mars* (2013) is his final science fiction novel. This made me sad, because I like his work, which is endlessly innovative and certainly a lot more literary than the work of some other popular writers. But Brian

was 88 years old when he said that. Now in his nineties, he is reported to be working on a major non-SF novel.

*Finches of Mars* is a short novel about a colony on Mars and its struggle to survive. For the first 10 years or so all children born are either stillborn, malformed, or die soon after birth. It is suspected that this is a result of effect of the lower gravity of Mars on humans. As the story unfolds, communications with Earth become sporadic and supplies become unreliable. It appears the colony may be doomed, especially if the settlers cannot solve the baby-birth problems. There is no solution; while the members of the colony refuse to give up hope they are prepared to die.

However, Aldiss springs a surprise, one that would spoil a story if attempted by a lesser author, but Aldiss is a master and he gets away with it. He has descendants of the colonists return from the future to give them the answer to their problem, a machine that generates oxygen, allowing the babies to breathe and enabling the terraforming of Mars so the colony can survive. This creates a time loop with no end. If they hadn't come back in time to help, the colony wouldn't have survived, but because they did come back with the solution, the colony does survive. Did someone discover the solution that enabled them to survive? This question is not answered; we see only the sudden unexpected arrival of the descendants with the solution for the problem. Even for Aldiss, I feel this is *deus ex machina* solution to an insoluble problem is a cop out. But then if this really is his last novel, it is interesting for that fact alone. As always, though, his writing is beautiful and a joy to read.

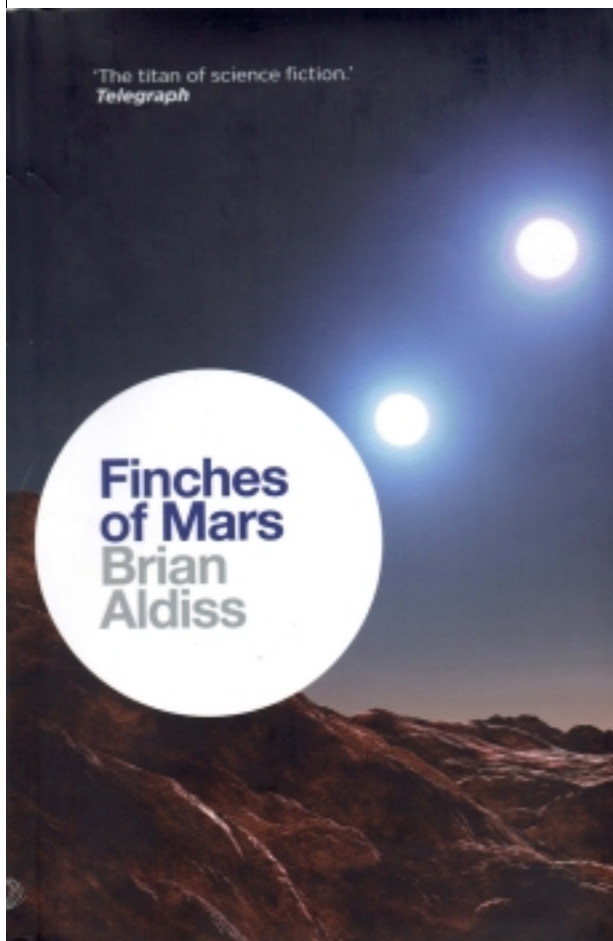
## Bova's *Rescue Mode*

For *Rescue Mode* (2014), ever-prolific **Ben Bova** is partnered with **Les Johnson**, a popular scientist TV presenter and physicist who works for the *Advanced Concepts Office* of NASA. This story is dated up to the year 2035, but in this novel the dates that head each chapter are relevant, believable, and crucial in the building of tension for the reader.

2035 is the year of the first manned expedition to Mars (the actual year in which NASA plans its first manned expedition to Mars orbit.) A ship carrying four men and four women (of various nationalities) is NASA's and the US's first mission to Mars. This meets with a lot of opposition in Congress, with various senators lobbying to cut funding for future missions, but the President is determined to go ahead.

When a meteoroid smashes through the ship over half way to Mars, causing considerable damage, it is too late to cancel the mission. The astronauts must continue on to Mars before they can return. This accident in space convinces many senators that it is too dangerous to send humans into space beyond the Moon. A current strong American presence on the Moon cannot be cancelled, but future Mars missions can.

The astronauts on the Mars ship manage to fix broken struts that hold the two halves of the ship together, but they have lost so much water there will not be enough, even with severe rationing, for all of them to survive the yearlong return trip from Mars.



On Mars there is a habitat with supplies for a month's stay, which is what had been intended. NASA, when it sent the unmanned habitat ahead of the manned mission, placed enough supplies for four months on the site. Four months for eight people means eight months for four people, so when they arrive on Mars the astronauts hatch a plan that may give at least half (if not all) of them a chance. They decide to take most of the water from the habitat and transfer it to the return ship in orbit, which would give four of them enough water to make it back to Earth alive. On the surface, the other four will have enough for a month, during which they hope to find water for themselves from the Martian permafrost.

By deliberately stranding half their number on Mars, the astronauts hope to force NASA and the politicians to reinstate the rescue mission or the second manned mission to Mars. Since everything the astronauts do is watched live on TV they gain massive public sympathy, which in turn forces the politicians who are accused of wanting to murder the stranded astronauts to change their mind and reinstate the next series of missions to Mars. The stranded astronauts find the ice they were looking for, but also discover that, when melted, it contains amoeboid life. They have discovered life on Mars, which was the main reason for the mission in the first place.

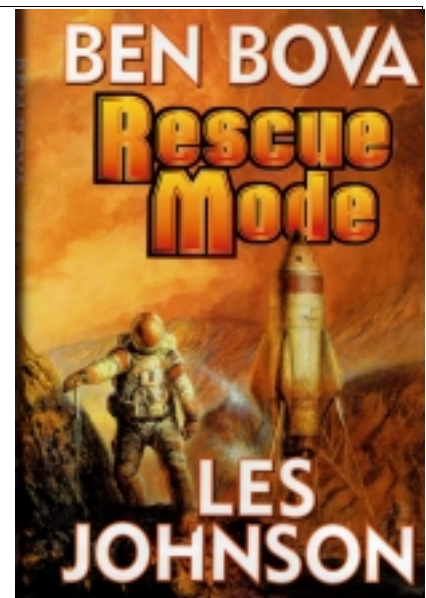
This idea of forcing the continuation of the manned space missions has been used before, most notably in *The Martian Race* by Gregory Benford (1999), and no doubt will be used again. *Rescue Mode* is not an outstanding book, but it is entertaining, well written, with believable characters and good science, and is a worthy addition to any collection of novels about Mars.

## Andy Weir's *The Martian*

In 2014 the whole science fiction community hailed the publication of *The Martian* by **Andy Weir**. Since then, it has appeared as an equally successful film starring Matt Damon.

Andy Weir is not a scientist who works for NASA, but the accuracy of the details in this first novel would make you think he does. He is a lifelong space nerd, a computer programmer who loves stuff like relativistic physics, orbital mechanics, and the history of spaceflight. All this can be seen in this remarkable novel.

Just five days after the arrival of this expedition to Mars, a massive dust storm threatens to destroy the first explorer's return vehicle by blowing it over, making it unable to take off. The commander orders the six-member team to abandon the mission and head for the return vehicle. As they try to board it, one member of the team is blown away by the wind and his space suit is pierced by a flying piece of aerial. When they realise one of the team is missing, some expedition members of them try to search for him. There is no radio contact or telemetry to indicate that he is still alive. The dust is so thick they can barely see anything, so the commander orders them to abandon the search and board the return vehicle. They return to the waiting mother ship, which will take them home. With the mission abandoned, they begin the return journey with each member of the team



grieving for their lost companion, the first man to die on Mars.

He isn't dead, merely unconscious. His space suit has not leaked air and lost pressure because the blood escaping the wound the aerial made freezes around the hole where the aerial pierced the suit, sealing it.

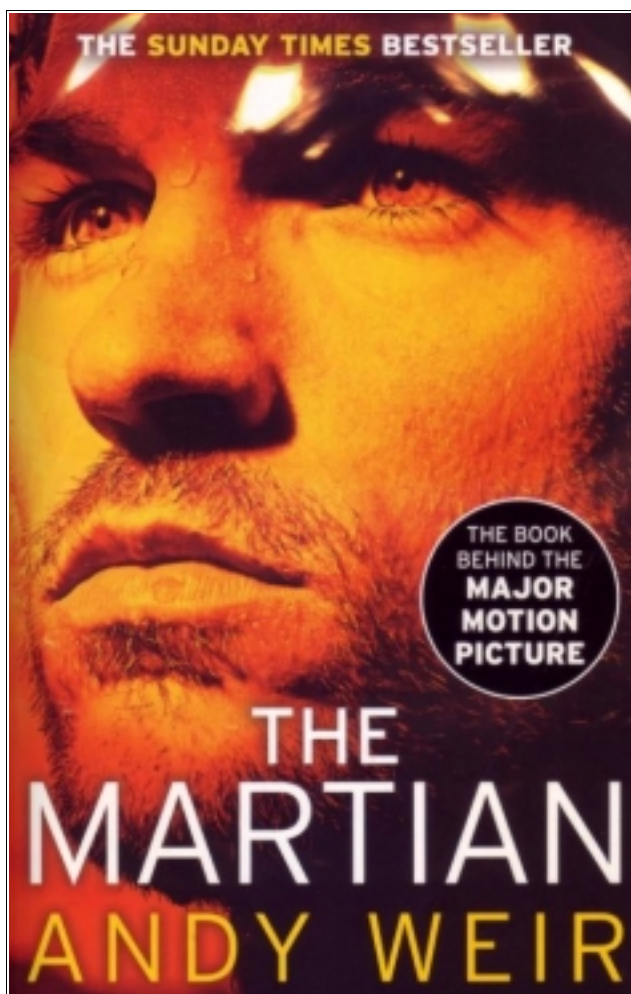
Waking up after the storm passes and realising the others have gone he makes his way to the habitat which is still standing and pressurised. Inside, he cleans his wound and dresses it and takes stock of what he has. There are supplies for a six-person team to last three months. This will last him a lot longer than three months, but not nearly long enough until the next expedition arrives (four years away). Besides, the next expedition will not be landing anywhere near his location. The habitat has already been landed on Mars. It includes a robot installation and return vehicle, now sitting there waiting for the astronauts to arrive; but it is half way around the planet 3200 kilometres away. The main character can last nine months on his own unless he can supplement his supplies by growing some food, but all he has are 12 potatoes. All other food is freeze dried.

He cannot make contact with Earth because the radio masts were destroyed during the storm. Nobody knows he is alive.

The rest of the book shows how he turns his habitat into a greenhouse to grow potatoes, the methods he uses to extract water, oxygen, and other necessities from the Martian atmosphere and the regolith, how he discovers an old Mars rover and cannibalises the primitive radio to finally make contact with NASA headquarters, using Morse code and written messages which orbiting satellites can read. However NASA decides to not tell his five companions, half way back to Earth, that he is alive. The politics involved in this decision make up a considerable section of the book.

The astronaut's only option is to make it to the other expedition site, where he can wait while using the supplies already there — but even these rations will give out before the next expedition arrives.

Eventually NASA tells the five returning team members that their lost expedition member is still alive on Mars. Against all advice they decide on a wild rescue



mission that would enable them to return to Mars just in time (after his food runs out) to rescue him. This doesn't involve turning around and going back (not at all possible) but by using Earth as a slingshot to send them back on a higher, faster trajectory back to Mars. The book tells us much about orbital mechanics and the feasibility of slingshot moves, something NASA has been doing with all the robot missions to the major planets in the outer solar system, but Weir makes it fascinating. *The Martian* becomes a thriller you can't put down.

The finale takes place in space, and, now filmed, rivals the great opening scene in the recent film *Gravity*. The returning team members are going so fast they will not be able to go into orbit around Mars but will have to do the same thing they did in Earth orbit; use the planet as a slingshot to shoot them around on to the return course for Earth. The stranded astronaut has only one shot at being rescued. He must strip the return vehicle down to its minimum weight so that it will reach a high enough orbit to match the velocity of the returning team's ship, and then transfer across before the returning ship gets too far ahead in its slingshot around Mars. This grand finale is nail-bitingly tense.

*The Martian* is a stand-out among good books about Mars. It certainly was the most exciting one I have read so far.

## Postscript: Ridley Scott's *The Martian*

*The Martian* (2015), directed by **Ridley Scott** and based on the novel by **Andy Weir**, is — at last — a film about Mars that is worth watching.

It is a simple story: an astronaut is stranded on Mars while the members of his team, thinking he has been killed in a storm that threatens their only means of getting off the planet, are forced to abandon the expedition after only six days. The next expedition that will arrive in four years, on the other side of the planet. The abandoned astronaut, who is not dead, must survive for those four years as well as travel to the other side of the planet to wait at the base already set up for the next expedition.

This film must hold up scientifically to be convincing. With Ridley Scott as director, it does exactly that. NASA was consulted in regard to designing the space suits for use in space as well as on the surface of Mars, designing the base, the surface vehicles, and the ships likely to carry the astronauts down to the planet and back up to the mother ship in orbit. NASA also allowed filming of major scenes at the mission control centre in Houston. No doubt it supplied photo mosaics of the various Martian surface features, beamed back from the rovers on the surface and the satellites in orbit around the planet.

Since only one character is on screen for most of the film, the choice of Mat Damon to play the role is brilliant. He carries the role so convincingly you empathise with him as he deals with the problems of surviving in this harsh environment. There is no atmosphere that he can breathe when outside the habitat or the rovers. He must deal with Antarctic temperatures, ranging from a bit above freezing to 100 below zero during the night. He can't run around outside on the surface without being in a space suit.

In earlier films about being wrecked on Mars it was always assumed the atmosphere was very thin but breathable, and that deep in the valleys and chasms it may be thick enough to breathe without using a space suit. Even as recently as 2000 in the Spanish film *Stranded*, the producers spoiled the film by showing not only a thicker atmosphere at the bottom of a deep chasm, but the water in a lagoon with grass and other plants growing. And let's not mention zombies on Mars, a popular theme in a recent film, *Last Days on Mars*.

Many people regard *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* as a special film, quiet and dignified, but as effective as the background surface scenes are (it was shot in Death Valley), many elements seem silly to us today. The stranded astronaut repeatedly lifts his visor to speak into a microphone, and eventually he stops wearing his helmet and space suit altogether. He also runs around with arms bare while wearing a T shirt. And of course he finds water in a cave and food growing in the water so he can survive. Even in 1964, when this film was made, the director must have known that Mars was far more inhospitable than depicted. The main character would never have been able to breathe the atmosphere. And as for the monkey and the aliens mining the planet

Fortunately Ridley Scott doesn't depart from reality.



The predicament in which the astronaut finds himself is truly believable. He is a botanist who devises a means of growing potatoes from snap-frozen stock in the supplies of the base camp while fertilising the growing medium (Martian regolith) with his own excrement. He uses his potato crops to supplement the supplies meant for an expedition of six over three months, which for him could last for a year. But he does not have enough food to survive the four years until the next expedition arrives.

He devises a means of communicating with Mission Control by cannibalising an old rover sent to Mars years before. Once it is known that he is alive, mission control must decide whether to tell the returning astronauts that their team mate is not dead. The film cross-cuts between NASA mission control, Mark Watney on the surface as he struggles to survive, and the crew of the returning space ship. This cross-cutting makes what could have been a very long film seem much shorter than it actually is. The main focus is on Mark Watney, as played by Mat Damon. He carries the film with his seriousness of purpose, his determination to survive no matter what, and his self-deprecating humour as he narrates a video log.

An explosive decompression of his habitat almost kills him — and scares the shit out of anyone watching the film. It also destroys his potato crop by snap freezing it. He has no choice now but to devise a means of reaching the base that has been already established for the next expedition, even though he won't have enough food to last until it arrives.

Once the members of the returning crew find that he is alive, they contrive to slingshot around Earth to send them back to Mars so they can rescue him before his food runs out. NASA doesn't want them to do it but they take their own action; they feel guilty for having left him on Mars, and they will do whatever they can to bring him back alive.

In the book by Andy Weir this final rescue and the preparations he must make are explicitly detailed, especially the scenes in space as the returning ship again slingshots around Mars. He must get into orbit and match their speed so he can be picked up or he will end up lost in space and dead when his oxygen runs out.

This final part of the film is truncated, almost as if the director thought that the film was running way over time and needed to be shortened. The rescue happens very quickly and suddenly the film is done. Perhaps in a future release, a director's cut will add more to the final rescue scenes, the stripping down of the return capsule, and the rendezvous in space in orbit above Mars.

Nevertheless, it is to date, the best and most believable film of the last 50 years about what it would be like to survive on the surface of Mars.

## Books about Mars: a summary of my own collection

### Fiction

1948–50: *The Martian Chronicles* (Ray Bradbury)  
1951: *The Sands of Mars* (Arthur C. Clarke)

1955: *Alien Dust* (E. C. Tubb)  
1964: *Martian Time Slip* (Philip K. Dick)  
1966: *Farewell Earth's Bliss* (D. G. Compton)  
1966: *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (Philip K. Dick)

1970–73: *The Earth is Near* (Ludek Pesek)  
1976: *Man Plus* (Frederik Pohl)  
1977: *The Martian Inca* (Ian Watson)

1984: *Frontera* (Lewis Shiner)  
1988: *The Day the Martians Came* (Frederik Pohl)

1992: *Beachhead* (Jack Williamson)  
1992: *Mars* (Ben Bova)  
1992: *Red Mars* (Kim Stanley Robinson)  
1993: *Green Mars* (Kim Stanley Robinson)  
1993: *Red Dust* (Paul McAuley)  
1993: *Moving Mars* (Greg Bear)  
1994: *Climbing Mount Olympus* (Kevin J Anderson)  
1994: *Mars Plus* (Frederik Pohl and Thomas T. Thomas)  
1996: *Blue Mars* (Kim Stanley Robinson)  
1997: *Mars Underground* (William Hartman)  
1998: *Return to Mars* (Ben Bova)  
1999: *The Martians* (Kim Stanley Robinson)  
1999: *The Martian Race* (Gregory Benford)  
1999: *White Mars* (Brian W. Aldiss and Roger Penrose)

2000: *Mars Crossing* (Jeffrey A. Landis)  
2001: *The Secret of Life* (Paul McAuley)  
2008: *White Mars* (Brian Aldiss)

2013: *Marsbound* (Joe Haldeman)  
2013: *Finches of Mars* (Brian Aldiss)  
2013: *Red Planet Blues* (Robert J. Sawyer)  
2013: *Mars Inc.* (Ben Bova)  
2014: *The Martian* (Andy Weir)  
2014: *Rescue Mode* (Ben Bova and Les Johnson)

### Other books ancillary to the above:

1966: *The Saliva Tree and Other Strange Growths* (Brian Aldiss)  
1970: *The Space Machine* (Christopher Priest)  
1990: *The Martian War* (Kevin J. Anderson)

### Non-fiction

1994: *The Snows of Olympus* (Arthur C. Clarke)  
2001: *The Quest for Mars* (Laurence Bergreen)  
2004: *The Real Mars* (Michael Hanlon)  
2008: *Landscapes of Mars* (Gregory L. Vogt)  
2011: *The Case for Mars* (Robert Zubrin) (originally in 1996)  
2011: *Exploring Mars* (Scott Hubbard)  
2012: *Destination Mars* (Rod Pyle)  
2013: *Mission to Mars* (Buzz Aldrin)  
Some issues of *Science Illustrated* magazines (Nos. 17 and 30) feature long articles about Mars.

— John Litchen, 2014, 2015, 2016

**Colin Steele's** qualifications include MA, GradDipLib, FAHA, FLCIP, FALIA, and KtCross Spain. He is an Emeritus Fellow of the Australian National University since 2004. Before that, he was Director of Scholarly Information Strategies and University Librarian, ANU (1980–2002). He was the SF reviewer for *The Canberra Times* for many years, and been contributing to *SF Commentary* since the 1970s.

# Colin Steele

## The field

### Books about science fiction and fantasy

**IAIN M. BANKS**

**Paul Kincaid**

**(University of Illinois Press; \$42.99)**

Iain M. Banks was born in Dunfermline, Scotland on 16 February 1954 and died 9 June 2013. His literary output comprised both mainstream fiction and science fiction (hereafter SF) novels, which noted British SF critic **Paul Kincaid** lucidly analyses in the latest volume in the University of Illinois Press 'Modern Masters of Science Fiction' series.

Banks began writing his Culture SF novels in the late

1970s, but was unable to find a publisher. He would later rework them for publication after the huge 1984 success of his controversial first novel *The Wasp Factory*, which was published as by Iain Banks. His SF was always published with the inclusion of his middle initial, the 'M' standing for Menzies. This authorial difference unfortunately led to a perception by the general public that Iain Banks wrote literature, while the SF Culture series by Iain M. Banks was often pigeonholed as genre and was usually disregarded by the editors of the mainstream literary pages.

Kincaid writes, 'What I have tried to do in this book is to suggest how varied Banks's work is, how many different approaches he took in exploring the key themes and ideas in his novels, and how many different approaches there are for the reader in unearthing and analysing and enjoying those themes ... A great storyteller who infuses his work with serious ideas, a writer who is equally at home with the most baroque science fiction and the most recognisable realist fiction'.

Until recently, Banks's literary output has not been extensively analysed. Simone Caroti's 2015 *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction* was among the first to examine the whole corpus of his writings. Kincaid similarly follows this approach, but with more of an emphasis on his SF and perhaps a more perceptive examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the novels.

Kincaid writes that 'Banks makes mainstream readers out of SF audiences, for I don't think that either form is dominant in his work. What is clear, however, is that the resonances between the two sets of novels are very significant, that it's impossible to give serious consideration to the work of Iain M Banks without regard to the works of Iain Banks, and vice versa.'

Kincaid approaches Banks's writing chronologically, after an opening biographical chapter, which is most useful given there is no biography as yet of Banks. This is followed by three extensive chapters on the history, theory, and philosophy of Banks's writing, which Kincaid also places within their original writings, subsequent revisions and final publications. This is useful in following the creative development of themes and issues throughout the novels.

In the final chapter, 'Aftermath', Kincaid examines





the reaction to Banks's death in 2013 and his last novel *The Quarry*, which was published posthumously that year. An appendix consists of a informative extended interview of an original 2010 email conversation between Iain M. Banks and Jude Roberts.

Throughout, Kincaid highlights the common ground in Banks's commentaries on social and political conditions in the SF and non-SF novels. Kincaid comments that 'Banks's political views suffused everything he wrote'. Banks was part of a new generation of politicised Scottish writers who emerged in the wake of the failed Scottish devolution referendum in 1979.

Banks' antipathy to Margaret Thatcher was well known, and this was reflected in novels such as *Walking on Glass* (1985) and *The Bridge* (1986). The Iraq war made him also a fervent critic of Tony Blair. I remember him cancelling a trip to the Adelaide Writers Week because he had cut up his British passport in 2003 in protest at the Iraq war. In 2004, Banks signed a petition urging that Blair be impeached for taking Britain into an illegal war. 'I still look forward to seeing him in that glass cubicle in the Hague' he wrote in 2007.

Banks used to quip that the Culture SF books were something of a holiday from the demands of literary fiction, and in them he could 'pull out the stops'. The first published SF Culture novel was *Consider Phlebas* (1987), followed by *Player of Games* (1988) and the *Use of Weapons* (1990). This novel featured two interleaved narratives, one of which moved forward in time and the other backwards.

The Culture series comprised nine novels, an novella, and a couple of short stories. In these, Banks created a utopia that was both dynamic and liberal. Kincaid notes that 'Banks posited a post-scarcity society in which there is no need to work, because all drudgery is performed by AIs. Agents of The Culture are on a mission to spread democracy, secularism, and social justice throughout the

universe in the face of the hostility of the Idirans, a religious, humanoid race. In this conflict, however, good and ill are not simply apportioned.

Banks has stated that the point about 'the Culture, who are the most advanced civilisation in my books, is that they alter their genetic inheritance to make themselves sane and not genocidal, as we often seem to be. They also create machines so intelligent that they can save us from ourselves. We have a lot to learn from them. I wish, given what a miserable bunch of murdering bastards we are much of the time, we were more like them.' These points have become even more relevant since Banks's death.

It is revealing, as Kincaid notes, that several obituaries praised Banks's mainstream novels, but not the SF novels, because most obituarists had not read the SF novels, despite their massive cult following and sales figures. Kincaid's analytical and sympathetic analysis, particularly of the Culture novels, will ensure that Banks' reputation, irrespective of nomenclature, as one of the leading British writers of recent decades.

## **FRIGHTMARES: A HISTORY OF BRITISH HORROR CINEMA**

**Ian Cooper (Auteur; \$52.99)**

**Ian Cooper** is a German-based author and screenwriter with degrees in Film and Drama from Reading University and the London Institute. He has also spent seven years teaching Contemporary Cinema at the University of London. His previous publications include *Witchfinder General* (2011), and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (2012).

In *Frightmares*, he provides a lengthy and roughly chronological overview of the British horror cinema. His is 'not an encyclopaedic guide, but rather an examination of the most important strands of home-grown horror'. He also delves into the 'oft-sidelined low-culture roots of the genre and the long-running fascination with the macabre'.

In his Introduction Cooper argues that the horror genre remains the only staple cinematic myth Britain can claim to be its own, a product of two 'seemingly incompatible traditions: a celebrated literary history exemplified in the works of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson and an abiding lurid fascination with the dark side of life as seen in the end of pier Chamber of Horrors attractions, murder melodramas, Penny Dreadfuls, Jack the Ripper Tours and sensational tabloid newspaper accounts of infamous murders'.

Cooper believes, moreover, that analyses of British Horror cinema, until very recently, have 'been ignored and maligned'. Until recently such books have largely concentrated on the dominance of the Hammer horror films, a series covered in Cooper's Chapter 2. Cooper also looks at their imitators, such as Baker and Berman and Amicus and the films 'which reacted against the new explicitness initiated by the company'.

Despite becoming arguably formulaic in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hammer's lasting achievement has been 'a successfully realised fictional universe carried over from film to film, which managed to invent the hoary old gothic tropes of terrorised women, cruel aris-



ocrats and haunted castles'. Some of the films examined in detail by Cooper are *The Mummy* (1959), *Vampire Circus* (1972), and *Dracula 72AD* (1972).

Each of Cooper's chapters includes analyses of key films, with textual analysis, production history, marketing, and reception. The first chapter, 'It's Alive!' The Birth of Home-Grown Horror,' while briefly referencing films in the early twentieth century, focuses on the output of the 1930s to the 1960s. Chapter 3 covers 'The American Invasion — Camp and Cruelty', and leading figures such as director Roger Corman and actor Vincent Price. Cooper places Alfred Hitchcock in the 'British horror tradition, which is where at least a proportion of his output belongs'.

In Chapter 4, 'Soft Sex, Hard Gore and the Savage Seventies', Cooper documents the shift 'from the hippie utopia of the 1960s to the grim dystopic 1970s and their reflection in the movies', while Chapter 5, 'Bloody Foreigners — New Perspectives' traces the influence of figures such as Roman Polanski and the Spanish director Jose Larraz, whose output included the 1974 film *Vampyres*. In Chapter 6, 'Rising from the Grave', Cooper notes the decline of the British Gothic and the revival of British Horror in the noughties.

Cooper includes a number of small black-and-white stills from films and posters, although colour photographs would have been even better. Price considerations, no doubt, played a part in this context. Overall, *Frightmares* is a useful critical overview of British horror films over the last 90 years, both for popular and previously neglected films.

## Australian science fiction

### TERRA NULLIUS

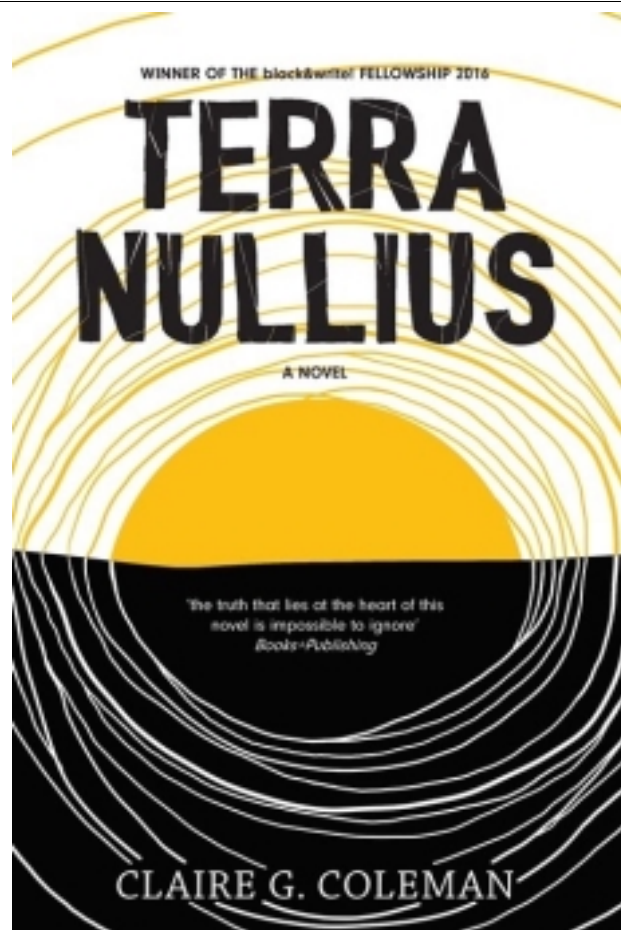
Claire G. Coleman (Hachette; \$29.99)

**Claire Coleman**, from the Western Australian Noongar people, intertwines the stories of two invasions of Australia in *Terra Nullius*: the arrival of the Europeans and their impact on the indigenous population; and a future alien invasion in which all inhabitants are oppressed and dispossessed.

Coleman says in structuring her novel, 'I deliberately used the style of historical fiction, then there's a big science fiction twist. Speculative fiction is one of the most powerful political tools in fiction. It's a genre in which there's great scope for Aboriginal literature. A lot of speculative fiction is written with a firm eye on the past and to use speculative fiction is often to be able to sneak politics into places people don't expect to see it. You can create a world that says what can't otherwise be said and surprise readers by showing them that they understand something they didn't think they understood'.

Coleman was influenced by H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*: 'I read that *The War of the Worlds* was inspired by a discussion that Wells had with someone, where he was trying to explain the situation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. *The War of the Worlds* and *Terra Nullius* are approaching the same question from opposite sides'.

*Terra Nullius* is therefore a text encompassing two colonial settlements and oppressions. Although reading



the early chapters, many readers will believe that Coleman is writing about the Australian colonial frontier post 1788, and only slowly realise that we are in a new Terra Nullius/Australia invaded by the 'greyfella', a Settler alien species. Humans refer to the invader Settlers as the Toads, while the Toads refer to humans as the Natives.

Most of humanity has been massacred, with survivors becoming slaves or servants of the Settlers, who, like the original English settlers, find the hot dry continent not to their liking. The Settlers are biologically unsuited to Earth, half their foodstuffs have to be shipped in from their distant planet.

Native children are taken from their parents, as happened with Aboriginal children, to be taught in Settler mission schools. When Natives try to escape they are hunted down and imprisoned or executed, just as during the Australian colonial frontier wars. It is realised that the Settlers 'beat us consistently in technology and the unrelenting, merciless, largely impersonal, application of force'. The aliens have come from a competitive and violent part of space where interstellar competition is rife, whereas Earth has been isolated.

The opening chapter portrays an oppressive environment, as Jacky, a young Native man, taken from his parents at a young age, escapes from a mission, run by a domineering nun Sister Bagra, into an unforgiving landscape. 'Jacky was running. There was no thought in his head, only an intense drive to run. There was no sense he was getting anywhere, no plan, no destination, no future. All he had was a sense of what was behind, what he was running from ... Jacky was running.'



Sister Bagra is determined 'to bring faith to these people, if they could be called people; to bring religion, to bring education to these savages. An almost completely thankless task, a seemingly pointless, useless task. The recipients of her efforts seemed totally incapable of appreciating what was being done for them, even going so far as resenting her help ... Her job was to be disciplined, to teach discipline, to bring the Word to the ungodly, so suffer she must.' When she is asked by a young nun whether the Natives have souls, she replies, 'What souls they have, we will save. Whatever it is they use for brains we will educate it, whether they like it or not'.

Slowly, some of the Settlers, including Troopers, begin to have second thoughts about their policy of harsh oppression, but the chances of rapid reform are bleak. Coleman begins chapters with extracts of documents from a distant future. These give glimpses of hope for better things to come in the long term. The conclusion to *Terra Nullius* is both unexpected and politically realistic.

Coleman herself has a strong political message: 'While writing *Terra Nullius*, I had in my mind an idea of who would benefit from reading it. The average Australian, who doesn't necessarily understand the Aboriginal perspective on the invasion — or the colonisation as they would call it. People who don't understand why we're upset about it. The people who chuck a tizzy when we say we should change the date [of Australia Day]. The entire purpose of writing *Terra Nullius* was to provoke empathy in people who had none.'

Coleman is to be congratulated on a significant combination to Australian SF and, within that framework, contemporary and historical social and political commentary.

## LOTUS BLUE

Cat Sparks (Talos; \$22.99)

*Lotus Blue*, by well-known Australian SF personality and anthologist Cat Sparks, again presents an environment dramatically affected by climate change and global conflict. Sparks acknowledges, in her Afterword, the influence of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Terry Dowling's 'Tom Rynosseros' stories, and Andrew Macrae's *Trucksong*, as well as numerous Australian SF and fantasy writers.

In *Lotus Blue*, caravan trains travel across the desert Sand Road between outposts that vary between gang-like compounds and underground enclaves sustained by ancient unreliable machinery. Sparks's main character, a 17-year-old girl Star, is bored with her caravan life and wants to run away to live in a settlement, against the wishes of her elder sister and, de facto caravan medic, Nene.

When their caravan train is destroyed in a vicious storm, danger comes from several fronts, especially from the awakening of an ancient war machine, 'a relic weapon', a Lotus Blue. 'Whoever controls the Blue will rule the sands. But that thing cannot be controlled.'

Star will ultimately have to grapple with the reality of her own past before she is targeted by Lotus Blue. Sparks's invention is impressive, especially in the cyborgs and human machine interfaces, although character development is often limited, and at times the narrative is convoluted. Nonetheless, an ambitious debut novel.

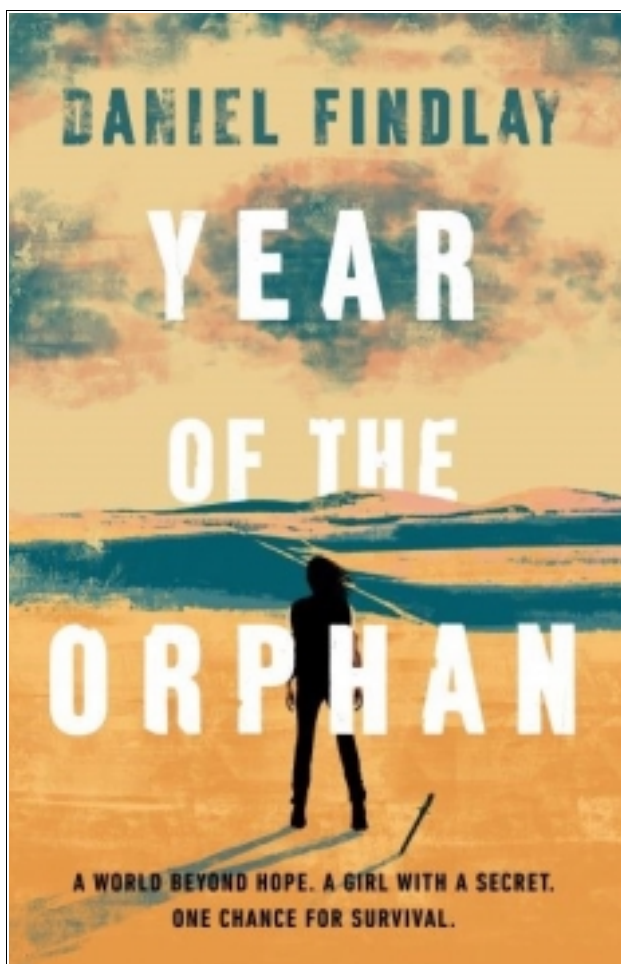
## CLOSING DOWN

Sally Abbott (Hachette; \$29.99)

Sally Abbott won the \$10,000 inaugural Richell prize for emerging writers in 2015 with her manuscript of *Closing Down*, set in a future world affected by both climate and







global economic change. Clare lives in the small rural town of Myamba, where she walks the streets of her decaying town recording the 'unutterable sadness of it all'. She documents an Australian rural collapse, accelerated by massive foreign, notably Chinese, land acquisition. The consequent personal dislocation has, for many, 'become far too much to bear'.

