

49th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

SF COMMENTARY 96

April 2018

72 pages

TRIBUTES TO

URSULA LE GUIN, KATE WILHELM, PETER NICHOLLS, BRIAN ALDISS

PETER YOUNG on THE INTERNATIONAL SF DATABASE

ANDREW MILNER on GEORGE TURNER

RON DRUMMOND on STEVE ERICKSON

RAY SINCLAIR-WOOD on SF POETRY

COLIN STEELE on THE SF/FANTASY FIELD

ANDERS BELLIS
GREG BENFORD
RANDY BYERS
STEPHEN CAMPBELL
ELAINE COCHRANE
PAUL COLLINS
AGNES COSSATO
GIAMPAOLO COSSATO
ROBERT DAY
LEIGH EDMONDS

ROB GERRAND
BRUCE GILLESPIE
TERRY GREEN
STEVE JEFFERY
CAROL KEWLEY
JOHN LITCHEN
PATRICK MCGUIRE
DENNY MARSHALL
MURRAY MOORE
GERALD MURNANE

TONY PEACEY
ANDY ROBSON
FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER
YVONNE ROUSSEAU
SANJAR SIRCAR
PAUL SKELTON
MARTIN MORSE
WOOSTER

and many others



Cover: Carol Kewley: 'Utopian Cat'.

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FRONT COVER: Carol Kewley: 'Utopian Cat'.

BACK COVER: Elaine Cochrane: 'Untitled (2014)' Cotton embroidery on linen.

ARTWORK: Denny Marshall (pp. 50, 59, 62, 71).

PHOTOGRAPHS: Fay Godwin (p. 5); Richard Wilhelm (p. 7); Andrew Porter (p. 8); George Turner Collection (p. 20); Randy Byers ('King-sized Pine Cones', p. 26); Ray Sinclair-Wood (pp. 32, 33, 35, 36, 57); John Litchen (p. 48); Terry Green (p. 65); Paul Collins (p. 71).

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Yvonne Rousseau

I must be talking to my friends

Tall timbers crashing

And the fingertips know what the brain does not
please hold on while the train is moving
please hold on cause the train is slowing
picking up souls who don't know they're going
— 'Please Hold On While the Train Is
Moving', Old 97s: *The Grand Theatre Volume One*

Douglas Adams loving the sound of deadlines as they whooshed past, but it's a bit unnerving when it happens to me. This is supposed to be the January 2018 issue of *SF Commentary* (the 49th anniversary issue) and this editorial was supposed to have been finished by late December 2017. But some articles have been waiting since February 2016, or much longer.

As *SF Commentary* 96 kept expanding throughout January and February 2018, it became clear that I should

include not only the 2016 lists and commentaries from people such as **Jenny Bryce** and **Doug Barbour**, but also their 2017 comments and lists. When nattering to **Ian Mond** on Facebook, I asked him if I could include his 2017 lists. Letters of comment kept arriving. **Colin Steele**'s column appears every issue, since I am now his only published outlet. **If you want Colin to review your books, send them to him at ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, Room 3.31, Beryl Rawson Building #13, Acton ACT 2601.**

My most glaring missed deadline has been the celebration of what would have been **George Turner**'s 100th birthday (October 2016), or the twentieth anniversary of his death (June 2017). Thanks very much, **Andrew Milner** and **Wesleyan Press**, for allowing me to reprint his article about *The Sea and Summer*.

The late late news, 2 April 2018: *SF Commentary* wins another Ditmar Award

Blow me down and knock me over the yard arm. Or something. This morning I received an email from Andy Porter in New York, who read it on the *File 770* news site, that I had won this year's **Ditmar Award for Best Fan Production**. Faced with the mighty podcasts and blogs that have dominated this category for the last 10 years, I did not expect ever to win another Ditmar.

Thanks very much to the voting members of this year's **Swancon**/national convention, held in Perth over Easter, for this gratifying award. Thanks also to the many contributors to the magazine over the years, and to **Elaine**, who has had to suffer all the strange processes by which the editor puts together each issue. Thanks also to **Lindsay, Steve**, and the team at **Copy Place** in Melbourne for being my printers for more than 30 years, and to **Bill Burns**, whose hosting of the PDF of the magazine at his site **efanzines.com** makes it possible to keep publishing. Sorry I can't print more than a few copies these days; no thanks to Australia Post.

Nice to be able to announce this award in this 49th Anniversary edition of *SF Commentary*, only 46 years after **John Bangsund** handed me my first Ditmar Award for *SFC* at Syncon 2 in Sydney, and nine months before the 50th Anniversary edition. After all, it was **John Bangsund**, **Lee Harding**, and **John Foyster**, the **ASFR team**, who gave me the impetus to publish in the first place.

Again, thanks to my supporters, literary, artistic, and financial, for staying the distance over all these years. It's good to win an award named after **Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)**, one of my greatest supporters.

Congratulations to the other nominated people and winners at this year's Ditmar Awards ceremony — it's very satisfying to hear that **Edwina Harvey** has won this year's **A. Bertram Chandler Award** and **Van Ikin** has won the **Peter McNamara Award**. Lifetime achieves, both of them.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 2 April 2018

Go right now to google ‘Lucy Sussex’ and ‘Sydney Review of Books’. Last year **Lucy Sussex** published a wonderful article, ‘An Anthropocene Tale and its Writer’ about George Turner’s writing in general and *The Sea and Summer* in particular. It can found at the website *Sydney Review of Books*. (Thanks also to Lucy for reminding me at Continuum that both of the Turner dates had whooshed past me.)

Thanks to **Ron Drummond** and **Ray Sinclair-Wood** for waiting many months for me to publish their articles.

What’s really upset my plans to finish this issue has been peering into the forest of Science Fiction Land and watching the tall timbers crashing. I was able to pay some sort of tribute to **Brian Aldiss** in *SFC95*, but in short order I found myself trying to get issued to the idea of the loss of **Ursula Le Guin** (at 88), **Kate Wilhelm** (at 90), and **Peter Nicholls** (at 78) in quick succession.

And **Stephen Hawking**, at the improbable age of 75, given that he has spent 50 years of his life suffering from the motor neurone disease. Not that I feel in any way qualified to talk about his work. A year or so ago everybody was watching a rather bland movie about his life, *The Theory of Everything*, but canny SF readers would be well advised to seek out on DVD the much better film *Hawking* (2004), starring Benedict Cumberbatch. Among its other strengths is its attempt to explain Hawking’s main ideas.

Ursula K. Le Guin

The instant response to the news that we had lost **Ursula K. Le Guin** was for **Carey Handfield** to say, ‘You should prepare a tribute to Ursula!’ Not, you will note, ‘I will prepare a tribute’, but ‘You should prepare a tribute’. I knew I had no time to do so, especially as the news came at the time when I received my first piece of paying work in five months. (That’s another reason why the deadline jumped another month during the second half of February and the first half of March.) I was connected with Ursula mainly through some wonderful letters of comment she wrote to *SF Commentary* during the early 1970s, and the organising of the Writers Workshop in 1975. Which is why Carey Handfield might well have written his own tribute to Ursula, especially a story he told me in person about visiting her and her family in Portland, Oregon, during his DUFF trip in the late 1970s. Most of my comments about the memorable fortnight in August 1975 — the week’s workshop and the week of the first Aussiecon — can be found in a piece I wrote for *The Altered I: An Encounter with Science Fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin and Others*, edited by **Lee Harding** (Norstrilia Press, 1976). The article appears below. Other workshop members wrote vivid pieces for that collection. However, Ursula’s continuing influence in my life has been mainly through her fiction, especially the ‘Earthsea’ books, *The Lathe of Heaven*, *The Dispossessed*, her deep and mind-jostling short stories, her powerful essays about fantasy and science fiction, and her opinion pieces about fiction and life in general. Other friends have been reading her blog for years, but I’m not a blog-follower. Like many others, I had hoped she would visit Australia again after 1975, but that didn’t happen.

Bruce Gillespie: Ursula’s Workshop 1975

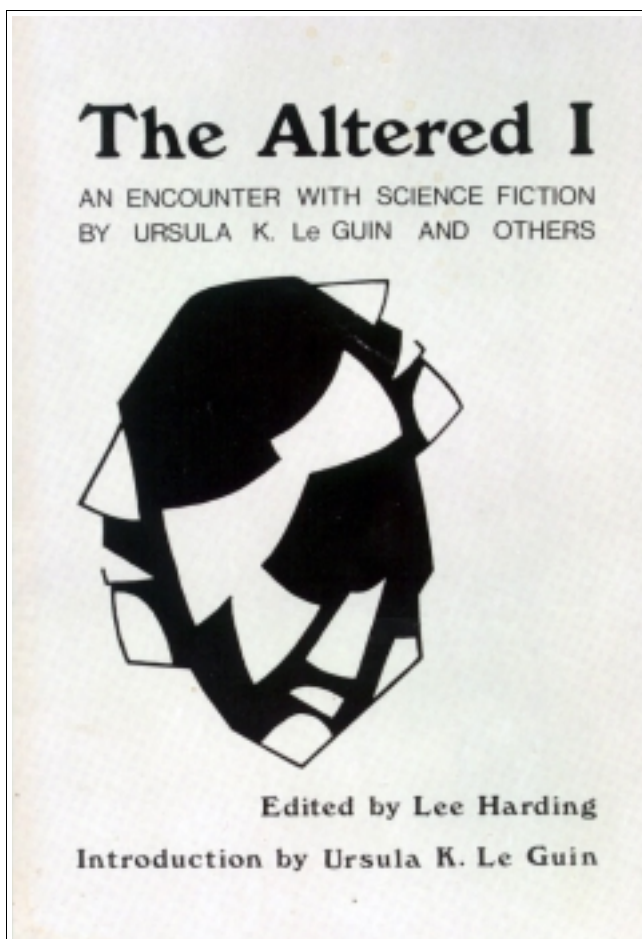
The 1975 Writers’ Workshop was **Ursula Le Guin**’s idea — indeed, her pet project — from the beginning. The Committee for the 33rd World Science Fiction Convention (**Aussiecon**, held in Melbourne during mid August 1975) had already chosen Ursula Le Guin as its Guest of Honour. This choice was understandable. Her science fiction novels, including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, are among the very best in the field. For my taste her Earthsea novels are *the* best in the fantasy field. The knowledge that Ursula Le Guin would be our Guest of Honour was a continuing source of elation; at the peak of her career, she would be visiting us.