Robbie, whose grandmother still lives in Myamba, is a journalist based in Geneva, where he documents global atrocities, while his partner Ella is a refugee monitor. Refugee camps have now become the size of large cities. Abbott ponders how individuals and communities can retain their sanity and remain human as the world around them collapses.

At times, however, Abbott's narrative pace stalls because of too many expositional commentaries, while the conclusion is somewhat underdone, although there is no doubting Abbott's message of personal resilience in order to survive. She has said in an interview, 'I know there are bleak parts of the book but I also hoped to some extent that there was a note of optimism. It's important that as the world gets more difficult for people — that kindness to strangers is as important as it ever has been.'

#### YEAR OF THE ORPHAN

Daniel Findlay (Bantam; \$32.99)

Daniel Findlay's debut novel *Year of the Orphan* is set in another desolate future with deliberate echoes of the Maralinga nuclear landscapes. Again we have another

small community struggling in a barren dusty landscape with a lack of water and resources.

Orphan, the main character, is a young 'scav' enslaved in a walled desert settlement, 'The System', which is being destroyed by a deadly disease for which no cure exists. 'By chance or bad luck they built their place on a secret an it were a terrible wun.'

Orphan herself is semi-literate. Findlay attempts to indicate this in his third-person narrative of limited vocabulary. This is an ambitious authorial venture, which needs real writing skill to succeed, as Russell Hoban showed in his novel *Ridley Walker*. Findlay, an experienced journalist, often has difficulty reaching that standard.

An example of the text, 'The aird been cold an clear the last few nights and she'd no need of her wrap, shipless as she were. Still, she'd slept with it stuffed in her mouth in case she cried out, though she reckoned she'd beat that habit a long time ago. All them stories but it dint change there were a fella trackin her and she dint like bein hunted. Dint sit right at all. There werent nuthin certain but wun thing, the Reckoner were coming.'

Orphan's life story is juxtaposed with unravelling the mysteries of the past and the Maralinga 'Ghosts' in the underground 'Glows', which may provide an antidote to the disease, but it also brings her, like Star, into increasing danger from both human and non-humans, especially the 'Reckoner'.

*Year of the Orphan* is another novel that emphasises the need for resilience and self-sacrifice against the backdrop of a decidedly grim landscape, from which Orphan ultimately 'may lead em to a new place ... past the dead town.'

## British science fiction

### SLOW BULLETS

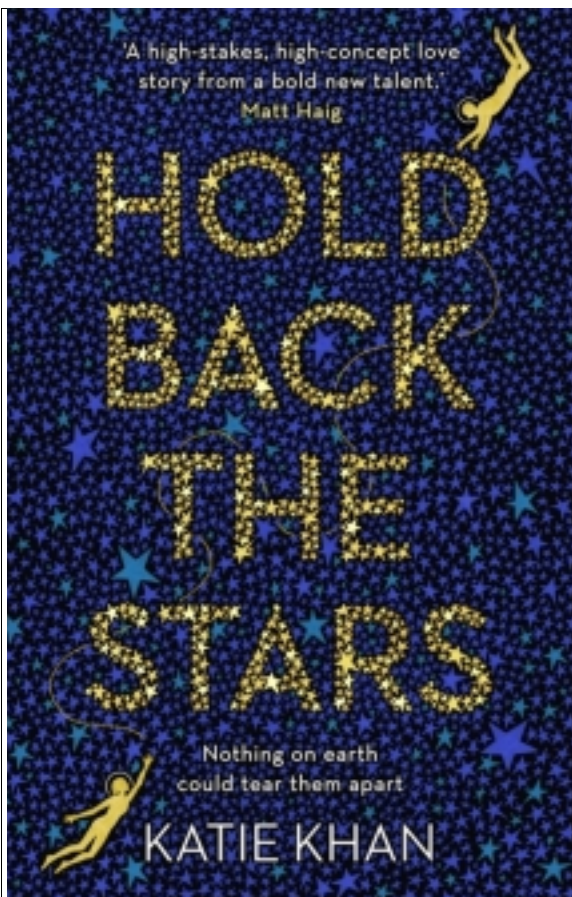
Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz; \$26.99)

*Slow Bullets* was originally published as a paperback in USA in 2015 and won the 2016 Locus Award for Best Novella. This welcome hardback now makes it available to a wider audience.

The novel opens, after a huge interplanetary war, with a female soldier, Scur, captured, tortured by a sadistic war criminal, and left for dead. Scur passes out and awakens later, many centuries later as it turns out, on a huge prison ship *Caprice*, whose crew, passengers, war criminals, and soldiers have been prematurely woken from hibernation. With the passage of time, the fertile planet, which was to be their destination, is now experiencing an ice age after its atmosphere was deliberately degraded by 'the Sickening', a strange alien presence.

A stowaway from the planet below, who has no means of returning, reveals that the aliens could manipulate the physical world, which inter alia stopped interplanetary travel and trade, leading to economic disruption on top of the physical change. This news and the overall chaos on board the ship compel Scur to take a leading role in maintaining order, a role not helped when she finds that Orvin, her mortal enemy, is on board.





Scur's personal battle with Orvin is a backdrop to the bigger issues of the ship's problems, not least the fact that the *Caprice's* computer systems are failing, including the ship's historical data base. Scur and her allies have to struggle to ensure their own survival and save the memories of civilisation.

Reynolds packs too much into his novella, which perhaps needed to be expanded into a full-length novel, especially in relation to the impact of the mysterious aliens, whom it is implied will return. His characters, apart from Scur, are far from fully realised. Orvin, for example, is simply a broad-brush villain. Nonetheless, Reynolds' narrative never slows, with Scur a memorable character in the Reynolds pantheon.

### **HOLD BACK THE STARS** **Katie Khan (Doubleday; \$32.99)**

Katie Khan's debut novel *Hold Back the Stars* has echoes of the movie *Gravity*, but with a decidedly different ending. It begins with Max and Carys, who have become separated from their small spaceship and have only 90 minutes of air left in their tanks.

The chapters alternate between Max and Carys seeking a solution to their dire predicament and their memories of how they met on a future Earth. Like many novels from non-SF authors, it is the relationship of the main characters that dominate, while the global background detail is extremely sketchy.

In Khan's future Earth, a nuclear war between the Middle East and the United States has left 'Europia' the dominant world force. Aid teams fight 'to get water to the refugees left in the US, the middle East annihilated'.

In Europia individuals must rotate every three years through different 'mixed communities'. This allows people to live 'free from national identity or an allied social pressure'.

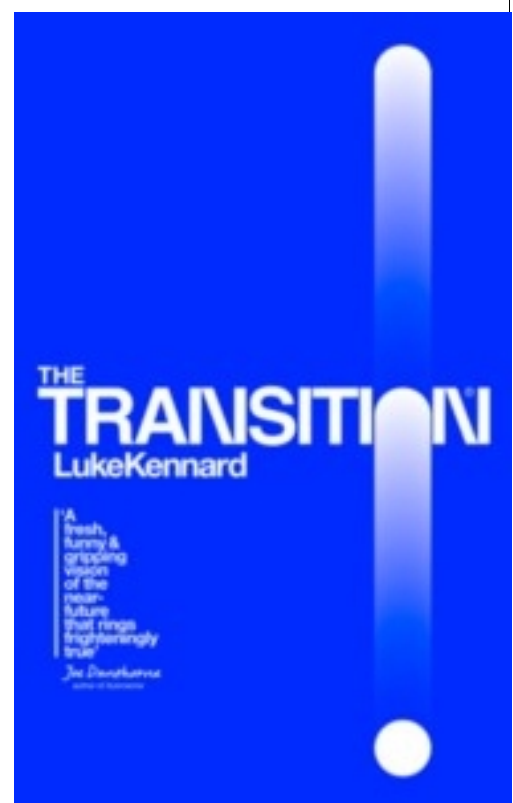
Marital relationships are discouraged until citizens become 'established' in society. But it is never quite explained how this is enforced across such a huge number of people, or how the rest of the world operates within presumably strict border controls by Europia.

Khan does, however, extrapolate on some of the current information on social media trends with the 'constant, scrolling feed of news, weather and updates' that surely would have an impact on the nature of individual freedom. So Europia isn't totally utopian.

Max is a fervent believer in individual freedom but Carys is less certain, so their relationship is tested in space, but far more than they had anticipated. Now, with theoretically only 90 minutes to live, they need to express their love, however awkwardly, for each other. While Max keeps saying, 'We're going to be fine', both realise that they are only 'two pointillist specks on an infinitely dark canvas'.

*Hold Back the Stars* is a cleverly constructed novel with an accessible text that will ensure readers adopt fast forward mode to find out the fate of Max and Carys. It is only when reflecting back on the narrative that Khan's societal structure seems improbable and that the fate of Max and Carys is clearly an artificial construct to tug the emotions. Having said that, a movie probably beckons.

In her Q&A at the back of the book, Katie says that the London 2012 Olympic Games gave her a sense of euphoria about Europe, so she 'decided to write about a multi-cultural European utopia, and alternate it with the story of Max and Carys falling in space'. Not sure what sort of book Khan would write now post Brexit and Trump.



## THE TRANSITION

Luke Kennard (Fourth Estate; \$29.99)

*The Transition*, Luke Kennard's debut novel, is set in a near-future Britain, which extrapolates from today's housing crises and the growing divide between rich and poor. It's a country where 'savings became the preserve of the shrinking caste who already owned several houses'.

It follows the fate of two thirtysomethings, Karl Temperley and his teacher wife, Genevieve. Karl's 17 credit card defaults means that jail beckons, but instead the two of them accept being placed in 'The Transition', where people are boarded with older couples who mentor them on self-reliance and budget restraint.

Karl and Genevieve are boarded with Stuart and his wife Janna. Stuart tells them that the 'transition isn't a punishment, it's an opportunity'. Karl believes, however, he might be part of an 'exploitative social engineering experiment' and rails against what he perceives to be domestic imprisonment.

Karl's anger leads to him being banished to the basement, leaving Genevieve, who suffers from bipolar disorder, to be manipulated by the hosts. Kennard successfully builds a growing sense of unease, but his narrative, despite some poetic prose, is not strong enough to sustain the plot over 300 pages. Nor is *The Transition* helped by a less than effective conclusion. Kennard's novel is ultimately less about the Orwellian Transition corporate control, but more about the nature of relationships and the need for trust and love.

## US science fiction

### NEW YORK 2140

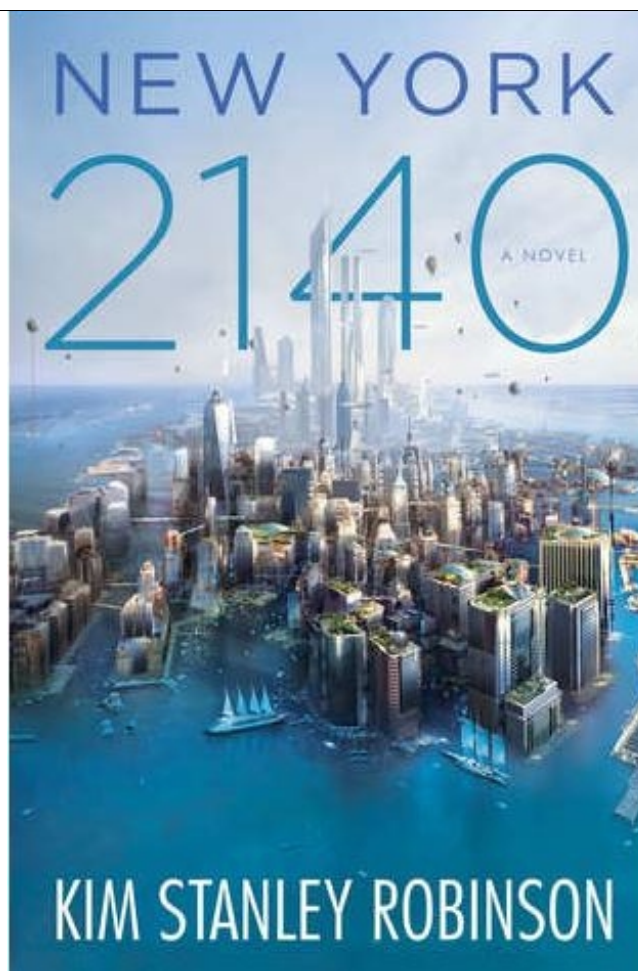
Kim Stanley Robinson (Hachette; \$29.99)

Climate change novels, termed by some 'anthropocene fiction', have become particularly 'hot', so to speak, in the publishing world. Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh has recently bemoaned that 'serious fiction' is not addressing the issues of climate change and that the literary establishments are ignoring the work of SF authors because they are seen as genre.

No one could ever say that **Kim Stanley Robinson** is not a serious writer. His novels often reflect environmental concerns, as in *2140*, where the impact of climate change means that much of New York City has been submerged. Robinson's future world has seen sea levels rise, initially after the 'first pulse' of Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets collapsing in the 2050s, with a second occurring at the end of the twenty-first century.

New York streets have become Venetian-like canals, with skyscrapers linked by bridges and water taxis. Humanity has adapted to the changed environment, but, as ever, the rich survive more easily, living in skyscrapers, with the majority of the population, 'citizens of the shallows', confined down below to the 'Intertidal' zone.

*New York 2140*, with its over 600 pages, is in the literary tradition of John Dos Passos, John Brunner, and Don De Lillo. Robinson follows eight main narrative strands, focusing on a diverse set of people living in New York's



Met Life skyscraper. The opening sections are a little cluttered as, Robinson tries to establish his characters, while indulging in some info-dumping, ranging over topics such as historic New York, Arctic fauna, and global capitalism.

Robinson has said in an interview with *Scientific American* that the book is about 'climate change and sea level rise, but it's also about the way that our economic system doesn't allow us to afford a decent future'. Robinson is a critic of a global market system that downplays climate change consequences in favour of economic growth.

Robinson comments: 'Everything is robust — except the current economic system. So let's reform that, revise it to something more intelligent and generous. That's my hope — and it doesn't hurt that it lets me tell a lot of fun and interesting stories'.

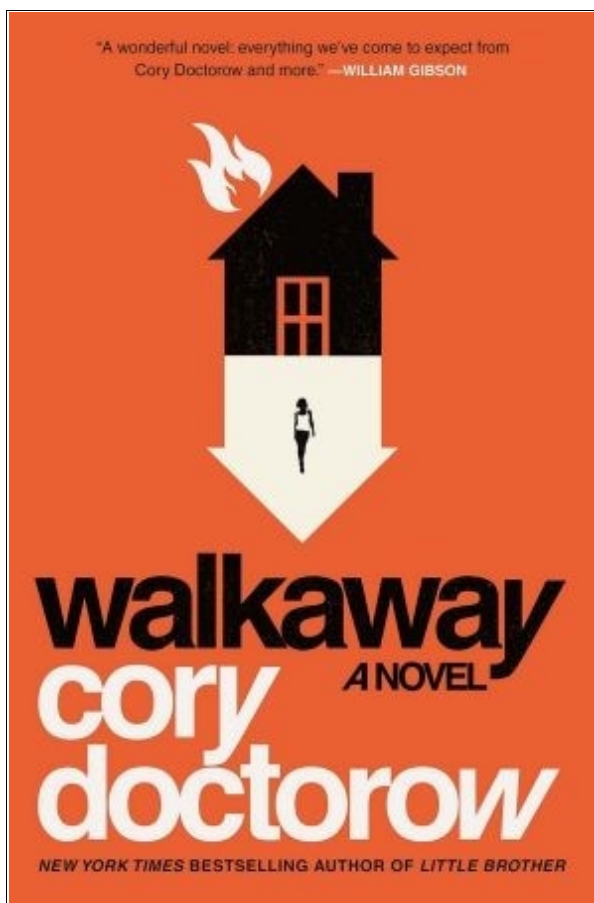
*New York 2140* ends in a decidedly utopian note, including a nationalisation of finance and the imposition of new taxes, including 'the Piketty Tax'. Readers might observe that we should probably do this well before 2140, otherwise après nous le déluge, both climatically and economically.

### WALKAWAY

Cory Doctorow (Head of Zeus; \$29.99)

Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway*, set in the mid-twenty-first century in a landscape devastated by climate change and run-down cities, has echoes of the 1960s and 1970s in its social and political settings.





Twentysomethings Hubert, Seth, and Natalie, following a communist late-night party, decide to leave behind their dysfunctional rich families, jobs, and global capitalism. Society is divided between the elite super-rich, the ‘zottarich’, or ‘zottas’, and a vast underclass. The zottas aim to control society, not just economically, but also by attacking and kidnapping dropout dissidents and revolutionaries.

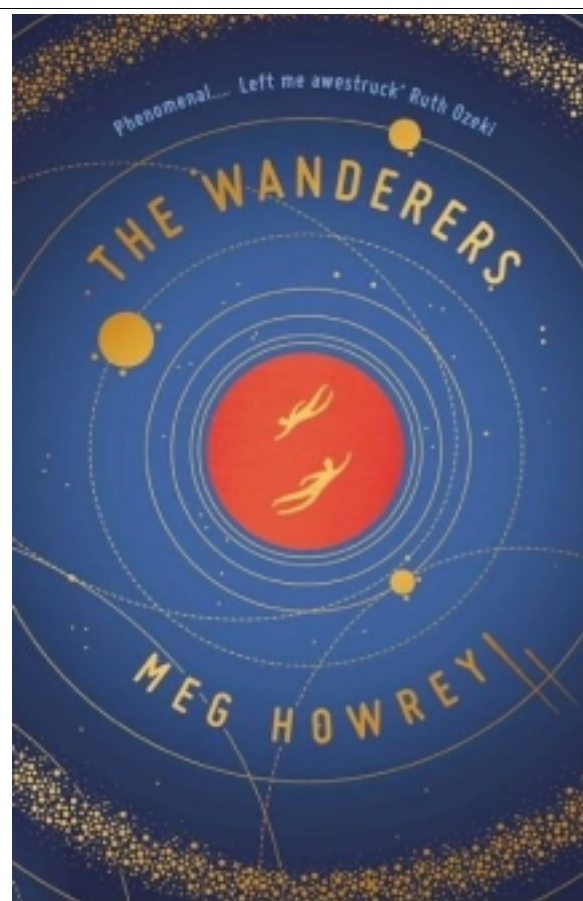
The walkaway trio are drawn into a scientific discovery that provides a sort of AI immortality. This, of course, attracts the attention of the zottas, as its possession will seal their societal and financial omnipotence. Doctorow juxtaposes the two disparate societies, one seeking an idealistic egalitarian world and those who want to retain the status quo of gross inequality. It is a sort of high-tech capitalist future versus 1960s utopian high-tech flower power.

As usual in a Doctorow book, there are many info dumps about future inventions, much quirky humour, and intriguing if not fully fleshed-out characters. *Walkaway* is essentially a utopian disaster novel underpinned by Doctorow’s inventive imagination — with a conclusion that indicates, inter alia, that the generation gap is eternal.

## THE WANDERERS

Meg Howrey (Scribner; \$32.99)

American author **Meg Howrey** says that she was inspired to write *The Wanderers* after reading a newspaper article about Mars500, in which six volunteers spent 520 days in isolation in order to simulate a complete Mars mission.



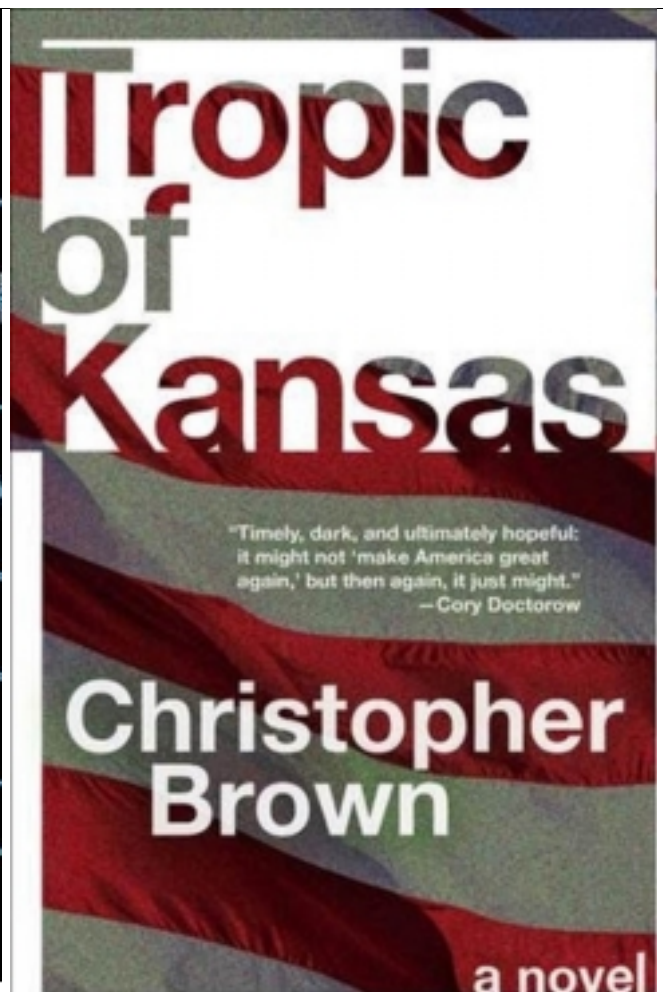
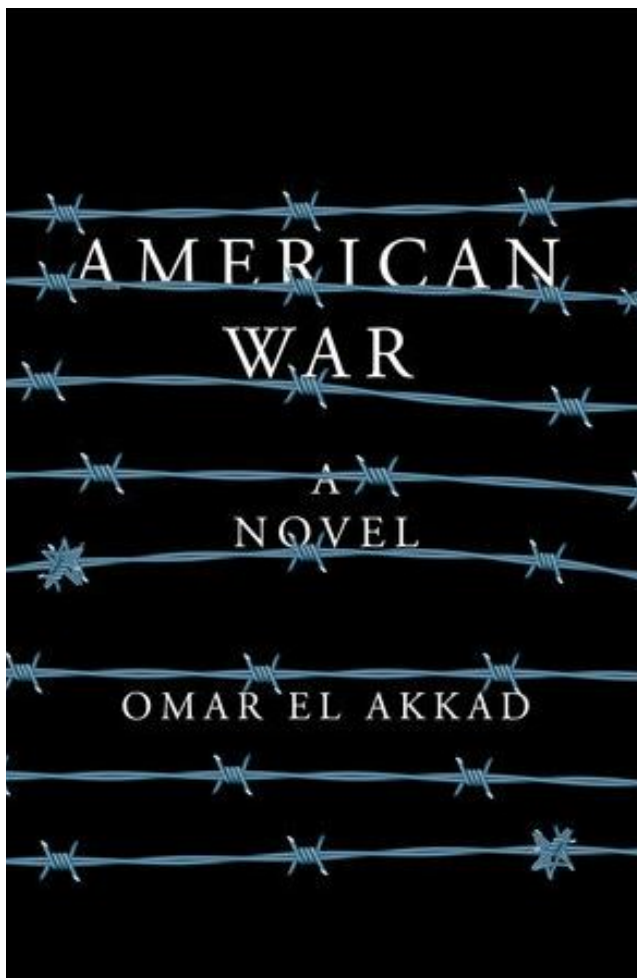
Prime Space, a private space exploration company, brings together three experienced astronauts, American Helen Kane, the world’s most famous female astronaut, Yoshihiro Tanaka from Japan, and Sergei Kuznetsov from Russia. They will be undertaking a 17-month simulation trip to Mars, located in the Utah desert, which will be a precursor for a real trip to Mars by the three.

Fifty-three-year-old Helen, a widow with a grown-up daughter, is quite happy to return to astronaut duties, even if on a simulated trip. Kane’s daughter Mireille a budding actress, however, is less than happy, as she realises, ‘If her mother goes to Mars, then that will be the only story of Mireille’s life. It will wipe out everything.’ Similarly Yoshi’s restless wife Madoka and Sergei’s teen-aged sons are forced to bear ‘all the burden of astronaut life and none of the joy’. Sergei’s son Dmitri is attempting to come to terms with his sexuality, while Madoka is much happier when her husband is away.

Howrey has said that her novel is ‘more to do with trying to investigate interior space, psychic space, emotional space’ than outer space. She juxtaposes the family stories with the tensions of the simulated voyage, which Prime Space tries to make as realistic as possible, to test the crew and the ship to their limits. The monitoring crew even change the timing of communications with the trio to simulate the passage of time to Mars while tensions are deliberately created between the astronauts and mission control.

And that tension includes an ambiguity, which is never resolved, as to whether the astronauts have actually travelled to and landed on Mars. It’s immaterial, in one sense, as Howrey’s main aim is to explore the nature of human interrelationships. It’s an impressive journey





through the inner self rather than a journey to Mars. *The Wanderers* deserves to be recognised in the best SF lists of 2017.

#### **AMERICAN WAR**

**Omar El Akkad (Picador; \$29.99)**

#### **TROPIC OF KANSAS**

**Christopher Brown (HarperVoyager; \$29.99)**

American dystopian novels have proliferated since the Trump Presidential victory, although these two books were in gestation well before the 2016 election. Both books reflect contemporary angst, with Christopher Brown noting that dystopian novels report 'ugly truths about the human society we live in'.

In contrast, however, Harvard Professor Jill Lepore, in the *New Yorker* recently described contemporary dystopian literature as the 'fiction of submission', in which 'cowardice suffices'. For such critics, dystopian fiction amounts to simply giving in to the worst in human nature.

Egyptian-born, Oregon-based journalist **Omar El Akkad** documents a second Second American Civil War (2074–93), followed by an even more deadly plague, in his debut novel, *American War*. This war is recounted by historian Benjamin Chestnut, and the crucial role in that war of his aunt Sarat Chesnut.

El Akkad states, 'I certainly never intended to write a

book about the future. The reason the book is set in the future is simply because I needed time for the fictional world to sort of marinate. I needed time for the sea levels to rise 60 meters or whatever ridiculous amount that I dreamed up to bury the coasts ... That was the only reason to sort of set it in the future, but I certainly never set out to write science fiction or anything like that.' Sigh here from this reviewer.

Civil war erupts in the United States after a group of 'Red' southern American states revolt against a fossil-fuel ban imposed by the 'Blue' states of the North. The global background is one of dramatic climate change with extreme sea level rise; much of the coastal US is under water, and the world is dominated by China and a pan-Arab empire.

El Akkad has stated, in another interview, 'at its heart, *American War* is a story about the life and death of a single character: Sarat Chestnut, a child of southern Louisiana, born and raised amidst the violence of a second civil war. It's a story about her capacity for love, suffering, and, ultimately, vengeance. And I think that, even across the vastest chasms of culture or geography, the things that drive us to love, suffering, and vengeance are always the same.'

Sarat is only six when Civil War breaks out in 2074, after the President has been assassinated. When her father is killed, the family is taken to Camp Patience, a refugee camp. Sarat matures there into a tough revolutionary 'bad ass heroine'. El Akkad's background themes of societal breakdown and fossil fuel conflicts play out as

Sarat, the presentation of whom occasionally lapses into caricature, takes on a pivotal role. *American War* concludes with an appropriate bittersweet ending.

In another debut novel, **Christopher Brown's** *Tropic of Kansas*, again we enter a future world, albeit an alternate one, that has seen dramatic climate change, great inequality between rich and poor, terrorism, and increasing corporate control, both private and governmental. This is a world in which Ronald Reagan was actually assassinated in 1981, although Brown does not detail the dramatic subsequent decline of American society, nor an effective rationale.

*Tropic of Kansas* starts with an unsuccessful attempt on the President's life, although President Mack is badly injured. The plot revolves around finding those responsible for the revolutionary movement against Mack's totalitarian regime. This is a depressing America, in which authority is ruthlessly enforced by Washington, by corporations and militias with drone-filled skies and a loosely described post-climate-change ravaged landscape. Disillusioned Americans try to escape to Canada. A reverse of the Trump scenarios.

Sig, the white foster child of a black family, a strong-willed 'feral' teenager, is Brown's central character. Sig is on the run from the authorities, and his foster-sister, Tania, a Washington-based Government investigator, is given the task, because of threats to her mother, to try to capture her 'terrorist' brother before he can become a catalyst for the forces of revolution.

The fast-paced narrative, much less reflective than that of El Akkad, alternates between the brother's and sister's viewpoints. Sig, in embryonic superhero mode, manages to stay one step ahead of his pursuers before a violent and perhaps too rapid a conclusion.

## British fantasy

### THE END OF THE DAY

Claire North (Orbit; \$29.99)

*Claire North* is the pseudonym of British author Catherine Webb. Her latest book, *The End of the Day*, takes a decidedly different direction from her previously successful novels, *The Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, *Touch*, and *The Sudden Appearance of Hope*.

In *The End of the Day*, she follows Charlie, a young man from Birmingham who has just been appointed the 'Harbinger of Death'. In this role, Charlie, on instructions from the anonymous head office in Milton Keynes, visits people who could soon to be visited by Death, and here one thinks immediately, for better or for worse, of Terry Pratchett's character.

North writes, however, 'everyone sees their own form of Death when he comes. Some see him as a figure all in black, others a woman with a bone white face. It's always different'. Charlie has three Harbinger associates that he sometimes meets, namely War, Famine, and Pestilence.

Charlie's visit doesn't necessarily mean that the person he meets is about to die, although in a number of cases it does. His purpose is essentially to honour a life and, sometimes, the death may not necessarily be physi-

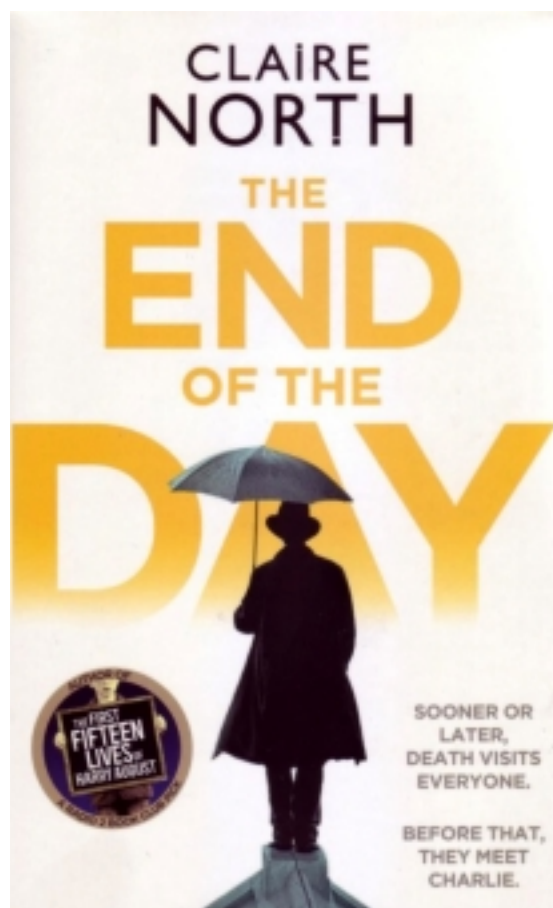
cal, but rather a death in another form, such as an idea, a belief, or the way a person has been living her or his life.

North has said in an interview, '*The End of the Day* is about the ending of a world. Every death of every individual, every town that falls silent, every stage gone dark, every choice that was made when another could have been found, is the end of one world, and possibly the beginning of another. Death doesn't just come for the last breath, but for the end of freedom, hope, despair, tyranny or certainty. But before Death comes to end something old or begin something new, Charlie comes, to honour all that went before'.

It's never quite clear how the people are chosen by head office to be contacted, as clearly Charlie can't visit every person dying each day on Earth. Charlie's visitations take him across the world, ranging from Africa, Asia, and Greenland. Charlie becomes necessarily expert in hotel bookings and airlines, travelling business or first class. Charlie says he always 'makes sure there's at least two hours between my arriving in any connecting flights, especially when changing planes in Atlanta'.

His visits don't differentiate between rich or poor, and there is a particularly poignant interaction with an elderly man and his daughter, who Charlie helps when they are evicted from their London council house. In the process of Charlie's travels, North manages to comment on a lot of contemporary issues, such as the division between rich and poor, the impact of climate change, and the nature of different belief systems and cultures.

The burden of the job eventually begins to overwhelm the initially cheerful Charlie, as he constantly navigates



the bridge 'between life and death', with North's quirky episodic narrative becoming darker. Ultimately, *The End of the Day* is about how we live and interact, and that individual redemption is possible. Clare North is an original and innovative novelist.

## BEREN AND LUTHIEN

**J. R. R. Tolkien; edited by Christopher Tolkien**  
(Harper Collins; \$44.99)

*The Tale of Beren and Lúthien* looks like the end of the mining of the **J.R. R. Tolkien** literary archive. **Christopher Tolkien** writes in the book's preface, 'In my ninety-third year this is (presumptively) my last book in the long series of editions of my father's writings'.

The tale of Lúthien and Beren was mentioned by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s. Its Tolkien origins, however, go back to the second decade of the twentieth century. The story follows Beren, a human, who falls in love with the beautiful elf-maiden Lúthien after seeing her dance in a glade. Beren, a nobleman, but now a homeless wanderer, has to prove himself to Lúthien's father, by undertaking an almost impossible mission. In the end, Lúthien must renounce her immortality to save Beren.

Christopher Tolkien remembers hearing the story, 'the chief of the stories of the *Silmarillion*', from his father as a child. Tolkien himself regarded the tale as one of the three great tales of the First Age alongside *The Children of Húrin* (2007) and 'The Fall of Gondolin' (versions included in *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*).

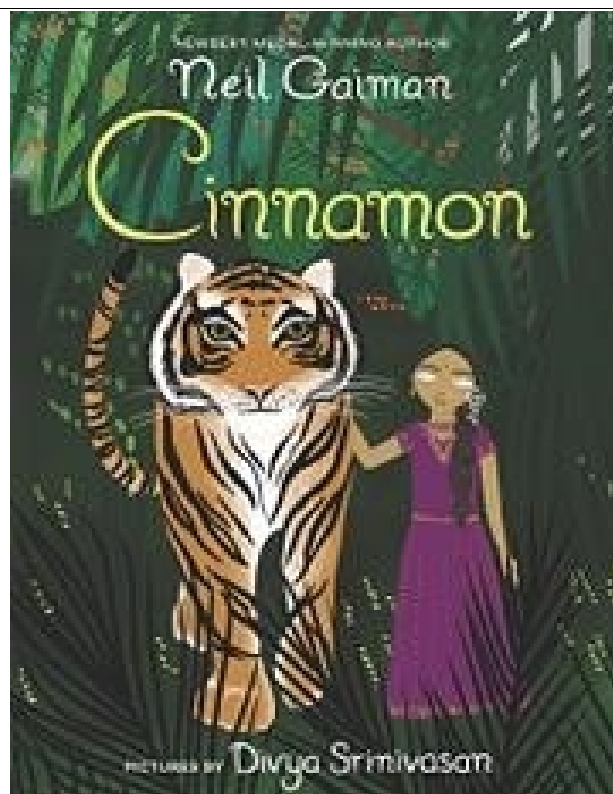
J. R. R. Tolkien had fallen in love with his wife-to-be Edith when he was 16 and she was 19, but Tolkien's guardian disapproved. They only married when Tolkien was 24, just before he went off to World War I, believing he would never return. When he did return to England to convalesce in 1917, Tolkien saw Edith dancing in a wood in 1917 near Roos in Yorkshire. Thereafter, they became to Tolkien Lúthien and Beren. Tolkien and Edith indeed have Beren and Lúthien inscribed beneath their own names on their tombstones at Wolvercote near Oxford.

Christopher Tolkien notes that the present compilation of extracts 'does not offer a single page of original and unpublished work', and that its purpose is 'to show how this fundamental story evolved over the years'. The book, a philological masterpiece, therefore consists of variants, including manuscripts and relevant extracts of Tolkien's correspondence, tracing the evolving content of Beren and Lúthien's story. Alan Lee's nine colour illustrations superbly complement a definitive chronology.

## CINNAMON

**Neil Gaiman (Bloomsbury; \$24.99)**

Best-selling author **Neil Gaiman** has joined up with Indian artist **Divya Srinivasan** to bring *Cinnamon* to colourful print life. It was written in 1995, but the text has only been available on Neil Gaiman's website or as part of *The Neil Gaiman Audio Collection* (2004).



Set in mythic India, *Cinnamon* begins with the words, 'Cinnamon was a princess, a long time ago, in a small hot country where everything was very old.' Cinnamon, a Princess, is blind because she has eyes made of pearls. To make matters worse, she also can't talk, an affliction which mystifies her parents, who offer wealth to anyone who can cure her.

Many try, but no one succeeds, until a talking tiger arrives, 'huge and fierce, a nightmare in black and orange, and he moved like a god through the world'. The tiger gains her trust by leading her through her emotions and the outside world and successfully breaks Cinnamon's silence.

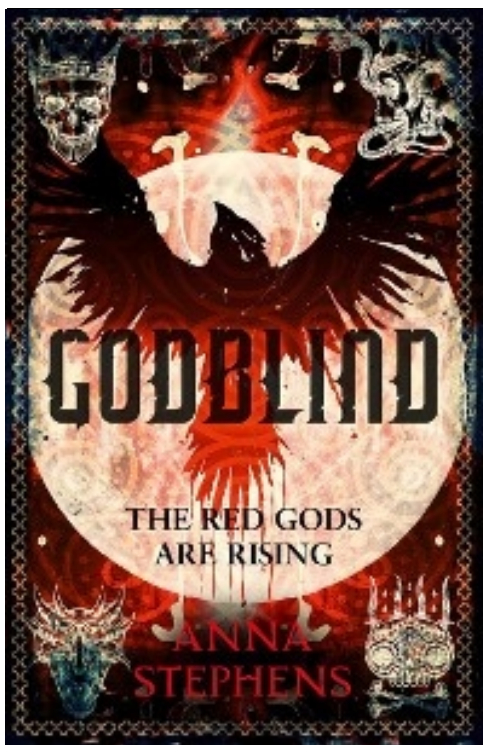
Srinivasan beautifully complements Gaiman's quirky and enjoyable text, which has a decidedly unexpected ending. Srinivasan has said, 'I was able to draw on my family's Indian background and incorporate personal items — designs from my mother's saris ..., for instance, show up on the walls. The auntie's tea set and table are based on ones my parents have had forever. I was able to include decorative Indian patterns I practised drawing as a little kid. It was really neat being able to weave these details into a book where they fit in perfectly ... All the characters were a joy to draw. I did get a special kick out of drawing the mean auntie. It made me laugh having her lounge atop a tiger rug in the scene where she gets eaten by the tiger. I'm glad they let me keep it in'.

## GODBLIND

**Anna Stephens (HarperVoyager; \$29.99)**

*Godblind*, the first in a trilogy, is also the debut book by British author **Anna Stephens**. In this fantasy setting, the stability between worlds is starting to break down. The world of Rilpor, which follows the Gods of Light, is threatened by the rival world of Mireces and their ma-





levolent bloodthirsty Red Gods. Stephens perhaps introduces too many characters in the initial chapters, which detracts from the pace of the narrative, but overall all the verve and violence of the action scenes and the raw language captures attention. One character that is certainly fleshed out is Dom, a troubled 'Watcher', a warrior and powerful seer, who will play a key role in Rilpor's fate.

#### RED SISTER

Mark Lawrence (Harper; \$29.99)

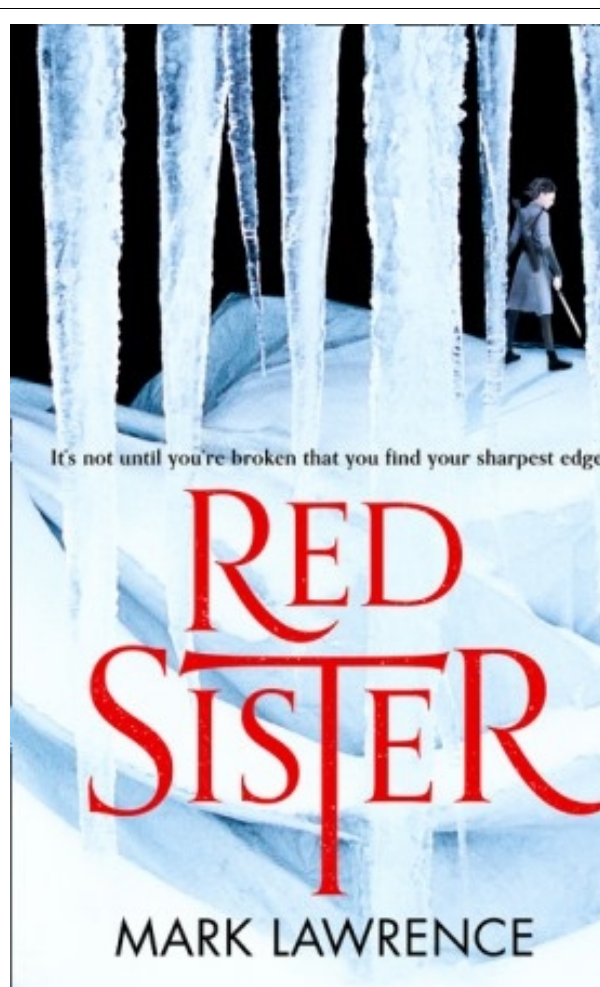
*Godblind* falls into the category of 'grimdark fantasy', of which another British author **Mark Lawrence** is a key exponent. Lawrence's *Red Sister*, which begins another trilogy, has as its main character, a young peasant girl Nona Grey. Lawrence tells her story in a non-chronological fashion, and slowly fills in her background, which ranges from slavery to pit fighting. The key plot focus comes when she is taken in as a young girl by the Sisters of the Sweet Mercy convent.

Here, she must compete against her fellow female students in order to realise her full potential, both as a person and as a deadly martial arts exponent. Nona is allocated one of the four novice categories, namely Martial Sister or Red Sister, 'a nun skilled in armed and unarmed combat'. The novel begins with the intriguing prologue, 'It is important, when killing a nun, to ensure that you bring an army of sufficient size. For Sister Thorn of the Sweet Mercy Convent Lano Taccis brought 200 men'. Read on! An impressive start to a new trilogy by Lawrence.

#### THE WEE FREE MEN

Terry Pratchett (Corgi; \$19.99)

**Terry Pratchett's** novels will live on for generations. His five-book 'Tiffany Aching' series, beginning with *The Wee*



*Free Men*, has now been repackaged, featuring new cover art and illustrations by Laura Ellen Anderson. Anderson, a prolific children's book illustrator, is the first female to have illustrated a Pratchett book. She has said in an interview, 'I was truly honoured and extremely excited to illustrate this magical series by Sir Terry Pratchett. Bringing Tiffany Aching to life was a pure joy. She is a fantastically feisty and bold character; a true modern heroine and an inspiration to any reader. And not forgetting the teeny yet fierce Nac Mac Feegle!' As new generations discover Pratchett, Anderson will certainly attract them in the bookshops through the striking covers.

## DRAGON'S GREEN

Scarlett Thomas (Canongate; \$19.99)

*Dragon's Green* is the first book in the 'Worldquake' trilogy for children by British author Scarlett Thomas, whose critically acclaimed adult novels include *Bright Young Things*, *PopCo*, and *The End of Mr Y*.

Thomas has said in an interview about *Dragon's Green*, 'I didn't want this to be like the 1980s feminist primers I read as a child, though, and I wanted to appeal to boys as well. I would give my fictional children magical powers, but also limit them in some way, because magic can't be easy. And I'd continue some of the investigations I'd begun in my adult fiction to do with the power of books, and how language and narrative create our world. Jacques Derrida for middle-graders? Why not? After all, no one was going to read it'.

The book opens with 'unprepossessing eleven-year-

old' Effie Truelove late for her class at the Tusitala School for the Gifted, Troubled and Strange, where the frightening English teacher Mrs Beathag Hide is sure to exact punishment.

Effie's world, located in a 'post-worldquake' setting, where the internet and communications have been permanently damaged, fringes on to a realm of magic, 'the Otherworld'. Two groups of sorcerers, 'the Guild' and 'the Diberi', battle for control of the worlds.

Effie's mother Aurelia mysteriously disappeared five years before. Aurelia's father and diet-obsessed step-mother are too busy to look after her, so she spends more and more time with her grandfather, Griffin, a mage, who has recently started introducing Effie to 'magical thinking'. After a brutal attack, which leads to Griffin's death, Effie finds he has left her a magical ring, various magical objects, and his extensive library of last editions, which are much rarer than first editions. Griffin had asked Effie to protect the books at all costs, particularly as Effie's father wants to sell the collection to a sinister bookseller, Leonard Levar. A key book, *Dragon's Green*, aids Effie's transition to the Otherworld and ultimately her place in the fight to combat the Diberi.

Effie cannot face the Diberi alone. She enlists her school-friends Maximilian, Wolf, Lexy, and Raven, and helps them unlock their abilities as mage, warrior, healer, and witch.

It may seem as if Scarlett Thomas is following many others, including J. K. Rowling, but her verve and invention will ensure that *Dragon's Green* becomes a children's favourite. It will also appeal to older readers, as Thomas's writing is always inventive and her allusions intriguing. The real magic ultimately lies in Thomas's text.

## HEKLA'S CHILDREN

James Brogden (Titan; \$16.99)

James Brogden has acknowledged that, while *Hekla's Children* is set in the 'British archaeo-fantasy-horror that has inspired it (Holdstock, Garner, etc)', it also has a 'particular Australian influence, which might seem a bit weird considering how, well, English the whole jolly thing is'.

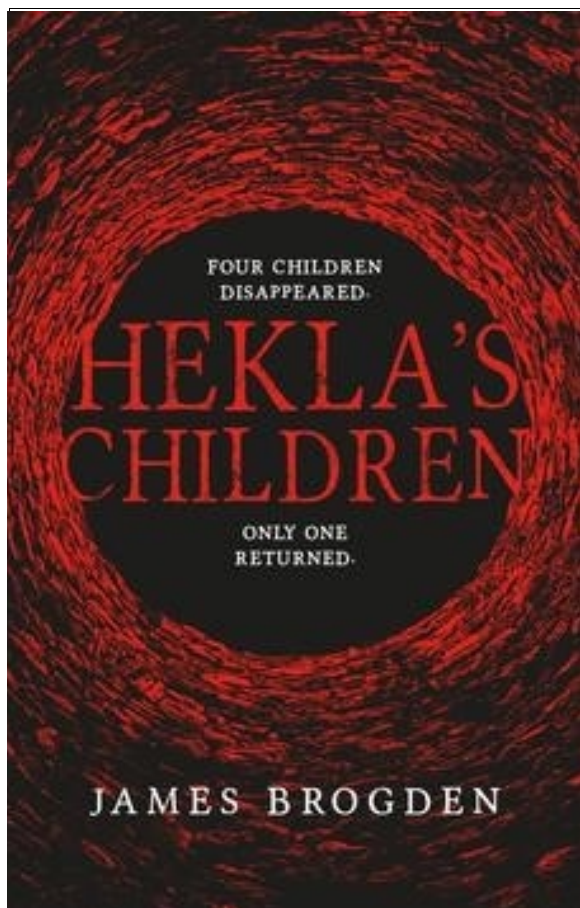
That influence is Joan Lindsay's *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, of which Brogden writes 'Ultimately, everything disappears: truth, time, youth, love, gender, class, race, and reason. All that remains is the power of the land, and our bones in it, and its bones in us. *Picnic At Hanging Rock* remains for me one of the most evocative explorations of this power, and well worth appreciating anew'. While Brogden's totality of vision unfortunately can't live up to that of Joan Lindsay, it is nonetheless an engrossing, although, at times confusing, juxtaposition of fantasy and horror.

Nathan Brookes, a teacher, has his life turned upside down when his four allocated students on a school excursion through Sutton Park, near Birmingham, disappear. One of the students, Olivia, turns up the next day totally disoriented and unable to explain how she disappeared and where the other three are. They are never found. Brookes is blamed, and ultimately leaves the school.

Ten years later, a body is discovered near where the







students disappeared. While originally it was thought to be one of the children, osteoarchaeologist Tara Doumani determines that the body is considerably older, indeed a Bronze Age warrior. Intriguingly, however, one leg of the body reveals a surgical repair identical with one of the missing children. Where the body is found turns out to be the site of a gateway between our world and the Land of Un. Nathan travels through that portal into the distant Bronze Age to discover that the three children are still alive.

Brogden cleverly links the main characters between past and present, as they confront an ancient evil force, the 'afaugh', which crosses between the two worlds. Brogden's conclusion, which is suitably dramatic, moves a long way from its original semi-mystical beginnings.

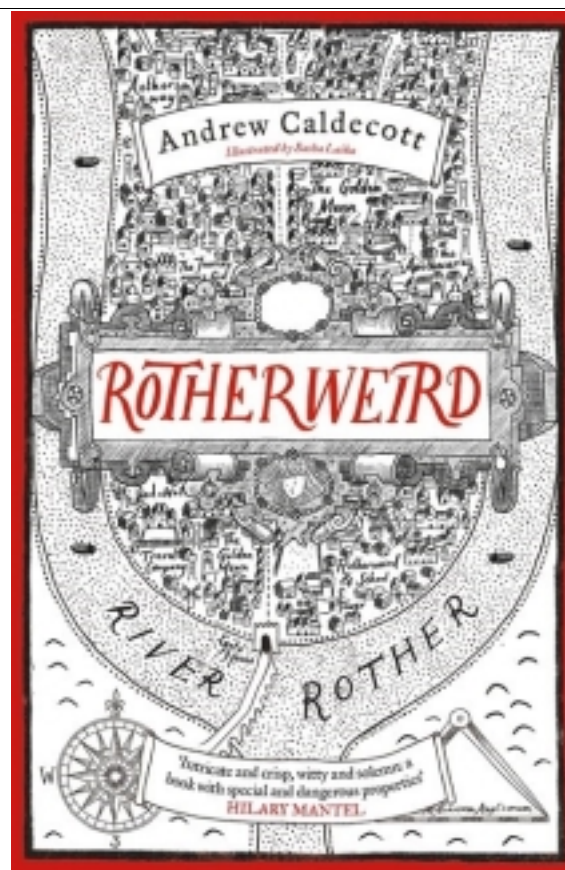
#### ROTHERWEIRD

**Andrew Caldecott (Jo Fletcher; \$32.99)**

*Rotherweird*, which has echoes of Jasper Fforde and Mervyn Peake, is the first volume of a trilogy from British QC **Andrew Caldecott**.

Rotherweird, a small area of England deliberately isolated since Tudor times, is indeed 'rather weird'. Students at Rotherweird school are not allowed to learn any history before 1800, a fact that new history teacher Jonah Oblong finds rather strange. His predecessor mysteriously disappeared when probing the history of Rotherweird, a school renowned for lucrative military inventions over the centuries. A surprising fact, given that Rotherweird itself is devoid of modern technology.

Jonah who had been unable to secure employment



anywhere else in England, was surprised that the school didn't want any references. Jonah 'like everyone else, had heard of the Rotherweird valley and its town of the same name, which by some quirk of history, were self-governing — no MP and no Bishop, only a Mayor. He knew too that Rotherweird had a legendary hostility to admitting the outside world: no guidebook recommended a visit.'

Rotherweird is populated by a large, and occasionally confusing, cast of eccentric characters with almost Dickensian names, such as the venal mayor Sidney Snorkel. Jonah's arrival coincides with that of another outsider, the extremely rich Sir Veronal Slickstone, who buys the Manor House. But is Slickstone who we says he is? Slickstone and Oblong strive, for different reasons, to connect past and present with dramatic results, ensuring Rotherweird's outward serenity will be disturbed.

*Rotherweird* starts off strongly but loses focus as it pads out the world-building background detail. Nonetheless, the overall concept is intriguing and final judgment must be reserved until the trilogy is completed.

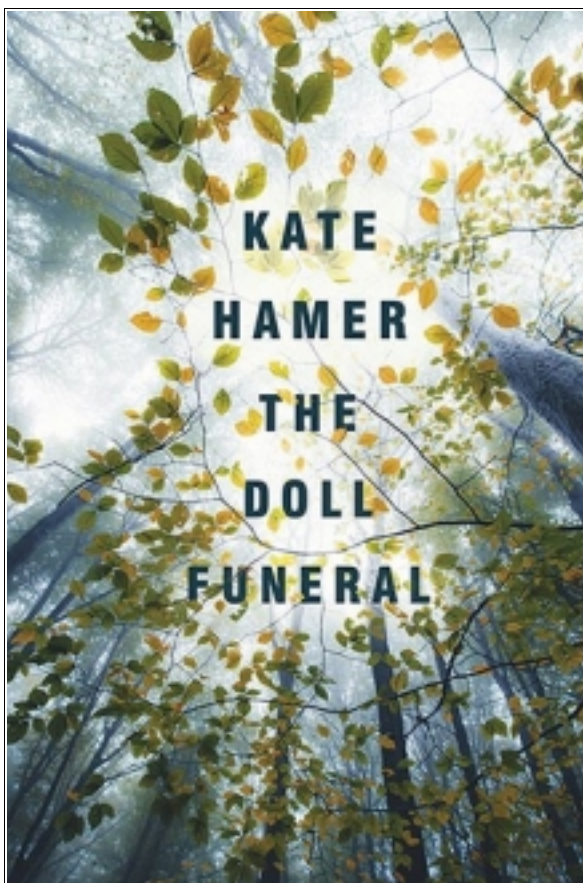
#### THE DOLL FUNERAL

**Kate Hamer (Faber; \$29.99)**

**Kate Hamer** had commercial and critical success with her debut 2015 novel, *The Girl in the Red Coat*, shortlisted for the Costa First Book award. Some critics noted its affinity to 'Little Red Riding Hood'. In that context, *The Doll Funeral*, set in the 1970s and 1980s, could be seen as a sort of gritty Cinderella story, venturing into Angela Carter/Brothers Grimm territory.

The main character, a young girl Ruby, lives deep in





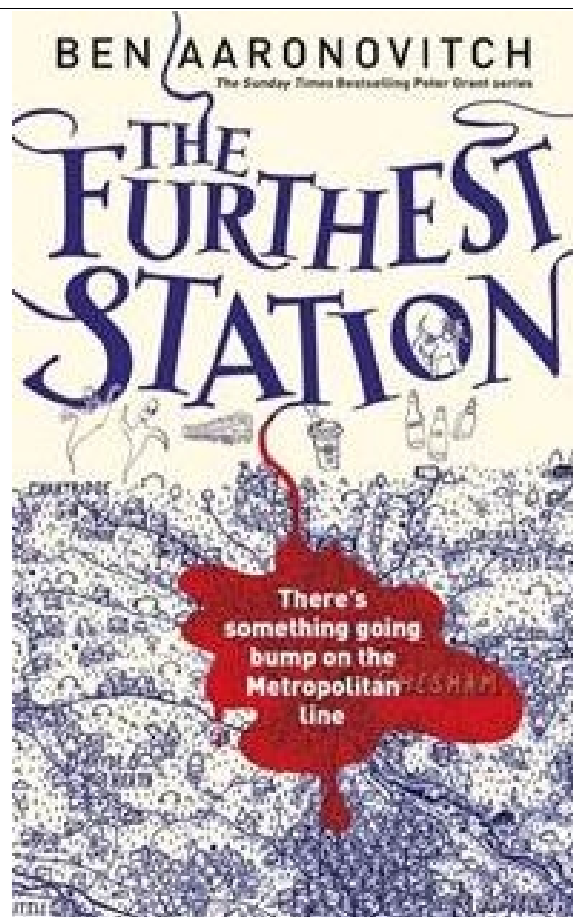
the Forest of Dean with her apparent parents, Barbara and the abusive Mick. On her thirteenth birthday in 1983, however, Ruby finds out that they are not her real parents. Ruby says, 'Barbara and Mick ... tell me what to do, and what to say. I'm supposed to say that the bruises on my arms and the black eye came from falling down the stairs. But there are things I won't say. I won't tell them I'm going to hunt for my real parents.'

Ruby's quest to find her real parents leads her to literally uncover ghosts of her past, notably co-narrators, her mother Anna, who became pregnant with Ruby at the age of 17, and had a short and troubled marriage with Lewis Black, and 'Shadow', a young boy Joshua Black, a distant ancestor. Ruby's quest also leads her to the company of three teenagers living in a crumbling house in the forest, a 'forest that has everything you need'.

Anna's story takes us back to the 1970s. As the novel progresses, the gap between the two decades gradually collapses until past and present merge. The last sentence reads, 'She [Anna] still came for me( Ruby), even though she was dead.'

Kate Hamer packs too much into the narrative. The harsh realities of child abuse, poverty, drugs, and mental illness sit a little uneasily, at times, with the paranormal elements of the narrative.

Hamer, however, has, in *The Doll Funeral*, fashioned an intriguing narrative framework from which the reader is keen to see a resolution, as Ruby makes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Ruby eventually finds, after some traumatic episodes, the necessary 'love and souls'.



## THE FURTHEST STATION

Ben Aaronovitch (Gollancz; \$26.99)

**Ben Aaronovitch's** 'The Rivers of London' series has proven to be extremely popular. Aaronovitch's dry sense of humour underpins his detectives, who investigate the interaction in London between the supernatural and the normal.

Aaronovitch has said in an interview, 'This is my first novella and I suddenly understood the appeal of the form to both writers and readers. Novellas allow you to tell a story in a very elegant, streamlined fashion. Something you can read quickly but without feeling cheated at the end. I may write more.' Certainly, *The Furthest Station* whizzes along the Aaronovitch entertainment line.

*The Furthest Station* sees PC Peter Grant, a junior member of the Metropolitan Police's Special Assessment unit, a.k.a. The Folly, 'otherwise known as these weird bleeders', joining forces with Sgt Jaget Kumar, his counterpart at the British Transport Police, his precocious niece Abigail, and a pre-school river god to find a missing person. In office procedures, 'the Folly prefers to do things the oldfashioned way. Just in case someone leaks our emails, and also because only one of us currently lives in the 21st century.'

The members of the team come together to investigate ghostly sightings on trains on the London Underground Metropolitan line. Ghosts from various centuries are trying to tell passengers that a real person's life might be in danger, but, a problem in verification arises, as the ghosts quickly deconstruct and the passengers almost

immediately begin to forget their ghostly encounter.

Aaronovitch underpins the race to find a missing woman, whose life is in danger, with background whimsy ranging from the influence of the Great British Bake off, junk food's impact on foxes, to commuter idiosyncrasies. More novellas soon, please Mr Aaronovitch.

## US fantasy

### THE RISE AND FALL OF DODO

Neal Stephenson and Nicole Galland  
(Borough Press; \$32.99)

Neal Stephenson never writes the same book twice, which is wonderful. Just think of the plot lines of *Reamde*, *Anathem*, and the three-volume historical epic the Baroque Cycle (*Quicksilver*, *The Confusion*, and *The System of the World*), as well as *Cryptonomicon*, *The Diamond Age*, *Snow Crash*, and *Zodiac*.

*The Rise and Fall of DODO* is a time-travel romp that mixes magic with quantum physics. Mel (Melisande) Stokes is a young Harvard 'downtrodden humanities lecturer', specialising in ancient and classical linguistics. She is recruited by Tristan Lyons to work the Department of Diachronic Operations (DODO), 'a black budget' arm of the US Government.

Mel's task is to decipher historical documents that reveal that magic was practised until 1851, when the invention of photography caused its demise. Tristan says, 'Photography breaks magic by embalming a specific moment — one version of reality — into a recorded image ... Once that moment is so recorded, then all other possible versions of that moment are excluded from the world.'

Ultimately Mel and Tristan's work results in the facilitation of a very unusual time travel mechanism, but, an original error to rectify timelines in the seventeenth century leads to complications. Excursions back in time take the reader to London in 1601, Constantinople in 1203, and London in July 1851, where, as the book opens, Mel is trapped.

Mel is recording her fate in her diary, and accepts if she can't gain resolution, before magic disappears with the advent of photography, she will never be able to get back to the future. The discovery that a banking cabal is aiming to gain temporal supremacy adds a further complication to the dangers faced by the leading characters.

The structure of the novel is as quirky as its text. The reader follows the plotline through a variety of second-hand sources, such as letters, diaries, emails, government reports, and computer log entries. *The Rise and Fall of DODO* is imbued with comic anarchy, including the deliberate references to Monty Python, and effectively mixes several genres as well science and witchcraft.

## Australian dark fantasy/horror

### SINGING MY SISTER DOWN

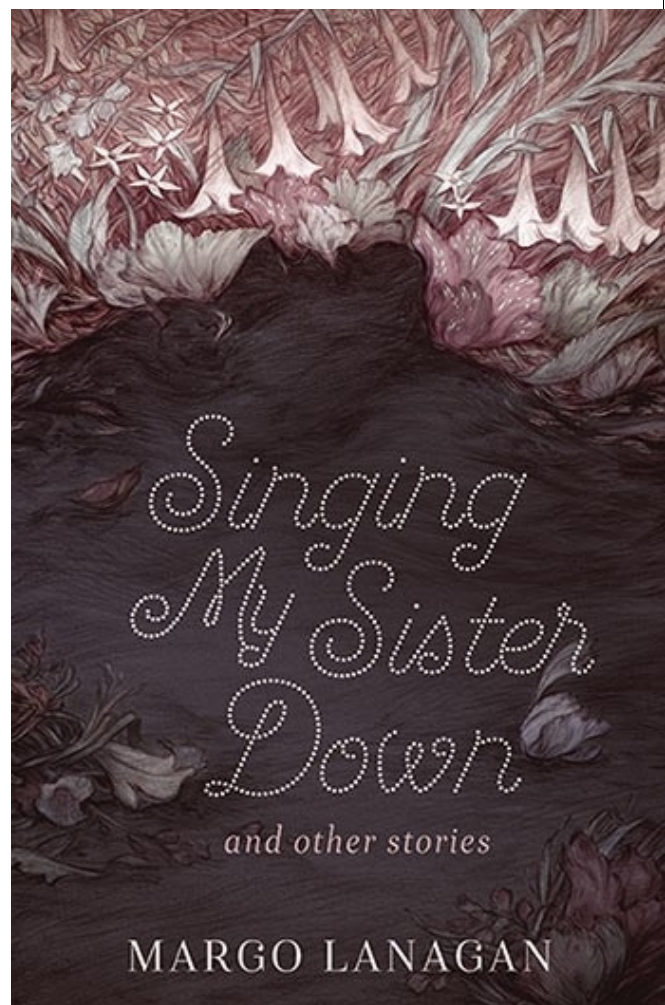
Margo Lanagan (Allen & Unwin; \$19.99)

*Singing My Sister Down* brings together thirteen stories from award-winning Australian author Margo Lanagan, whose impressive oeuvre includes the excellent *Sea Hearts* and *Tender Morsels*.

Ten of the stories, including the title story, are reprints from previous collections, but three are new: 'Swing from the Moon', 'Not All Ogre', and 'The Wood-Queen's Quarters'. There is no indication of the *raison d'être* for this collection. Is it meant to be the best? If so, perhaps Lanagan could have been persuaded to provide a short introduction to each story to make it even more memorable.

The title story, 'Singing My Sister Down', first published in 2004, won many awards, including the Aurealis Award for best Young Adult Short Story and the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction. Lanagan recounts the slow death of Ik in a tar pit from a largely unspecified crime, although it seems to relate to killing her husband. Her family reach out, both physically and emotionally, to her in the tar pit to provide comfort while realising her inevitable fate.

The story is based on a documentary that Lanagan saw on similar tar pits near an African village. It is both





moving and harrowing at the same time. Lanagan says this is one short story she never reads aloud to an audience because it reduces her to tears.

Many of the short stories explore a variety of cultures and belief systems in various settings, such as mediaeval fantasy, fairy stories, superstition, and horror. Thus, 'Not All Ogre' spins off the prince from 'Sleeping Beauty' and his ogre mother. In Lanagan's startling story, which literally cuts to the chase, the man-ogre Torro tracks down the sleeping princess but rather than waking her with a kiss, his solution is much more cannibalistic, 'with the satisfaction of her in his stomach'. In similar macabre fashion, 'Winkie' sees a gruesome Wee Willie Winkie in pursuit of a young girl's eyelids.

'Ferryman', in similar fashion, uses the Greek myth of the Hades ferryman as its base for extrapolation. Sharon is taking lunch to her ferryman father in the underworld, but his accidental fall into the Styx leads to an impending death, and a moving family reunion, before Sharon assumes the ferryman role.

In 'Red Nose Day' two disgruntled clowns conspire to kill their competitors by shooting them one by one as they emerge from rehearsals. Lanagan has said in a 2017 Linda Morris Fairfax interview, 'You have that same sort of feeling that the clowns have taken over and are ruling the world, that modern times are a circus and all sorts of things have just gone out of the window in the cause of entertainment.'

While Margo Lanagan conjures up mythic worlds, in the style of Angela Carter, she also makes the reader think more keenly about their own fears. Lanagan says

in the Fairfax interview, 'All literature works at a symbolic level, but fantasy is just a further step into murkiness. It stirs up the silt of our deepest self, then suggests new ways of settling.' Lanagan is undoubtedly one of our best contemporary Australian authors, irrespective of genre.

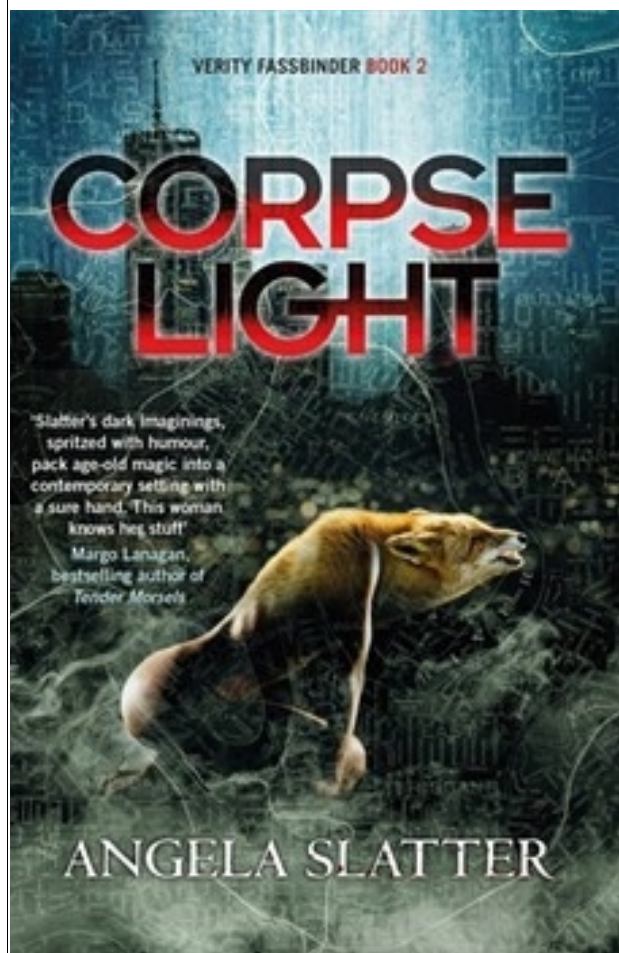
## CORPSE LIGHT

Angela Slatter (Jo Fletcher; \$32.99)

In *Corpse Light*, Brisbane-based award-winning fantasy writer **Angela Slatter** continues to impress with the quality of her writing and imagination. One wonders if, like Canberra's Daniel O'Malley, she were to write a novel without specific genre elements she would gain greater national exposure and recognition. Sadly, most of the national awards overlook the genre fields. But that's another story.

*Corpse Light*, the sequel to *Vigil*, is the second book in Slatter's Verity Fassbinder series. Verity, half-Normal, half-Weyrd, is given the task of protecting Brisbane from supernatural dangers. But now that Verity is heavily pregnant, she's handling less demanding cases. Or that's what she thinks. A theoretically simple insurance investigation, involving rivers of mud in a Brisbane house, is not what it seems. This 'Unusual Happenstance' insurance claim becomes even more unusual, when it recurs and signals an ectoplasmic invasion with drownings on dry land.

As Verity herself becomes under attack, she must also protect her family, including her stressed husband, somewhat irresponsible mother, and her new baby, who is born halfway through the book. Slatter examines fa-





miliar contexts, including the nature of motherhood, in the background to an action-packed text that necessitates Verity descending to the Underworld and an encounter with 'the Guardian'. *Restoration* will be the final volume of the trilogy.

## CITY OF CROWS

**Chris Womersley (Picador; \$32.99)**

*City of Crows* sees Australian award-winning author **Chris Womersley** dramatically change fictional course. It is, in his own words, 'the story of a young woman in 17th century France who turns to witchcraft in a desperate effort to rescue her son who has been abducted. It was inspired by the Affair of the Poisons — a scandal that rocked the French court in the late 1670s, in which the Parisian police uncovered what they thought was a plot to poison Louis XIV. In their investigations, they instead uncovered a thriving underground network of sorcerers, magicians, abortionists and astrologers working in Paris.'

*The City of Crows*, which opens in 1673, is set in the lead-up to the Affair of the Poisons. Charlotte Picot, a young widow, has lost three children to illness. She flees, with her remaining son Nicolas, from her village. En route to Lyon, Nicolas is captured by slave traders, presumably to be sold in Paris. She must travel there to find 'my last living child'.

That journey, however, will lead into a maelstrom of witchcraft and occult associated with a quest to find a hidden treasure. Charlotte becomes, with the aid of an occult book from an elderly sorcerer, the magic-working 'Forest Queen' with powers that will be needed to overcome demons guarding the treasure.

Womersley richly documents the history, settings, and indeed smells of 1670s Paris, where his characters feature in a decidedly gothic plot, which veers uneasily between reality and the supernatural.

## US dark fantasy/horror

### SLEEPING BEAUTIES

**Stephen King and Owen King (Hodder; \$32.99)**

*Sleeping Beauties* is the first collaboration between **Stephen King** and his son **Owen King**. With King's other son, Joe Hill, already well known in the horror stakes, Stephen King is clearly developing a fictional dynasty.

In *Sleeping Beauties*, the Kings tackle the theme, not an unusual SF one: what might happen if women disappeared from the world of men? In this latest version, women, suffering from the Aurora virus, go to sleep and become encased in a cocoon. It apparently transports them to another space, 'so much better than the old man-driven one'. If they are awakened, or their cocoon is disturbed, they become zombielike and begin murder-

ing male members of their family, especially husbands.

Stephen King has said in an interview, that 'Men are the more dangerous sex, the ones who are more apt to be confrontational, to hold on to ideas. If you had all the men fall asleep I think that the women would work together pretty well.' The Kings are clearly on the side of women in both worlds.

By and large, the Kings ignore the global impact of female removal, as 'the women of this town stand for all women'. They focus, in 713 pages, on the issues as played out in Dooling, West Virginia, a small run-down Appalachian town. Here the town workforce centres on a women's prison, where the murderer of meth dealers Evie Black confronts prison psychiatrist Clinton Norcross. Evie is apparently immune to the sleeping sickness. Is she the cause or the hope for a medical solution? For whichever reason, the town's irrational male population are intent on capturing Evie, with Clinton leading the defence of the jail.

The reader learns that Evie is 'an emissary', and apparently not from Earth. But who has sent her and why? Is she the new Eve? Don't mention the snake, or a messianic Gaia. Unfortunately, among the very large collection of characters — undoubtedly too many — Evie remains possibly the least accessible. She is more a symbol of the Kings' reflections on a misogynistic society, seen through the prism of a dark horror fantasy. More rigorous editing would have helped the pace of the narrative, but there is no denying that *Sleeping Beauties* is an intriguing spin on the Grimm fairytale, ably balancing the supernatural, religion, and gender politics.

## British children's/young adult fiction

### A VOYAGE THROUGH AIR

**Peter F. Hamilton (Macmillan; \$14.99)**

*A Voyage Through Air* is the final book in leading British SF author **Peter Hamilton's** 'Queen of Dreams' children's fantasy trilogy. I had not come across the trilogy until now, but is well worth seeking out for readers from seven upwards. Young Taggie Paganuzzi learns in the first book that she is actually the Queen of Dreams of a magical realm and she must defend that realm against the King of Night, leader of the Karraks. But by this final volume of the trilogy, it may be that Taggie can resolve the conflict if she can find a long-lost gate between her universe and the cold, dark one of the Karraks. But to do that she may need to enlist others, including a Karrak Lord, to help her to gain access to the 'Universal Fellowship' and seal the gate between the separate universes.

— Colin Steele, July–October 2017

## I must be talking to my friends (continued from page 19)

**SF Commentary 95 is at least nine months late. The first half of this part of the Letters section appeared last time. The second part appears below, followed by letters of comment on SFC 94.**

## Letters of comment on SF Commentary Nos 91–93 (continued from SFC 94)

**STEPHEN CAMPBELL**

**52 Aitkins Road, Warrnambool VIC 3280**

I may not have the intellect to criticise science fiction as a writing endeavour, but I do have some opinions about science fiction as a genre. The ‘tropes’ (lexicographers must laugh) that most SF writers, and especially fantasy writers, use are certainly a genrification and a de-nutting, hence, popularising so that SF is no longer frightening on a real level, just familiar ideas to press the right buttons for entertainment. I find this world very frightening, and SF has had something to do with that, because I read it and loved it as it took me to the perimeters of chaos. I did not care who wrote it, just that another human being could understand the way that I felt (feel) about the world. I was not alone, which meant that the world really is as I witness it, even though it seems surreal sometimes. And magical. And unbelievable. The writer is trying to tell me that, but uses disguise so that the story will sell, so that it is disseminated to other people.