But Guests of Honour, it seems, are not people to stand on pedestals at science fiction conventions. In late 1974, Ursula Le Guin made it plain that while in Australia she wanted to advance some project that would have lasting benefit for the Australian science fiction world. The project which she suggested was a workshop for aspiring and previously unpublished writers of science fiction.

Ursula had already been a writer-in-residence at Clarion Writers’ Workshops and similar events in the USA. During the last ten years, these workshops have become famous for their intense, hard-working approach to developing the talents of would-be writers — and for the number of now-practising science fiction writers who have begun their careers there. However, no workshop of this kind had yet been conducted in Australia. Any such project would need to be based upon the detailed advice from Ursula herself, and put into effect by an Administrative Organiser in Australia.

Robin Johnson was Chairman of the 33rd World S F Convention, and had quite enough worries by December 1974 without trying to organise a writers’ workshop as well. He had to appoint an Administrative Organiser in a hurry; he said to me, ‘You’re It.’

In December 1974, long before the workshop itself was due to be held, the main problem confronting the Committee was raising enough money to hold the workshop. Also, we wanted the workshop to fit two main



Lee Harding edited, and Carey Handfield, Rob Gerrand, and I (Norstrilia Press) published the complete record of the 1975 Writers' Workshop in *The Altered I* (1976). The front cover (above left) was by Irene Pagram. The photo on the back cover (above, right) is a bit of a mystery. I don't know who Fay Godwin was or is, or how she came to take best photo of Ursula Le Guin on stage at Aussiecon smoking her pipe. I assume we had to give back the original of the photo.

criteria:

(1) The attendees should be as physically comfortable as possible, so that they would have maximum time and opportunity to concentrate on writing and discussion. For instance, we had to bear in mind that the workshop would be held in the middle of a Melbourne winter.

(2) The organisation of the workshop program should follow, as far as possible, the specifications suggested by Ursula Le Guin.

Robin Johnson and I made an application for funds to the **Literature Board of the Australia Council**. In March 1975, the Board made a substantial grant towards the running of the workshop itself, and towards travel expenses for Ursula Le Guin's journey to Australia. In June 1975, the Board made a much-needed grant towards the travelling and accommodation expenses of those people who wished to attend the workshop. Now we had the funds — but how to make sure it would be a success?

This article is mainly a catalogue of the people who helped me to do my job — in fact, those who did most of it for me. For instance, in February 1975, the long-suffering **Carey Handfield** could be seen driving me around hairpin bends and down rough bush tracks in the Dandenong Ranges in search of a suitable site for the

workshop. The Melbourne Tourist Bureau provided our most promising lead. They suggested **Booth Lodge**, about two miles beyond Belgrave. Carey and I drove there, talked to the staff for half an hour, and decided that nothing should stop us from making Booth Lodge the site for the workshop. The facilities include a very large house, containing meeting halls, a dining room, a kitchen, a self-contained flat, and recently built sleeping quarters. Each block had room for eleven people, plus a central common room. Situated in an isolated area of the Dandenong Ranges, about 40 km from the centre of Melbourne, surrounded by trees, its placid, uninterrupted working atmosphere made it the right place for our requirements.

After those site-finding expeditions, most of the preparations for the workshop were fairly routine, but posed some unique problems. How, for instance, could I let young writers throughout Australia know that the workshop was being held? I'm not sure that I solved this problem. A number of people who would have liked to have attended the workshop did not hear about it until too late. I tried various methods of publicity, including a news sheet released to the press and media, information distributed through the various state branches of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (our most valuable

source of publicity) and, of course, information in the *Progress Report* of the World Convention itself.

I received 46 inquiries for application forms: 29 from Victoria, 6 from New South Wales, 4 from Queensland, 2 from Western Australia, 2 from Tasmania, 1 from ACT, 1 from South Australia, and 1 from New Zealand. Each person was required to submit at least one short story at least 5000 words long with his or her application form. Eventually 23 people from four states submitted stories, and 19 were accepted to attend the workshop (one person dropped out on the first day, so that there were 20 attending altogether, including Ursula and me).

These figures are deceptive. They hide a long process of receiving bits of paper, posting letters, sending great bundles of manuscripts by airmail to Ursula, and making friends with several prospective attendees who took the trouble to phone me. Ursula kept sending back enthusiastic letters and enjoining me to 'keep up my courage' until August. From May until July, we sorted out the innumerable fine details that were needed to weave the web of a functioning community of 20 for a week.

A central task involved in running the workshop was the photocopying. Ursula had asked that each member should be able to read the stories submitted by every other member, both at the beginning of the workshop and as people wrote new work during the week itself. The initial task of photocopying included 20 copies of each 19 stories. The entire job was taken over by **Ken Ford**, **John Ham**, and **Don Ashby**, the members of the Magic Pudding Club slanshack in Carlton at that time. **David Grigg** organised transport.

As we travelled by car convoy to Booth Lodge, after an evening meal at the rendezvous point, Cahill's Restaurant in Melbourne, I kept thinking to myself, 'Will it go right? What can go wrong? How did I get *into* all this?'

The members of the workshop not only made my job

easy, but took it away from me altogether. When I arrived at Booth Lodge, everybody else was already gathered in a circle, quite silent, each person reading everybody else's manuscripts. The photocopying machine was ready for operation. Rooms had been chosen; typewriters unpacked. And, most reassuring of all, **Margery Chisholm**, the administrator of Booth Lodge, was there to help me calm down and to make sure that everything ran smoothly.

Ursula Le Guin arrived on the Saturday morning after a hectic few days in Sydney, and at last I could shake hands with one of the people I admire most. After a very brief rest, she joined us in the main room, and we began the wearying, exhilarating, often hilarious task of workshopping stories, creating new ones, and re-creating ourselves.

The rest of this book tells the story of that week's experience. We were surrounded by an atmosphere of dripping trees, the incessant, comforting sound of typing, and the warmth of each other's company. My part in the experience is just a footnote; I was left with nothing to do! Within a day or so, the others had decided to do their own photocopying, arrange any extra provisions that were needed, and stick to time schedules. What did I do? I wrote stories, of course. For the first time in four years, the encouragement from Ursula and the members of the workshop freed some blockage from my brain and I found myself typing stories at 3 a.m., just like everybody else.

The only way I can summarise such an experience is in the way I tried to say it to Ursula Le Guin herself: that she trusted us to trust each other to trust ourselves.

And I was there too.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, March 1976, in Lee Harding (ed.): *The Altered I* (Norstrilia Press, 1976), pp. 1–3.

I've left out an awful lot of memories in the above piece. **Ursula Le Guin** herself covers many of the personal details in her Introduction; for example:

The Grongs remained with us all week. The Grongs must have come up on Sunday; my recollection is that somebody remarked incredulously that on his way to the workshop he had passed through a town named Grong Grong. And somebody else said of course, that's where the Grongs live. And somebody else said, what do Grongs use wattle for, actually? And from then on there was no controlling it. The mysterious reproductive ritual of the Grongs, which involves singing over the cabbages at night, was discovered. It was established that auctioneers shout Growing, Growing, Grong, and that two grongs do not make a gright ... Workshopping is a tension-making business. You get awfully silly on the off moments (*The Altered I*, p. 8–9).

As I remember it, **Randal Flynn**, aged 17 at the time, was the originator of the Grongs. Also, on the first morning of the workshop, he got up at 5.30 a.m. for his shower, waking more than a few of us an hour and a half too early. Shock, horror. His explanation? He was a

Queenslander, and Queenslanders always get up at 5.30 in the morning; didn't we know that?

Kate Wilhelm

I didn't meet **Kate Wilhelm**, as she seems not to have attended conventions regularly. She wasn't at Torcon II in 1973, my only overseas worldcon. However, I've enjoyed her fiction since the late 1960s, particularly the short fiction she wrote for her husband Damon Knight's *Orbit* collections in the 1970s. Some of her novels I also found very powerful, especially *Juniper Time* in the mid 1970s. It was set in a near-future Pacific Northwest, telling of a journey through the high inland desert that has also been a favourite area of Ursula Le Guin's. I was disappointed that Kate Wilhelm published mainly mysteries during the last 35 years of her writing life, but I collected all that Justin Ackroyd could track down for me. She had a fine, clear style, and she always has been most interested in the lives of her characters. In her science fiction she depth-explored concepts of self and perception that were treated somewhat more wispily by some other members of the 'Milford Mafia' (the group of writers who gathered around Kate and Damon when they were living



A recent photo of Kate Wilhelm. (Photo: Richard Wilhelm)

in Milford, Pennsylvania up to the end of the sixties). Her champion among publishers was **Gordon Van Gelder**, who took me to task, with some gentleness but a detailed convincing argument, when I wrote my essay 'Where did Our Kate Go?' for an apazine well over 20 years ago. I was disappointed in the direction that her writing was taking in the eighties, but that was mainly a fan's feeling of disappointment that a favourite writer is setting out in unexpected directions. (This was probably why Brian Aldiss lost many of his stuck-on fans over the years, because he couldn't resist bolting through any new fictional gate he saw open.) I've read a particularly good

tribute to Kate Wilhelm by Gordon Van Gelder on the internet, but it would be copyright. Worth searching for.

Peter Nicholls

Peter Nicholls died on 6 March 2018. His death notice in *The Age* reads:

NICHOLLS Peter Douglas

Science fiction critic, encyclopedist, bon vivant, and pontificator. Died on 6th March 2018, aged 78, surrounded by family, inspired adoration and exasperation in equal measure. Remembered with enormous love by his sister, Meg; children, Sophie, Saul, Tom, Jack, and Luke; grandchildren, Pia, Cassia and Uma; and his wife, Clare Coney.