Science fiction became a way to predict a possible truth that could occur or even already exists. Science and technology are married in the genre, and as a genre these stories must now comply with rules of behaviour. We in the twenty-first century are looking back now at the history and development of this form of writing, and yet I still don’t seem to know what it is. Genrification of it is merely trying to tame the wild beats that it really can be. This is the expression of access to the morphogenetic field, that collective unconscious of mankind that Jung spoke of. This is information from outside three-dimensional space, and the sense of wonder it can produce is not unlike the feeling that religious people have when they describe being visited by the ‘holy spirit’.

Science fiction is more than just products, although in this military industrial capitalist economy product sells, and

SF is popular.

Science fiction has been a warning of science fact. Alvin Toffler saw the value of this predictive art of writing his book *Future Shock*. I’ve read that Australians are generally frightened of reading science fiction, but we are frightened of everything. For all we know, fiction might be truth and we are trying to find out. We might only be a simulation, but the computer has nothing to do with it, although part of our duty is to press its button. The challenges to the system are now part of the system. The price of truth is to acknowledge it.

(7 June 2016)



I've been listening to classical ABC FM Classic radio exclusively for quite a while now, and often think of your appreciation of music and the strange joys it can offer. A whole program was presented in terms of what were called 'tropes' by the announcer. The Pocket Oxford Dictionary tells me that a 'trope' is a 'deviation from the normal way of saying something, figure of speech [Gk *trópos*, turn]'. I get the impression that the meaning of this word is being transmuted into a meaning anything other than the derivation from normal. It seems to be now a catchword for anything you might have seen in movies, not something peculiar. But then, peculiar and the enjoyment of the peculiar is a standard of science fiction fandom. As it grows into a colossus it might discover that it is reduced to eating itself and its own peculiarities, and where will be our sense of wonder then?

(15 October 2016)

## GEOFF ALLSHORN Montmorency VIC 3094

Thank you for the recent copy of *SF Commentary* 91, and congratulations upon reaching your 47th anniversary issue! Thank you also for allowing me to subscribe to your varied fanzines over recent years; I have found them to be interesting, challenging, informative, and inspiring. I have hesitated to write a response because I felt that my own small contribution would pale in comparison to the cosmic consciousness that streams from your always-impressive list of SF luminaries. *SFC* 91 is perhaps the issue that most clearly provided an epiphany for me: its eclectic listings demonstrated an intersection of the worldly with the other-worldly. This marriage of the mundane with the megalithic summarises, for me, part of the appeal of fandom as a way of life.

As a child, I loved the 'elec-trickery' portrayed in *Catweazle*, the children's TV series, appreciating its perspective of awe and wonder at our modern world. I was attracted to space and 'hard science' SF as a young pre-teen, when I gazed wondrously at ghostly, flickering black-and-white TV images of real-life Moonwalkers, and later devoured the cosmic vistas of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the pulp space opera novels of Captain W. E. Johns. I became a bilingual fanboy: learning to enjoy both literary and media SF as I recognised the metaphoric alien in both robot Daneel Olivaw and the half-human Spock. I was young and idealistic; I saw SF as a means to catch the dreams of visionaries and to participate in constructing a better future. This ideal probably helped to inspire my adult dabblings in human rights activism.

In recent years, as a teacher, I rejoiced when the 'Harry Potter' fantasy stories introduced new generations of young people to both the joys of reading and the potential for transformative, magical imagination within our mundane lives. Today, in my post-teacher phase of life, I see myself as someone who still metaphorically walks with giants — alongside those whose grand visions fuel my understandings that science fiction has the power to deflect its stereotypical 'otherness' into a celebration of diversity and alternate ideas. To me, *Stranger in a Strange Land* is more than simply the title of a good

book: I see it as being a mirror, metaphor, and mission statement all rolled into one.

The latest *SF Commentary*, with its eclectic listings of books, TV shows, CDs, and ephemera, reminds us to seek the magical within the mundane, and to enjoy the extraordinary within the everyday. It is reminiscent of a Dr Seuss book which I recall from my childhood, *Horton Hears A Who*, in which the protagonist discovers a micro-cosmic world full of wondrous creatures, and whose friends cynically attempt to destroy his micro-universe until they also come to realise its reality. Perhaps SF folk are custodians of a similar legacy: we nurture the seeds of wondrous dreams and visions within a culture that seeks to replace the aspirations of science with retro-grade agendas, dogmas, and superstitions. It is our job to be visionaries and explorers, sceptics and seers, pioneers and gatekeepers.

In this spirit, I suggest that we might contextualise the real-life memoir *Take Me To Paris, Johnny*, by Melbourne author John Foster, as providing a worthy literary template. Foster writes about his partner, Juan Céspedes, who is considered alien in both his birth country of Cuba and his adoptive refuge in the USA, and who spends many years in a vain search for a welcoming home. It is only after migrating to Melbourne in 1986 that Juan finally finds shelter within an extended family — only to be tragically struck down with AIDS in the days before modern medications turned HIV into a manageable chronic condition. Although teenaged Juan had been inspired by Armstrong's lunar footsteps, his adult reality fell heartbreakingly short of his dreams.

Foster's memoir is not science fiction, but it contains many SF tropes: its examination of, and deep empathy with, the 'other' in our midst; its questions on whether science can provide the answers we seek; its frightening implication that our own failings might be among the worst monsters in our cosmos — and the reassuring suggestion that our common humanity may provide us with meaning in our search for significance.

Our ability to explore such emotional depth transcends and transforms our experiences of the everyday and the everywhen. Thank you for providing such a journey.

(26 May 2016)

Thank you for *SFC* 93. It makes me wonder if you are already planning ahead for your one hundredth issue (maybe to coincide with your fiftieth anniversary issue?)

I found some synchronicity with your articles about fanzines: your own early life corresponds to mine in that we were both publishing proto-zones at a young age, even before we were aware of the fanzine concept. In my case, life led me largely in other directions, whereas you stayed true to your early calling. Your lifelong dedication to the craft is surely both challenging and inspiring to the rest of us.

James 'Jocko' Allen's article reinforces the notion that zines comprise a fundamental SF sub-culture, and raises the question whether zines are a living fossil left over from earlier times, when classic SF pulp magazines may have evolved from fanzines in form but also with an added commercial intent.

Thanks once again for paraphrasing FIAWOL as:



'Fandom Is A Way Of Life'.

(7 April 2017)

**MURRAY MOORE**

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

I was equally surprised and pleased to discover the photo I sent you, of myself and my pile of Gillespiana, adorning the bacover of *SF Commentary* 91. The cutline says 'his complete collection of Gillespie fanzines', which is true. However, the pile is every unique Gillespie fanzine I possess, and a large double-digit number it is in total, yet less than a complete collection of Gillespie fanzines. Not in the pile in the photograph are duplicate issues I have in hand; make a note, other Gillespie fanzine collectors.

You and I are un-alike in at least one way. I find difficult making a ranked list of books I have read and of films and of plays that I have seen. Maybe doing so is easier for you, you being a citizen of a country who votes using the form of voting known here as the Australian ballot.

One of your favoured suspense writers, Michael Robotham, is unknown to me. I will check our public library first, because, like yourself, we here on Henley Road have groaning bookshelves. And, I have 11 Robotham titles from which to choose. As a Mississauga library user I can select a book that catches my interest and add it to My List. Robotham's *Life or Death* has become the 182nd book on my My List; free off-site storage of books for which I have paid through my taxes.

Most often I am borrowing a season of a TV show. In hand I have season five of *Babylon 5*. I am waiting for seasons of *The Knick*, *The Leftovers*, *Homeland*, *Vikings*, *True Detective*, *The Expanse*, *Mr Robot*, *The Americans*, *Humans*, and *Game of Thrones*. Some of these shows are first seasons that I am trying: *Knick*, *Vikings*, *Expanse*, *Mr. Robot*, *Americans*, *Humans*. I don't buy DVDs or CDs. Books are my weakness.

I see films in bursts. In late March and early April on a Saturday I saw *The Lobster*, and *The Witch*, and, on the subsequent Thursday, *Chi-raq* and *Room*. Generally, seeing literary novel-equivalent films means the extra effort of travelling into downtown Toronto. Pretty much everything filmic is screened in a venue somewhere in our suburban city and in Toronto. But then I see your review of *This Must Be The Place*, a film about which I had no information.

Cable TV series are high competition. I just watched in three days the 10-episode first season of *The Leftovers*. You might, reasonably, think *The Leftovers* is a cooking show. The premise is that, randomly, around the world, two per cent of the human population is present one second and not present the next second; not even a sound effect \*poof\*. No cause is forthcoming. Season One begins three years later, in a small New York State town.

I have seen 13 or 14 of the 24 movies you saw for the first time in 2014, in one or another year.

Colin Steele's reviews prod my urge to read. Yesterday I was good. I returned home from our local flea market only with a list of authors, titles by whom I saw there: Rex

Stout, Mickey Spillane, Tom Disch, Jack Williamson, Ron Goulart, Robert Silverberg, Fred Pohl. I decided to read an odd pairing of authors, books I already owned, collections of short stories by Spillane and Silverberg. I read Spillane's 'Kick It or Kill' then started Silverberg's 'This Is the Road'. Sour and sweet, rough and smooth, hot and cold.

(13 June 2016)

I started reading Michael Robotham's *Life or Death* yesterday evening and I finished now, noon the next day. A true page-turner. Your recommendation has brought an author a new reader, hurrah.

I am not Texan so I didn't catch any oddities, but he doesn't seem to have an American editor; there are several non-US usages, e.g. 'edge of street' in US is 'curb'; also, Americans do not wear cardigans. This paragraph is the merest nit pickery.

(13 June 2016)

**[\*brg\* Robotham is Australian; all his crime novels except one are set in Britain; *Life and Death* is still, as far as I know, his only novel set in USA. It's by far the best of his novels that I've read.\*]**

I read all but the last four pages of *SF Commentary* 94 under ideal conditions, at a cousin's camp.

Southern Ontario is home to millions of Canadians. The bulk of them, more than seven million, live in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

Some southern Ontarians own a second, summer-use, often-adjacent-to-water home. In southern Ontario such a second home is a cottage. In northern Ontario such a second home is a camp.

Canadians go camping, i.e. sleep in a tent with which they travel and set up. Lazier and/or richer Canadians go glamping (glamour camping), driving to a fixed location and sleeping in a tent outfitted equivalent to an expensive hotel room. Parents send their children to camp for one week or multiple weeks, to learn to canoe and et cetera. You can fly to a fishing camp in the middle of nowhere.

For the second consecutive July, Mary Ellen and I slept four nights at my cousin Verna's camp. It is not accessible by road. You travel to it by motorboat. Lake Panage is west of Sudbury, the city built on top of a nickel-rich meteor. Lake Panage is adjacent to picturesque Killarney Provincial Park; Canadian Shield country, rock, and pine trees.

What happens at my cousin's camp? Not much. The day begins sitting on plastic chairs on a point beside the lake, the four of us drinking coffee or tea or orange juice. Breakfast happens later, in the two-bedroom cabin. Late afternoon sees the equivalent of English tea. Supper is later, in early evening.

We talk, mostly. Mary Ellen and I slept in the newer building, the bunkie. A bunkie is a mini-cottage, not a mining camp bunkhouse. Two rooms, a big bed below a ceiling fan; a shower; and, new this year, a toilet.

This year we left the camp on the Saturday, by boat then car, to Sudbury, to my cousin's son's home, to a celebration of a graduation of a granddaughter of my cousin. The following day the one of her three daughters

who lives in Sudbury came to the camp, bringing two lively dogs.

Passing for work at the camp was my watering new grass; standing, consecutively, on a stool and a ladder, helping to hang a string of lights above the cottage's deck; also a string of prayer flags between two pine trees, souvenirs from one of my cousin's many foreign trips.

The temperature and the humidity both were such that I noticed neither, in contrast to the previous July, when we were at the camp one week, or two weeks, later in July; heat and humidity then were the same as at home (unpleasant).

Mind you, camp is not a year-round paradise. Black flies in May, when Verna and Robert open the camp, are sufficiently annoying that hats with netting are worn. Mosquitoes are giant in size compared to black flies.

We saw at camp native red squirrels (none here in Mississauga: driven out, decades ago, by bigger black squirrels and gray squirrels); two garter snakes; two chipmunks; a snake in the water (Robert said it was a water snake but maybe it was a garter snake?), a toad (also very rare in Mississauga); at a distance on the lake, loons, and mergansers. Beside the dock were young bass and the female bass which laid them, returning and using the same sandy spot to lay eggs every year.

The camp is close enough to the mainland that Ontario Hydro has laid a cable to the point where we sit in the morning and placed there an electrical transformer. The camp also has a landline telephone, although cell phones work. Camps are few and far between on Lake Panage because of a lack of level ground at the edge of the lake. Lakes in southern Ontario are ringed by cottages, in comparison.

Sounds isolated? The provincial government decided to create Greater Sudbury. My cousin's camp is within Greater Sudbury, meaning she pays municipal tax on her camp at the same rate as if she was next door to Sudbury City Hall. But she gets no services. You have a heart attack or you break a leg? From camp you must get by boat to the marina and its adjacent helicopter pad.

Years ago, Rob Sawyer, a big cheque in hand from selling one of his novels to TV, was thinking of buying a cottage. Owning a cottage makes absolutely no financial sense. A cottage is a second home, either not far off or as expensive as your principal residence (providing you own a house); plus taxes; plus upkeep; and terrible traffic if you are a weekend commuter.

There is only one major highway going north from Toronto: if you have no reason to drive north on a Friday, you stay home; same thing on Sunday and early Monday for southbound traffic.

For the cost of a cottage, you can travel in style annually or rent a cottage for a month. Best is to know someone who will invite you for a long weekend!

Books I took but did not open: Joe Lansdale's *Savage Season*, the first of the Hap and Leonard novels; Roald Dahl's *Going Solo*, volume two of his autobiography (East Africa as an employee of Shell Oil and his Second World War as a pilot); Stacey May Fowles non-fiction collection *Baseball Life Advice: Loving the Game That Saved Me*.

Also unused, my Kobo Touch, loaded with Gutenberg.org downloaded novels and the 2017 Hugo Award nominees, some of which I read before the voting

deadline. I liked Amal El-Mohtar's short story 'Season of Glass and Iron', a feminist fairy tale. Nebula Award voters liked it, too (Best Short Story). I am not prejudiced to like her writing because she is Canadian (born in Ottawa).

Speaking of Lansdale, I discovered, ordered, and received today (14 July) a copy of *Miracles Ain't What They Used To Be* by Joe Lansdale, No. 17 in the PM Press Outspoken Authors series; Terry Bisson appears to be the editor. I recognise nearly all of the authors as SF/F/H authors, established big names, e.g. U. K. Le Guin, N. Spinrad, M. Moorcock, K. S. Robinson, Ken MacLeod. No. 19 seems to be the newest number in the series.

Here is the description of No. 19, *Totalitopia* by John Crowley: 'John Crowley's all-new essay "Totalitopia" is a wry how-to guide for building utopias out of the leftovers of modern science fiction. "This Is Our Town", written especially for this volume, is a warm, witty, and wonderfully moving story about angels, cousins, and natural disasters based on a parochial school third-grade reader. One of Crowley's hard-to-find masterpieces, "Gone", is a Kafkaesque science fiction adventure about an alien invasion that includes door-to-door leafleting and yard work. Perhaps the most entertaining of Crowley's "Easy Chair" columns in *Harper's*, "Everything That Rises", explores the fractal interface between Russian spiritualism and quantum singularities — with a nod to both Columbus and Flannery O'Connor. "And Go Like This" creeps in from Datlow's *Year's Best*, the Wild Turkey of horror anthologies.

'Plus: There's a bibliography, an author bio, and of course our Outspoken Interview, the usual cage fight between candor and common sense.'

The format is softcover, 5 inches by 7.5 inches; US\$13. The Lansdale book is 112 pages plus six end of book pages of ads for other PM Press books and bumpf about PM Press.

And I see on the PM Press website that I can buy Outspoken Authors series packs, seven of the titles /numbers for \$55 and five additional titles/numbers for \$40. These are attractive spotlights, each on one author, fiction and non-fiction and an interview. Just in case, Bruce, you have nothing to read.

(18 July 2017)

## JAMES 'JOCKO' ALLEN just moved to Fawkner

I had a trawl through *SFC92* last night while helping [my daughter] Gen write a paragraph about chapter 9 of *Jane Eyre* for her English Lit class. Very nice, well up to the usual standard. Lots of interesting letters, although I did smile about Roman Orszanski's very technical letter about fonts, sizes, leading, and the differences between the electronic versions. I thought there was a difference in the editions, but I don't understand printing anywhere near as well as you and Roman do. The exchange between the two of you did leaven the lettercol.

Keep up the good work. (I am wondering how you will celebrate issue 100 of *SFC*.)

(18 July 2016)

**DANIEL KING**

**420 Spencer Road Thornlie WA**

I'm re-reading the novels of David Lindsay at the moment. I recommend his *The Violet Apple* to you; it's about someone who finds and plants a seed from the Garden of Eden's Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. I see that Christopher Priest has a new Dream Archipelago novel out in September, which I'm looking forward to. I decided not to proceed with Greg Egan's *Incandescence*; I can't stand novels with non-human protagonists, and the beetle of that novel completely ruined for me what otherwise could have been a very impressive story. (It managed to create the sense that space is so vast as to be almost frightening and, by extension and mutatis mutandis, evil.)

(27 July 2016)

David Lindsay's other novels are completely different from *A Voyage to Arcturus*. I think you'd be pleasantly surprised! But with the exception of *The Haunted Woman* his novels are hard to track down. He's my favourite writer out of all literature — no exceptions!

(28 July 2016)

**MICHAEL BISHOP**

**PO Box 646, Pine Mountain GA 31822, USA**

Must thank you wholeheartedly for the latest issue of *SFC*, which arrived here yesterday morning (Saturday, 30 July).

I really like the way you've presented 'Scalehunter: Lucius Shepard and the Dragon Griaule Sequence', and although it probably betokens a disgusting degree of self-regard, I couldn't help, once I had got the issue home from the post office, standing — yes, standing — at our circular kitchen table and reading as much of the text as I could before fatigue required that I lower my butt into a chair to finish the article.

Sadly, I discovered that its last sentence, on page 32, before the bibliographical guide to *The Dragon Griaule Sequence* and the Author's Note, features a redundant 'in these' that I should have caught before sending you the article. The error almost certainly appears, I fear, in the e-file that I emailed as an attachment.

Checking now.

Yes, the error's mine, so I've just now deleted one of the two appearances of 'in these' in my own file, with apologies for letting it slip past. I find no other problems of that sort in the piece, but if anyone else does and tells you, I hope you'll let me know.

Anyway, another lovely issue. And I plan to sit down — no more standing to read this coming week — and read Ray Sinclair-Wood's 'Poems of the Space Race' straight through.

Thanks again, Bruce, and also for the two kind mentions of *Joel Brock the Brave and the Valorous Smalls* in the issue. (Yes, I early on found the letter you printed as well as the Shepard piece.) Hope all is well with you and yours, beyond the altogether un-ignorable fact that you now have only two of the five cats that you had when you moved to Greensborough.

(1 August 2016)

Bruce, please forgive me. I've been more than remiss in not letting you know that over the Christmas holidays — I'm not even sure how long ago, at this point — I received *SF Commentary* 93, *Treasure* 4, and the covers of *SFCs* 92 and 91, all of which you were kind enough to bundle and send all the way from Greensborough, VIC, Australia to me here in Pine Mtn, GA, USA.

Currently recovering from the holidays, trying to set up my folders and ledgers for 2017, and worrying about how the next four years will go with the loudmouthed Orange Orangutan whom we elected to our nation's highest office allegedly, and frighteningly, in charge.

(6 January 2017)

So sorry to learn that 'at the end of February this flow of regular work stopped, for reasons which [you] may never discover.' That's hard, especially when you have a passion that drives you to produce works that you genuinely wish to share. In any event, you need not apologise to me because I no longer know where to put the books, magazines, chapbooks, pamphlets, broadsheets, art work, etc., etc., that I continue to accumulate even without buying anything or seeking such material out. On the other hand, I fear my computer's memory is filling up as fast as do my shelves and mantels.

Still, thanks so much for *SF Commentary* 94. At 60,000 words! Which I will do my best to read ASAP.

(7 June 2017)

Bruce, thanks for the kind words about the 'disgrace to the whole SF world' of my not having won a Hugo, but I don't really regard it that way at all, perhaps because my SF work is always a little off-centre and mainstream-tending, and I'm sure that the fan boys and fan girls can see that I have different aspirations (most still unfulfilled) than their favorite fully committed genre writers.

I'm doing pretty well with the radiation therapy. I do fatigue a bit more easily, but I'm still pretty active. Jeri and I walk a lot, including the hills of Atlanta, which can give one's calf and thigh muscles a real workout, especially in July and August, and I've even been roughhousing with our hostess's two-year-old Great Pyrenees dog, who doesn't quite know what to make of me. We also help Ann take him for walks. Indeed, for the first two or three days we did this, I marvelled at Bailey's apparent lack of any need to eliminate anything, either by peeing or pooping. Finally, a day or so ago, from Ann's high rear deck, I actually saw Bailey defecate in the back yard and realised that he was not in fact some sort of supercanine created by mad Russian or Red Chinese scientists. Anyway, I am looking forward to finishing my treatments on August 16, which isn't that far away now. After that, in four to six weeks, I'll have surgery to remove the shrunken and/or moribund sarcoma in my upper right thigh.

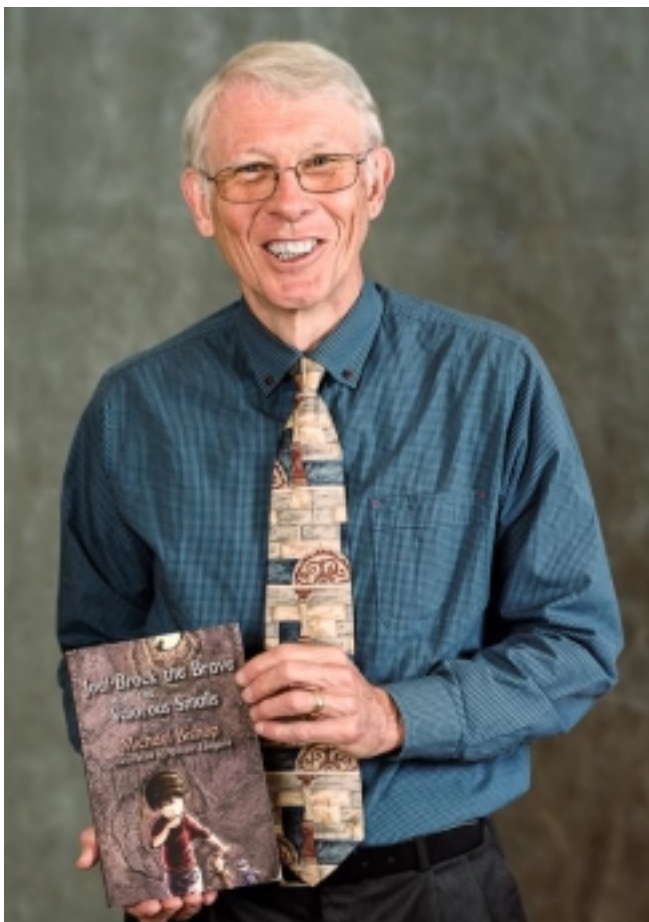
(6 August 2017)

Well, I've always loved both dogs and cats, but we no longer own either, primarily, I think, because we have grandchildren (now both very nearly adults) and hoped to do a good bit of travelling in our retirements and didn't want to be continually boarding out our animals. We managed more travelling, ironically, while we were





**Top: Cover of Michael Bishop's new collection of short stories, *Other Arms Reach Out to Me*. Below: Michael spreading the word at the Nebula Awards 2016 about his new novel *Joel-Brock the Brave and the Valorous Smalls*.**



both working as a teacher (that's me) and an elementary school counselor (Jeri), unless you count driving to and

from Atlanta for medical appointments and/or procedures as recreational travel.

Bruce, I don't expect printed copies of your publications and indeed am awed by what you have managed to produce over the years in that regard. Glad to learn that some unexpected paying work has come your way of late, but understand that it is not enough to enable you to continue turning out print copies of your fanzines as if they were fliers coming out of a mimeograph machine, and you shouldn't have to feel obliged to do so for folks who don't care to read anything online.

Economics just don't permit that sort of production now, unless one is independently wealthy, and fewer people aren't, I'd imagine, than are. As far as our own retirement incomes go, we are fortunate in that Jeri's retirement and the health insurance that goes along with it have kept us both well and solvent ever since she began working for the Troup County Board of Education, out of nearby LaGrange, in the mid 1990s. As for me, the most money I've ever made from my writing came in the early 1990s when *Brittle Innings* was optioned twice and then bought outright for a film (never made) by Twentieth Century Fox, and we used a lot of that money to help put our children through college. However, I did inherit some money from my mother when she died in 2013, and that has been helpful in assuring us a relatively stress-free future, however much time we have left. But Jeri has long been the real breadwinner in this family, and her health insurance has kept me both healthy and

alive.

I keep wishing to get past this cancer and to have a chance to travel. My personal ambitions in that regard involve trips to Ireland and Australia, but who knows?

(7 August 2017)

## ROBERT LICHTMAN

**11037 Broadway Terrace,  
Oakland CA 94611-1948, USA**

Today's mail brought *SFC* 92, much to my surprise. I hadn't been expecting it since 'normally' these days it shows up on efanazines first. It's a lovely issue, as always, and I was happy to see my updated account of Carol's and my situations. However, and very sadly, just above it you write of Joyce Katz's stroke. And by awful coincidence, today is the day Joyce has died — or is about to die. This morning brought Arnie's 'Joyce is dying' letter via Trufen and Facebook, saying the life support machines are being turned off; but so far I've found no definitive word that has happened, just a lot of commiserations to Arnie and eulogies to Joyce. My fingers are crossed, hoping for some kind of miracle, but I'm not expecting one. She was a kindred spirit, and I'm already missing her.

(1 August 2016)

As you've seen, no one posted about Joyce's death until I did — providing links to the *File 770* coverage as well as a couple gaming sites. I saw your response this morning.

Yes, I'd be happy for you to reprint my FAPA article in *\*Treasure\**! I'm attaching a Word file with the text so that you don't have to retype it, and hope that your intent in doing so — to interest someone in doing a similar brief but sufficiently detailed history of ANZAPA — is successful. Probably *you* would be a candidate for such a history as a charter member. Funny thing, I went to do a Google search to confirm this and ran across [http://www.gillespiecochrane.com.au/?page\\_id=13](http://www.gillespiecochrane.com.au/?page_id=13). Small world!

I had a smile of recognition reading your confession that you plan to read through the issues of *SFC* to 'become acquainted with the major articles I have published'. I take from this that you are forward looking in your editorship. I'm that way, too. I love the process in all its aspects — the gathering of material, the decisions about 'playing order', the soliciting of artwork for headings, the editing and playing order of the letter column, etc. — but once an issue is published I tend not to look back except for that final fateful read-through of a printed copy to see what, if anything, I messed up (those previously unspotted typos, etc.).

So, in a sense, all issues of *Trap Door* are fabulous in my memory, but some more so than others. Two of my favourite issues coincide with the sad death of old friends: No. 16 back in 1996, the year that both Redd Boggs and Charles Burbee died, with its Harry Bell cover (that I'd had on hand for a while waiting for something to put in the open door — and what was there was part of the text of Burb's 'watermelon joke'), the conclusion of my anthology-serialising of Redd's SAPS *zine Penseroso*, Burbee's article on Elmer Perdue (which I assembled from a rough draft I found in the fanzines he'd given me

on a 1993 visit and sat on) plus a previously unpublished Al Ashley piece (also discovered in those fanzines), Gary Hubbard's long and hilarious account of going to the first Vegas Corflu, Paul Williams's article about his bike accident (retrospectively very sad), and concluding with a short Elmer Perdue memoir by Rotsler. And No. 25 in 2008, the Calvin Demmon memorial issue, with memoirs by Andy Main (with whom Calvin coedited the legendary fanzine *The Celebrated Flying Frog of Contra Costa County*) and John D. Berry (with whom Calvin coedited *Hot Shit*), plus shorter memorial pieces by Lenny Bailes and Don Fitch, selections from both those fanzines that I chose, Dick Lupoff's article on how he was able to update his *Lovecraft's Book* to the much more detailed *Marblehead*, Greg Benford's memories of Sid Coleman, and John Nielsen Hall's lengthy China travelogue. Each issue also had what I regarded as less memorable but still very publishable pieces by others, too, something inevitable in producing a genzine as I'm sure you're aware.

Ah, memories and digressions ...

(5 August 2016)

**[\*brg\* It's become such a melancholy year for losses that I find I have not remembered elsewhere in this issue losing Joyce Katz. Apart from a lifetime of being fans together, she and Arnie showed great kindness when I visited Las Vegas in 2005. Arnie and Joyce had organised the American end of the early months of the Bring Bruce Bayside Fund. Although Joyce had severely damaged both feet only a few weeks before, she arranged a party of Vegrants to welcome me to Las Vegas. What a party! What a great person!\*]**

## DAMIEN BRODERICK

**128 W. French Place,  
San Antonio TX 78212, USA**

Thanks for *SFC* 92, but as I've said several times, please don't send these expensive zines to me — the acuity of my one working eye is now so degraded that even with glasses I literally can't read most of the tiny font text in *SFC* 92. I can, of course, read the online version, which I do, blowing the text up to monstrous proportions. I feel so guilty as each *SFC* lobs in here, since I can't do anything sensible with it and I know mailing copies internationally costs you an \$arm&leg.

This *might* change later in August, after I get an intraocular lens implanted after they ultrasound out my cataract clogged eyeball. I guess I'll ... see.

Did I mention that I've sold my expansion/revision of Brunner's nearly 60-year-old *Threshold of Eternity* to Arc Manor? Should appear sometime earlyish next year.

(2 August 2016)

I see on Amazon that my most recent book is now loosed upon the world: *Starlight Interviews: Conversations with a Science Fiction Writer*, by Damien Broderick: <https://www.amazon.com/Starlight-Interviews-Conversations-Science-Fiction/dp/1605439150> (trade paperback: 298 pages; Ramble House/Surinam Turtle Press; \$20.00). Interviewers/contributors include Ramona Koval (ABC

Radio), Alisa Krasnostein (*ASif!* weblog), Russell Blackford (a 1989 interview, now updated), and my own piece from *Foundation*. Most astonishing, there's the scarifying exchange of letters between me and the great feminist novelist Joanna Russ, showing how even dedicated communicators can get themselves tangled in emotion and confusion. *Starlight Interviews* is completed by three stories.

(11 May 2017)

## DAVID LANGFORD

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

In the 29 April 2016 instalment of Patrick McGuire's long letter sequence, he wonders about on the C. S. Lewis 'article' in *SF Horizons 2*. This is actually a poem in seven quatrains titled 'On the Atomic Bomb (Metrical Experiment)', reprinted from Lewis's *Collected Poems* (1964), where the source notes say it first appeared in *The Spectator* magazine for 28 December 1945 ... a year when rather a lot of people had things to say on the subject. The untitled discussion between Lewis, Kingsley Amis, and Brian Aldiss in *SF Horizons 1* is easier to find elsewhere — it's reprinted as 'Unreal Estates' in the Amis/Conquest SF anthology *Spectrum IV* (1965), and also in the Lewis collections *Of Other Worlds* (1967) and *Of This and Other Worlds* (1982), the latter retitled *On Stories, and Other Essays in Literature* (1982) in the USA.

(4 August 2016)

## STEVE SNEYD

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

I know Lucius Shepard's writing only from his very powerful long poem, 'The White Trains', a sideways take on American folklore, and my second favourite Rhysling Award winner from down the many years; I'd put it behind only Andrew Jonah's 'Sonic Flowerful of Primes'.

So it was interesting to learn something of fictional use of the dragon 'corpse' in a landscape, as a veiled comment on the ferocious side of the USA — the CIA, Kissinger, etc — disruptions of democracy and imposition of military dictators in Latin America. (The idea that Obama should lecture Cuba on democracy is a classic 'do as I do, not as I say' move).

(5 August 2016)

**[\*brg\* Steve also sent a postcard listing a few more SF and mainstream contributions to the literature of Mars: Brian Aldiss's recent Mars books, *White Mars* and *Finches of Mars*, which John Litchen covers in Part 2 of his article; Frederick Turner's epic poem *Genesis*; and Steve's own long poem, *Asahueras on Mars*.\*]**

## JERRY KAUFMAN

**PO Box 25075, Seattle WA 98165, USA**

Thank you for *SFC 93*, with the colourful covers by

Ditmar and Elaine. I enjoyed your look-back at science fiction in your life, and your life in fanzines. Jocko Allen's piece on his life in zines was interesting, too, but not as riveting because I know so little about the zines he's produced.

John Litchen on Mars fiction touched on many works I already know and a number that I've never read or even heard of. So many ways of seeing Mars! I was surprised that he couldn't find any books from the 1980s, so I've checked Wikipedia's article on fiction about Mars. There were a small number of short stories and novels, but compared to the 1990s, the '80s were very scanty.

And thanks, too, for the Colin Steele roundup.

(3 January 2017)

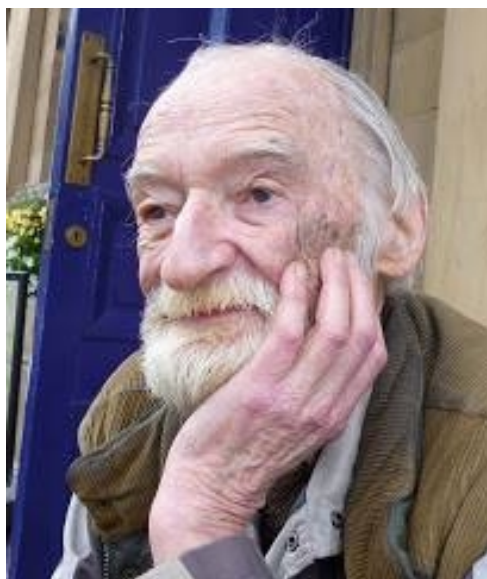
## MATTHEW DAVIS

**15 Impney Close, Church Hill North,  
Redditch B98 9LZ, England**

I was reading S. J. Perelman's 'Cloudland Revisted' series of essays last year, and your discussion of Jo Walton's *Suck Fairy* reminds of me Perelman's own precursor attributing the depletion of imaginative materials in childhood books to supernatural malignity: 'During the twenty-eight intervening years, it was apparent, some poltergeist had sneaked in and curdled the motivation, converted the hero into an insufferable jackanapes, drawn mustaches on the ladies of the piece, and generally sprinkled sneeze powder over the derring-do.'

The 'Cloudland Revisited' pieces are mostly good fun, as Perelman rereads the thrillers such as *Fu Manchu* and slightly raunchy novels that enthralled him as a young adolescent, only to discover in his jaded senescence that in place of nostalgia regained they were only the cheapest cardboard.

At the same time I was reading the early issues of Alan Moore's H. P. Lovecraft comic *Providence* and realised that Perelman was growing up in the same city as HPL. Barring HPL's own anti-semitism, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that in his wanderings he might have popped into Perelman's parents' store to buy sweets or ice cream and seen the young Sidney. In later years, when Perelman and Nathanael West were rooming at Brown



**Steve  
Sneyd.**



University, they were only four or five streets away from HPL's own accommodation. So near and yet so far in so many ways.

Your comparison of William Sloane to Fritz Leiber has more about it than you may realise. When Leiber's novella 'The Dealings of Daniel Kesserich' was published posthumously, it was suspected by several reviewers that it was inspired by Sloane's *To Walk the Night* (1937). In fact, Leiber's work was written in 1936, but was swiftly rejected by every publisher and magazine to whom it was submitted, and was later lost by Leiber for many years.

The 1952 story 'Yesterday House' indicates that Leiber recognised some similarity between himself and Sloane, as the plot is similar to Sloane's books. Leiber's villain has the name Kesserich, which, as it occurs nowhere else, maybe a kind of secret tribute. This story may have been inspired by Sloane suddenly bulking large in Leiber's publishing hopes. In the late 1940s William Sloane became a publisher and released a couple of fantasy novels by Ward Moore and Fletcher Pratt. Suspecting that at last here was an appreciative market, Leiber returned to a novel *You're All Alone*, abandoned with the closing of *Unknown* in 1943, but by the time the book was completed Sloane had given up on the commercial possibilities of fantasy.

However 'Kesserich' may not be the last lost Leiber story from *Unknown*. At the time of the magazine's closing it held an unpublished story 'The Velvet Duchess'. Campbell lost it and Leiber did likewise. However in prepping for materials for a study of Leiber, I see the University of Houston archives have a holding for this story. Whether it is complete or not, maybe someone will find out one day. Only last year I found a forgotten short story 'Stonehenge 94101', written for a Berkeley counter-culture newspaper in 1976, which was a kind of prologue for *Our Lady of Darkness* — so who knows what else is out there?

(21 August 2016)

I'm still at the same address, though more of my time is now devoted to keeping the house running as my mother's MS is quite advanced. I'm still collating materials for biographical/critical essays on Leiber and Shekley similar to the Sturgeon one. Unfortunately, in each case my sense of completism has hit walls.