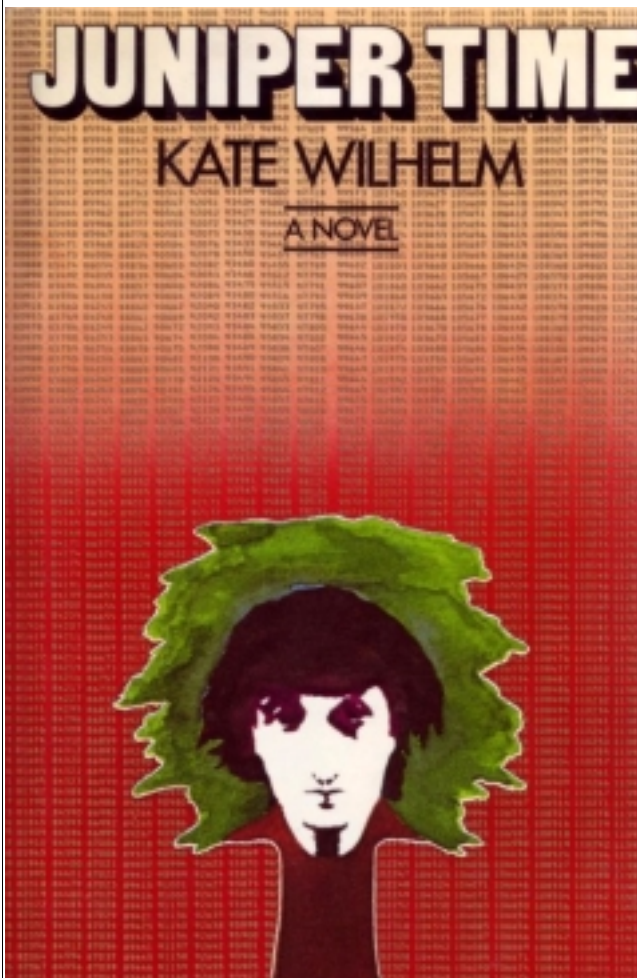
My brain tells stories to itself
While I'm asleep. Last night
I smoked and talked, the dead replied
A party in my dreams.
What fun!
Peter Nicholls

If even his family can admit in his death notice that **Peter Nicholls** inspired exasperation as well as adoration, and that he was both a bon vivant and a pontificator, I suppose I can be honest about my contradictory memories of him.

I met Peter first when I was staying in London in January 1974. He was the head of the Science Fiction Foundation, at that time located at the East London Polytechnic, and editor of *Foundation* magazine. He was very friendly, perhaps because of enjoying hearing a somewhat less mellifluous Australian accent than his own after he had been living several years in USA and Britain. He even invited me to stay the night at his place in London after a dinner with Brian Aldiss and other SF people. However, after I returned to Australia Peter told me that on that night he and his first wife were on the point of breaking up, and were probably not speaking to each other.

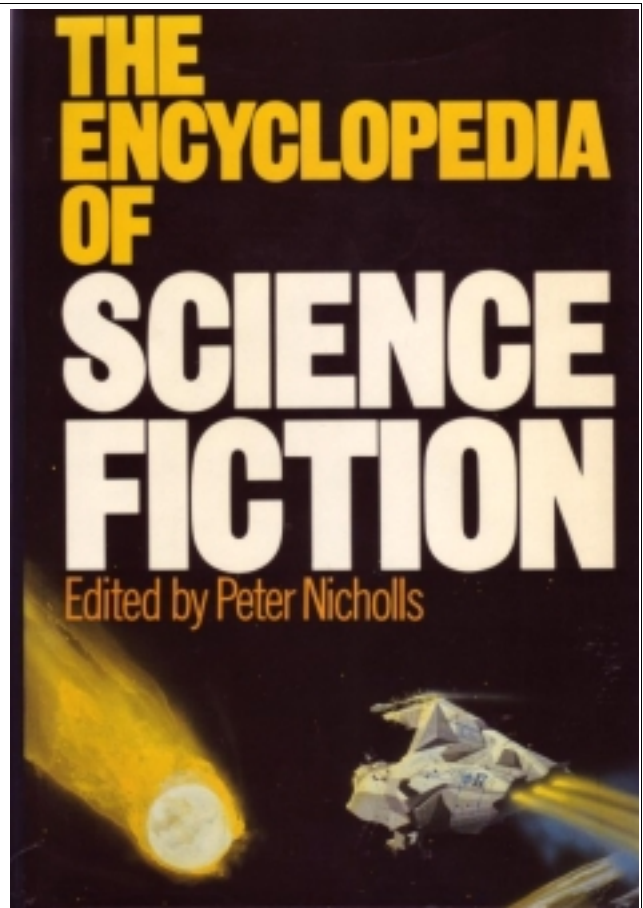
Peter and I kept in touch throughout the seventies, and he allowed me to reprint one of the finest articles ever written about the work of Ursula Le Guin: an essay called 'Teaching Children the Value of Death' about my favourite fantasy novel, *The Farthest Shore*. In the eighties, Peter married **Clare Coney**, with whom I had been corresponding since 1969 because of her role as editorial assistant to John Bush at Victor Gollancz. She had been sending me review copies of Gollancz SF titles every month; her knowledge of SF probably matches Peter's. Clare and I finally met after she and Peter migrated to Australia in 1987.

Peter's major project during the 1970s had been the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. It tells a lot about his persuasive powers that he was able to push this project to Granada Books, and even more about his writing and editorial skills that he and his contributors were able to finish the book in much the style (although probably a quarter the length) that it required. The second, much larger edition, with John Clute as the new





Peter Nicholls as most of us remember him.
(Photo: Andrew Porter.)



co-editor, was well underway when Peter and Clare arrived here. Elaine and I visited them very soon after they arrived — the photo that Peter took of George and me can be found on the cover of *Foundation* 76.

Peter and Clare bought the old Parer mansion in Mont Albert, by Australian standards a vast Victorian mansion with its own interior courtyard and a very large garden. Peter had been able to unpack his books — up the walls, almost beyond eyesight, of the courtyard, which had become a vast central room for the house. Elaine and I went to several events there, although not the Aussiecon 3 party (August 1999) that many people remember best. Peter and family also attended our Garden-warming Party in 1992, reported brilliantly by Yvonne Rousseau in *The Metaphysical Review* (although she lived in Adelaide and based her article entirely on information gleaned from telephone conversations).

During the 13 years between arriving in Melbourne and contracting the Parkinson's disease that took 18 years to kill him, he was probably writing a great deal for the second, then the third edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. He kept up contacts with some local writers, but was known mainly for playing hosts to overseas visiting writers.

It was never quite clear whether he meant to or not, but Peter had a talent for stepping on my metaphorical corns each time we met. Did he feel infinite superiority to everyone he met, or was it merely his manner? As Aussiecon 3 approached, he announced that a large

party would be held at the mansion on the first night of the convention. At first Elaine and I were not invited — we were not nearly important enough. More to the point, I had already asked the convention organisers if I could deliver my Fan Guest of Honour speech on the first night of the convention, the one night when there would be no other program items. Rose Mitchell and Perry Middlemiss, on behalf of the convention committee, asked Peter and Clare to move the party to the night *before* the beginning of the convention, but this did not happen. I therefore anticipated that few people would attend the first night of the convention. However, when I rose to speak on that night, I found that the auditorium was full. Many of the people I had most hoped would attend the Convention Opening had gone straight to the party, but there must have been nearly 1000 in the auditorium. John Foyster opened the convention, and after I had bumbled on, Dave Langford gave one of his (more than) hilarious convention talks. Somebody offered me a car ride out to The Party, but I couldn't see any easy way of getting home again, so I didn't go.

I'm not sure that many Melbourne fans met Peter and Clare after Aussiecon 3. In 2000, he was diagnosed as having the first stages of Parkinson's. Every now and again he attended the monthly film nights hosted by Race and Iola Mathews, and Race and Iola stayed in contact with him. So did Yvonne Rousseau, each time she visited Melbourne from Adelaide. But I saw him again only a few times, once at a party to welcome John Clute to Melbourne, and once at Aussiecon 4 in 2010. He had lost an enormous amount of weight, and was having trouble speaking, but he did enjoy catching up with a lot

of old friends on Hugos night. At that time his medical condition had been improved greatly by a new medical technique; it gave him extra years of life, so much so that he was able to attend the world convention in London in 2014, but his last six months must have been very difficult for him and his family.

Peter's achievements have been many (including various fine books he edited, especially the first two editions of the *Encyclopedia*, *Science Fiction At Large*, *The*

Science in Science Fiction (1982, with Dave Langford and Brian Stableford) and *Fantastic Cinema* (1984). I would have expected him to have been consulted often by Australian publications such as *The Age* about matters scholarly and science-fictional, but as I have discovered over the years, even to mention science fiction in certain circles in Melbourne is to face instant freeze-out. I hope that somebody can put together a book of Peter's finest essays as a fitting tribute.

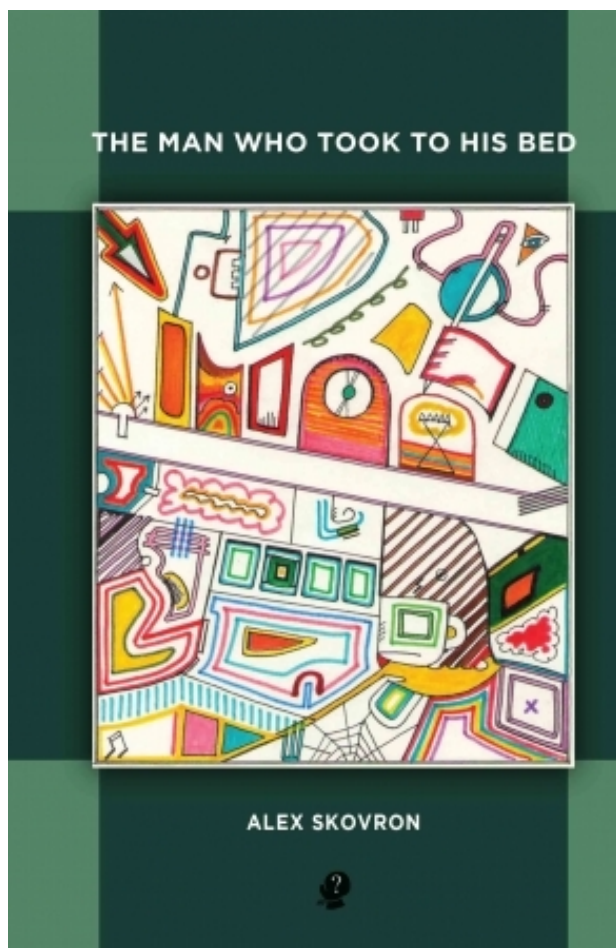
Books my friends have sent me

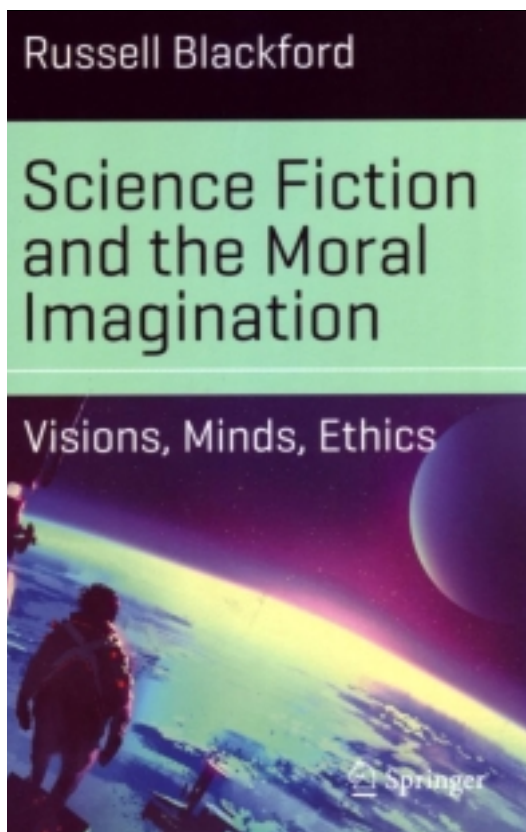
In my comments on my Favourite Books of 2017, I refute the notion that one should not review books sent by people one knows. Instead, these days the only books I *do* receive are from people I know. Publishers might be willing to send e-books if asked nicely, but I don't read e-books. Unfortunately and unintentionally, I seem to have stopped writing long reviews of books, so have been glad when Colin Steele or others have sent me reviews of books I also want to recommend.