In Shekley's case there are two novels from the last years of his life that have been published in foreign languages but never released formally in English. I can attempt reading them in French but it seems less than second best to have to read him in another language. Irritatingly, an ebook publisher gradually issued all of his works a couple of years ago — even non-genre novels from the 60s and long novellas, and reorganised some of his small press collections — but those two novels still didn't get any recognition.

Leiber was very involved in fanzines all his life, and while I have reasonable samples from throughout, there's a concentration of material from the early 60s which has proven unobtainable so far. The universe has however made up for it certain serendipitous ways:

I was reading Gina Berriault and there's an essay she wrote in the early 70s on OAPs living in San Francisco's Tenderloin — which corresponds exactly to Leiber's

own life at that time. Later I was reading Isaac Rosenfeld, and his last piece of work is an extended survey from the mid 50s of the different neighborhoods of Chicago and their inhabitants' characteristics — which again corresponds to Leiber's situation. Then an American newspaper happened to run an article by a woman who'd bought the Chicago house from the Leibers. So swings and roundabouts.

There was a good story by Isaac Rosenfeld in a 1946 issue of *Kenyon Review* — 'The New Egypt' — which is the sort of SF I thought Tom Disch might have enjoyed — rather thanatopistic as a society becomes obsessed with building pyramids, inducing subsequent social revolts.

In a similar unrecognised SF vein, George P. Elliott is noted for a few stories that were reprinted in SF magazines in the late 50s/early 60s, but reading him it turned out that many more of his stories were fantasy or outright science fiction. The somewhat surprising discovery is their overall argument that the liberal-scientific viewpoint is inherently nihilistic and destructive. One for the SPCK's Big Book of Anti-Enlightenment Science Fiction — other potential contributors R. A. Lafferty and C. S. Lewis. If you gave an unattributed copy of his 1970 sex/death/genetics/feminism story 'Femina Sapiens' to reasonably well-read SF fans I suspect a decent number would say it was by Tiptree or Russ.

(24 April 2017)

## RICK KENNETT

PO Box 118, Pascoe Vale South, VIC 3044

Always love a good cat story. Was amused reading how your neighbour found his cat had returned with the addition of a collar and minus his gentleman bits. With cats you have something very much in common with H. P. Lovecraft. He was a real ailurophile. There's the (possibly apocryphal) story of a cat jumping into HPL's lap as he was sitting down to do an all-night stint of writing while the friend whose house he was visiting went off to bed. In the morning the friend came down to find HPL still sitting in the same place, not having done any writing and the cat still curled up in his lap. 'I didn't want to disturb kitty,' he said.

It's been years since I was owned by a cat. Nowadays I have to make do with visits from next door's albino tom who I call Cat, because I don't know his real name. He'll come in for a slurp of goat's milk, and woe betide me if I dare offer cow's milk. The nose will be turned up, there'll be a meow of disdain, and he'll walk out, tail in air. 'There are cats in India that'd have that!' I call after him, channelling my grandmother.

The other day my doctor asked why I use goat's milk. 'Because I'm a Capricorn,' I replied and he gave me a really odd look. I'm sure the notion that I was joking completely eluded him.

My other puss-by-proxy lives at the lawn bowls club in North Carlton. The park beside it is where I usually start my couriering day. Occasionally a young tabby, whose collar tag identifies him as Jimmy, though I call him James T. Cat, emerges from the bushes for a pat and a purr. For some reason he finds my fingers rather tasty and makes concerted efforts to chow down on them.

Continuing the *Star Trek* ambience, I say in Dr McCoy tones, 'Dammit, Jim! I'm a courier, not your breakfast!'

You have all of Robert Aickman's books? I presume you mean his collections of 'strange stories', as he used to like to call them. They are indeed strange, as well as elusive, inconclusive, and sometimes downright incomprehensible. He edited the first eight volumes of Fontana's *Great Ghost Stories* series, and though he included some real ghostly classics like 'The Haunted and the Haunters', 'A School Story', 'The Red Lodge', 'The Queen of Spades', 'Thurnley Abbey', 'Afterward', and 'The Wendigo', he would also include decidedly non-ghost stories. 'Levitiation' is about a guy hypnotised and levitated by a stage magician. When the magician dies of a heart attack the guy just floats off into the sky. Where's the ghost in that? Similarly 'The Gorgon's Head' is about the head of the Gorgon and sudden statuary, 'The Travelling Grave' is about mobile killer coffins, while 'The Voice in the Night' and 'The Damned Thing' are essentially physical horror with SF rationales. Aickman's introductions to these volumes read somewhat stuffy. But he could write an excellent 'strange story'.

(28 August 2016)

**SHERYL BIRKHEAD**  
**25509 Jonnie Court,**  
**Gaithersburg MD 20882, USA**

You know, after some unspecified time of procrastination, it becomes a true embarrassment to reply. I finally gave in/up and am sending an email with abject apologies. In stark honesty, I felt I had nothing substantive to offer your pubs. I continue to carry around the paper copies and try not to get too embarrassed when I notice they are all still in the unlocked stack. Of course there is always the problem that I have not seen the electronic ones — but your name+fanzines is on my RSN list.

So, this is just a quick note to say — yeah, love what you do, but feel totally inadequate to respond in anyway that is productive for you!

Thank you — sorry to be such a miserable responder (heck, with no responses I guess you can't even call me that!).

(6 September 2016)

**[\*brg\* I was always hoping you could send me some more of your cartoons in exchange for print copies of *SF Commentary*. But now I find I cannot offer print copies to anyone in exchange for anything.\*]**

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**[\*brg\* Not only did we lose Jack Wodhams this year, but I lost, suddenly, one of my more recent and regular correspondents, Los Angeles fan identity MILT STEVENS. He died suddenly on 2 October 2017. I met**

**him at Corflu in San Francisco in 2005. We had a very pleasant conversation, but I had no idea how much he had contributed to American fandom until I read the tributes, especially in *File 770*, that followed his death. With much thanks to Milt over recent years, here are his last three letters to me:]**

**MILT STEVENS**  
**Simi Valley, CA 93063, USA**

In *SF Commentary* 92, Ray Sinclair-Wood describes Stephen King's reaction to *Sputnik*. I was 14 when *Sputnik* was launched, and I had been reading SF heavily for several years before that. My reaction was much different than King's. I delighted. I was goshwowboyohboy jumping up and down delighted. The future was actually going to happen.

Some things are just plain good. That's the way I regarded space travel. Even if the Russians got there first, the rest of us would be along shortly. If the Chinese were to develop a cure for cancer, it would be a similar situation. They would have the glory, but we all would get the benefit.

Not everyone in the United States was delighted. Our government wasn't delighted. They needed someone to blame for this. The choice was obvious. Teenagers. In the movies of the early fifties, teenage monsters had menaced towns all over the country. There were teenage zombies and teenage cavemen but no teenage rocket scientists. Armies of pundits, gurus, and know-it-alls appeared instantly to denounce the American education system. *Life* magazine devoted an issue to comparing a Russian student with an American student. In the next letter column, someone did point out they were comparing a superior Russian student with an average American one. That was ignored.

The solution to our problems seemed obvious. All American children should become engineers. The idea was so pervasive that I even believed it myself for about six months. There seem to be all sorts of intelligences, and mine wasn't suited for engineering. Of course, the panic passed. Within the year, one pop music station was featuring the three minute adventures of Sam Sputnik, Space Spanner.

Twelve years later, I attended a party at John and Bjo Trimble's house on Lunar Landing Day. All sorts of fans attended that party. The future seemed to be coming along nicely, and we hadn't even gotten to the giant thinking machines.

The world and poets have moved in two different directions. The poets blame the world for the situation and feel bitter about it. If the world won't come to the poets, maybe the poets will have to go to the world.

(6 September 2016)

*SFC* 93: Before reading John Litchen's article about fiction set on Mars, I was more or less aware that I had read a lot of SF about Mars. I sort of miss those seedy bars

next to the canals where rugged spacers used to hang out waiting for the next story to show up. Those places used to be common when I was young. Rugged spacers have to go all the way out to the moons of Jupiter to find an appropriately seedy bar these days.

Litchen's article made me realise what a huge volume of fiction had been set on Mars. I was almost overwhelmed. The jungles of Venus never attracted as many writers. Mars has 'It' and Venus didn't.

The typewriter shown on page 9 brought back memories. I did some of my earliest fanac on the typewriter like that. Fans had to be tough back in those days. They needed typing fingers of steel. I went over to using a portable typewriter as soon as I could afford one. I went from a portable typewriter to word processing without ever owning an electric typewriter in between. Thinking about typewriters is nostalgic, but I'm awfully glad I have a word processor.

You mention a writer who thought the science fiction label would scare off potential readers. I suspect it would almost be the opposite. I think most fiction readers do most of their reading within one or two genres and look for fiction carrying the appropriate labels. I consider bestsellers and literary fiction to be genres for the purposes of this discussion.

They say the average American reads one book a year. Like most averages, that's probably misleading. Aside from students, I imagine that something like 10 per cent of the population do 90 per cent of the reading. The so-called casual reader is probably a mythical beast.

(20 December 2016)

In *SF Commentary* 94, Leigh Edmonds writing about working on a history of Australian fandom grabbed my attention. That sounds like something that might still be possible. I have my doubts as to whether it is still possible to do a history of fandom or even science fiction in the entire English-speaking world.

I did the program for the recent Corflu. At Corflu, it seems natural to talk about the history of fandom. I was thinking of the history of fandom when I included a panel titled 'Fandom and Us'. At a Corflu, the 'Us' is paper (or previously paper) fanzine fans. I'm not so sure what fandom is these days. Some would include interests from *Little Lulu* to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in 'fandom'. It's possible that the term 'fandom' had become an albatross. I describe any intentional group as a fandom. However, it's science fiction fandom that interests me and not New York Mets fandom.

I had another panel at Corflu titled 'On Beyond Numbered Fandoms'. The numbered fandom model is deader than a regiment of zombies. Paper fanzine fandom just isn't the centre of the fannish universe anymore. I've mentioned the idea of dialectical fanac, but I think I'm joking. Actually, I hope I'm joking. There is the idea that history is the history of war. Sometimes it seems that way. Fandom is defined by conflict? The current so-called culture wars would go along with that idea. This idea isn't very appealing if you like the idea that fandom is supposed to be fun.

History as the product of social forces or of exceptional individuals? Reality is usually a bit of both. Sometime one of these factors is more evident than the

other. A few decades ago, I did a brief history of LASFS. Without any theoretical consideration, I used the exceptional individual approach. Periods in the club's history could be defined by the people who dominated the club. This included Forry Ackerman, Bjo, and Bruce Pelz. Bjo denounced my idea of LASFS without any specific criticisms. She probably didn't like the suggestion that her time had come and gone by the time of my writing.

You could view the history of fandom as a series of responses to technological change. While people had been corresponding back and forth since Roman times, fandom needed the typewriter. Worldcons couldn't have grown as they did without generally available air travel. Some technologies had an impact on us and others didn't. Who knows what new technology is about to hit us over the head?

(15 June 2017)

**[\*brg\* Reading these three letters again, I'm struck by how sensible and wise are these comments, how much their tone echoes my own thoughts about these subjects. Thanks again, Milt, for being such a valued correspondent over recent years.\*]**

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

*SFCs* 91 and 92:

I wish you had said more about what you liked about *The Zero Theorem*. It was shown at the American Film Institute, but only for one week and then only for two showings a day, alternating with another film. I thought it was a film that made very little sense, and I suspect the 'science' in the film is extremely frantic handwaving. But I was glad to see it because I like the flavour of Terry Gilliam's films and this film is very much a Gilliam film. It is nowhere near as interesting as his great films — *Brazil*, *Twelve Monkeys*, much of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* — but it is an enjoyable film for people who like what Terry Gilliam does. It is also his most recent film, although the Internet Movie Database says that his film about Don Quixote is once again in pre-production, with news reports saying it has once again been delayed.

I think the most interesting boxed set I purchased last year (well, a kind friend gave it to me for Christmas) was the Naxos boxed set of Shostakovich's symphonies. But I have been discovering a lot of obscure but enjoyable late Romantic music on YouTube, thanks to whoever posts videos as KuhlauDifeng2 and Unsung Masterworks. Thanks to these fine people, I have realised that Sir Charles Villiers Stanford is a composer who was 85 per cent as good as Vaughan Williams or Walton but is now quite obscure. Some other composers who are worth listening to are Richard Wetz, Marcel Tyberg, and Boris Lyatoshensky. I have been filling in the gaps in my knowledge of Nikolai Myaskovsky's symphonies; he wrote 35 of them, and many are as good as anything Prokofiev or Shostakovich wrote.

There was once a story in *Interzone* about time travellers who went back and created fake pastiches by composers or authors that were popular, so that people who liked the art the Beatles or Tom Wolfe produced in the



1960s could enjoy more of it. YouTube is performing a similar function for people who like Mahler, Bruckner, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich and would like to find similar composers.

I've actually seen some Australian films, which I define as films set in Australia and featuring Australian stories. I did not know *The Light Between Oceans* (Derek Cianfrance) was set in Western Australia (and filmed in Tasmania) until a woman at the screening I attended said she knew it was Australian because the characters lived in Albany. I thought Cianfrance's *The Place Between the Pines* was a deeper and more serious film, while *Light* is the sort of film my sister insists I call 'a film that has women in it' because she gets irritated by 'women's movie' and really irritated by 'chick flick'. *Light Between Oceans* struck me as well told but not terribly deep, with good performances by Michael Fassbender and Alicia Vikander.

*The Dressmaker* (Jocelyn Moorhouse) is ... well, what is it? A tragic comedy? A comic tragedy? A 'dramedy'? A grotesquerie? Moreover, what does this film tell us about your country? Of course Kate Winslet is good, although I didn't realise her ability to adopt a perfect Australian accent. But to my mind the star performance here is Hugo Weaving, especially because people who only know him from grim roles in *The Matrix* or *The Lord of the Rings* could not know he could play a swishy cop who just loves fondling women's clothes. A friend told me after the screening, 'Well, he was in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*', but I had completely forgotten that film.

We don't get many Australian TV shows exported here, but I did see four episodes of *Janet King*, which I thought was competent. I didn't realise that Australian barristers wore wigs (but not always?) or that they 'took silk'. Are there QCs in Australia?

I enjoyed the saga of Harry, Flicker, and Archie. If you had three black cats, how could you tell them apart? They must have liked each other, if they would all sit together. Did they lick each other on the top of their heads?

**[\*brg\* Of course. But Flicker exercised power over the other two by being the cat has initiated head-licking. It's not just colour that distinguishes cats. Flicker and Archie were all black, but had completely different face shapes and fur textures. Harry has white feet and a white bib and is tubby. He and Sampson (who lives in the top half of the house) are brothers from different litters, but do not get along. Sampson is tabby and thin.\*]**

Your saga reminds me of my parents' cats, the grey calico Sue (as in 'A Boy Named Sue') and his black half-brother, whose name was Bagheera III, but who my stepmother called 'Baggy'. Sue was Top Cat and very talkative. He also once, when I came home from a store with new shoes and put the shoe box on the floor, made a wild noise which came across as 'Aaaaccck' but which I understood as, 'I really like this box, thank you for putting it on the floor for me to sit in.' But when Sue passed away, Bagheera decided that he knew how to talk and liked talking. Bagheera also enjoyed it when you drummed your fingers on the floor, because he would then come to you for petting.

Ray Sinclair-Wood's look at how poets interpreted aviation achievements was quite interesting, particularly his discovery that Babette Deutsch had a long enough career that she could write about Lindbergh in 1927 and *Apollo 11* in 1969. But as to why poets can't come up with memorable poems about space — when was the last time today's poets came up with memorable comments about anything? Poetry today is an insular and ingrown art, and since we know very little about what today's poets have to say about anything, it's little wonder we don't know what they have to say about space travel.

I disagree with Patrick McGuire about the short obituaries in *Ansible* about actors who appeared in a few SF series. It's important to document whose these people were, and I'm glad Dave Langford does it.

(4 October 2016)

### SFC 93:

Since John Litchen mentions Wernher von Braun, I can tell my von Braun story.

In April 1975, I was taking an advanced high school chemistry class where they let us leave school early on Fridays so we could go to the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in Columbia, Maryland to attend popular science lectures given so that the physicists could keep up with fields outside their specialties. Van Braun gave one of these lectures. This was after he left NASA and about six months before his death.

Von Braun gave a straightforward account of recent developments in the satellite industry. In question time, someone asked, 'Dr Von Braun, will we ever get to Mars?'

Von Braun's face lit up, and you could quickly tell that manned flight to Mars was what he really cared about. He described what I later learned was Project Orion. First we would build a space station, and then we would go to Mars — a voyage fuelled by atomic power. The spaceship would have a crew of six, and the astronauts would have to have a cook ... and a butler ...

'What about women, Dr von Braun?' someone shouted.

Wernher von Braun's face turned beet red. 'Well, well, of course we will have women in space,' he said, 'and some day a baby will be born on the Moon!'

The claim Litchen makes that Sir Arthur C. Clarke's *The Sands of Mars* was the first piece of fiction to mention e-books didn't seem right to me, so I asked on the Fictionmags mailing list. One member noted that E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops' has a line in it about 'there was a button that produced literature'. But the writer who most deeply anticipated the introduction of the electronic book was Robert Canton Brown, whose byline was 'Bob Brown'. Brown was a prolific short story writer and an avant-garde poet, and in an essay in *transition*, which he later expanded into a 1930 book called *The Readies*, Brown said he would 'contemplate a reading machine that will revitalize this interest in the Optical Art of writing', and that 'readies' would do for reading what talkies did for the motion picture. With an electronic machine, he said, he could 'read hundred thousand word novels in ten minutes if I want to'. He and his avant-garde friends produced texts for his proposed 'readie' machine, but it's probable that this machine was never built. (For more information, see [69](http://historyofinfor-</a></p>
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mation.com, a website run by Jeremy Norman.)  
(9 January 2017)

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

The end of a really nasty year: Trump; Brexit, and, I see on Facebook from various Aussie friends, a lot of bad shit from your own government. Even we Canadians, with our ‘terrific’ PM, are seeing some chinks in the glowing armour. The incoming leader of the most advanced nation on the planet is choosing a cabinet so anti-science it boggles the mind, which should be something all science fiction people find at least a bit troubling.

I’ll turn instead to various bits and pieces of *SFC 92*, some of which seem to tie in more specifically with books and CDs scattered around me these past few weeks.

Not that I have the usual new singer-songwriters to talk about, although I do rather enjoy Jason Isbell, more the earlier work with The 400 Unit than the material that has gained him glory (or, as may be usual, I have just not noticed him for too long). I’ve gotten more and more into The Grateful Dead — their best live work (and a lot of Jerry Garcia’s various bands’) stands up over time.

Recent albums by some favourites include Natalie Merchant’s revisiting of her first solo album. It is terrific, her voice a warmer, deeper instrument than it was then (thought *Tigerlily* was a great discovery, which turned me on to her work). The new Aiofe O’Donovan CD *In the Magic Hour* is quite wide-ranging in its arrangements, a little less rock and roll than her previous *Fossils*. Lucinda Williams’s *The Ghosts of Highway 20*, another double CD, is good, with Bill Frizell (wow) and Greg Leisz on guitars, but I’m not listening to it as much.

Have you heard of the alt-country singer-songwriter, Carter Sampson? *Wilder Side* would I think interest you; I certainly have been enjoying it.

**[\*brg\* I’ve heard of all the other people you mention, and have some of their CDs, but not Carter Sampson.\*]**

I seem to be listening to much more classical work than I used to. And that means going back to a lot of CDs for another listen, and still working my way through the Martha Argerich and Beaux Arts Trio sets. The former got to working with collaborators fairly early in her career, so the many albums of sonatas are just brilliant, and I haven’t reached the end yet.

Dobrinka Tabakova is a Polish-born composer now living in England, and *String Paths* on ECM presents a kind of twenty-first-century Romantic music, very easy, but not simple, listening.

Thanks for Michael Bishop’s ‘Scalehunter: Lucius Shepard and the Dragon Griaule Sequence’, because I so thoroughly enjoyed ‘The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule’ and ‘The Scalehunter’s Beautiful Daughter’ when I read them some time ago, the former in *The Jaguar Hunter*, the latter in *The Ends of the Earth* (great collections). I certainly tend to agree with Bishop about them both, but then, as he rambles on about the

other tales and the novel, he more or less convinces me that I needn’t seek out these two books, or at least not until they are available as affordable paperbacks, maybe.

I seem to read a lot of SF/F but yet miss out on a lot of the ones that make the awards nominations. And I confess that I simply haven’t gotten around to the various (obviously interesting) non-SF books you see as being in-their-way SFnal. It’s also nice to see such as Mark Plummer and Randy Byers talking about all those books I haven’t managed to get to yet (by the way, Mark, about the only fanzine I ever receive these days comes from Bruce, so you won’t see me anywhere else.) I do hope Randy Byers is still doing well, and reading like mad.

**[\*brg\* He isn’t. More later.\*]**

I have read C. J. Cherryh, and like a lot of her work, so I’m with Randy on that, as well as on the ‘Ancillary’ books, which I found interesting because of the way Leckie gave us a sense of a huge AI and its inhumanity forced to diminish and become somewhat human. (See Graham J. Murphy’s review of all three books in *LARB*: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-empire-divided>). Unlike you, I have read all but one of the ‘Iain M. Banks’ books (still saving the final one, but will get to it very soon now), but not all of ‘Iain Banks’.

Steve Jeffery makes the first mention here is Jo Walton’s *What Makes This Book So Great*, which led me to get it out of the library, and I’m making my way through it now. I enjoy Walton’s enthusiasm while often disagreeing with her, or rather not being convinced enough to go read some of the books she loves. She’s not writing criticism, or even reviews, really, so it is a different kind of book. But it did remind me of why I (like to) re-read. Which lead me to re-read William Gibson’s *Count Zero* the other day, and that experience reminded me of how fully Gibson had found his way to his highly particular style by just his second novel (as Delany said, ‘Put in opposition to “style” there is no such thing as “content”.’). He packs a huge amount of information about his imagined future world into the speedy ongoing narrative(s) of the book. And, of course, SF doesn’t ‘predict’, really, but his vision of huge corporations with their own armies being larger and more powerful than countries, and the clear sense in the ‘Sprawl’ trilogy of a very rich few and a mostly poor and scavenging many (and his vision of future economics/politics seems more prescient as each decade passes. Or, as Frank Herbert wished: ‘The function of science fiction is not always to predict the future but sometimes to prevent it.’

I do think Steve is on to something with the Edit Fairy, as Walton is with the Suck Fairy.

Then there’s Leigh Edmonds, who offers you the purely fannish letter par excellence; always a delight to read. But not getting the Argerich set is his loss. And anyway the best recording of Chopin’s *Nocturnes* is by Maria Joao Pires (albeit in a rather expensive two-CD set): late night nineteenth-century blues.

**[\*brg\* The son of a friend of ours can play all the Beethoven piano sonatas rather well, although he has not proceeded with a professional pianistic career. I told him that my favourite versions of the**

**sonatas on CD are those by Barenboim, his first recordings that he made when he was very young. My friend's son said that he agreed — but his favourite pianist is Maria Joao Pires. However, she has not yet issued a complete boxed set of her recordings of the sonatas.\*]**

To Patrick McGuire's epic: we've been watching *The Murdoch Mysteries* on CBC ever since it started. It has indeed gotten more into its deliberate (and meant to be wink-wink comic I think) technological anachronisms, with Murdoch, definitely a sherlock, inventing, with just slightly off names, all kinds of later inventions, many of which can help with policing. So, a kind of alternate history Toronto from about 1895 through 1910. It's an odd kind of cozy police procedural, and may have by this year gone on a bit too long; although we're still watching. I have no doubt that Patrick is right about the 'errors' surrounding Catholicism at the times, etc, but I also doubt many viewers bring his knowledge or awareness of such to bear; we just enjoy. Another mark of his modernity, despite his faith, is Murdoch's relationship with and eventual marriage to the Doctor, a non-Catholic, and, in terms of the period, a somewhat 'fallen woman', except she's not, quite?

In turning to the latest Bujold novel, McGuire mentions Jo Walton, again with reference to *What Makes This Book So Great*. Like Walton, Patrick likes a lot of series. I'm enjoying the Walton book, in bits and pieces, but despite her best efforts, she has not convinced me, despite a book-by-book enthusiastic response, to read either the Bujold or the Brust series (I was about to say I don't do series, but that's not true; just not these ones, among others). On the other hand, like Walton I now use the library a lot (and the Edmonton Public Library is one of the great ones). And I once was a big Simak fan, although I haven't read his work in some time. There are so many really good recent writers in both SF/F to keep up with. Still, Walton's defence of re-reading did get me back to those early Gibsons, and probably some others soon, too. I thoroughly enjoyed *Roadside Picnic* way back when, and thought Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, however much it deviated from the novel, a masterpiece. If I can find it, I would probably be interested in the newer version of the novel.

All the letters, as usual, are interesting. I agree with you against Jeff Hamill on Engh's *Arslan*, a dark dystopian satire is ever there was one. I continue to be a fan of all those Scots SF writers. And I'll agree with him about no clear demarcation between genre list and high lit.

My notes on rereading William Gibson's *Count Zero*: I was immediately caught up in the three strands of his story (a way of intertwining plots he has pretty well kept to since). What I noticed this time (December 2016) are: (a) the style, the poetry of consumer culture, plus the ability to slip so much information about his invented future world into the ongoing narrative and discourse (he packs more info into 275 pages than many manage in three times the length); (b) his way of achieving great speed, even when slowing down to the rate of a single character's thoughts, which he represents in short

bursts, a kind of verisimilitude a reader probably, unconsciously, identifies with; (c) the fantastical prescience: of course the matrix of cyberspace as he presents it is more fantasy than science, but aspects are arriving, and politically his dystopian vision seems rather uncomfortably accurate; (d) his mastery of chapter titles, a kind of weird poetry of their own. Damn, he was good (and has remained so).

(19 December 2016)

*SFC93* and *Treasure 4* arrived. Now all I have to do is find some time to read them. Been reading a huge amount of material, much of it on SF/F and graphic fiction (Canadian) by a professor seeking promotion, whose university asked me to be an outside reference. I have my own new book of poetry to proofread now. MSS to read.

But I've attached last year's SF/F readings (this time I've cut my year's reading list down to just the SF/F books, plus one book on the history of science I thought you might be interested in, plus a few re-readings. Hope you enjoy them even if you don't use them.

(18 January 2017)

#### **SFC93:**

My memories of my early reading are scattered. I did read a lot of science fiction and fantasy, indeed, recall picking up the first, or at least early issues of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, which I think remained my main magazine, even with *Galaxy* and others around too. But, there in Winnipeg I just didn't 'get' any sense of fandom at the time. I had a few friends who read this stuff too, and we talked about it (I think). And I was certainly picking up some of those new paperbacks. At what age? I'm not sure. I was nine in 1949, when *F&SF* appeared, so I must have been reading some by then.

In my early teens, I hit the secondhand bookshops, and was reading all the major writers, such as Asimov's 'Foundation' trilogy, Heinlein, and others, but my favourite writers from nearly the get-go were Bester and Sturgeon (which is why when I returned to the field in the later 1960s (after *Dune* and *The Lord of the Rings* caught my attention after I had more or less finished my PhD), I turned toward writers like Delany, Le Guin, Russ, and Zelazny. When I began a PhD dissertation on SF, on Delany, Le Guin, and Russ, a librarian at the University of Alberta told me about sercon fandom. I got some copies of a British SF publication whose title I can't remember right now, there not being much in the way of scholarly publications until a few years later. And that's how I eventually found my way to *SF Commentary*. A very different path than yours, but a certain connection that is still going on today (but I think I've always remained essentially, in so far as I am a fan, a serconnish one).

For example, I didn't read a lot of those early Mars stories. Or did I read only some of the shorter works? If I read Burroughs, I don't remember; my encounters with *Tarzan* were in comics (although I was far more interested in *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*). And, although I learned through the years a good portion of the mythos of Burroughs's Mars, I don't recall reading those books either — which doesn't mean I didn't read them; only that other books and their heroes (such as the Saint) stuck in my memory. So, John Litchen's 'Fascinating



Mars' tells me a lot about a number of books I haven't read (nor intend to, I must admit). There's just too much redundancy in the article, repeating things he's already said. I tend not to like plot summaries, but Litchen has certainly filled me in on how these novels work, and that information too will help keep me away from most of the books he mentions in Part 1.

I did read Pohl's *Man Plus* when it came out, and I agree that it is one of the most interesting and better written of the books to which Litchen refers. I am not that interested, except for a few writers of the period, starting in the '60s (and the aforementioned Bester and Sturgeon) in rereading much SF from that time. I note that he just mentions a few of the other writers who took up the Mars of an ancient civilisation, a Mars on which humans can live: Leigh Brackett's and C. L. Moore's Mars tales were more to my taste. I actually believe that a lot of today's writers write a lot better than the old guys, and their more accurate Mars seem more interesting, too, although Zelazny set a couple of wonderful tales on those older concepts of Mars and Venus.

So I'll be looking forward to what Part 2 contains. John will certainly be looking at Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy, I assume, not to mention the Mars on his later novels set in a settled solar system. Some of the new Scottish SF writers have also invented some scientifically accurate (for the time being) terraformed Mars in their fiction, too. I think of Alastair Reynolds, who has constructed some intriguing versions of Mars in his novels, especially the future Africa *Poseidon's Children* trilogy. Then there's Charles Stross's *Saturn's Children*, in which he, not unfairly, speculates that humans may not be able to adapt to space flight, so it's the 'robots' who colonise the planets, and they have no problem 'living' on Mars. Anyway, that's hardly all the people writing about Mars, I'm sure, but they're the ones I know and like.

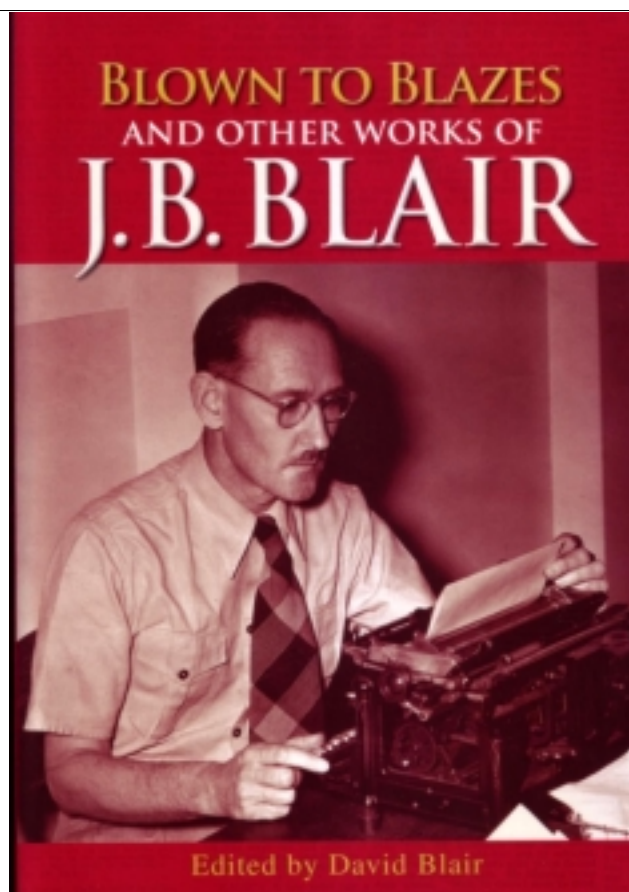
In his how-does-he-read-all-those-books? column, Colin Steele reviews Dozois and Martin's *Old Mars*, which I haven't read yet, but have read and found pretty entertaining their *Old Venus*, in which they ask contemporary writers to imagine tales set in what we now know to be fantasy planets. Serendipity, I guess.

I haven't read most of the books Colin mentions, although I have read a few, and wish he had found room for a few more comments on the very intriguing *All the Birds in the Sky*, which I found fascinating. Some I will try to catch up with, but there seem to be just too many to ever do so (I'm back ending a bunch of Canadian, mainly Albertan, books right now for a jury I'm on, for example).

(23 May 2017)

**RICHARD BLAIR**  
1 Pemell Street, Newtown NSW 204

**[\*brg\* The article I published in SFC 93 about My Life and Fanzines also appeared in *Biblionews*, the magazine of the Book Collectors Society of Australia. Its editor is Richard Blair. While discussing corrections and updates to my article, he told me about the book of fiction written by his father, and sent me a copy.\*]**



I thought you might like a complimentary copy of this book, *Blown to Blazes and Other Works* by J. B. Blair, edited by David Blair (2007; 317 pages; large trade paperback format). It was edited by J. B. Blair's son, David, my brother. It was self-published and was sold mainly by subscription.

Some, such as the 'Rumpelmayer' stories, are in the realm of fantasy, and some were listed by Graham Stone in his bibliography of Australian science fiction.

Most were written in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

(10 November 2016)

**WILLIAM BREIDING**  
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Tucson AZ 85719, USA

**SFC 93:**

I totally get it if *SFC* goes all digital. My only request is if you make the decision to do so to please drop me an email and let me know so I can scan efanazines.com for latest Gillespie zines. As far as the hundred dollars goes: if you go digital — buy some books or go to dinner.

Tommy James' 'Hanky Panky' was originally recorded and released in 1963 with little fanfare. It was rereleased in 1966, and became a No. 1 hit in the States. It was a song whose time had come. In 1963 it might have been just a little bit risqué, but by 1966, a year of hundreds of great pop songs, it was at the top as one of the rhythminest, rockinest pop songs around.

I was very moved by your personal fanhistory, and think I understand now why Mark Plummer was so moved by my own, published back in the late '90s by Bill

Bowers, when he wrote a letter of comment and sent it direct. I also enjoyed James Allen's memoir, though it was much more idiosyncratic and jocular than your own. (Perhaps just a difference in personality — you being Mr Sercon and all.)

And I loved John Litchen's 'Fascinating Mars, Part One.' I was propelled to purchase Brian Aldiss's *The Saliva Tree* because of this piece, and am looking forward to reading it sometime soon.

Should you go completely digital, I may have to experiment around and see how well my printer can handle an issue, since I can't stand reading in front of the computer screen for hours on end.

Well, all for now. Sit back, put on the headphones, and blast 'Crimson and Clover', over and over.

(12 February 2017)

**[\*brg\* 'Hanky Panky' was 1963? I do remember vividly some hits from when I was attempting to teach secondary school up the country in 1969 and 1970, and Tommy James' 'Crimson and Clover' was one of my favourites. [Later, much later: I looked it up, and yes, 'Crimson and Clover' was a hit in 1963.]**

**Thanks very much for the \$100, but this makes it difficult to abandon the print edition altogether. I'll go through my card index this weekend and work out how many hard copies I'm definitely obliged to send out if I send any. But in the end I might have to disappoint you. I spent \$1000 on postage alone during the last three months of last year. I didn't make much money last year, and it looks as if I'll be making a lot less this year.\*]**

**[\*brg\* What an extraordinary and wonderful surprise it was to find in today's mail a copy of your book *The Rose Motel*. I'm sure you must have told me you were working on it, but this year has been so worrying I had quite forgotten that it was coming. A superb package, and looks very readable\*]**

Glad you got the book. We all knew that an electronic-only edition of SFC was coming. I do believe the day is here!

(11 June 2017)

I'm nearly done with *SFC 94* — the Leigh Edmonds and Robert Day locs were simply fantastic —

I just read a book by Julia Elliott called *The New and Improved Romie Futch*. This book would fit perfectly into your Nova Mob talk a few issues ago about books that should be being read by science fiction fans. It takes place in America's Deep South. Romie Futch is a complete fuck-up who answers an internet ad for experimental organic cerebral downloads where knowledge is planted directly into your brain. The book has a fun romp with language.

I've been trying to find a way into this book for a review. I can think of no one else who might be interested it but you. As *Rose Motel* reveals, I don't really do reviews in the traditional sense — it's usually about me as much as it is the book/music/film. Would you be interested if I find the right way to tackle it?

Thank you for the kind words about *Rose Motel*. It is

very much appreciated.

(17 July 2017)

**GIAMPAOLO COSSATO**

**Cannaregio 3825, Calle Fontana,  
30121-Venezia, Italy**

I recently saw the Australian-made TV series *Cleverman* (Season 1). It sounded like a manifesto trying to emphasise a situation that perhaps does still perpetuate in your country. The series appears captivating with its mixture of lore and superhero elements. And the announcement of a second season seems to indicate some appreciation.

**[\*brg\* Season 2 of *Cleverman* left even more red herrings hanging off the end its last episode than did Season 1, but I enjoyed the company of its characters and situations so much I'm looking forward to Season 3. Like Jack Irish and The Code, it shows that Australian TV series can be create more buzz than any of the imported shows.\*]**

While I was following it I remembered that I had an old book in my library connected with the subject: *The Embarrassing Australian* by Harry Gordon, published in 1963. I had practically forgotten its existence. My memory is not at its best, but sometimes it takes just a fragment to wake it up.