For instance, **Colin Steele** wrote in *SFC 94* a long review of *Dreaming in the Dark*, edited by **Jack Dann**. This is a beautiful piece of bookcraft from PS Australia, an exciting new offshoot of Britain's PS Publishing. I haven't heard of any other PS Australia titles, but that's the internet for you ... the more information there is out

there, the less likely you are to hear about what you want to know.

The book makes a slow start, then comes to life with the fifth story, Terry Dowling's 'Midnight in the Graffiti Tunnel', which is, as Terry describes it in his 'Afterword', a story of "dark forces to be reckoned with at your peril" tables-turned'. Other four-star stories include 'Neither Time Nor Tears' by Angela Slatter, Richard Harland's 'His Shining Day', Rosaleen Love's 'Snowflakes All the Way Down' (a dazzling piece about travellers discovering 'the beginnings of a new creation' — my favourite story in the book), Alan Baxter's 'Served Cold', Janeen Webb's 'Fade to Grey', Kirstyn McDermott's 'Burnt Sugar', Kim Wilkins' 'In Hornhead Wood', and Simon Brown's 'Moonshine'. Jack Dann has been one of my favourite anthologists for more than 30 years, so I'm looking

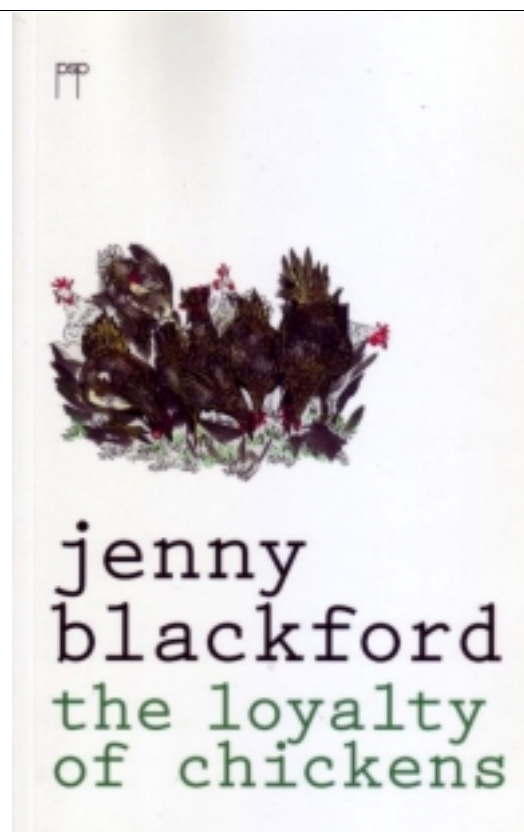




forward to his next 'Dreaming' volume.

Alex Skovron's *The Man Who Took to His Bed* is his first book of short stories after a long career of publishing books of poetry. None of these stories was first published in a genre magazine, yet the best of them would be appreciated better by *SF Commentary* readers rather than *Meanjin* readers. 'Day in the Life', which begins the book, is a perfect alternative-worlds short story. My other favourite stories are 'The Instrument' and 'Marking Time'. Alex Skovron's tone is playful as well as precise, but too many of the stories seem written to fit the length requirements of Australia's literary magazines — i.e. short and sharp, but a bit too short.

Russell Blackford's *Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination: Vision, Minds, Ethics* (Springer, 2017; \$39.99), is nothing if not ambitious, and I must admit I've read only bits of it so far. Russell has set out to cover the entire compass of moral thinking in science fiction literature in 204 pages plus index! Not that it's a very useful index, covering only broad subject matter and not individual authors. It does, however, include a 'Chronological List of Works Discussed'. Naturally, the first name I looked for was that of George Turner, but he doesn't seem to be here. Few other SF authors became so finely tuned to the moral consequences of thinking about 'the future', as can be seen in *The Sea and Summer*. And there is no discussion of any book by Brian Aldiss! Still, Russell Blackford discusses with accuracy and insight those authors he has chosen, and the whole book represents a miracle of conciseness. For instance, it's very unlikely I will ever read Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, but it's useful to have available a clear summary of its main ideas. (I trust that Peter Nicholls,



the dedicatee, read this book before he died.)

Another Blackford! **Jenny Blackford** (Russell's partner) has forged a career in poetry for herself in recent years, after many years of writing fiction and reviews. *The Loyalty of Chickens* (Pitt Street Publishing; 2017; \$28) is her first full-length collection. I read it at the time I was reading some books by some very well-known Australian poets, and I found Jenny Blackford's poetry somewhat more dazzling and penetrating than theirs. A warning, though. If you're not a cat fancier, you might fail to gain maximum enjoyment from some of the best poems in the new collection. (Jenny's earlier, short collection was *The Duties of a Cat*.) My own favourite poem in the collection is 'The Hero's Journey', in memory of a favourite cat who has just set off for Cat Valhalla ('He was the One True Cat. His claws were living scimitars,/his glowing copper eyes/Greek fire'). Our poet stands witness to life by looking at the passing of favourite people, especially in 'Dipping into that Lake' ('My mother's disappearing/week by week,/dipping gently/into that forever lake.') I love that phrase 'that forever lake' — it would have been a much better title for the whole collection.

A great friend of Russell's and Jenny's, and of me, over many years has been **Damien Broderick**. He (or books he's edited) is referred to frequently in *Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination*, often references to articles or books I haven't heard of, let alone seen. However, via his co-editor **Van Ikin** he did send me three volumes of the collected best essays from Van Ikin's fanzine/critical magazine *Science Fiction* (published in Western Australia). I received copies mainly in my capacity as Literary Executor of George Turner, although I do have two

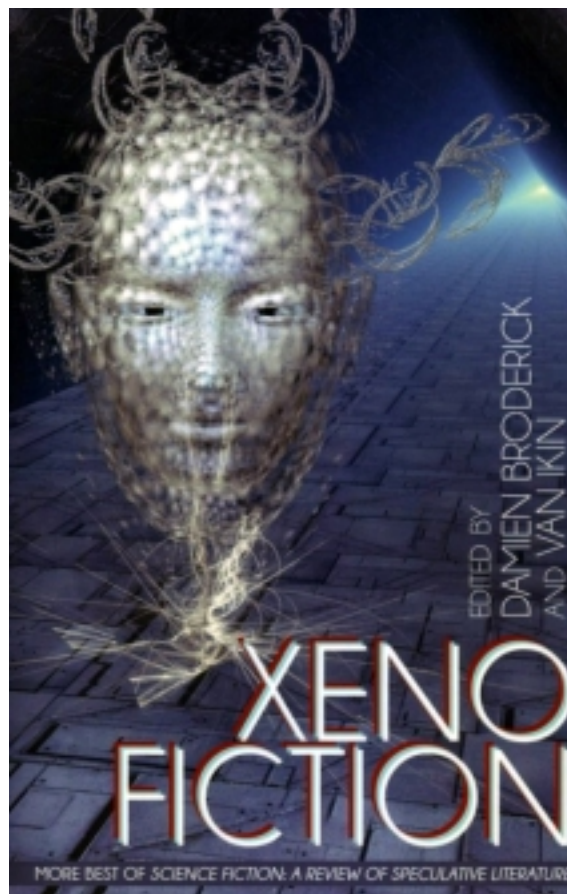
essays here. The three books are *Warriors of the Tao: The Best of Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature* (Borgo Press, 2011), *Xeno Fiction: More Best of Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature* (Borgo Press, 2013), and *Fantastika at the Edge of Reality: Yet More Best of Science Fiction* (Wildside Press, 2014). They can be ordered from Amazon.com, either as print on demand or (I assume) e-books. I trust they are still available; I am several years late in talking about these books from the Urgent Shelf.

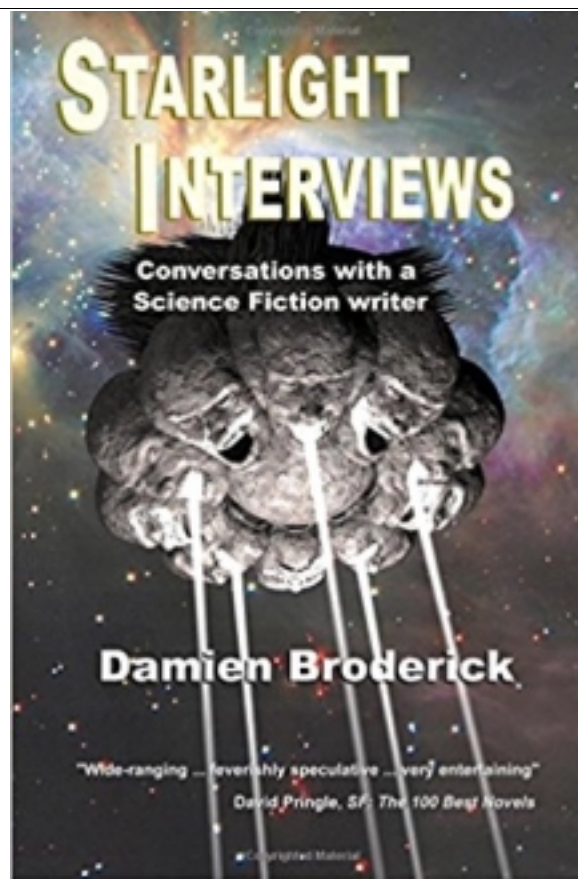
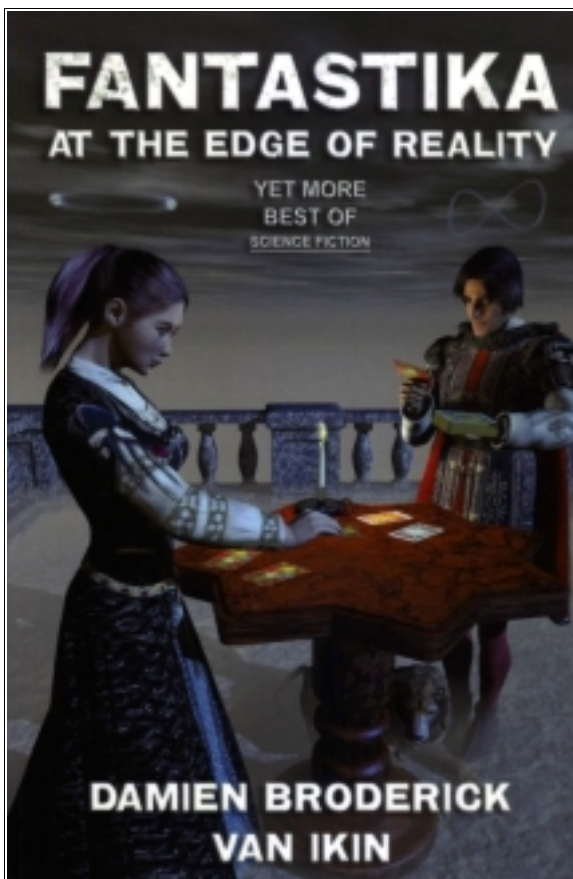
Naturally I would have preferred that Damien had edited a volume of the 'Best of *SF Commentary*', but it seems that his copies of *SFC* have been locked away in some storage vault in either Brunswick or San Antonio. Not that he could have gone ahead with such a project, for the same reason I have not published a 'Best of *SFC*': he would have to buy back the reprint rights from some rather expensive authors, such as the literary estate of Stanislaw Lem. Damien did have a stack of *Science Fictions* to disinter, resulting in three very satisfactory 'Best of' volumes. I must admit that I've never taken to *Science Fiction* in quite the way I took to the great critical fanzines of yesteryear, such as *Speculation*, *Science Fiction Review*/*Alien Critic*, *Algol*, *Lighthouse*, or *Australian Science Fiction Review*, but that's only because Van Ikin tends to conceal his own life, personality, and opinions as much as possible, so that it is hard to compare his achievements with those of such dazzling paper personalities as Pete Weston, Dick Geis, Terry Carr, John Bangsund, and John Foyster. Also, *Science Fiction* has rarely included a letter column, usually the glowing heart of any fanzine. Until these three books appeared, I had failed to take proper notice of the store of great articles that Van Ikin has

actually published since 1977.

Warriors of the Tao includes contributions from Russell Blackford, David Lake, Bruce Shaw, Sylvia Kelso, Tess Williams, Terry Dowling, Bruce Gillespie, Sean McMullen, David Medlen, Yvonne Rousseau, Van Ikin, Helen Merrick, George Turner, Terry Dowling, and Darko Suvin. I cannot begin to choose a 'best' from among these articles, although my favourite is Yvonne Rousseau's "The Disquieting Terrain of the Spirit", one of the first major articles written about Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*, and Sean McMullen's 'The Golden Age of Science Fiction', a concentrated version of his overview of Australian science fiction, as amplified in *The MUP Encyclopedia of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (published 20 years ago!) My own 'The Non Science-Fiction Novels of Philip K. Dick' must be my best article, since it keeps travelling around the world.

Xeno Fiction includes articles by Kirpal Singh (whatever happened to Kirpal Singh?), G. Travis Regier, Barbara Bengels, Yvonne Rousseau, Helen Merrick, Veronica Brady, Talia Eilon, George Turner, Marie Maclean, Elizabeth Hardy, and Terry Dowling. Of particular importance is Veronica Brady's review of Greg Egan's first novel, *An Unusual Angle*—the only review it received anywhere. (Nearly all the other books published by Norstrilia Press (1975–1985) were reviewed in newspapers and magazines throughout Australia, but not that one.) George Turner's article about the fiction of Peter Carey is not among the manuscripts that he left to me in his papers, so I'm very glad to have it reprinted in this book. Marie Maclean (long mourned by her friends) also





Broderick and Ikin book covers on this and previous page by Anders Sandberg.

contributes an article about the work of Peter Carey. Terry Dowling's 'The Art of Xenography' is a 100-page article about the works of Jack Vance. This is a record length even among the other Very Long Critical Articles that have appeared in Australian SF fanzines over the years.

Fantastika at the Edge of Reality poses a whatever-happened-to question. Whatever happened to Anne Brewster? I met her several times, and had hoped she might write for *SF Commentary* sometime. Did she go overseas to take part in the 'Interview with Stanislaw Lem' published here? I haven't heard of or from her since. Another unique interview is that between Terry Dowling, George Mannix and Peter Weir. Since Peter Weir has taken some trouble during the last 20 years to be *not* identified as a director of 'weird films', it must have taken quite some persuasion for him to talk to two people identified with SF in Australia. Other contributors to *Fantastika* include Hal Colebatch, Jack George C, Yvonne Rousseau (the Australian critic and reviewer whose works I enjoy most), Russell Blackford, Tess Williams, Caroline Flynn, Donald M. Hassler, Pascale Krumm, Marian Foster, Kevin Smith, Keith Curtis, Carl P. Yoke, and Bruce Gillespie. In the three volumes there is not as much coverage of Australian writers as I might have expected, which makes Russell Blackford's coverage of Lee Harding's novels all the more welcome. This volume also includes a good section by and about women SF writers.

The most recent book that **Damien Broderick** has sent

me (as a Word file) is *Starlight Interviews: Conversations with a Science Fiction Writer* (Ramble House Surinam Turtle Press, 298 pp., \$US20), available from <https://www.amazon.com/Starlight-Interviews-Conversations-Science-Fiction/dp/1605439150>. I'm not sure that I want to read 298 pages of *any* author talking about him- or herself, but given that limitation, *Reading by Starlight* succeeds because it features a wide range of approaches to science fiction. If you set Damien talking about one or other aspects of his writing and editing career over the years, you will probably get a quite different response as he goes from one questioner to another. The questions and answers range through such material as Damien's fiction itself (of course), his practice of academic-style criticism of the field, his many interests in science (including his scientific investigation of the possibilities of paranormal communication), his editing of anthologies, and — in a particularly engaging conversation with the readers of the *AsIf* blog — his attempts to edit the Fiction section of Australia's *Cosmos* magazine. Damien was in San Antonio, his editor in Sydney, and the contributors were sending in their stories by email. There could be many a slip between Fiction editor and fiction writers. Why did one unnamed female writer not send a story to *Cosmos*? Because Damien had so far not published any stories by female authors. Why had he not? Because (and this echoes my experience with *SFC*'s contributors) very few women writers had sent him stories. There's the scarifying exchange of letters between Damien and Joanna Russ, showing, as the blurb puts it, 'how even dedicated communicators can get themselves tangled in emotion and confusion'. *Starlight*

Interviews is completed by three stories. This is a book for browsing, with all the browsings adding up to a unique view of more than 50 years in the life of an SF writer.

Damien sent me a complete Bibliography of his works up to the end of 2015. And now there are many more from 2016, 2017, and the first months of 2018. You could check the complete list at the **International Science Fiction Database** entry on Damien Broderick.

- *Intelligence Unbound: The Future of Uploaded and Machine Minds* (ed. with Russell Blackford), Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- *The Daymakers: Selected Stories from Science Fantasy* (ed. with John Boston), Surinam Turtle Press, 2014
- *The Evidence for PSI: Thirteen Empirical Research Reports* (ed. with Ben Goertzel), McFarland, 2014.
- *You're Not Alone: 30 Science Fiction Stories from Cosmos*, Surinam Turtle Press, 2015.
- *The Valley of the God of Our Choice, Inc* (with Rory Barnes), Wildside Press, 2014.
- *City Of The Tiger: More Selected Stories from Science Fantasy* (ed. with John Boston), Surinam Turtle Press, 2015.
- *Other Spacetimes: Science Fiction Interviews* (with Van Ikin), Borgo Press, 2015.
- *The Physics of PSI: Science of the Paranormal* (ed. with Ben Goertzel), McFarland, 2015.
- *Knowing the Unknowable: Putting Psi to Work*. In preparation.
- *Running on Empty? The Problem of Philosophical Progress*

(ed. with Russell Blackford). In preparation.

- *Perchance to Wake: Yet More Selected Stories from Science Fantasy* (with John Boston), 2016.
- *Threshold of Eternity* (with John Brunner), 2017.
- *Pscience Fiction: The Paranormal in Science Fiction Literature*, 2017.

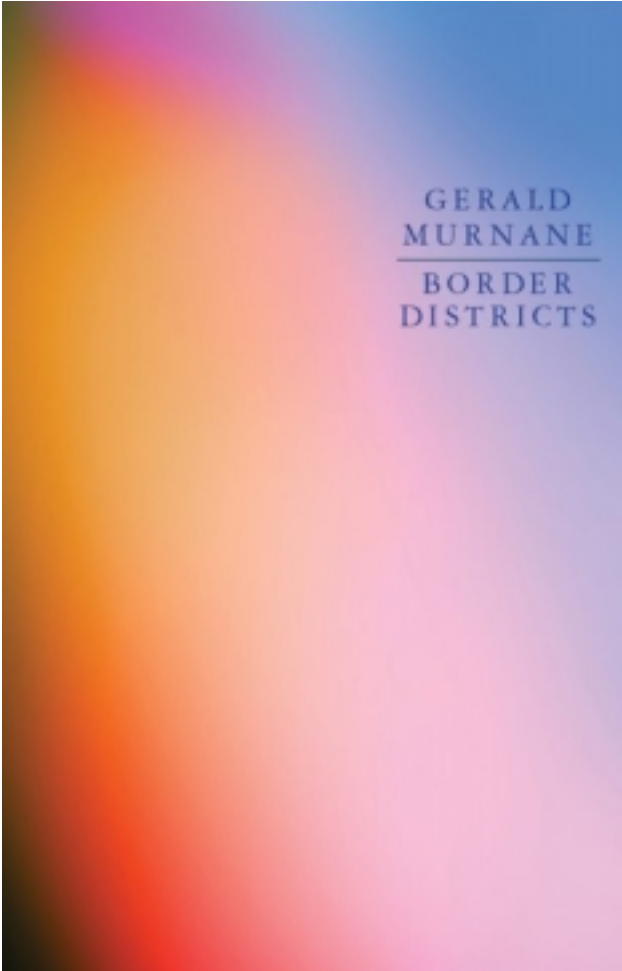
All this Dickensian energy, from a man who these days has enough eye problems watching a computer screen, let alone reading a book!