I pulled it out and went through it once again. Fascinating story about Greg Saunders, an Aboriginal serviceman during World War II who was refused entry to the force that Australia sent to Japan as part of the occupying force after the war. The Army, it said, 'is not accepting aboriginals for service with the interim forces. I cannot add to that statement.' The controversy fizzled out at the time without making a dent on the wall separating the 'new arrivals' from the natives.

The book offers a first person (and very personal) account of the tragedy of the Second World War and the Korean War, allowing Greg Saunders direct experience to judge from his point of view the merits and demerits of friends and enemy. They are several place in the book where the Italians are ferociously lambasted ('The bottom of the list. They were splendid at surrendering ... that was all') but, to be fair, in some cases, he reserves the same treatment to his own compatriots and people of other nationalities.

It is a bit disheartening to see how we Italians ended up in his list. Mussolini wanted to emulate Hitler, but the Italian army was far behind in term of equipment and commanders capable of using the little equipment that was available. Mussolini should have embraced neutrality, as did Salazar in Portugal and Franco in Spain (or the Swiss and the Swedish for that matter).

While the Germans liberated Mussolini, putting him at the head of the Republic of Salò in Northern Italy, the Royal Government of Italy signed a truce (for all intents and purposes a surrender) with the Allies on 3 September 1943. At that point the Italian soldiers had no longer any clue to whom they were supposed to obey, and were hunted down by the Germans to boot.

Many defected or surrendered to the Allies and then

fought on their side, many more ended up in concentration camps (care of the Germans), and a good number join the partisans. One of the murkiest periods of Italian history in modern times (but not so modern any longer, as few protagonists are still alive). I might add that, for entirely different reasons, nowadays Italian history has not lost its veneer of murkiness.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I hate war (as the proverb says: 'War is sweet to them that know it not') and am seriously worried about what's going on in key countries such as the United States, Germany, UK, France, and the rest of the European Union. I have left out Russia and China, where democracy is unknown, and I might add Turkey to them, unfortunately. My father did not participate in the Second World War, but he was a soldier during the one running from 1914 to 1918.

(21 December 2016)

### PEGGYANN CHEVALIER

**Eudaemon House, 103 Ainsworth Blvd W,  
Ypsilanti MI 48197, USA**

Thanks so much for the print copy of your beautiful *SF Commentary* 93 — but I feel guilty getting it, as work was slower last year and I wasn't able to subscribe. Gorgeous cover art by Ditmar and Elaine. I appreciate how much thought, time, creativity, and expense goes into producing it. Great read, too, and so much good stuff to look at. Right now I'm especially enjoying Colin Steele's 'The Field: Books About SF and Fantasy'. I've covered most of the reviews with sticky notes saying 'Get this one first!' or 'Must read!' or 'Get this one first too!'

(3 January 2017)

I wouldn't have a problem viewing *SFC* on eFanzines.com — it's still a beautiful production. And if I wanted to print out all or parts of it, that would be easy enough for me. If that would simplify and de-costify things for you, I'd be all for it.

(4 January 2017)

### IAN MOND

**Caulfield North VIC 3161**

My blog might be 20 or so reviews behind my Facebook page, but I thought I at least report on what were my favourite 10 books for 2016 (with an eleventh just for luck, and because it's brilliant).

Before I list my favourites for the year, here are some stats. Overall I read 117 novels (and a smattering of novellas). Of those 65 were by men and 52 were by women. In regard to the genre-literary divide that plagues us all, I read 82 books that lean to the genre side of the ledger, while 37 of the novels were more literary. And so here is my top 10 (or 11):

- *Lovecraft Country* by Matt Ruff (2016)
- *The Thing Itself* by Adam Roberts (2015)
- *The Shore* by Sara Taylor (2015)
- *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty (2015)
- *Martin John* by Anakana Schofield (2016)
- *The Ballad of Black Tom* by Victor Lavalle (2016)
- *Solar Bones* by Mike McCormack (2016)

- *The Tsar of Love and Techno* by Anthony Marra (2015)
- *Eileen* by Ottessa Moshfegh (2015)
- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead (2016)
- And number 11: *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang (2015, though first published in South Korea in 2007).

So that was 2016 for me. Obviously I highly recommend the books above. Though I could easily have recommended another 30 or more books. 2016, for all the talk of annus horribilis I read some really fine fiction. Hoping 2017 produces something similar.

(3 January 2017)

**[\*brg\* My own list for 2016 turns up in this issue or the next. I tried to do an analysis of types of books read (following the example of Claire Brialey in ANZAPA) but got lost, because some fit several categories. Of the 67 books I finished, about half could be described as science fiction/fantasy/dark fantasy/slipstream. Of your list, Ian, I've just bought *Lovecraft Country* and *The Underground Railroad* (having enjoyed Ben Winters' alternative present-day America of *Underground Airlines* recently), have heard of *The Thing Itself*, but not seen a copy, and have never heard of the others. But I still have a house full of unread books, and I'm enjoying plucking from the shelves unread books I've owned for anything up to 50 years.\*]**

### ANDY ROBSON

**63 Dixon Lane, Leeds, Yorkshire LS12 4RR,  
England**

Thanks for the replacement cover for *SFC* 92. Some people might wonder if all these extra covers might be designed to create a collectors' market in 10 year's time. People pay thousands for Elvis's records in Japanese covers.

**SFC 93:** The 'Revelations' article shows how lucky our generation was — the generation now 50 or beyond. We had the chance to find items in secondhand bookshops or tiny independent magazine shops that we'd never heard of or imagined, but which turned out to be in brilliant tune with our desires. Now that independent publishers of any kind are merely swept aside by corporate distributions, there is no way current or future generations will be able to discover the 'good stuff'. Maybe in 20 years there will be some kind of Google app that can face the enquiry of: 'Give me something I've never seen or thought of at a ridiculously low price that will keep me happy and ecstatic for a month'. But it won't work, any more than a dictionary will let you find the word for why lightning doesn't move in straight lines or why we sometimes see double rainbows.

The piece on fiction about Mars is intriguing, though it is wrong to imply that interest in Mars faded in the 1980s. Just the opposite. Hardly a month went by without (often spurious) reports and photos of strange baseball-like fabrications on the planet (the remains of Russian or Chinese satellites?) and shadows that might be



humanoid life-forms. Fiction, however, had found other solar systems of planets convenient to write about. Better to write about them than to write a Mars story whose science would be debunked before the story reached a publishers. The arguments go on, and yes, the baseballs have been back again in the early days of 2017.

Fanzines are too often ignored, regarded as outpourings of juvenilia. The ones taken seriously are often the dull compilations by writers who later rose high on the literary ladder. The ones that should have been taken seriously reflected the social life, folklore, and fleeting linguistic quirks of 20 or 30 years of the lives of unknown editors from the real world of fans.

So thanks for being there.

(1 February 2017)

Sorry that *SFC* 94 will be the final print issue, but all of us who produce (or have produced) zines will be aware that your monthly bill alone for something that size would probably be over \$A1000, as around two-thirds of your loc column comes from overseas people.

**[\*brg\* Until I came to a clumping  
impending-poverty-led stop, I was spending \$1400  
to print and post each issue of *SF Commentary*.  
Enough!\***

A mention of Christmas fireworks rings some bells. I recall parents talking of Boxing Day sporting events culminating in fireworks in the 1920s and 1930s, but New Year's fireworks only really began here in the pre-dawn of 2000. Before then, December fireworks had been available only for the Hindu Diwali only. For special celebrations, a public display licence could be applied for at any time, but it required the presence of police and fire brigade and could be a costly affair.

Congratulations on your 70th birthday, and having enough mobile friends to invite to a grand party, since many 'youngsters' are dropping out of the human race these days. I know of a 90-year-old inviting his hairdresser to his party because of his struggle to fill the chairs around the table. (Though for some, still having a haircut at the age of 90 would be something to boast about.) I have about 50 people I meet up with each year, but getting double figures to attend a party would be difficult.

It's all a conspiracy. When I started work, there were always members of the staff involved in passionate embraces in the elevator, but as soon as I was old enough for it to be my turn they moved to a single-storey factory.

(18 July 2017)

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## Feature letters remembering David J. Lake and Jack Wodhams Sanjay Sircar, Andrew Macrae, Jack Wodhams, Paul Collins, and Yvonne Rousseau

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### SANJAY SIRCAR

Poste Restante, Watson P0, Windeyer St,  
Watson ACT 2602

I last spoke to **David J. Lake** in December 2015, which I see must have been a few weeks before he died. I was trying to ring him today, found his address had disappeared, and was sent your obituary. (NB: DJL was a 'Reader/Associate Professor', not a 'Senior Lecturer'.) I would like to contact David Ferris, his stepson, whose mother was very fond of me and who should remember me, and would be grateful if you would forward this email to him, with a request that he contact me directly. Thank you for your help.

(24 December 2016)

**[\*brg\* Thanks, Sanjay, for your enquiry. I'm not sure where my obituary of David Lake might have been posted, but I'm glad you saw it. It turns out that I mistook the order of publication of David's later *SF* books, but I'm sure the correct details can be found at Wikipedia or the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*.**

**Dr David J. Lake was one of *SF Commentary's* strongest supporters. I hadn't heard from him for**

**awhile, except for a short message telling me not to send him my magazines anymore (although he had been a constant reader of and contributor to them for the last 40 years). I assumed that he was fading fast. The next message I received was from David Ferris, telling me about David Lake's death. Please write to [david.s.ferris@bigpond.com](mailto:david.s.ferris@bigpond.com). That was the email address I received at the time.\*]**

Thank you for kind and quick reply. DJL was independently famous as a Renaissance scholar, but treated very badly at the University of Queensland, which, as he said, got rid of him at the first possible moment, mid-term. He was the only senior academic to stand up for literature as against Modernism-Marxism in the years before the department 'turned'.

It turned out that we — at very different periods — attended the same school in Calcutta. I longed to hear of his Indian experiences and his Saigon ones, but he would not tell me. That obituary was pleasant, though, you say, inaccurate. He also wrote a novella — whether published or not I know not — on the love life of St Augustine, and a private autobiography, of which he sent me a piece but did not wish me to read more. I am glad I spoke to him a month before he died, when he seemed fine. He was mentoring an Iranian student, I think. In *all*



David J. Lake, with his Ditmar Awards, 1980s.

the years I knew him, he was *always* saying that he was in despair and had nothing more to write in him, then went on to write more — which irritated me very much.

God rest his soul. He left behind more than most, though his life had troubles galore in it. I have his gift of signed copies of his two children's books, on which I heard a paper at a conference. I long to read his verse, *Hornpipes and Funerals*. Somewhere I have two unpublished translations of his of two poems from the Geman.

I will write to 'Young David', as they called him.  
(24 December 2016)

I did write to David Ferris, no answer.

David Lake received no support at the University of Queensland. His doctoral work on Marlowe was published by Cambridge University Press.

Thank you for looking for the St Augustine story and the complete autobiography, if you have them, as and when you can. I cannot see D. Ferris gathering or conserving anything.

(26 December 2016)

**[\*brg\* I've found the typescript copy of David Lake's autobiography. I published only one chapter of it in one of my magazines, but the rest makes lively reading. I didn't have the facilities at home to make a quick copy of it, but have recently bought a new scanner. :: I cannot find a copy of David's 'St Augustine' story, although I have read it. Maybe he asked that I return the manuscript to him without copying it.\*]**

## ANDREW MACRAE Brunswick, Victoria

David Lake taught me at the University of Queensland in 1990–93. He taught the science fiction course that pretty much changed my life. (What, you mean there are other people who take science fiction seriously? as an academic subject?!) He introduced me to Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and supervised my honours thesis on the work of Philip K. Dick

He also taught an honours-level subject on Milton's *Paradise Lost* that I still remember. He used to have us over to his house in St Lucia to teach the sessions. The pillars under his house were labelled according to Blake's cosmology. I have to say, he was an odd man, at least to this Gen Xer as the grunge era broke — but he was interesting and he had a big impact on my life, as good teachers do.

(8 February 2016)

## JACK WODHAMS 'Jacaranda', Bethesda, Corinda, QLD 4075

Thank you very much for going to the trouble and expense of posting me a copy of your excellent and very well produced *SF Commentary* 92.

You sure are steeped in SF, and music, too. You make me seem a fraud in both cases. My reading of SF is extremely limited, dating back to John Wyndham and Keith Laumer, interspersed with Damon Runyon, O'Henry, P. G. Wodehouse, James Thurber, C. S. Forester, comedy, adventure, crime, etc. My interest in music has been equally as eclectic, finding me responding, at the time, to Irish reels, Dixieland jazz, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, through Strauss waltzes and Sousa marches to Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, to some lesser-known creators like Meyerbeer and his ilk.

Consequently I have bought few records. I have lashed out to buy one or two — someone playing a great tune on an oboe, for instance, and John Williams playing his guitar, especially the Spanish Concerto thing — and others — but I have not the time to listen to them.

Time. Yes. I am still writing, and this absorbs most of my time. To try and concentrate and give my full attention to a piece of music would be an impossibility for me. And music deserves to be listened to. Background mush is no good at all.

So there you have it, Bruce, my confession on my eighty-fifth birthday. I write, as I have always written, largely for my own amusement. It exercises the brain, you know. These days, where the computer plays such a huge role, I submit nothing. I don't need the money, and I guess I'm just an old fuddy-duddy, accepting a computer purely as a word-processor that is superior to a typewriter.

(3 September 2016)

## PAUL COLLINS Ford Street Publishers, Abbotsford VIC 3067

Saddened to receive an email from Jack Wodhams' nephew telling me that Jack passed away on Thursday, 3



Lee Harding (l.) and Jack Wodhams (r.), Q-Con, Brisbane, 1977. (Photographer: Paul Collins.)

August 2017. He had Parkinson's Disease, and had been in a nursing home for the past year or so. Jack was one of Australia's biggest names in science fiction during the 60s, 70s, and 80s, and the last of his peers, A. Bertram Chandler, David Lake, Frank Bryning, and Wynne Whiteford. He was one of the very elite who sold regularly to *Analog*, arguably the world's leading SF magazine at the time. I published many of his stories, some of which appeared in overseas 'Best Of' anthologies and were reprinted in US magazines. I published three of his books in the early 80s and for a time was his literary agent. He submitted another novel to me a couple of years ago, and in collaboration with Adam Wallace, it became *The Vanilla Slice Kid*. He was my favourite correspondent. He somehow wove stories into his letters — they were never mundane or matter-of-fact. The last of them arrived a couple of months ago, and fortunately I replied to it before it was too late. His letter held his usual raconteur voice, but he admitted it took him half a day to type as his fingers wouldn't do his bidding. His almost illegible spidery signature indicated the state of his Parkinson's. An artist, wood sculptor, writer, and all-round nice guy,

he's sadly missed. The pic was taken at the Breakfast Creek Hotel in Brisbane, circa early 80s. Vale Jack Wodhams.

(18 August 2017)

## YVONNE ROUSSEAU Reservoir VIC 3073

Honouring birthday traditions, I have failed until now to thank you for *SF Commentary* 92, which reached me on 26 July, and for your deeply philosophical Horacek birthday card, which reached me on 28 July: thank you for both!

In *SF Commentary*, I was especially engaged by Ray Sinclair-Wood's 'Poems of the Space Race', which recalls how South Australians in October 1957 drove away from city lights in order to see *Sputnik 1* orbiting overhead. I was already away from the city lights then, living in the State of Victoria on a dairy farm in South Gippsland and coming to the end of my first year of secondary school in 1957. In contrast to my lack of success in spotting comets overhead, I really did see *Sputnik* with no difficulty at all, and consequently felt friendly toward it. Meanwhile, in late Novembers we could sometimes see the Southern Lights (Aurora Australis) by standing on the driveway next to our house where the wind in the foliage of our boobialla windbreak sounded like wild waves battering an invisible shore. Outer space used to seem closer to us then, and more awesome.

(1 August 2016)

Receiving the sad news that Jack Wodhams has died of Parkinson's Disease, I remembered that I had reviewed him long ago when I was the SF reviewer for the *Australian Book Review* in the 1980s. Looking this up, I found that in the same article I'd reviewed your *SF Commentary Reprint Edition: First Year 1969*. I attach a copy of this review to demonstrate how different things seemed to me then.

(17 October 2017)

## Yvonne Rousseau: Beyond known worlds

review by Yvonne Rousseau (*Australian Book Review*, April 1983, pp. 2–3)

Bruce Gillespie (ed.) *S F Commentary Reprint Edition: First Year 1969*, Bruce Gillespie, index, 200 numbered copies, 152 pp., \$40.00, 0949587001

David Lake, *Ring of Truth*, Cory & Collins, 244 pp., \$3.95, 0909117144

Jack Wodhams, *Future War*, Cory & Collins, 184 pp., \$3.95, 0909117152

Jack Wodhams, *Ryn*, Cory & Collins, 196 pp., \$3.95, 0909117101

Van Ikin (ed.), *Australian Science Fiction*, University of Queensland Press, biblio., 320 pp., \$17.95, \$7.95 pb, 07022 1961 4 hb, 07022 1971 1 pb

An interesting discussion between Ursula K. Le Guin and Stanislaw Lem (the world's best-selling SF author), about Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* — available only in an Australian magazine!



This revelation of *SF Commentary*'s existence and nature, deduced from footnotes in an American paperback, bewildered me in 1977: surely overseas artists would share (and thereby promote) that image of our 'vast but specifically Australia-shaped cultural desert' which Ken Russell (*ABR* 47, p. 24) has called part of our own 'false common wisdom'? Surely they would reserve any truly illuminating communication for the magazines of the civilised hemisphere?

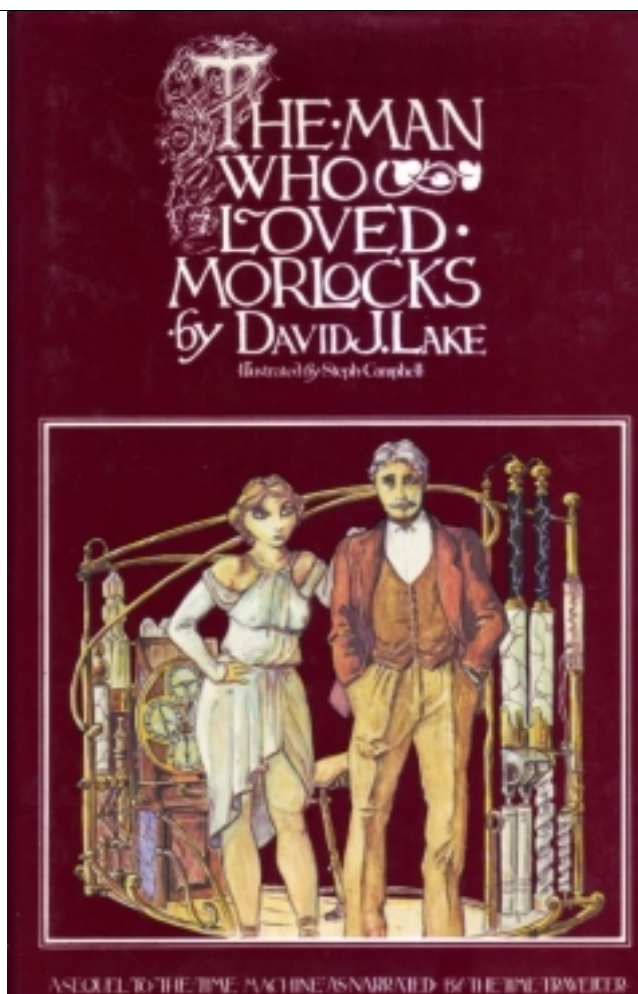
On the contrary, letters and articles in the *Reprint* of the magazine's first year, 1969, come from such well-known overseas authors as Brian Aldiss, James Blish, John Brunner, Samuel Delany, Philip Dick, Harry Harrison, Stanislaw Lem, Christopher Priest, and Robert Silverberg. A book-review in one issue provokes discussion in following issues, not only from readers interpreting the book quite differently, or expounding opposing critical techniques and philosophies: the book's author may also respond, with analysis of his aims and methods (rather than mere conventional variations on the 'jolly-well off-side!' complaint). Since SF 'fandom' consists of writers as well as readers, a completely unembarrassed communication between the two becomes possible, and can only be envied by their 'mainstream' counterparts.

Bruce Gillespie began *SF Commentary* as 'an almost anti-fannish concern', with a 'hard-line critical stance'. This distinctive, and solidly worthy, aspect of the magazine is counterpointed by the more informal charm of fannish interactions, displayed in amusing letters, transcripts of discussions at two SF conventions, and in Gillespie's *Reprint* overview, 'Beginnings', whose continuous narrative is distributed through the volume so that it keeps pace with the reappearance of the issues whose history it recounts (a thoughtful touch which, like the excellent index, encourages readers to purr). Gillespie's reminiscences of the 1969 social life of Melbourne's sf luminaries, in conjunction with the resurrection of their actual correspondence and conversations, also hold the eavesdropping fascination which rivets people to Bloomsburyana.

Meanwhile, for fourteen years *SF Commentary*'s most constant contributors have united in bemoaning the current depressing standard of science fiction — disagreeing mainly about whether and when there ever was any worthwhile science fiction. Is their perverse persistence to be explained by Damien Broderick's suggestion, at the 1968 Melbourne SF Convention, that 'science fiction is corrosive rot ... destroying neurones in great scabby bits that fall off inside your head'? Or is there a secret faith that, as Gerald Murnane wrote in a 1973 *SF Commentary*, 'there are certain facts of life that we can only understand by viewing them in a fantastic setting — a world of gods or giants or fairies or aliens from space'?

David Lake's novel, *Ring of Truth*, has all the trappings of such a setting. There is a world whose physical laws differ from ours; there are unicorns, centaurs, satyrs, and taken-for-granted ghosts; there is an heroic quest, whose fulfilment blends with disillusion. Yet, as Le Guin has observed, 'the presence of mythic material in a story does not mean that the mythmaking faculty is being used': and here the effect is of cliché, rather than of archetypal resonance.

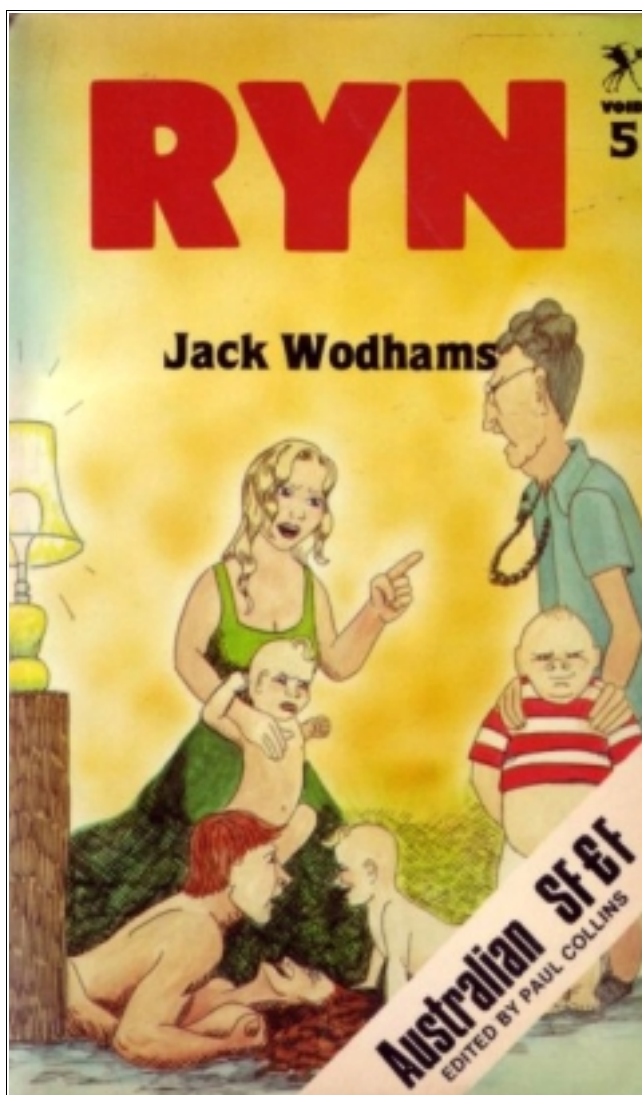
The problem partly reveals itself in the prose. In a



random example, an Angel has just indicated the possibility of flight in heavier-than-air vehicles: 'Kernin showed that he found this incredible; whereupon Daelir laughed (his laugh was like a tinkle of small bells); and proceeded to demonstrate.' This surely lends point to D. H. Lawrence's remark, from *Phoenix*: 'You have to have something vicious in you to be a creative writer.'

The absence of anything vicious — anything private and chaotic, potentially tragic — in the characters is the secret of the difference from the same author's far more successful *The Man Who Loved Morlocks*, where the traditional elements add to the wit and charm (the psychoanalysis of the Time Traveller only being enhanced by its recalling the analysis of Holmes in Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven Per Cent Solution*, or Orwell's claim that 'it is the thought of the "pure" Agnes in bed with a man who drops his aitches that really revolts Dickens'). *Ring of Truth* contains much that ought to be similarly witty: that the faithful lower-class servant resembles the Sam of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* rather than the Sam of *The Lord of the Rings*; that the lizardly exponents of Siblinghood are perverting the *Animal Farm* maxim, 'Four legs good, two legs bad'. Perhaps it is the pressure of so much mythical material lying so utterly inert that transforms the effect to one of platitude rather than wit?

But perhaps the novel is intended only to transmit what Philip José Farmer has called the 'joy in creating well-thought-out and original worlds'. If so, I should mention that the thinking this time is imperfect; I am forced to be a little arcane, in order not to reveal the



secret of Lake's world — but if Pelas Velnul is visible from Nakhtos (some 8000 miles away) as a 'broad patch', then the 'soft silver radiance' of the nearby Holy River Sinolis would burn one's eyes out — while bonfires visible for thousands of miles (pp. 50 and 228) are not for standing next to.

Lake's attempt at world-building is, however, one variant of what Peter Nicholls describes as a science-fiction writer's 'conscious effort, sometimes quite successful, to stand outside' his or her society and its illusions. **Jack Wodhams**, in *Ryn* and *Future War*, adopts a different technique for this effort; he illuminates a commonly held opinion or slogan by applying it to an unexpected situation, or advancing it to a 'logical conclusion'. The common wisdom of *Ryn* is '*si jeunesse savoit*', and its imaginative leap is to have a male adult consciousness incarcerated in a newborn baby. The resulting novel is mildly satirical, with some engaging plot notions (although the explanation supplied for the entire situation is so perfunctory as to be merely an irritation).

The four stories of *Future War* extrapolate into the future some of our best-accepted assumptions about warfare. People bemoan the fact that the 'cream' of manhood is slaughtered in war, so that the 'genetic pool' degenerates; in 'Butcher Mackerson', advanced tech-

nology enables civilisation to solve this problem by reserving its armies for the crippled. 'United We Fall' examines the belief that the army 'makes a man of you' — but what about its insistence on submissiveness and its emphasis on mopping floors, making beds, cleaning clothes? Indeed, in the third story, 'Pet', the ideal soldier is perceived to be a 'fighting eunuch', advantaged by 'the removal of sexual stress'; while in 'Dead Heat' a feminist force is made utterly lethal by the commonly accepted notion that women must outdo the best possible male performance before their competence will be admitted.

Wodhams is an uneven writer; his 'Pet' sometimes verges on the brilliant, in its illumination of sexual images and their implications; and it is a pity that he has apparently maintained the indifference to 'this *grammar* business' which he expressed at the 1968 Conference. Anomalies like the past-tense 'swole' are obstacles to reading, and could so easily be removed by collaboration with an editor.

The very direct dealing with ideas, which Wodhams exemplifies, can also lure a science-fiction writer into producing 'simplistic characters and melodramatic plots which animate elementary didacticism' — Raymond Federman's summary, in *The Twofold Vibration*. This description is certainly deserved by some of the Australian science fiction written between 1845 and 1945, which is now reprinted in **Van Ikin**'s anthology *Australian Science Fiction*. The notion of 'improving the breed', whether finally vindicated or not, occurs with a regularity distressing to modern sensibilities, which have been traumatised by the reality of the Nazis' genocidal 'final solution'; and the terror of 'white' vulnerability to being overrun by 'the coloured races' also recurs (novels of 1904 and 1909 depict the Japanese conquest of Australia).

Ikin has 'cast his net wide', adopting 'a relaxed approach to definition', and his introduction contains extremely interesting excerpts, information, and analysis of historical trends. In his 'modern' selection, representing twelve authors, the nearest approaches to didacticism are perhaps those of Michael Wilding and Peter Carey (implicit didacticism on art), although George Turner's contribution might be thought to echo earlier warnings about creating and underestimating 'underdogs'. Captain Chandler and Wynne Whiteford provide entertaining variants of the 'time machine' genre, with traditional Wellsian or Conan-Doylish eccentricities; Dal Stevens and Jack Wodhams illustrate power's corruption of the individual; Frank Bryning and Damien Broderick create another context for our world view; Lee Harding and Philippa Maddern present alienation.

The most impressive excerpt is from M. Barnard Eldershaw's 1947 novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, while the most interesting story is perhaps Philippa Maddern's 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' (as Ikin says, 'a new approach to the female characters in science fiction'). *Australian Science Fiction* creates rising expectation, and the sense that Australian sf is, if anything, becoming ever better: a mood in marked contrast to the present day gloomy outlook of English and American SF.

**Yvonne Rousseau** is author of *The Murders at Hanging Rock*.



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## Feature letter: Patrick McGuire

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

In your Book Collectors talk (*SF Commentary* 93), I was surprised by the orthodoxy of your definition and additional characterisation of science fiction. I think you and I would have avoided several discussions of which works can usefully be considered as SF if you had really adhered to that standard in *SFC*. Granted, given the present reality, if one maintains a fairly rigorous standard for SF, one has to deal with the existence of allied genres such as science fantasy and SF-tinged technothrillers and paranormal romances.

Also, while I think that it is true that some kinds of SF were regarded as more respectable in British literary circles than in US ones from the 1890s onward, I don't think literary respectability can be neatly equated with hardcover publication (as you so equate). Recall that a lot of 'boys' adventure books', including SF ones, were published as hardcovers, as were the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the early works of John Taine, and others. While I have not seen a statistical breakdown, I would bet that before the mid 1920s, there were at least as many hardcover original SF titles published in the US as in the UK. After about 1925, changes in literary fashion did drive US SF into a separate genre — first pretty much out of books entirely and into the specialised pulps and then, after World War II, also into genre hardcovers and paperbacks, with only the occasional breakthrough into the mainstream by an SF author or the occasional successful venture into sf by a mainstream author. I think the same forces were at work in the UK., although more weakly. (My loc in *SFC* 92 notes that J. M. Walsh had no SF published in book form in the UK after 1932. In fact, from that point until 1950, with the exception of one short story in 1939, all of his subsequent SF short stories appeared not in the UK but in the US pulps.)

I suspect you are mistaken in stating that 'in the early days fanzine publishers did not charge for their publications'. That might have been true of the proto-fanzines of 'amateur journalism', where fairly wealthy amateurs bought their own small letterpress printing presses and did their own typesetting, but my impression from historian Harry Warner Jr is that when fanzines as such came around, charging for them was routine. Most of the fan editors of the thirties and forties did not have a lot of money to spare, and needed to break even, or at least to control their losses. (In those days, banks imposed a significant per-cheque charge on the chequing-account holder, so for small sums one commonly sent cash. I seem to recall that Harry Warner says the common price of a fanzine was 'a sticky quarter' — sticky because it had been taped to a piece of paper or cardboard for secure

mailing.) You yourself quote Lin Carter even in 1966 as speaking of a dollar for a fanzine subscription. By the time I got into fandom in the late sixties and into the 1970s, one could often, but not always, get fanzines in return for submitting articles or letters of comment. (I gather that inflation in Australia has been somewhat more severe, but one 1966 US dollar for a fanzine subscription would not be 50 2016 US dollars, as you state. More like 10, although the matter is admittedly complicated by the fact that all periodicals have become disproportionately more costly. In those days postage for printed matter was subsidised by governments, and paper was cheaper relative to other goods than it is now. You later equate A\$4700 in 1968 with about A\$60,000 in 2016, suggesting that even Australian inflation was only about thirteen-fold since the late sixties. Perhaps you meant that an equivalent hardcopy domestic subscription today, with disproportionately increased paper and mailing costs and the death of mimeo, would run to \$50, which it easily might.)

Anyway, as usual I seem to find it easier to talk about points of disagreement and seeming errors than about the bigger picture and what I liked, but I did enjoy the article.

I could say much the same about John Litchen's Mars article. Like most commentators, John does give Wells more credit for originality than the very considerable amount that Wells genuinely deserves. Wells was not the first author to portray a Martian invasion of Earth, although he seems to have been the first Anglophone author to do so. The book version of *The War of the Worlds* appeared in 1898, whereas Kurd Lasswitz's *Auf zwei Planeten* had come out in 1897. It is true that the magazine version of Wells's work also appeared in 1897, but the very different Lasswitz novel is about five times as long, and considering that factor plus the relative publication paces of books and magazines, the only reasonable conclusion is that Lasswitz came to the idea earlier and had been working on his book before Wells began his. (Wells and Lasswitz apparently devised the Martian invasion plot independently of each other.) The idea of the interplanetary spread of disease had also appeared in SF before Wells. Lasswitz has diseases spreading both ways between Terrans and Martians, although not in so major a plot role. It is said that sophisticated SF foresees not only the automobile but also the traffic jam. In this spirit, John Jacob Astor's *A Journey in Other Worlds* (1894) not only raises the possibility of interplanetary infection but describes measures taken to guard against its happening in the first place. In his future-set novel, Astor also depicts elaborate traffic-control measures and road construction undertaken on Earth to keep automobile traffic running smoothly! Alas, the Astor novel is not correspondingly sophisticated in most other respects.



(As I detailed in an article in *NYRSF*, unfortunately, the Lasswitz novel is so far represented in English only by *Two Planets*, a 1971 mediocre translation made not from the original but from an unsatisfactory German abridgment that had also made some unsuccessful outright revisions to the text, evidently in an effort to modernise it.)

I have not read any of the sequels to the Wells book that John mentions. But there are many others beyond those, of which I will mention two that I have indeed read. The first is the notorious Edison's *Conquest of Mars* (1898), the start of a long and sorry tradition of genocidal-retaliation novels. To its credit, this Garrett P. Seviss work is also one of the first novels, or perhaps the very first, to rationalise humans on other planets by having them transported there by aliens many centuries ago, rather than depicting humans as having evolved (or having been created) on other worlds separately from Earth humans. The second book I will mention is *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches* (1996), an anthology with contributions from major SF writers that describes what supposedly happened in other parts of the world also invaded by the Martians at the time of the English invasion described by Wells. I read that soon after it came out in 1996, and I recall it as being fairly good. (Actually, I am now in the process of a reread of the Wells for my local SF book club, and I note that Wells describes the shots from Mars as being timed at 24-hour intervals, and thus tied to Earth's rotational period rather than Mars's. I think Wells is taking a rather simplistic view of orbital mechanics and is implying that the shots are so timed so that all the cylinders will come down in the same area on Earth, namely England, perhaps chosen for the initial invasion as Earth's most industrialised country. The end of the novel also mentions relief bread shipments from France, implying that France itself was uninvaded.) *Global Dispatches* is edited by Kevin J. Anderson, but it posits the Wells novel to be true (except for a little hand-waving to permit international invasions), unlike his own *The Martian War*, which (as I learn from John) tells the 'true story' behind the Wells novel rather than being a sequel proper.

As for Burroughs, I reread a couple of the John Carter novels in recent years. They held up better than I might have expected, but not well enough to inspire me to reread the whole series. I share the opinion of many or most sf fans that the *John Carter* movie was considerably better than its box-office performance would suggest, especially once one gets past the PC opening where the screenplay portrays Carter as a defender of the noble Native Americans rather than Burroughs's Indian-fighter. The movie and Burroughs himself both slide over why it is that Carter, a plantation owner and slaveholder who fought on the Confederate side in the American Civil War in defence of enslaving black people, should be so unprejudiced in his relations with green and red Martians. (Of course, in the movie the redness of the red Martians seems to have been reduced to a matter of skin decoration.)

John's discussion of Clarke's *The Sands of Mars* reminded me that I had not reread the novel in a long time, possibly not since I first read it as a teenager. It turned out to be carried by the Kindle subscription

library, and I have embarked upon a reread, although I will not hold up this long-delayed loc to wait for me to finish it. When John says 'we can assume' that the story takes place in the mid twenty-first century, I'm not sure if he means that 'we can conclude' that from the text, or 'we can revise it in our imaginations' to that date. As written, the story undeniably takes place in about the 1990s. Gibson is in his mid forties and has been writing since the 1960s (11% mark in my e-reader). Perhaps, like Clarke, Gibson got off to an early start in his teens, but I think he must have been born in 1953 at the latest. Gibson wrote a well-received SF novel in 1973 or '74. It is a century (22% mark) since Wells wrote his SF (which was mostly in the nineties and the oughts).