Gerald Murnane claims that *Border Districts* will be his last book of fiction, although he still has several books to appear in 2018 and 2019 (a collection of his short fiction; a poetry collection; and — at last — the complete edition of his second novel). To me, *Border Districts* fits no category. It is more like a book of meditations than a work of fiction, but meditations that curl around each other, a confluence of all Murnane's major preoccupations.

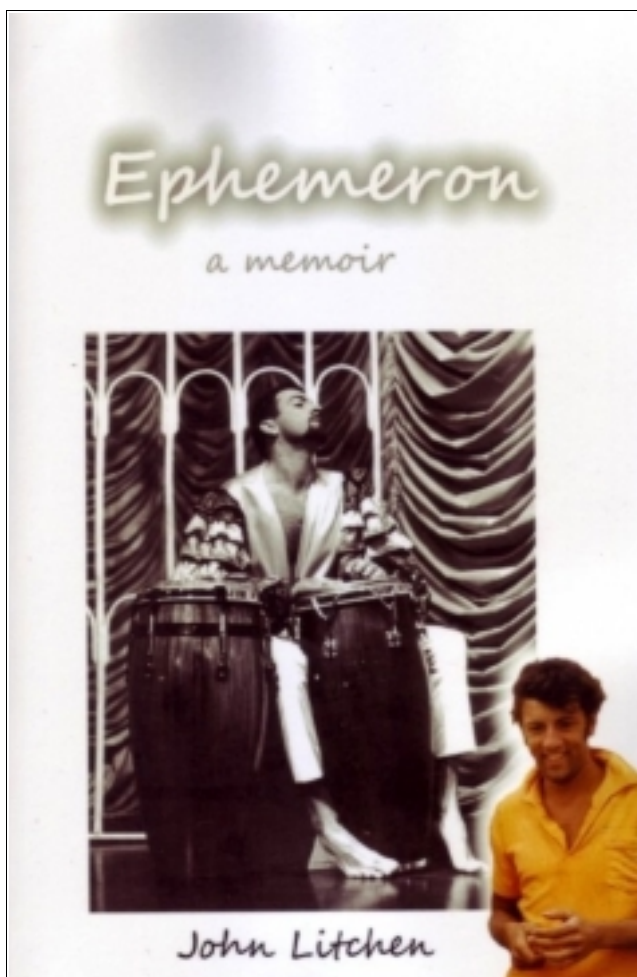
Michael Epis, reviewer for *The Big Issue* (23 February–8 March 2018), says it better than I can:

Gerald Murnane has been at it again. *Border Districts*, his 11th book of fiction, is like a detailed study of all that has come before. As is his way, this is fiction without the familiar bulwarks — no protagonist, no action, no dialogue, no names. His lifelong obsessions — the play of colour, stained-glass windows, the fall of light, Catholic iconography and 1950s religious instruction, the distance of men from women, horse racing, marbles, fragments of half-remembered books and poems — abound. And although all Murnane's previous work insisted on its fictionality, this one defiantly describes itself as a report. Either way, it is again the sustained work of his unique consciousness, a spidery intelligence that spins a gossamer web from ghostly remembrances that ultimately captures the secret workings and yearnings of the human heart. It has the deceptive slightness typical of a master of his craft approaching the end of his work. It will do no harm to the chances of Murnane's oft-touted Nobel Prize.

If you've read my fanzines **bry** (*Scratch Pad* on efanzines.com) and *Treasure* over the last 10 years, you will have read the first six chapters of **John Litchen's** *Ephemeron: A Memoir: Fragments from My Life — with Science Fiction* (Yambu Press, PO Box 3503, Robina Town Centre QLD 4230 Australia; \$30). However, *Treasure* is running even further behind schedule than *SF Commentary*, so my readers have so far read only a bit more than half of this wonderful book's 514 pages. In earlier self-published books, John has written about his early years as the son of Greek migrants living in Williamstown, Melbourne. In *Ephemeron* the shy young man suddenly bursts into life and decides to see the world, despite the fact that his family expects him to stay in Williamstown and take over his parents' dry-cleaning business. In the early 1960s John takes up underwater fishing and photography, travels to northern Australia and back, then heads off overseas. Few people anywhere can have had so much fun taking advantage of that easy-travelling era in order to experience as much of the world as could be

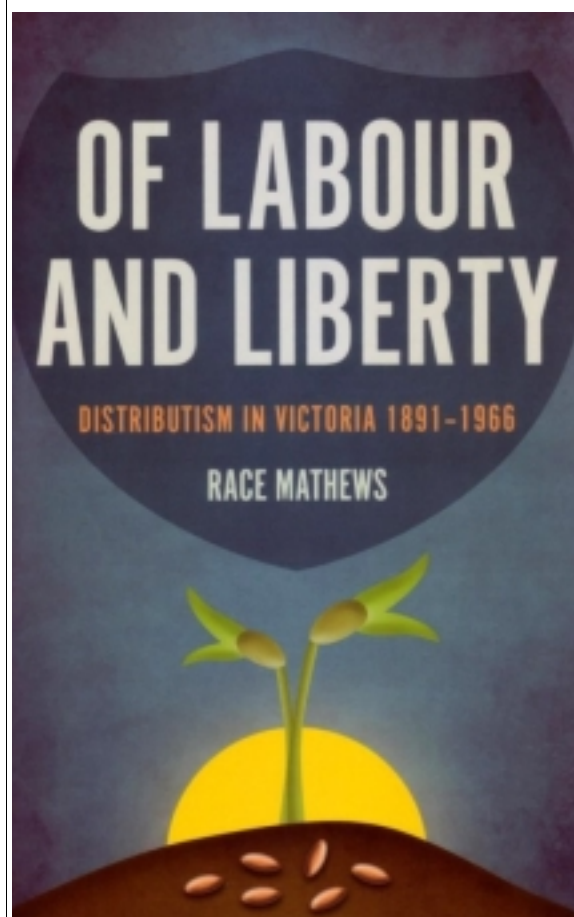


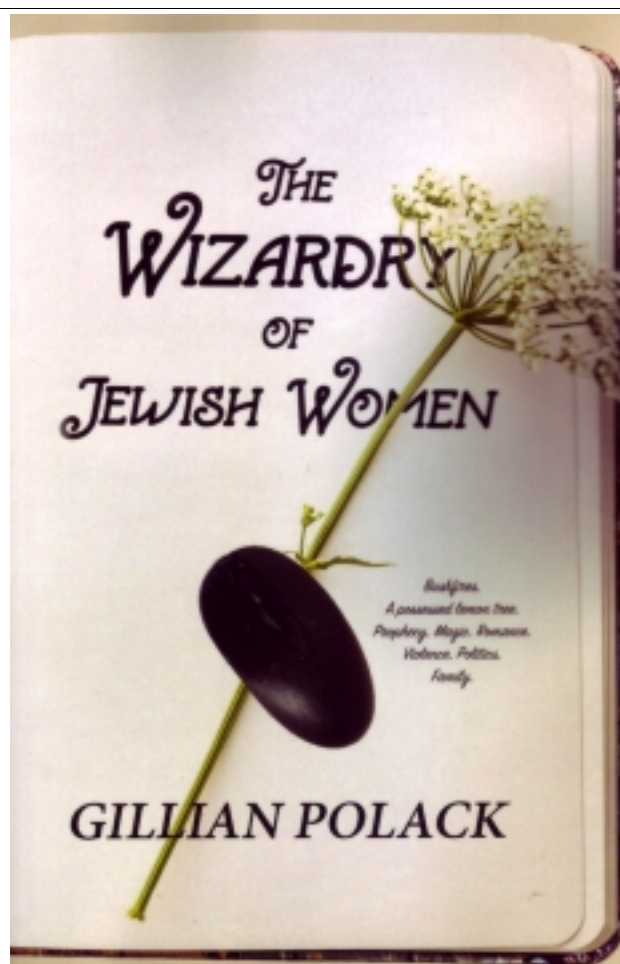
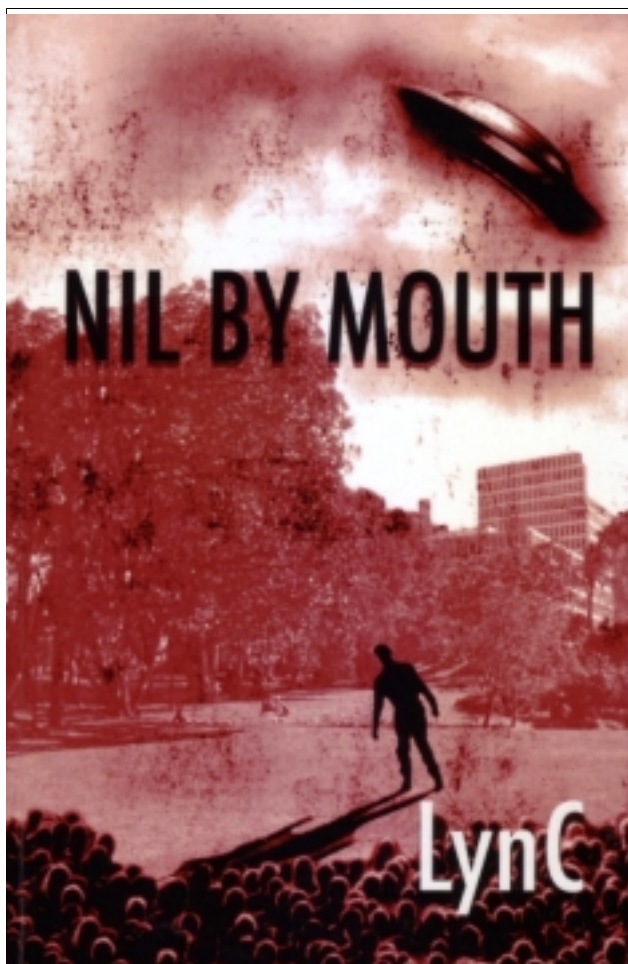
GERALD
MURNANE
BORDER
DISTRICTS



seen, heard, and felt. John Litchen's story is lively, and the photographs plentiful.

Race Mathews' *Of Labour and Liberty* is based on his second doctoral thesis (completed in his late seventies), but reads like a political thriller. He traces the strands of Australian life that led eventually to the split in the Australian Labor Party in the fifties, and the lack of impetus toward real social reform that we find in most political life in Australian today. Race's own interest is in the political theory of Distributism, which has so far been put into practice only in one location: Mondragon in northern Spain. Yet its origins stretch back into the nineteenth century, and had a particular influence on progressive Roman Catholics during the early part of the twentieth century. What the Catholic leaders in Australia took from the movement's ideas was the welding of the interests of labour and capital into mutualist organisations, in an attempt to cauterise the influence of the Communist movement in trade unions. Unfortunately, this led to the crusading attempts by B. A. Santamaria and his followers in the 1940s to eliminate the left from the trade unions and the Labor Party by any means available. This led to the split in the Labor Party in 1954, ensuring the federal electoral success of the Liberal-Country Party Coalition from 1949 and 1972. Race Mathews brilliantly traces the tortuous writhings of the Australian Labor Party during this period, although discussion of Distributism itself does get lost along the way. In the end, its influence can only be shown in the rise of the mutual funds, all of which have been swallowed up and destroyed by capitalist monsters, aided and abetted





as much by the 'modern' Labor Party as by the Coalition.

William Breiding's *Rose Motel: Fanzine Pieces 1980–2014* (self-published; \$US15 plus postage from 3507 N. Santa Rita Avenue, #1, Tucson AZ 85719, USA) shows how good a writer for fanzines can be. There are some funny stories, and reviews, but my favourite pieces are William's long essays about his early life. He seems to have spent his whole life deciding what and who he really is, but instead of sinking into despair during crisis points in his life he has used every opportunity to observe and learn from the people and situations he has met.

I'm not sure whether I should mention two books that should be still available from the publisher, but probably are no longer available from anyone but the authors. **Satalyte Publishing**, established in 2014 by Steven and Marieke Ormsby from their home in Gippsland, Victoria, seemed to hold out hope for quite a few Australian authors who were finding it difficult to find any publisher looking at new work. Satalyte books were to be published as Print on Demand volumes.

One of the first titles was *Nil By Mouth*, the first novel published by Melbourne author **LynC**. It is a compelling story of alien occupation of Earth and the humans who try to interact with the aliens. The book includes some very powerful scenes of inter-species misunderstanding leading to very uncomfortable crises (including a teeth-clenching scene of alien-human birth). *Nil By Mouth* includes more action and feeling in its 150 pages than most other SF or fantasy novelists fit into their intermi-

nable 500-page stories. It is perhaps, too compressed; I still did not understand some plot points, even after a second reading, but I enjoyed the novel.

By the time Satalyte published **Gillian Polack's *The Wizardry of Jewish Women*** (2016), it boasted a catalogue of 58 books. That's a great deal too many activity in too short a time. In fact, I had received no publicity about any of these books (apart from a copy of *Nil by Mouth*, given to me by the author, and several reprints of Jack Dann's books). Fortunately, Gillian invited me to the Melbourne launch of her latest novel — and, yes, it is a novel, not a Self Help Book for Jewish women readers or a recipe book (although Gillian has published at least one recipe book). *Wizardry* includes, as the title suggests, stuff about wizardry, dreams, and other matters that interest SF readers, plus much about the intertwinings of family history.

At the launch of *The Wizardry of Jewish Women* by Michael Pryor (who has given me permission to publish his launch speech) I bought my copy (at \$28.95). I noticed some other books on display, but nothing was said about them by Steven Ormsby, the publisher. Only later did I realise that all of Gillian Polack's other books published by Satalyte had been sitting there for sale. A few months later I heard that Satalyte had gone belly up, so it was now unlikely I could buy any of their titles. Gillian says she has copies for sale from home, but I don't feel free to publish her address. I guess you can find her by googling.

What has Gillian been doing in recent months?

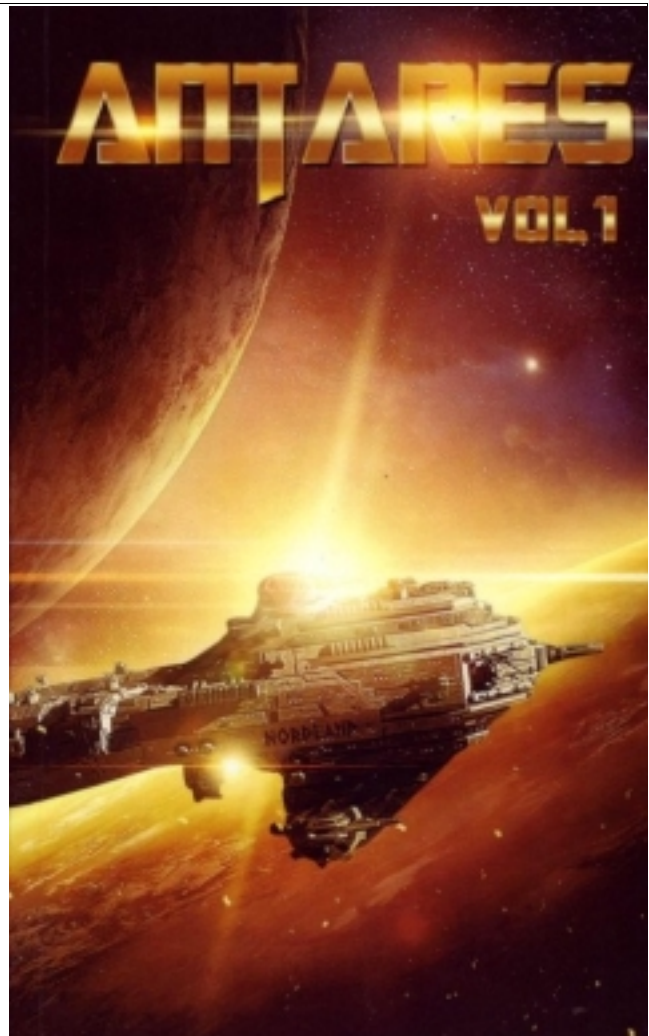
Shooting Star Press will release a retrospective of my short fiction along with new stories. June 2018 (Continuum) is the launch month. Two of the stories were accepted by Aphelion before it folded, and with their finding came the letter, which moved me muchly. I never knew Peter McNamara and yet I have a letter from him. He liked two of the stories and accepted them for publication but I wrote three. The third he said was descriptive and not really a story.

Book View Cafe is bringing out the books published by Satalyte. I love working with these people. It's changed my writing life. They're so generous and knowledgeable. My moment of great learning was when Vonda McIntyre copy-edited *The Time of the Ghosts*.

I have a new novel out next year. *The Year of the Fruitcake*. Given the title, what else could it be but SF? Have a look at <https://ifwgaustralia.com/2018/01/21/new-book-signing-the-year-of-the-fruitcake-by-gillian-polack/>

The health side of life is wildly exciting and I've been back to full time work for a while. Alas, there are no jobs (I've been interviewed for a bunch of uni jobs, but missed out very narrowly on all of them), so my research might have to fade into nowhere so that I can put more time into paid work. I find this ironic, for my research is what makes my teaching important for writers, but the Writers' Centres are cutting down on interstate teachers because they've had funding cuts, so I can't make that link anymore. I've applied for funding where I can, but I'm between the university world and the writing world in a way that's been hit badly by our current economy. That's the bad news. If I weren't getting published, I'd give up and get whatever job would take me, but fiction is the centre of my universe, so I don't want to!! This is why it meant so much that you're have work of mine and about me and want to publish it. (Simon Brown also wrote out his speech for the launch of *The Art of Effective Dreaming*. I love it when better writers than I launch my books!)

In recent years **David Grigg** has sent me copies of his books of his own short stories. They are all recommended, and can be bought from him at david.grigg@gmail.com. In the process of publishing them, he has made himself into a fine producer of book packages. He tells me he is producing new editions of classic novels for one publisher. For **Nordland Publishing** (www.nordlandpublishing.com) he has also edited (with **M. J. Kobernus**) *Antares Volume 1 2016*, which seems to be the only volume published so far. M. J. Kibernus admits to living in Norway; contributors live all over the world, including Australia, USA, Canada, and Japan. I don't know the names of any of the writers apart from David Grigg himself, and LynC from Melbourne. Most of these stories seem to be from beginners (their stories are a bit safe and undeveloped), although their mini-biographies reveal that they are very busy newcomers. My own favourite story is a strange incantatory story, bordering on the hallucinogenic, called 'Indrid Cold, Indrid Cold' by Chris Capps. LynC's 'Nematalien' is the other story I remember best.



And all the others?

The above list does not include the vast number of books, fanzines, magazines, Blu-rays, DVDs, and CDs that have been sent to me out of friendship by many supporters of *SF Commentary*. A large percentage of them have been sent to me by **Dick Jenssen** (including many movies I would never been able to see otherwise), as well as people such as **David Russell** (including the 14 DVDs and a book he gave me for my recent birthday, especially *M. R. Carey's The Girl with All the Gifts*), and **Thomas Bull** (including music by the Minneapolis group Cats Laughing). **Denny Lien** sends me interesting literary magazines from Minneapolis. Most recently **Bill Wright** paid for my membership of upcoming *Continuum 14* in Melbourne. Thanks, everybody; *SFC* people are amazing and fantastic.

I was going to include a review of **Eileen Kernaghan's** *Sophie, in Shadow*, which **Thistledown Press**, her Canadian publisher sent me several years ago. I cannot find the review I wrote anywhere on my system! I will rewrite it. And I still haven't written about two of the **Strugatsky Brothers** novels that **Franz Rottensteiner** sent me more than a year ago.

Life hurtles on; I'm trying to catch up.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 8 April 2018

Pete Young wrote this article for me in ... er ... 2013. So I am not merely four years behind schedule on catching up with the *SF Commentary* In Basket, but five years behind. While Pete has maintained his job and devotion to his family, he has also begun publishing another regular fanzine called ***The White Notebooks***. It is one of my favourite fanzines, not only because of the quality of the writing and page design, but also each issue is about one-tenth the size of this issue of *SFC*. I can only thank Pete for the enormous work he has put into the Gillespie entries in ISFDb (International Science Fiction Database) so far. He has rather batted back to me the job of scanning and making available as PDFs the issues that he has so valiantly indexed.

Peter Young

The Bruce Index

Becoming a Moderating Editor at ISFDb

Since Pubbing my last *Ish of Zoo Nation* in 2005, I'll be the first to admit that, while not exactly gafiating or fafiating, I at least had to retreat to the peripheries of fandom while I got married, moved house and country, and had a kid, all while holding down a part-time, month-on month-off job back in the UK. I've not been inactive in fanzine publishing, however, and have since put out three well-received (I hope) issues of *Journey Planet* that I guest-edited with James Bacon and Chris Garcia. Things are looking up.