I parenthetically note that it is very odd that Clarke posits that Wells will be best remembered in the long run for his mainstream fiction. As I write in 2017, a TV series is still running (or has just been cancelled) that features a time-travelling Wells as a character, and *The War of the Worlds* is redramatised every few years.

Clarke also does not seem to have thought through very well the idea of electronic storage of books and music. (Clarke never says 'digital'; conceivably he has some sort of analogue process in mind, analogous to analogue tape recording or to holograms.) If Gibson cannot find a simple enough book on astronautics in hard copy, why does he not look in the quarter-million electronic books in the ship's library, presumably selected with the ship's eventual non-astronaut passengers in mind? And why is Gibson making carbon copies of what he writes, when the originals never leave his hands? We are specifically shown that he recovers his original pages as they emerge one by one from the fax machine as they are transmitted to Earth. Finally, it is possible that John's edition differs from mine, but in my edition Gibson's spacewalk has nothing to do with the antenna modification; it is a separate excursion.

John regrets the obscurity of Ludek Pesek's *The Earth is Near*. I note that it got a plug in the 'Mars' article of the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, but that the plug is gone by the second edition, although the latter has a longer article on Pesek himself. Pessimistic SF generally has an uphill struggle, at least in English. (Some other cultures have gloomier worldviews.) The novel also gets a favourable entry in the 'Children's SF' section of the second edition of *Anatomy of Wonder* (and for all I know in editions not to hand). Also, the Viking landings happened in 1976, so Pesek, contra John, did not have the benefit of those, and there were no Mars rovers in 1976, contrary to what John says when discussing *The Martian Inca*. The pink Martian sky was detected by Viking. The first Mars rover arrived only in 1997. It really is not very hard to check this sort of thing.

There are some further oddities in John's brief account of the space race. The decision to send Apollo 8 around the Moon was a bit of risk-taking international gamesmanship, but on the basis of what I remember from the time and what I have read in subsequent histories, I deny that it resulted from any 'panic' about the Soviets. Next, when American astronauts circled the Moon in 1968, it was the first time human eyes directly viewed the far side, but I would not say that 'for the first time we gained a glimpse' of it, since the Soviet *Lunik 3*

had sent back photographs in 1959 (which I seem to remember seeing as a child in the newspaper at the time), and I presume the US *Lunar Orbiter 1* (1966) made detailed observations.

I read Pohl's *Man Plus* when it came out. I remember it as well done, but rather melancholic. I had not recalled that in it Mars was to be a refuge from an ongoing catastrophe on Earth. On a podcast, I recently heard some SF author (I forget which) denouncing as defeatist all the SF that posits fleeing to another planet after humanity wrecks the Earth. I hadn't thought that all that much SF actually uses that gimmick, but perhaps there is more of it than I remember. But one really has to stretch logic and common sense to come up with a scenario where resources exist to manage terraforming within the Solar System or colonisation beyond it, but not to adapt to, or otherwise deal with, whatever the posited disaster on Earth is. I think that when the gimmick is used in SF, it is generally as an urgent motivator to get on with the story, not as an idea the author takes as even remotely probable, and not, I think, as an idea that many readers beyond the lunatic fringe will take seriously as a real-life possibility.

I also read Kevin J. Anderson's *Climbing Olympus*, but what I remember from it is mostly that it contained a lot of bad, or at least non-idiomatic, Russian. That it failed to sink into my memory does not speak well for it, although of course that could be an idiosyncratic reaction. John might want to search out Walter Miller's short story 'Crucifixus Etiam' (1953), which is perhaps the foundational story concerning 'people who come to change Mars, and end up being changed by it themselves'.

From Colin Steele's capsule reviews, I learn that revisionist biography has struck Charles Williams. I have only had a vague interest in that writer, since his fiction does not speak to me, but if Grevel Lindop's book is accurate, the revelation does not say much for C. S. Lewis's powers of insight into his friend's true character. After Williams' death, Lewis repeatedly referred to him as a paragon of virtue. (Not that authors as a whole have good record of insight into character off the written page.) I have been meaning to ask a knowledgeable acquaintance of mine how the Lindop book has been received in circles of organised Lewis admirers, but I keep forgetting.

(27 May 2017)

I downloaded *SF Commentary* 94 yesterday. I noticed a few small things in my loc in at least the portrait edition (I did not check the landscape) that you may or may not

think are worth correcting in the online edition. (1) You changed my word 'market-oriented' to 'market-orientated.' At least in US English, 'orientated' is generally considered an unrecommended stylistic choice sometimes indicative of poor education. It is a back-formation from 'orientation.' (This is in the paragraph starting 'Early Cherryh works'.) (2) Later, in my discussion of Willis Conover, 'in a D. suburb' is your typo for 'in a D.C. suburb' (meaning a suburb of Washington, D.C., as I hope is clear to non-Americans). (3) Also, in a subsequent email (subject line Re: Conover, sent on 3 January 2017), I corrected the show that I saw Conover on from *I've Got a Secret* to *To Tell the Truth* (obviously that makes no difference to non-North Americans).

(10 June 2017)

I was unaware of the international difference in 'orientated'. *Merriam-Webster* online says it is 'chiefly British', but includes no usage note. However, I also found an essay explaining why in US usage 'oriented' is preferable, at: <http://writingexplained.org/oriented-vs-orientated-difference>. This site claims that even in British English, 'oriented' is much more common than 'orientated', but for all I know their methodology is faulty. And Australian usage might here differ from British, for that matter.

(10 June 2017)

In my loc to *SFC* 91, I expressed a wish to see Ken MacLeod's introduction to the British edition of the new *Hard to Be a God* translation. A local bookstore (in fact the one where Steve Stiles used to work) carries a small selection of remaindered British SF paperbacks, often of books that also have a U. edition. The edition with the MacLeod intro recently showed up there. (These imported books are priced cheaper than new paperbacks in Britain, but not much cheaper than new US paperbacks.) The intro was short, so I read it in the bookstore. It proved, like the Hari Kunzru one in the US edition, to be mostly on the sociopolitical background of the novel, although it does draw a few genre comparisons, such as with Ian M. Banks. MacLeod makes the point that the Strugatskys may be drawing a parallel between the unpredicted rise of fascism in late-medieval Arkanar with the unpredicted rise of totalitarian Stalinism in the socialist USSR. An interesting thought, but Boris Strugatsky in his own writing stresses instead that the work is opposing the possible recurrence of Stalinism under Khrushchev. (The reality, under Brezhnev and successors, never got quite that bad, but it got bad enough.)

(9 August 2017)

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## Letters of comment about SF Commentary 94

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### Feature letters:

### Leigh Edmonds, Robert Day, and Bruce Gillespie

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#### LEIGH EDMONDS

Ballarat East VIC 3350

Thanks for letting me know about *SFC* 94. I can't make up my mind which format I like it in but either way, the print is a bit small on this screen to read comfortably so I have to see what it looks like on my 'device'. In terms of the way images sit on the page I prefer the landscape version but for reading perhaps the portrait.

(7 June 2017)

[\*brg\* Thanks, Leigh, for *iOTA* 8, in particular for your essay about books about alternative history and books about real history. Many of my favourite SF books of recent times have been about alternative history, or alternative presents that turn on an alternative past. The best of the them all are Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. Len Deighton's *SS-GB* might be there as well, but I've only seen the TV series — powerful stuff.

People these days are gung ho for 'speculative' fiction, so alternative histories fit within that category. Recent alternative histories I've enjoyed have included *All Our Wrong Today's* by Elan Mastai; *The Massacre of Mankind: A Sequel to The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells, by Stephen Baxter; the 'Winter' novels by Dave Hutchinson, the best of which is *Europe at Midnight*; *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer; *Arcadia* by Iain Pears; and *The Lost Time Accidents* by John Wray. I should have reviewed all or most of them, but haven't. Time keeps being lost or misplaced.

Thanks for the full story of your enforced bed rest. Suffering a blood clot still sounds much more chilling an event than the account you offer.\*]

I'm also glad to be reminded of *Bring the Jubilee* and *The Man in the High Castle*, two stories that I still remember reading when most everything else has been forgotten. I wouldn't say that *The Berlin Project* is as good as either of those. Greg Benford seems to me to be a more 'mechanical' or perhaps *Analog*-style writer, which probably means that this book isn't memorable in the longer term.

Alternative history stories are popular? What came to my mind is a story in which Lee Harding and Ian Crozier patched up their differences and with their combined energy and imagination go on to establish *Etherline* as a major publishing empire, like *Locus* only a decade or two

earlier and much better. In this world Lee lives in a penthouse in one of those apartments in Collins Street which, by the way, AFPA owns, and you and I travel the world in business jets making billion-dollar deals for new stf films, or some such, and doing lunch with all the best writers.

That doesn't sound too bad.

(15 July 2017)

[\*brg\* All the alternative worlds sound better than the actuality. But I've been reminded quite a few times in recent months how close Australia came to being an outpost of the Third Reich (Len Deighton's introduction to *SS-GB* is a copy of the most probable surrender document that Britain would have had to sign if it had surrendered in 1941 or 1942, ceding all of Britain's possessions and dominions as well as Great Britain itself) or not being here at all (somebody disobeying a superior's order prevented the first shot of the Cuba conflict of 1962).

The other two alternative books I failed to mention are Ben Winters' *Underground Airlines* (people being sent north from the Confederacy in a modern divided USA) and Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railway* (slaves escape north from the Confederacy in the 1830s literally via an underground railway with branch lines).

I'm reading Race Mathews' *Of Labour and Liberty*, which reads very well as a history of Distributism, although it's basically his DTheol thesis; he gained this second doctorate two years ago, at the age of 79. (I do read entire books of history from time to time, although I had rather forgotten doing so. I read E. H. Carr's *What Is History* in 1968, while doing my DipEd, and must re-read it, to judge from your extracts.)

In *iOTA*, why not just keep adding to your timeline (the one that you gave out at Continuum), and republish it every few months? One thing you could do is include the publishing history of your own fanzines under various titles. All I remember of your separate titles is that *Fanew Sletter* was purely a newszine, and various other fanzines of yours included the nice mixture of personal stuff and reviews and articles.\*]

Race has two PhDs. That doesn't sound excessive. I did give some thought to doing this fandom history as another PhD so I could get in touch with some cultural



studies supervisors, but I reckoned they'd want to give the work the kind of shape I wouldn't want to give it. So I decided to supervise myself, which is one of the reasons for including the historiography parts.

I wouldn't read Carr again. He really is quite dated. If you want to have a go at something along those lines have a look at *The Art of Time Travel*. It is very nicely written and interesting but, now that I think about it, a bit self-indulgent. There's a lot more history going on in Australia than what he writes about. In many ways this book reinforces the current stereotypes — which doesn't mean that it isn't a good read.

I could probably put together a list of my fanzines up to about 1986 because I kept a complete file, which is now at Murdoch University. After that, it's complete chaos, and I suspect some of it has disappeared completely from before I started using Windows.

(16 July 2017)

**[\*brg\* If I remember correctly, Race Mathews did his PhD in the late nineties, a few years after he retired, and then his Doctor of Theology two years ago. He is, of course, a card-carrying atheist, but the Distributist movement is so deeply rooted in the Catholic Church's social reform arm that he found himself writing a history of some aspects of the Catholic Church in Australia, as well as going back to the beginnings of the Distributist movement in the late 1800s. Race actually talks about this stuff even better than he writes about it, if you can catch him a chatty mood. When you consider its doctorate origins, *Of Labour and Liberty* is a very readable and informative book.]**

**The trick is to find a History section in a bookshop these days. Brunswick Street Bookstore still has one, and so does Readings, but I'm not sure whether they would put a book about history in the History section or the Theory section (a much larger section). Most history I read these days is in the form of biography or autobiography.\*]**

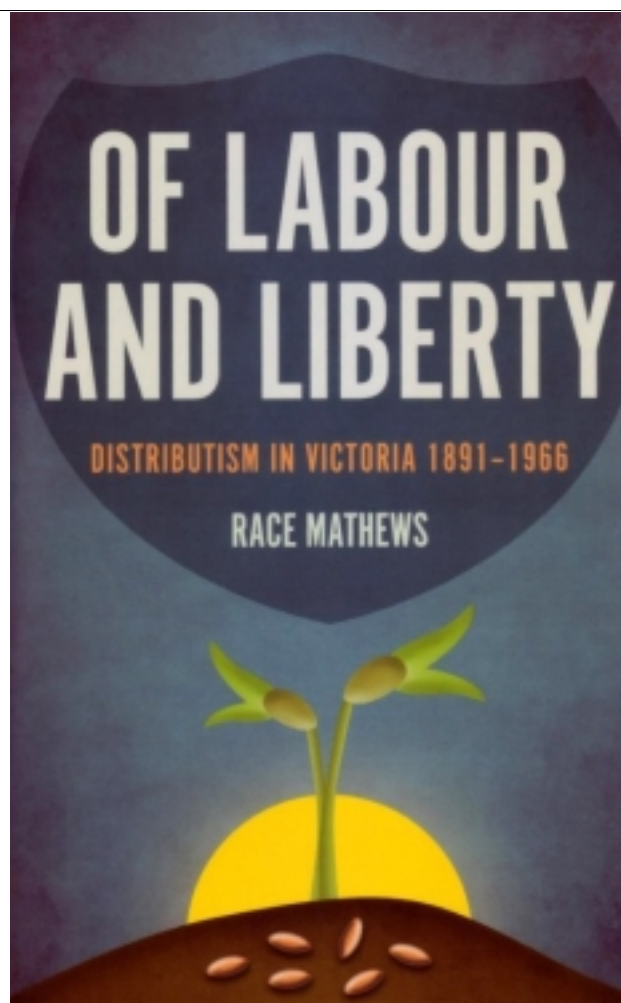
Race is one of those overachievers. I hope I have as much energy as he when I get to be his age.

I don't go into book shops these days; too tempting. What I do buy is usually history that I've seen reviewed in the history journals and which I then get through Booktopia or (if pressed) Amazon. It's not as much fun as going into book shops but I have enough trouble keeping up with the reading I want to do without adding more to the pile — and I hope not to have to go through the recent hospital stay to keep up again.

(18 July 2017)

**[\*brg\* Race sent me his new book as a review copy, so I really must read and review it. His wife Iola Mathews co-wrote a superb book about the history of her family in South Australia (the Hack family arrived just after the establishment of Adelaide). I indexed it, and thoroughly enjoyed reading it.\*]**

Browsing is a true pleasure but unfortunately I usually find things that I have to acquire as a result. So I try to avoid browsing to avoid the temptation. The last time I



was in Geelong I had a spare hour or so to kill so I gave in to temptation and found my way to Barwon Books, where I had spent many happy hours while working on the Barwon Water history. I knew that I was leading myself into temptation, but it was such an interesting bookshop that I could not resist. Sadly, or not as the case may be, the books had gone and there was one of those fashionable tapis serving restaurants where it had once stood. 'Phew!', I said to myself, 'that was a close one'.

When I think of Facebook I'm reminded of the character in *Dr Strangelove*, the base commander who talks about being robbed of his 'precious bodily fluids'. I reckon that we probably only have so many million words in our systems and that if we spend them on fripperies like Facebook then we won't have them to spend on other, and perhaps more worthwhile, things. Like letters of comment, perhaps?

Which reminds me to say that I've finally had the opportunity to start on the latest *SFC*. I see that Colin Steele has been relieved of his post as reviewer for the *Canberra Times* which means, I guess, no more of those crunch reviews for *SFC* either. I don't know whether or not this is a good thing; it means that in future I will have no idea at all about what I'm missing out on but, on the other hand, I won't be wracked by the sense that I'm really missing out by not having read, for example, the latest Chris Priest novel.

I have to go to Melbourne on Thursday, so that means more reading time. Perhaps I will continue this then.

(25 July 2017)

**[\*brg\* I thought it was clear from Colin Steele's introduction to his column that although he is no longer reviewing for *The Canberra Times*, he is now reviewing exclusively for *SF Commentary*. I leave it up to him how he uses the column to elicit review copies from publishers — that's still one of his main aims.**

**Not sure how long the noble art of the Letter of Comment will last. I came across my *Metaphysical Review* files the other day. These were the letters of comment to just the last two issues, Nos 27 and 28 (both from 1998). There must be at least 80,000 words of locs there, perhaps 100,000. But I printed and posted 300 copies each of *TMRs* 27 and 28, an impossible feat these days.**

**Secondhand bookstores just keep disappearing. But some of the best independent bookstores can still be found around Melbourne.\*]**

I went to see the specialist about my condition today and he kept me waiting an hour and a half, which gave me time to graze on the remainder of *SFC* 94. I can't say that I read it all, somehow my eyes sort of slide over the occasional paragraph that looks like serious litcrit, but I enjoyed the rest. This 'sliding' must have been a habit I picked up many years ago and I can't get rid of it. I've been reading old issues of *ASFR* these past few days and being reminded yet again what an amazing thing it was. I came across a Bob Smith paragraph (probably in issue 11) saying that nothing like it had been produced in Australia before, and very little of its quality anywhere. There is some fine writing by Lee Harding and John Foyster, and when John Bangsund lets loose his wit and ability with words there are only a very few fan writers who come close. But this 'sliding' across litcrit that my eyes does is a problem because I'm trying to get a 'feel' for what the writing was like, and suddenly I'm at the end of a Widdershins piece and I realise I've taken in absolutely nothing of it. Which is a pity, because it was such clever writing.

**[\*brg\* That's your outlook, not mine. Looking through nearly 50 years of *SF Commentary*, *The Metaphysical Review*, and *Steam Engine Time*, I realise that 'litcrit' (non-academic; 'straight talk about science fiction', as Harry Warner Jr wrote) is what readers really respond to. There's nothing like *SF Commentary* left anywhere, anyway.\*]**

But I'm supposed to be writing about *SFC*, not *ASFR*. Boyohboy, do some of us carry on with long wandering discourses on this and that — and I'm looking right at you Edmonds! Perhaps we should take a pledge of self-denial and limit ourselves to no more than a couple of thousand words when we respond to an issue. That way you could fit lots more people into each issue.

I was highly taken — as you would expect — by Robert Day's commentary on making scale models and the web site address he gave. I had to look it up when I got home and, boy, does he make some nice models. So, instead of beaver away on this letter of comment I instead had a bit of a look around his website and forgot all about the fine things that I was going to write about (which may



**XFY-1 model. (Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)**

not be a bad thing and push me over my word limit).

Robert mentions the problem of trying to get a kit of a Scruggs Wonderplane XFY-1 (what a fabulously fannish name for an aeroplane — there certainly was such an aeroplane as an XFY-1 but I don't recall that it was made by Scruggs) from your local hobby store. The solution to this problem is not to suddenly get the urge to make such a model but not be able to find one. The trick is to realise, many years earlier, that there will come a time when you get that urge to make that model and so to buy the kit when you see it the shop so that it's waiting for you when that urge does strike. This means, of course, buying a lot of kits that you think you might want to build one day way off in the future, and the end result is poor souls like me with a garage full of unmade kits, so many that I will need to live to be 136 to make them all.

This strategy does pay off occasionally. Of late I've had the urge to make models of various business jets, and one of the prettiest is the old Aero Commander 1121 — the Jet Commander. As it turns out, there was a kit of this made back in the 1960s which you can now buy on the interweb for over \$100. Unlike many kits where the molds are passed from one company to another and repressed endlessly, the moulds for this kit were broken in a train wreck many years ago (modellers possess such arcane knowledge) and so there will be no more pressings of this particular kit. But, a decade or so ago, I picked up one for only a few dollars and now, great joy, it is built

and in the process of being painted. It will be beautiful or, as the Ballarat club motto reads, '*is ero bellus*'. Ours might be the only scale-modelling club in existence that has a Latin motto, but then about 20 per cent of our members have PhDs and we had to do something with the extra brainpower so we're also known to discuss the philosophy of Pythagoras when we get over criticising the latest Airfix kit (not that there's too much to complain about there).

I could go on about this all day and all night, but not to bore your readers witless should you decide to print this. I should also mention, and you can pass this on to Robert, than only this past weekend I started my own blog, which is mainly about scale modelling. It is called *A Place to Put Things* and it's not very interesting so far unless you like looking at pictures of a model of a Qantas Boeing 707-338C. I don't expect it to get too much more exciting in the future either.

Actually, although the material collected might be different, there's probably not much difference between stocking up on Douglas DC-8 kits for future enjoyment than there is to buying books or music that you hope to get around to reading or listening to one of these days. I'm certain I have many more as yet unread books in this house than unmake model kits in the garage. And it is highly unlikely that I'm going to live to be 136 so most of them will remain unread and unmade. But at least they are there, ready to hand, if the urge should ever take me. That's what I keep telling myself, anyhow.

PS: Talking about living to be 136. The doctor's verdict today was that I am progressing very well for a person who was in my condition when I arrived at the hospital. (It keeps getting worse each time I see a medical practitioner about it.) The other thing he said is that, after running all the tests they can think of, they have no idea what caused the blood clotting in the first place and so I will have to keep on taking the tablets to keep my blood from clotting — and, as he said, waking up dead one morning — from here on until I run out of kits to make and books to read. Not entirely good news, but it could have been a great deal worse.

(26 July 2017)

## ROBERT DAY

**Flat 2, Heatherlea, Station Road, Kirby  
Nuxloe, Leicestershire LE9 2EN, England**

Thanks for sharing Leigh's loc with me. I should put him out of his misery over the 'Scruggs Wonderplane XFY-1' — that's a generic joke name someone — probably a model aviation journalist called Mike McEvoy — came up with many years ago for any obscure aeroplane that got kitted once, and which probably flew with the Force Aérienne de Burkino Fasso or some other equally obscure outfit. (Aviation enthusiasts revel in obscurity, whilst railway enthusiasts so often seem to prefer the familiar. How strange.)

Of course, like most interests, building scale model aeroplanes evolves into a fandom, with its household names, its events, its filthy pros, and its own fanspeak. So Leigh has described his stash of unbuilt kits; everyone

has a stash, whether it be large or small; and we all know, deep down, that it exists to prove the adage about collectors — 'the one with the most toys when they die is the winner'. Certainly, my last will and testament will tell my colleagues in the Sutton Coldfield Model Makers' Society where to go, and tell them that there will be a bucket by the door, and that they should otherwise fill their boots. As with any collection, at the end of the day it only exists to conserve that which is collected and to recycle it among new aficionados when the time comes.

A surprising number of SF people also have connections with aviation; I know that the former publisher's editor and now agent, John Jarrold, is not averse to cutting the plastic from time to time. And of course, the late Bob Shaw worked in proper aviation, and wrote on the subject. I recollect picking up a second-hand copy of *Aircraft Annual* and finding a Bob Shaw article in it on the Sultan of Oman's Air Force. And it read just like any other piece of Bob's, matter-of-fact and yet lyrical, even on the subject of a bunch of (frankly) mercenary airmen flying out of a desert air strip but still sitting down to creature comforts of an evening, such as alfresco film shows, beneath a canopy of stars.

(26 July 2017)

## LEIGH EDMONDS again

I did get the joke about the Scruggs XFY-1 Wonderplane. My memory suggests that it might have been coined by whoever wrote the 'Roger' column on the inside back page of every issue of *Flight* back in the 1970s. Because I was working in the Department of Civil Aviation at the time, I was on the distribution list, and I'm sure that everyone on the list in our section got as much enjoyment out of reading Roger as I did. It was writing in a fannish style only about the aviation industry. The other part of the joke is, of course, that there was an XFY-1, only it was made by Convair and it is a wonder that it flew. Actually it didn't fly very well, which is why it never went beyond the experimental stage (hence the X in the designation).

To continue your education in such things, Bruce, the F stands for 'Fighter' and the 'Y' tells you that it was manufactured by Convair. The '-1' tells you that this was the first version of the XFY. I hope that is clear. I could go on and fill another half dozen pages with interesting — to me anyhow — facts about aeroplane designation systems around the world, but, again, I will exercise restraint.

I have a different attitude to Robert about what he calls his Stash and I call my Treasure. Unlike most modellers, I hope to have turned all of the scale model kits in my collection into models by the time I die, which, by current estimations, will be when I'm around 136. Plan to live forever in the knowledge that you could be dead tomorrow, as they say. Consequently, I will consider myself to be the winner in the Stash/Treasure size competition if I have the smallest one when I do finally get around to going to the Great Model Shop in the sky which is, of course, right next to the Tucker Hotel.

I did remember that Bob Shaw worked as a designer



for Short Brothers in Belfast. To me his most memorable fanzine article was about how he (and some others perhaps) had spent a year designing a door for the Short Belfast that could be used as an emergency exit if the crew and passengers needed to leave quickly. Only when the project was completed did he discover that his door was located immediately in front of one of the inboard propellers so that anybody who used it would be instantly chopped into a thousand tiny pieces. I think I might have chatted to Bob about this during dinner at Aussiecon 2. Ah well, Bruce, enough entertainment for now. I

think I'll go and give the model of a BOAC Cunard Boeing 707-436 (did your eyes glaze over for a moment there, as my eyes glaze over litcrit — maybe there isn't enough room in my brain for both kinds of knowledge). I'm making another undercoat of white (two coats of white primer, two or three undercoats of white automotive lacquer, a brisk rubbing down and two top coats of Tamiya rattle can TS-26 does the job nicely, if you're interested) and then get on with *iOTA*.

(11 August 2017)

## Paul Skelton: the Steam Engine Time letter that escaped

**[\*brg\* *Steam Engine Time* finished its run in 2013. Readers were told that No. 12 was the last issue, but they sent letters of comment anyway. They are safely tucked away in a file, and will be published when I find time to prepare the index to all 12 issues of *SET*. However, the following letter about the phrase 'steam engine time' bounced in from famous British fan Paul Skelton. Since it's the first letter of comment he's sent me for quite a few years, I thought it needed airing now. Besides, it's also a tribute to Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, editors of the very-much-not-defunct *Banana Wings*.\*]**

**PAUL SKELTON  
122 Mile End Lane,  
Stockport, Cheshire, SK2 6BY, England.**

The reason I was asking about the context of the title for *Steam Engine Time* was that I mentioned it in a letter of comment to *Banana Wings* 55, though Claire and Mark cut that bit.

Here's the appropriate bit ...

When I wrote of James Watt looking at the rattling kettle-lid it was with the unspoken assumption that he was the inventor of the steam engine. Since then of course I have been reading *The Book of General Ignorance* by John Lloyd and John Mitchinson, which points out that lots of the things we thought we knew (such as for instance the telephone being invented by Alexander Graham Bell) are simply not so. And no, the steam engine wasn't Thomas Newcomen either. Apparently it was invented by a bloke called Heron (more usually known as Hero, particularly when he wasn't snaffling frogs from Cas' pond) from Egypt. Let me quote from pages 24–25 of the book (and yes, really, there is a germane point to all this):

'Heron lived in Alexandria around AD 62, and is best known as a mathematician and geometer. He was also a visionary inventor and his aeolopile or 'wind-ball' was the first working steam engine. Using the same principle as jet propulsion, a steam-driven metal sphere spun around at 1500 rpm. Unfortunately for Heron, no one was able to see its practical function,

so it was considered nothing more than an amusing novelty.

'Amazingly, had Heron but known it, the railway had already been invented 700 years earlier by Periander, tyrant of Corinth. Called the Diolkos, or Slipway, it ran for 6 km (4 miles) across the Isthmus of Corinth in Greece, and consisted of a roadway paved with limestone blocks in which were cut parallel grooves 1.5 m (5 feet) apart. Trolleys ran along these tracks, onto which ships were loaded. These were pushed by gangs of slaves forming a sort of 'land-canal' offering a short cut between the Aegean and Ionian seas.

'The Diolkos was in use for some 1500 years before it fell into disrepair around AD 900. The principle of railways was then completely forgotten about for almost another 500 years, until people had the idea of using them in mines in the fourteenth century ...'

And whilst all that is interesting, if not indeed fascinating, here's the 'germane' bit ...

'The historian Arnold Toynbee wrote a brilliant essay speculating what would have happened if the two inventions had been combined to create a global Greek empire, based on a fast rail network, Athenian democracy, and a Buddhist-style religion founded on the teachings of Pythagoras. He briefly mentions a failed prophet who lived at 4, Railway Cuttings, Nazareth.'

So, does this mean that Arnold Toynbee was the inventor of the entire school of 'Alternative History SF'? Hey, and just how fannish was that '4, Railway Cuttings, Nazareth'? Obviously, when you are arse-deep in slaves there's little demand for a steam engine, so it just wasn't 'Steam Engine Time' ... and as I typed those three words I realised I might just have been incredibly stupid and spent all this time telling you something everybody already knows, given that there was a fanzine of that title and all this may already have been discussed there, and even possibly have been the reason behind the title. Ah, well, what the hell Archy. In for a penny, in for a pound, so I'll just finish off the quote from the book: 'Heron also invented the vending machine — for four drachmas you got a shot of holy water — and a portable device to ensure that no one else could drink the wine you

brought along to a bottle party.'

The LASFS still use this last I believe in their clubhouse. When Marty and Robbie Cantor took us to a meeting, back in 1990, Marty showed me the drinks fridge and pointed out that anything in plain view was available to anyone, whereas stuff in paper bags was for the use of the person who'd brought it. He then directed me to a nearby equivalent of an off-licence where I picked up a half-bottle of scotch and, being the mean old cheapskate I mentioned earlier, ensured it was brown-bagged. Of course I don't know if Heron actually invented the brown papyrus-bag, or an equivalent device, but either way I guess the LASFS can claim that some of their traditions go back to around AD 65.'

Claire claimed to have made the cut in the *Banana Wings* version for space considerations, but given my concerns when I mentioned *Steam Engine Time* back there I was never quite sure whether maybe she was just sparing my blushes, given that I might have been the only ignoramus who wasn't already familiar with all the above material. The thing is I still consider it interesting, particularly the concept that Toynbee is the father of the 'Alternate History' SF sub-genre; especially with yesterday's information on Google about the Antikythera Mechanism. I'd like to briefly mention it in *All New or Reprint 2*, but not if it's already old hat. So what I'm asking is, was this information generally known, and was it discussed in *SET*? Obviously, if it was, I don't want to be coming at it again.

(19 May 2017)

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## GERALD MURNANE PO Box 40 Goroke VIC 3412

I was sorry to hear about your trials with Centrelink. It was a happy day for me a few years ago when I finally revealed to them that I was not residing in my own home. This allowed them to include the house in Macleod as one of my assets and to disqualify me immediately from receiving a part-pension and from holding their health card or whatever they call it. I didn't miss the hundred dollars of pension that they had been paying me but I was sorry to lose the health-card. Overall, tho, I was glad to have no more to do with Centrelink. Just to step onto their premises, which I did rarely, was to feel oneself suspected of some or another wrongdoing. It always puzzles me, by the way, to hear stories of honest citizens such as yourself being hounded, when I see every day in Goroke able-bodied men living a life of leisure while being neither employed nor in search of employment but, presumably, collecting money every fortnight from Centrelink.

Two recent blood tests strongly suggest that my prostate cancer has been arrested, if not yet extirpated. A further test in December will indicate my condition even more clearly.

My thirteenth book, *Border Districts*, will be published by Giramondo in November. Soon afterwards, they'll

[\*brg\* Thanks very much, Skel. Great stuff about the 'steam engine time' concept, especially the re-invention of railways over the centuries. I don't think anyone ever discussed the concept in detail in the magazine *Steam Engine Time*. I've just looked through No. 1 (April 2000), which can be found on [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com). I discovered there, in my editorial, a description of how Maureen Kincaid Speller, Paul Kincaid, and I came to publish *Steam Engine Time*, but absolutely nothing about the concept itself! So obviously Maureen (whose title it was), Paul, and I must have taken it for granted that SF fans would know what we were talking about.

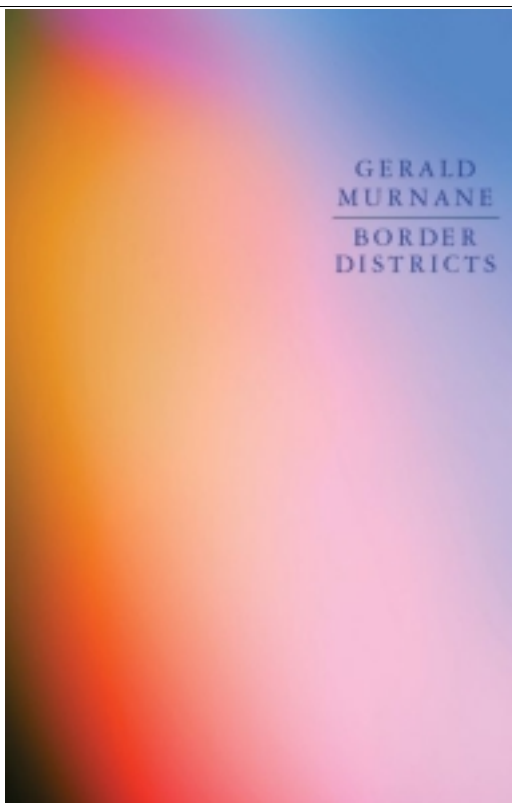
As the letters of comment rolled in, it became plain that quite a few people were puzzled about the 'SET' concept, so I know we must have explained it later, especially when Gary Westfahl's *Science Fiction Quotations* (Yale University Press) was published in 2006. It includes Charles Fort's original wording (p. 286): 'If human thought is a growth, like all other growths, its logic is without foundation of its own, and is only the adjusting constructiveness of all other growing things. A tree cannot find out, as it were, how to blossom, until comes blossom-time. A social growth cannot find out the use of steam engines, until comes steam-engine-time (Lo!, 1931).'

Once I found the quote, I'm pretty sure I used it in every subsequent issue of *SET*. If we had used the title *Blossom-Time*, we would have been plagued by gardening enthusiasts. As it is, we seem to have attracted no steam engine fans.\*]

publish *The Collected Short Fiction of Gerald Murnane*, which hardly counts as a new book, given that all but one of the pieces in it have been previously published in books of mine. The same two books will be published in New York early next year by Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, except that the collection will be titled *Stream System*. My fourteenth book, to be published late next year by Giramondo, will be a collection of poetry.

In the meanwhile, Michael Heyward is reading the unpublished second half of the long work that was cut in half to produce *A Lifetime on Clouds*. Before he got it from me he was keen to publish the long original under its latest title, *A Season In Mind*. (Over the years, I've devised and discarded several titles for that odd book.) I'm not sure that he'll like what I've given him, but I'm no judge of how others react to my work. The Americans are making a great fuss of *Border Districts*, which I regard as a quiet, autumnal fictional essay not to be counted among my best six or seven books. There's even talk of a journalist from the *New York Times Magazine* coming to Goroke and doing in-depth interviews with me over several days. If this comes to pass, it will be an amazing vindication of something you once quoted to me from Kafka many, many years ago, something to the effect that if you stay at your desk the world will come and writhe on the floor in your sight.

Anyway, even if the *New York Times* doesn't turn up, a Gerald Murnane Conference is taking place in early



Cover of Australian edition (Giramondo).

December in the clubhouse of the Golf Club, with eight distinguished scholars presenting papers on my work and me also saying my piece.

PS: Google *Border Districts* Macmillan and admire their wondrous cover, far better than the stuff I've had on many of my other books.

(16 June 2017 and Grand Final Day 2017)

**[\*brg\* Ever since I read the manuscript of the whole manuscript of what was then called *A Season on Earth* in the 1970s, I've hoped that the complete book would eventually be published. Over 40 years later, lo! it will come to pass.**

**I am intrigued by the thought of staging a Gerald Murnane Conference in Goroke. Are there enough hotel rooms in Goroke, or do the eight distinguished scholars need to bring their own camping gear? And will any part of the proceedings ever be published so that the Gerald Murnane readers of the world can participate in some way?\***

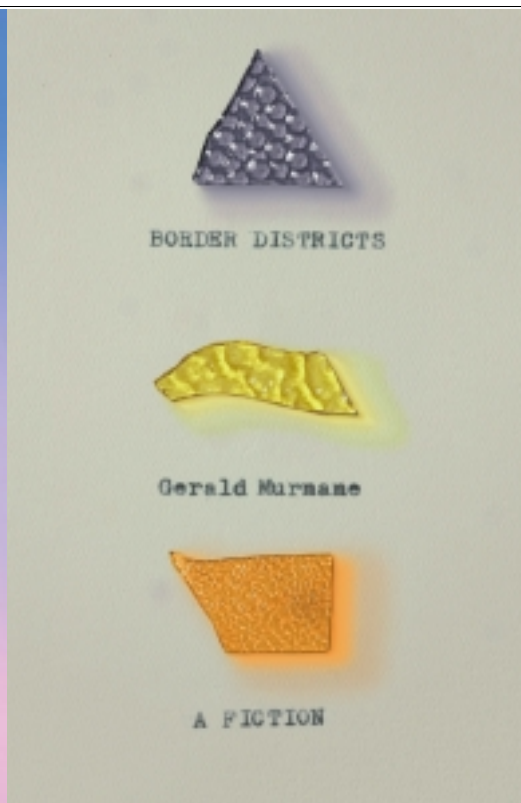
#### **LAST EMAIL FROM**

**RANDY BYERS, Seattle, Washington USA**

Thanks, Bruce. I'm sorry to hear of your continuing financial difficulties, but absolutely no worries on the paper fanzine front. Do what you have to do to keep pubbing yer ish.

(7 June 2017)

**[\*brg\* Randy suffered a recurrence of brain cancer not long after this email, and could no longer communicate with all his friends. He died on 20**



Cover of US edition (Macmillan).

**November 2017. See page 4 for my early short tribute. In a year of sad news and losses, this is the saddest news of all.\*]**

**MICHAEL DOBSON**

**8042 Park Overlook Drive,  
Bethesda MD 20817, USA**

In *SFC 94*, I particularly enjoyed your history in SF and fandom. My earliest memory of an SF-style book was *Space Flight*, from the Golden Library of Knowledge, which I later discovered was by Lester Del Rey. The first two books I bought, armed with US80¢ earned from selling greeting cards, were Eric Frank Russell's *Men, Martians, and Machines*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*, about as diverse a pair of books as you could imagine.

I've sent you a copy of *Random Jottings* 12, but given that you publish so much more frequently than I do, and that you've expressed a willingness to read the ish on eFanzines, I'm thinking I should return the favour and save you the trans-Pacific postage. Let's make *RJ* 12 the last physical trade, and I will henceforth look for each new issue courtesy of Bill Burns.

(19 May 2017)

**LARRY BIGMAN**

**21 Bel Air Drive, Orinda CA 94563, USA**

The Philip K. Dick conference went well, and I got much positive feedback. They are considering publishing proceedings, so will see. Mine was designed as a talk, not a classic academic paper. But I do intend to expand it now, and that will come your way.

(31 July 2016)



Obviously you caught my vibes in the trans-Pacific aether just now! Just three minutes ago I finished leafing through *SFCs* 1 to 20. Packing up and moving books to storage in order to refinish wood floors, I got to the *SFC* box a few days ago. Which prompted me just yesterday to look at eFanzines, and I saw *SFC* 94 and your announcement. I know you know I'm disappointed (given my full *SFC* set and history and all), but I'm very understanding. If/when you do more print, count me in. Would you send me new issues of *\*brg\** for now please? Thank you.

(6 June 2017)

I just visited Jack Rems at Dark Carnival bookstore in Berkeley today. Jack recently announced he will be closing up later this year after 41 years. He's understandably sad and realistic about the current and likely future state of independent bookstores, let alone specialty F&SF ones. I've been a customer since 1980 when we moved to Sacramento, right after my wife and I married and I graduated medical school. I brought to show Jack today the first book I bought from him, the Simon & Schuster first edition of Greg Benford's great *Timescape*. We had gotten to Sacramento in late June of 1980 so I could start my internship at UC Davis. *Timescape* came out in July, sold well, and went through reprints quickly. As a collector, I wanted a first edition, but couldn't find one until my first ever visit to Dark Carnival that August. I've been a regular visitor and customer ever since. And for the last 20 years I live all of 15 minutes away. But now it will be gone. It is sound testimony to Jack's interest and efforts that he has maintained such a major lynchpin of the SF community in the Bay Area for over four decades. Now Alan Beatts' Borderlands Books in San Francisco will be the sole remaining genre bookstore in the SF Bay Area. When I moved here 20 years ago, there were five.

(13 July 2017)

## JOHN LITCHEN

**PO Box 3503, Robina Town Centre QLD 4230**

I was wondering when you would finally go all electronic, and now it's happened. It should be a lot easier on you since you won't be restricted to page numbers by printers and postage costs.

I still don't understand those people who have no way of downloading a file. Surely they can go to their public library and book some computer time (which is usually free) and download copies to read. They probably have to pay for the paper in the printer if they want to print it. Then there are those places in shopping malls where for \$2 you can get a half hour on a computer. Surely they can download a PDF file to look at from eFanzines. They wouldn't want to print it, because it costs 10 cents a page. Do those people have mobiles? Most mobiles will allow you to download PDF files.

(8 June 2017)

I discovered a book called *Melbourne and Mars: My Life on Two Planets*, by John Frazer, published in Melbourne in 1889. This predates *War of the Worlds* and the sequel to it

by Gary P. Serviss, *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (which was serialised immediately at the conclusion of the American serialisation of *War of the Worlds*).

*Melbourne and Mars* is a fascinating book, in that it contrasts life in the Victorian colony from 1850 to 1889, and particularly in Melbourne, with an idyllic life on Mars. Both Serviss's book and Fraser's book use 'electricity' as the super power that makes life easier for everyone. Everything is powered by electricity. The part about Melbourne is probably the most accurate telling of what life was like in that city in that time. John Frazer died the same year this book was published. He had previously written books about how to find a husband and books on the science of phrenology. He was practising as a phrenologist (with his wife) as well as a relations adviser for people wanting to arrange marriages. The book is only available as a downloaded PDF from the National Library archives (and it is free).

Did you know that E. C. Tubb wrote at least five books (apart from *Alien Dust*) about Mars or with a Martian setting in the 1950s?

He wrote in all 144 novels, including 33 about Dumarest and his search for a long-lost almost mythical Earth, and filled magazines in the 1950s with shorter works. He died in 2010. He kept writing up until he died, and his last novel, finished in 2008, wasn't published until after he died. All his stuff would be space opera or planetary adventure stories. I've been looking at some of them and it is surprising how good his writing was. He used about seven pen names, and in some years wrote as many as six novels, and who knows how many short stories. He also wrote murder mysteries and westerns under pen names. His output slowed down in the 1970s and on but he never stopped writing.

These early writers who made their living as writers were quite phenomenal, and to think E. C. Tubb was only one of many who did the same over the middle part of the twentieth century, at least before TV penetrated households worldwide and people stopped reading as much so they could watch their newly acquired marvellous moving picture device. They also stopped attending movies, which prompted the development of 3D as well as widescreen systems. (The first 3D film was made in 1922 and it was a science fiction telefilm called *M.A.R.S.* about a scientist who makes radio contact with Mars. It was also released as a 2D version in cinemas and it was called variously *The Man from Mars*, *Radio Mania*, or *Mars Calling*.)

(8 June 2017)

## RAY WOOD

**PO Box 188, Quorn SA 5433**

I'm still managing to survive, though I'll probably need a carer sometime soon. (The post-polio stuff is, I think, finally having its way with me.) All the same, I manage to go hiking in the country around Quorn around two days a week. Walking I can still do, though most other things are getting beyond me.

Yesterday my regular hiking mate and I climbed Mt Brown to do battle against the bull-ants. They love to nest along our walking trails because they provide super-

highways for them to forage vastly further than normal. And the Meat-Ant variety of bull-ants (they have red heads) every now and then seem to go insane, and attack anyone walking over or even near their nests. They can jump up to 15 cm onto you. So they frighten the hell out of, especially overseas visitors, who of course have never met such an attack before. You probably know that Bull-Ants exist only in Australia, though of our 94 species one is found on New Caledonia. More people die from Bull-Ant bites in Australia every year than die from snake bite.

So we were pick-axing their very large nests, which are usually two to three square metres big, and then spraying them with poison. You have to do that several times before they finally give up and move elsewhere.

Weirdest thing of all in my battle with growing old, I think, is that though my handwriting still works fine, for some insane reason my typing has become dyslexic!

I entertain myself, when I'm not hiking, by typing fairy tales, would you believe — purely for my own entertainment. I've come round to the opinion that the fairy tale is probably the earliest 'literary' genre of all. It's what I reckon the Songman chanted and sang and gestured and danced on one side of the tribe's night-time fire. Actually, I feel that science fiction is a sub-genre of the fairy tale genre. I've also come to think the fairy tale is the greatest of all literary genres.

I'm typing my seventy-second fairy tale at present. They're short stories, novelettes, novellas, short novels, and novels, close to a million words of them now. How weird is that? Good for a laugh, anyway.

It amuses me that, as my memory gets worse, my creative powers get better.

(8 June 2017)

## CASEY WOLF

**14-2320 Woodland Drive,  
Vancouver BC V5N 3P2, Canada**

Oh, please don't feel guilty. You have gone above and beyond the call of fannish duty and I will just have to step up to the plate and learn to love reading on the iPad. I'll have to find a new way to comment, too — I use the technique of writing faint pencil notes on the page or an asterisk by a section I want to reread and potentially comment on. I can't do that on the PDF, at least not on the iPad, and I really don't like reading on the laptop. I will have to break from my mould and boldly go where I haven't been willing to go before. I will think of it as an adventure, and no doubt it will be just fine. Sorry I took so long to stop whinging about it. The upside is your zines will no longer be sitting next to the loo, which makes them easy to dip into but may be undignified.

I am at a place of plateau and partial paralysis as far as home-hunting goes. I have applied everywhere I wanted to, and if I want to widen my search I have to apply to places I don't want to live in, and so it is more scary than frustrating. Remembering that I make less on my handicapped pension than a single market rent apartment now costs, I must get a subsidised place, and they are very hard to come by. With the tearing down and rebuilding of Vancouver, there are thousands now com-

peting for those spots. I was talking with someone at BC Housing the other day; she said she knows people who have applied to 30 or 40 places and still have been waiting several years. The frank reality is that seniors are ending up on the streets, literally, in homeless shelters or in cars or sleeping in parking garages. It is terrifying. Even people in their eighties, believe it or not. So I am considering an option I have not wanted to go for, and that is leaving my city entirely and starting elsewhere. I don't think I have the courage to do it. I don't want to start all over again, and I don't really have the resources. But I am looking at it. We shall see. So far I have secured a bed in Haiti for a few months if I lose my home here, and another in a friend's house here for, again, a while. But neither of those would work long term and I am exhausted just thinking about it.

I definitely get the sense of wonder in Randy's photo. I instantly liked it when I saw it, before I had even taken in the details. I would happily toss myself onto one of those chairs and gaze off at the horizon. And I see the connection to Jeffrey Smart — whose work-related paintings are particularly attractive to me. I wonder if a postcard I bought years ago in Australia might have been one of his earlier works. There is a feeling that is familiar.

When people are faced with brain tumours and such, in my experience they get very brave very fast. Suddenly every moment counts, and much of what got in the way before is irrelevant. It was that way for me, though my cancer was elsewhere. It still might have killed me. Of course, terror comes with this, but also untapped strength. I wonder if Randy feels amazing at all, or even courageous, or just feels like he is doing all he can in the time allotted. This is not to downplay his courage, but to change perspective on it. My friend Kathy had one of the more distressing cancers I have witnessed and died at about 40 years of age after several years of struggle. Yet every painful step of the way she would shrug and say, 'It could be worse.' And carried on enjoying her life as much as she possibly could.

Glad to hear you, Elaine, and the cats are all about the good life there. Do you see any kittens in your future?

(11 June 2017)

## KEVIN CHEEK

***A Feast of Laughter: An Appreciation of R. A. Lafferty*, Ktistec Press, 10745 N. De Anza Blvd, Unit 313, Cupertino CA 95014, USA**

I am the editor of *A Feast of Laughter*. Please give my thanks to Elaine for her article about R. A. Lafferty. The amazing combination of material we were able to assemble for Volume 1 led to the continuation of *Feast of Laughter* into the foreseeable and unforeseeable future.

We are planning Volume 5, which is planned to come out right after the new year. We would love to include any thoughts on Lafferty you and Elaine would care to write.

(19 July 2017)

**[\*brg\* *East of Laughter*, Edition 4, contains articles by people such as Michael Swanwick, Robert Silverberg, Gene Wolfe, Gardner Dozois, Sheryl**

Smith, Dave Langford, and many others. Elaine has only ever written one article about the works of R. A. Lafferty. It appeared in *Steam Engine Time* 1, and a few years ago in *Feast of Laughter* No. 1. I've never written about Lafferty because I just not clever enough to untangle his glorious mythic stories.\*]

**LLOYD PENNEY**  
**1706–24 Eva Rd.,**  
**Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2, Canada**

As much as I like the new technologies that have radically changed our lives, I regret some of the changes, such as those to books, fanzines, magazines, and cursive writing. Perhaps they are old, but they have formed a huge part of our lives, and now they are being phased out, and we are ridiculed for our desire to keep them around. So, there are still those who will not deal with electronic zines, and that is their loss. I understand the modern finances, and honestly, it's a lot easier to store an e-zine than a paper zine. I have, at this time, no source of income, either. Even jobs where I had a second interview seem to have dried up, and those people so excited to talk to me gone silent. And, there are few publishing jobs here. I wish there was a fund I could draw upon, but there are no other sources available. Bless Yvonne for being willing and able to support me at this time.

This past 12 months has been full of politics of the negative, as in to my south, and of the positive, in elections here and in France. There are many politicians who need a sharp reminder that becoming a representative does not give them the keys to the treasury at their discretion, but makes them civil servants, and the public their bosses. I remember my own high school reunion many years ago. Only one from my graduating class showed up, and I was told the rest lived in town, and weren't interested in even showing up to the free event. My high school was torn down two years ago.

I have noticed in Australian and American politics that high-priced executives are hired as managers of major government departments, not to defend the organisation, but to destroy it from within.

I turned 58 in June, and feel old enough as it is. Yvonne is planning to have a massive retirement and 65th birthday party for herself, and all I can do is help with the planning. (Her retirement day may be her last day at work, which will also be her birthday. What a gift to give to yourself.) A belated happy birthday to you, Bruce. May there many more.

To Patrick McGuire: There was no settlement from my last job. I was simply laid off, and after nearly 20 months. I am still looking for work. I've had a little telemarketing here and there, some work doing registration for trade shows, and a little voicework, but nothing even semi-permanent.

*Murdoch Mysteries*, our favorite Canadian show, is now shooting its eleventh season, and it continues to look very good. We did indeed go to England, spent a week in London, and another in Lincoln. Yvonne is already saving for a return trip. I hope we can go, and I hope that I will be able to contribute to that saving. We are being

steampunk vendors; we vended at a show last weekend, and will vend again in two weeks. It is fun, but it is hard work bringing all the table furnishings to each show. This is the year that both Yvonne and I mark 40 years in fandom; I hope we will have the chance to celebrate that.  
(24 July 2017)

**ROBERT DAY**  
**again**

In *SFC 94*, Colin Steele writes about 'the diminished scene'. I get that feeling about SF generally. Many of the books that are being applauded by fans these days seem to be horror or fantasy. These things are all very well, but some of us yearn for more substantial fare. I remember a time when there would be SF books in any assembly of best-sellers in supermarkets; now it's a very rare event (especially since the death of Iain Banks). Even mainstream High Street bookshops here in the UK, such as W. H. Smiths, rarely have much of a range of good SF. The branch of Smiths I visit most often has one bay devoted to SF and Fantasy. One shelf is almost completely *Game of Thrones*; another is Stephen King; a third is comics. I find this depressing. For a better selection, I have to either drive to a larger Smiths, some six miles in the opposite direction; and even then, their selection is only slightly better. Otherwise, it's a trip into Leicester city centre, where there is a big Smiths and a branch of Waterstones. There, at least, I can find a reasonable range of titles; but my visits are fairly infrequent because of the cost of parking and the likelihood that I shall come away with a big pile of books that will sting me deeply in the pocket. As for independent bookshops — well, there aren't any. These shops are getting fewer and further between across wide swathes of the UK.

And then there are birthdays.

I shall turn 60 in just over a week's time. How that happened, I shall never know; I still feel like a thirty-something inside, and indeed as I work now with people where 45 is considered 'old', I find my outlook and attitudes pleasantly reflected in a lot of things that these people say, do, and think (even if I more often find myself siding with our office's slightly off-the-wall, conspiracy-theorist-vegan Pole than with the local millennials, mainly because the Polish guy seems better informed). (And he repays the compliment. He was deeply impressed a few weeks ago when he saw me looking at stuff about Stanislaw Lem online.)

Sadly, that 'head age' gets seriously challenged by physical conditions. I have to go tomorrow to have my prostate examined, with ultrasound and a biopsy sampler. 'Just to be sure' said the consultant, and I rather hope he's right. I've just started on a fourth tablet for blood pressure, and that's only about six weeks after starting on one for Type 2 diabetes. (When my doctor got the blood test results back with a fairly hefty increase in my blood sugars, I ventured to explain, 'Well, I might have backslid a little on the diet', to which he said 'Not your fault — you'd have had to throw the diet completely out of the window for that sort of increase.') Still, I venture to suggest that 40 or 50 years ago, I would have been much worse off with the same sort of ailments. And



indeed, I seem to remember that when my father hit 60, he was beginning to count down to retirement. Now, I can see the attractions, but my employers are talking about my getting training, and taking on new projects. I have to work a year longer than my father did to get my state pension; but just at the moment, I've still got new stuff to do rather than think about putting my feet up. (Having said that, I've got a few projects in mind for when I do finally retire; and I've not forgotten that I've agreed to do some articles for you. They are on my 'to-do' list for now, but they're about half-way down and other, more urgent stuff keeps pushing them further down the list ...)

I knew Peter Weston by sight; I only spoke to him a couple of times at conventions or at the BSFG, and *Speculation* was slightly before my fannish time (though I did at one stage have a copy of the last one, the Cordwainer Smith issue). But as Big Name Fans go, he was up there with his name in lights. You might find my review of his personal fannish history, *With Stars in my Eyes*, of interest: <http://deepwatersreading.wordpress.com/2017/02/10/with-stars-in-my-eyes-my-adventures-in-british-fandom-by-peter-weston/> And tonight, I hear that we have lost another British fan whose name might be remembered from 1980s fanzines, Alan Dorey.

Leigh Edmonds says of Wagner's Ring cycle that he 'got to the final chords .... with a sense of relief rather than elation'. Which put me in mind of Tchaikovsky's comments, when reviewing The Ring for a St Petersburg newspaper. 'When the final chords sounded, I felt as if I'd been let out of prison.' Yet after all that, I remain enthusiastic. I've just finished re-listening to my Wagner collection and chunks of The Ring and *Meistersinger* have been running around my head for weeks. And not the popular bits, either. In fact, I've decided that my retirement present to myself is going to be a trip to Bayreuth to see The Ring. Apparently, if I start applying for tickets in October when they go on sale for next year, I might stand a chance of getting some by 2024. (You can apply online, but the allotment of tickets for online sales is exhausted in minutes and you don't get a choice of where you sit for your selected price range.) And there are some cheap seats where you can't see the stage at all.

The job continues to go well. And I've had some time to think about the process I went through to get it, in particular the potential employer who didn't think I was 'a team player', and I think I've finally worked that one out. The company that I went to for that interview was a small outfit, run by the founder and owner, and he was in the interview session. In the course of that interview, the name of their chief competitor came up, and I said 'They're the reason I'm here today' and went on to tell the tale about how the owners of my last company — a venture capital house — had decided firstly to outsource all their IT development and testing to this competitor firm, and then thought 'What the hell — why don't we just buy the company anyway?' I may have been a bit scathing (in an oh-so-polite way) about this and about the owners of my last employer; and I think the owner of this company took that the wrong way. He saw himself as a part of his 'team', and there I was, dissing the owners of my last place. If that be so, then what he didn't realise was that these were distant owners based in London, with

no on-the-ground presence in Leicester, and no stake in the company or its employees other than the financial one. I had no sense that they had any interest in me or my colleagues; and so I owed no loyalty to them, because they'd certainly shown none to me. If this sole proprietor of the company I was interviewing for felt that meant that I might be disrespectful about him in future, well, he'd got the wrong end of the stick. But I owed my loyalty to my colleagues, the company I worked for, and ultimately their on-site management in Leicester, not a group of money suits in a office in London's West End. As far as they were concerned, despite having a multi-million-pound turnover, my company was just one in a portfolio of investments, and the individuals in it just numbers in the accounts.

Which taught me a valuable lesson about applying for jobs (and other human interactions as well); sometimes, with the best will in the world, there are times when there is just a complete mismatch between what one person says and what another person thinks he or she means, and that mismatch can be so great as to make any further understanding between those two people impossible. Chalk it up to experience and move on.

I share Casey Wolf's dislocation over dates beginning 20-something. I find it happens when I talk to sensible adults and they admit to having been born in years which I still think of as the recent past.

Patrick McGuire references the old TV game show *I've Got a Secret*, which had a brief run in the UK in the late 1960s/early 1970s. The thing I noticed about it, even then when I was quite young, was that the problem with the format was that you would occasionally get one contestant who completely outclassed all the others. The show seemed to have (in the UK, at least) a lot of women who had won awards from women's magazines — I'm convinced they had at least three people who claimed to be 'A Mum in a Million' — but for me, all the rest were outshone by a contestant who had played sandcastles with Albert Einstein.

As a child, this contestant had been taken on holiday to the Belgian coast in the middle 1930s. (They must have been reasonably well-off to afford such an excursion.) Being doughty Brits, the one thing that never stops a beach holiday is poor weather, and so it was that this person and his parents were on the beach near Oostende on a blustery and cold day when two men in overcoats and hats came along the beach. The younger of the two engaged this person's parents in conversation, while the older sat down and built sandcastles with the child. Later, he commented on his moustache and curly grey hair. It was indeed Einstein, stopping off before catching an ocean liner to cross into exile in America.

I doubt that story has been recorded anywhere else, and it's entirely possible the tapes of the show were lost. But what a recollection!

(25 July 2017)

**JOHN HERTZ**  
**236 S . Coronado St., No. 409,**  
**Los Angeles, CA 90057 USA**

You now know why I wanted to reach Ditmar (Dick

Jenssen by phone last November. When the Rotsler Award went West one year we realised we should ask first.

Robin Johnson phoned yesterday. It turned out he not only wished to converse, but worried on your behalf why you hadn't heard from me. Another awesome compliment. Many thanks.

Perhaps I ought to object to 'the American death cult', 'the great American fallacy, that the only way to solve problems is with violence ...'. I'm so pleased to see that someone else has spotted that. I call it the American Death Cult — the answer to any question in America seems to be 'death'.

Or perhaps I ought to feel flattered someone supposes the US so great that we hold a monopoly on this horrid notion plaguing humankind through the millenia. But it won't do.

Anyone who can see how Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories was no bumbling duffer — alas, I still haven't written my DUFF report — and yet can think Holmes a 'high-functioning sociopath' — well. Or unwell. I'll go back a step and deem it good such (dare I say it?) anti-intellectualism isn't contained on this continent. No. Can't be good.

I agree Blish's *Cities in Flight* stories are good. They're imaginative and craftsmanly (-man isn't masculine). At Denvention III the Classics of SF book discussions I called 'Wonders of 1958', six books in five talks because it seemed *The Triumph of Time* and *A Case of Conscience* ought to be considered together. I proposed that *Time* was better than *Conscience*. If an author makes bouncing on a hobby-horse the energy of a book my sorrow is neither complete nor conclusive — test case, *The Pilgrim's Progress* — but Blish's *Conscience* is weak. *Time* has plenty for a reader who's not drawn to its messages.

Poetry. To say the least, it's a management of our meeting phenomena too big or too powerful or too manmade — or too small or too weak or too nonhuman — to fit into the compass of prosaic understanding and expression. Certainly there's beauty in mathematics. Or music. Or painting. Or language. But if I can't show it to you, I'd better not blame you. None of this 'You have to dig it to dig it, you dig?' or 'If you have to ask, you'll never understand.' Attributed to Po Chü-I is 'Lao Tze, if one who knows speaks not, why did you write 5000 characters [i.e. the *Tao Teh Ching*]?'

If we're going to groan what SF got wrong, why stop at tape, film, microfilm? Why not complain about wire? I've said elsewhere that when I saw the wire recording in *Between Planets*. I'd never heard of such a thing and took it for some futuristic technology. But even 'SF is not in the prediction business' doesn't end the inquiry. The author has to anchor strangeness in something. Tolkien was angry at Shakespeare's fairies, but that's what Shakespeare's audience knew. In a different day Tolkien made his Elves otherwise. Also a different medium. I've said plays show us outsides, from which we infer insides; print shows us insides, from which we infer outsides.

You may if you wish reprint my remarks on *Les Misérables* (*Vanamonde* 1249). I'd just as soon you left Phil Castora in, but you're the editor:

The best notes I know for Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* (1862) are James Madden's in the 2008

Modern Library edition, translated by Julie Rose. My own copy is the 1987 Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee revision of Charles Wilbour's translation 1862, whose notes appear at the feet of pages (where notes belong! grr!) but not nearly enough. Modern Library apparently first published the Wilbour in 1931; the ML edition with Stephen Alcorn's woodcut on the jacket is not dated; ML reissuing the Wilbour in 1992 still offers both it and the Rose.

Yes, it's a masterwork. Yes, it's long; 1194 pages by Rose (who after expatiating how faithful she was, which I can't judge, says Alexander Pope 1688–1744 reinterpreted Shakespeare 1564–1616 primly — aiee! [p. xxiv; dieresis mark for Phil Castora]) + 136 pp. of notes, 1222 by Wilbour (and how he managed to get his translation published in the year of the original is a story in itself). No, there aren't any digressions. Every side-path and detail is of the essence, from giving Cambronne's answer at Waterloo as *Merde!* (the journalist Rougement reported *La garde meurt et ne se rend pas!* as 'The Guard dies and does not surrender!'), which was put on the base of a statue of C. after his death; C. denied he'd said either) to the sewers of Paris.

Hugo said he was writing a polemic: 'So long as the shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilisation, artificially creates hells on earth .... books like this cannot be useless' (beginning and end of his preface, translation Wilbour). But that last word is strange.

For years the coal of my desire to read this book was cold. I hearkened too much to how Hugo was a social critic — ipse dixit — and how *Les Misérables* was about relentless Inspector Javert's pursuing Jean Valjean for stealing a loaf of bread. Although 'a loaf of bread' is an oafish misstatement, the criticism is there; the pursuit is there — oh, the pursuit! O Javert, what an end for you! — but we'd not call Rembrandt's *Night Watch* (1642) a painting about men's hats.

I've said the works of Jane Austen (1775–1817) are to us like writing by a Martian for fellow Martians; of Georgette Heyer (1902–1974), set in that period, like a science fiction author's writing about Martians: Austen assumes we understand. Hugo is a Martian from across a canal. What do these Martians tell one another to evoke the world they all share? We, who are in the business of verisimilitude, evoking fictional worlds, can watch. I mention the notes first here because *Les Misérables* is so studded with allusion and reference that we need the help.

(3 August 2017)

**[\*brg\* Thanks very much for the three issues of *Vanamonde* you sent me (Numbers 1235, 1248, and 1254). You are missing out on today's golden period of fanzine publishing if you do not download fanzines from [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com). Bill Burns's service has brought back into fanzine fandom many fine editors and writers who, like me, could no longer afford to print or airmail-post their zines. Rob Jackson, Pete Weston before cancer caught up with him, Graham Charnock, Pat Meara, all have been posting fanzines that would never have been published otherwise. Even Leigh Edmonds has**

returned to fanzine publishing with iOTA (available on eFanzines.com).

I really appreciate your remarks on *Les Misérables*. Like you, I've been able to read the complete novel in English, published by Collins Classics in Britain, and enjoyed all the asides, even when I first read the novel at the age of 13 or 14. They seemed just as delicious when I re-read the book again after more than 50 years. It is an epic tale, perhaps the greatest epic tale of them all, based on epic characters. Yet its social criticism of the 1830s era in France has also been the backbone of my love of the book, as very often during my lifetime I've seen the attempts by various nefarious politicians to return modern societies to the squalid society of the 1830s (not only in France, but everywhere else as well). Javert does not merely pursue Valjean for the sake of a loaf of bread, but because of his principle of pursuing all malefactors, regardless of the justice of the original sentence. The original convict society in Australia (1788 to the 1840s) comprised prisoners transported here because of stealing loaves of bread. Or that's what History teachers told us at school.

I did see the big Hollywood movie of the musical *Les Misérables*. I don't like the music much, although many of my friends do. (That could be because in the widescreen version various movie stars sang their own lines.) I was impressed by the way the movie captured the intricacies of the last stages of the Denardier plot line. One day I must catch up with the DVDs of various stage versions, and perhaps even get to see it on stage eventually. Also, I aim to catch up with all the various movie adaptations of the book itself. My favourite version is the 1933 version starring Charles Laughton as Javert.

I trust your health holds up well, and that you are surviving financially better than I am.\*]

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## We also heard from ...

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**ROBERT ELORDIETA** (Drouin, Victoria).  
**BILL BURNS** (Hempstead, New York, USA).  
**COLIN STEELE** (Canberra, ACT).  
**CLAIRE BRIALEY** (Croydon, London).  
**CHERRY WEINER** (Dacula, Georgia, USA).  
**DONNA MAREE HANSON** (Canberra, ACT).  
**JEFF HARRIS** (Adelaide, South Australia).  
**ROB GERRAND** (St Kilda, Victoria).  
**JOY WINDOW** (Lismore, NSW).  
**TESSA DICK** (Crestline, California, USA).  
**LOUIS DE VRIES** (Ormond, Victoria).  
**MALCOLM McHARG** (Kilaken Bay, NSW).  
**HOPE LEIBOWITZ** (Toronto, Canada).  
**CAROL KEWLEY** (Albion, Victoria).  
**ALEXIS HARLEY** (Lalor, Victoria).

**STEVE JEFFERY** (Kidlington, Oxford, UK).

**PETER SIMPSON** (Chelmsford, Essex, UK).

**PETER SULLIVAN** (UK).

**DENNIS CALLEGARI** (Kew, Victoria) thanked Colin Steele for his review of 'one of Georgia Blain's books. I'd never heard of her before hearing about her death a little while ago (just before the death of her mother, Anne Deveson)'; he found a copy of Georgia Blain's last YA novel, which is more than I've been able to do; Georgia Blain's last book is her story of last days.

**GAYLE LOVETT** (Canberra, ACT) enjoys 'having Colin's reviews in one place. Your work in putting them together is very much appreciated. I am having a wonderful time without running my book shop. I really do miss many of the readers who dropped in but I most certainly don't miss running a business.'

**WERNER KOOPMANN** (Bucholz, Germany) and his wife **ULLA** have spent an enormous amount of time and energy in travelling during recent years. Werner has sent me lots of photos and postcards from his travels, including trips to France and the Black Forest in Germany. 'It still hurts that we were not able to see you when we were in Australia. On TV we saw a lot of Australia, but that is not the real thing at all.'

**SIMON BROWN** (Thailand) has been 'very keen to read John Litchen's history of Mars in fiction.'

**ROB JACKSON** (Chichester, West Sussex, UK) will continue to send me copies of the print edition of *Inca*, despite the fact that I can no longer afford to send him print copies of my magazines. 'The only way I'd stop sending you print copies is if you said "Sorry, I don't have room!" A few people have said that.' My thanks, as ever, to people who continue to send me their print fanzines.

**JIM CAUGHRAN** (Toronto, Canada) suggests: 'With no print version, you might give some idea to formatting for computer screens. Double columns, 9 inches or so high, means going through the page, re-upping, and going through the page again. If there's a sidebar, it may trap the reader (me) by not being the continuation of what I was looking at before. It's easy to see a sidebar in print, not so easy blindly reading through a column on the screen.' But that's why I publish the Landscape PDF version on eFanzines.com.

**MARIANN MCNAMARA** (Adelaide, South Australia) sent greetings via her son Pat to Continuum 13 in June. 'I don't think I'll be able to make it to Melbourne again this year, as I have some very pressing home-based stuff, then also travelling overseas later in the year, visiting family in Denmark and a McNamara war grave on the Western Front.'

**ALEX SKOVRON** (Caulfield North, Victoria) wrote: 'Many thanks for the PDF of *SF Commentary* 94 — and for making those corrections to my piece. It looks great. As always, it's good to be a small part of your fanzine world.' It's good to be part of your world, Alex, but I didn't get to the launch of your new book of short stories *The Man Who Took to His Bed*, and so far I have not been able to track down a copy.

**HELENA and MERV BINNS** (South Oakleigh, Victoria) offer their 'sincere commiserations; printing and postal charges have increased horrendously over recent years, making amateur publishing a dying art. We are grateful to have had the paper copies over the years, and



we do appreciate that you and Elaine have been so kind to us.'

**MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER** (Silver Spring, Maryland, USA) writes: 'I will print out the issue the next time I am in the University of Maryland library (where I print out large projects). I make my living as a free-lance nonfiction writer and editor and understand when the work dries up.' Hope to hear from you again soon, Martin; I look forward to your letters of comment.

**ROBERT LICHTMAN** (Oakland, California, USA) assures me that 'your place on the *Trap Door* mailing list is assured for the duration (yours or mine).' Thanks, Robert (and Carol).

**EDWARD McARDLE** (Ivanhoe, Victoria) continues to do a great job of producing the Melbourne Science Fiction Club's bimonthly *Ethel the Aardvark* every two months — although I haven't seen one for awhile. As a Lifetime Member of the Club, I hope I'm still being sent the PDF file of each issue.

**DORALEVAKIS** (Northern Territory) hopes to catch up before the end of the year. She gets back to Melbourne between teaching terms, but seems to have been too busy for socialising this year. We're always here, Dora!

**DEREK KEW** (Bulleen, Victoria) has been hit by several severe health conditions over recent years: 'On top of everything else I have contracted a chest infection that has laid me low even more so for the last four weeks. I am now on my fourth lot of antibiotics and this last type seem to be improving me. At one stage there was talk of hospitalisation, but hopefully I will now continue to improve to get back to square one. Square one is I am then to be tested for eligibility for home oxygen treatment to help me breathe better.' Despite all that 'I'm still looking forward to a lunch and will let you know soon I hope.' Derek is the bloke who invented the Luncheon of Comment in 1974, and still does his best to keep the tradition going.

**ALEXANDRA PIERCE** (Brunswick, Victoria), was wondering 'whether you would be interested in me writing for *SF Commentary* this year. Two thoughts I had were to write about my experience at WorldCon — my first international convention — or on the experience of editing the Octavia Butler book, and/or *Letters to Tiptree*. I'm also happy to contribute extended book reviews; I recently wrote a review on *The Glass Universe*, about the women who contributed to astronomy at the Harvard Observatory at the turn of the twentieth century, and will be reading *Hidden Figures* in the near future or Jo Walton's 'Just City' trilogy or anything else, really!' This is a wonderful offer, which I will take up when I've cleared

some of the backlog of material in the Vast *SFC* Manuscript Bin (rather like Uncle Scrooge's money bin, but it doesn't pay the bills). Meanwhile, thanks for suggesting at Continuum that I really should be thinking about a 50th Anniversary Issue gathering in early 2019.

**JEFF HAMILL** (Seattle, Washington, USA) has been very busy 'assisting with preparations for a Socialist Workers Party conference in Oberlin, Ohio this past week. I did a fair amount of design work for the conference displays, and this took all my energy (and then some) for days ... Nowadays I prefer reading books and magazines in PDF format, since I have trouble reading without a bright light, and a backlit iPad screen is perfect for me ... So many "established" magazines and newspapers charge for digital subscriptions that I feel no qualms about sending you an occasional donation, whether you send me paper copy or not.'

**GILLIAN POLACK** (Canberra, ACT) sent me a round-up of her personal news about early this year, but since then she has been back to Europe for the 2017 World Convention in Finland, published another novel, written much, and made a trip to Melbourne, where we caught up. BOOK VIEW CAFE.

**DEBORAH FOSKEY** (far-eastern Victoria) and **DAVID FOSKEY** (Malvern) are people I saw last in 1964 in Bacchus Marsh. We went to Bacchus Marsh High School together. As my sister **JEANETTE GILLESPIE** (Guildford, Victoria) discovered just last weekend when attending the Bacchus Marsh High School reunion, not only was David Dux of the school in 1964, but Deborah was Dux two years later, in 1966. (Jeanette was Dux of the same school in 1968.) Thanks to Facebook I've been able to make contact with both of them this year. **Deborah** has been a member of the ACT Parliament, a forests activist, and now 'I am a rural person again, as always an advocate for fair society and ecological health, still writing a bit or trying to find time for it; but a passionate gardener and a goat keeper.' **David** visited me in Greensborough a few months ago. Astonishingly, he has hardly changed appearance in 50 years, because he has been a competitive long-distance runner during that period. 'I married late. There are two children, daughter 27 and son almost 25. Both good people, and I'm happily married with my only wife. We live in Malvern and have been in the same house for 27 years.' David was the most brilliant student I met during my twelve years at school, either in Oakleigh or in Bacchus Marsh. He did not go into academic research, but led a successful career as an IT specialist.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 14 November 2017