But in the absence of having had much time (or spare energy) to devote to sustained fanzine production until now, I was faced with a need to continue contributing *something* to fandom. These things begin small, of course, and as my semi-compulsive list-making has an inevitable overlap with my interest in science fiction, given my bibliographic tendencies it was only a matter of time before I'd become a contributing editor at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database most days of the week.

Anyone can become an editor at the ISFDb. New editors tend to appear out of the blue at the ratio of around one a week, and with encouragement and enthusiasm to learn how the database functions (and a large supply of books/magazines/fanzines from which to work) editors can hang out there as long as they want, or as long as they feel they have something to contribute. Me, I've always found it just a little addictive.

Getting to know the ISFDb from the inside as an editor is a steep learning curve which inevitably incurs making dozens of mistakes as you get your head around the architecture of the site, and the correct ways to enter information into it. Editors' mistakes are mostly small (and they don't do any irreparable damage, as anything can be corrected) and errors made are usually that of bibliographic practice or, equally often, data entry. But perseverance furthers, and in a moderated environment this needs to be met with patience, encouragement and good communication skills from the Moderating Editors who approve edits, a good and encouraging attitude is

something I have always experienced there. I'd been contributing edits at ISFDb for almost a year before being invited to become a Moderating Editor myself in April 2012. My input since then has gone up considerably, and all editors, contributing or moderating, quickly spot areas they feel could be improved upon, and create personal projects. I picked out a couple of areas I'm currently working on: Locally published speculative fiction (and by local I mean South East Asia), and fanzines.

'Aha,' you are thinking, 'so this is the *SF Commentary* connection.' Indeed it is, but it's not the whole story. Apart from the readily-accessible quarter of my book collection (the other 3000 books are still stored away in England) I had already indexed into the ISFDb my fanzine *Zoo Nation* and all issues of *Journey Planet*, plus others including the entire run of *The Philip K. Dick Newsletter* that Paul Williams sent to me a few years ago. Looking around for other fanzines to index I noticed there were some very visible gaps: *SF Commentary* being perhaps the biggest and most obvious, and far more deserving of a complete presence at the ISFDb than just about any other fanzine I could think of. Before *any* issues of *SF Commentary* had been indexed Bruce's page at the ISFDb (<http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?19631>) amounted to about two dozen articles and a dozen reviews: it was clear some things were sorely lacking there. Without even notifying Bruce I set about correcting this great injustice, and began entering my hard copies of *SF Commentary* plus the e-zine editions up at efanzines.com.

It was not long after that I spotted Bruce lamenting on the Fictionmags list the fact that he had not indexed the contents of all his fanzines, and was looking around for places to store this vast body of knowledge. A few months went by and, of course, it was always my intention to let him know sooner rather than later that I'd begun already, but as usual the urgent ends up taking priority over the important, or some things just end up sliding

forever into tomorrow. Near the end of January 2013 this wish of Bruce's was mentioned again by Phil Stephenson-Payne, and I felt that my notification to Bruce was becoming overdue. I responded on-list and the conversation quickly went off-list. Things have since continued productively onwards from there.

Indexing *SF Commentary* at the ISFDb requires more engagement with the material that the effort required to index most fanzines or magazines. It's not just the substantial nature of the publication itself; how *SF Commentary* relates to other Gillespiezines is a small factor, but it's how the *conversation* is carried on, and in so many areas, that is noticeable and challenging. This inevitably has an impact on what gets indexed. Basically, any spec-fic related content is In, but non-spec-fic related content is generally not indexed at the ISFDb: articles on music, gardening, cats, and other real-life matters don't really have a place in a database of speculative fiction, so it's down to each editor to ultimately decide what gets indexed. Reviews of spec-fic books are In: this sometimes involves creating a new entry for a title not already in the database, and I find myself having to do this more with *SF Commentary* than any other fanzine that carries reviews (which is fine). However reviews of non-spec-fic related books are generally Out, with some exceptions for works peripherally related to science and/or speculative fiction. Another area of consideration with reviews is: when is a 'capsule review' too short? If something is presented as a review, no matter the length, it's usually In; if words written about a book are presented as brief comments, sometimes amounting to just a sentence, it's usually Out, but again, there is some decision-making to be done.

All in all, whatever publication I'm working on, the bibliographic work is enjoyable, and is something I can do while also listening to podcasts or watching a 50s skiffy B-movie I've downloaded from the Internet Archive. I have also found a convenient ally in bibliographic enterprises relating to Bruce Gillespie Esq. in **Mark Plummer**. His Gillespiezine index in *SFC* 84 was very useful, and Mark and Claire are lending me what I hope will be the complete run of *SF Commentary* back issues for this project, as well as many back issues of *Banana Wings*, which I'm also about a third of the way through indexing.

And as I said, that's not the whole story. There's also *The Metaphysical Review*, and *Steam Engine Time*, and **brg**, and *Scratch Pad*, and *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* to get through, and, and, and ...

Bruce has always given us much food for thought.

About the ISFDb

The site gets about 32,000 visits every month, and is currently about 20Gb in size. The (as far as I know, unstated) aim would appear to be to add a record for every title and publication — and that also means every printing/edition of every title and publication in every language — that can be found. This is perhaps less a

specified aim as a statement of what is possible with the software. This covers a *lot* of ground, and the ISFDb is already simply a stunning (and free) source of concise and detailed bibliographic information about science fiction, fantasy and horror.

I would say that while I believe it's *the* speculative fiction bibliographic database for written works and has a broader reach than SFE, it has to have its self-imposed limitations within the wider expanse of literature, which given a broad enough definition could possibly all be regarded as speculative. So there have to be boundaries under the 'Rules of Acquisition': for example, 'psychological horror' is In; however 'slasher horror' is Out. Graphic novels, too, are currently Out (and there are already the Grand Comics Database and ComicBookDB which cover much of that territory) but once the software is up to the challenge, that may change. Children's and YA fiction is In, with an as-yet-undetermined lower reading age limit. Some non-genre titles are In for authors deemed vaguely as being 'above a certain threshold', the most obvious example being Isaac Asimov. As I have obviously indicated above, paper fanzines (and PDF e-zines) are In, and in my opinion this is an area which could still do with considerable further input; however blog entries, including those which contain works of fiction, are Out because they are considered to be published in an 'unstable' format.

This inevitably leaves gaps: the database is compiled by humans after all (with the help of a few software robots), and humans have been known to be vague and inconcise and occasionally insufficiently well-defined and a bit fuzzy around the edges, but as yet no one has come up with a suitable patch for that, so a database compiled by humans as well can only reflect our lamentable state of existence.

The majority of the information currently in the database is inevitably Anglocentric, which also reflects the majority of its users (I believe there is a similar but smaller German database), but it is being expanded further beyond the Anglosphere: with the help of contributing and moderating editors of other nationalities, we are also adding Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, and Russian titles and publications on a daily basis.

What the ISFDb particularly needs is more programmers. Currently the software side is managed by a small handful of people, and with more programmers new features and facilities/abilities could probably be rolled out *much* quicker

— Peter Young, 2013

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS
Continued on page 48.

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Andrew Milner

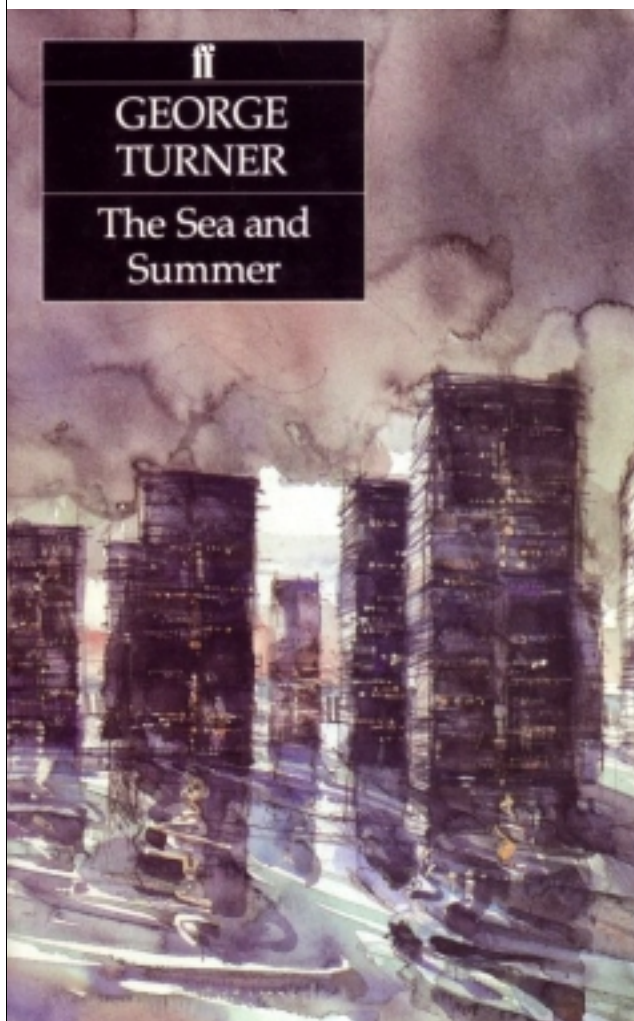
The sea and eternal summer: An Australian apocalypse

I

Despite the international success of individual writers like Greg Egan and of individual novels like Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*,¹ Australian SF remains essentially

peripheral to the wider contours of the genre. Yet there is a long history of what Adam Roberts describes as 'works that located utopias and satirical dystopias on the opposite side of the globe,'² that is, in Australia. The earliest example he gives is Joseph Hall's 1605 *Mundus alter et idem sive Terra Australis ante hac semper incognita lustrata* (*A World Other and the Same, or the Land of Australia until Now Unknown*), the last Nicolas Edme Restif de la Bretonne's 1781 *La Decouverte Australe par une homme-volant* (*The Discovery of Australia by a Flying Man*)³. Lyman Tower Sargent's bibliography begins slightly later, with Peter Heglin's 1667 *An Appendix To the Former Work, Endeavouring a Discovery of the Unknown Parts of the World. Especially of Terra Australis Incognita, or the Southern Continent*, and proceeds to list something like 300 'Australian' print utopias and dystopias published during the period 1667–1999.⁴

There are yet others overlooked by even Sargent and Roberts: neither mention Denis Veiras's *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, for example, first published in part in English in 1675, in whole in French in 1679.⁵ European writers made very extensive use of Australia as a site for utopian imaginings well before the continent's conquest, exploration and colonisation; even Marx's *Capital* ends its first volume with an unexpected vision of Australia as an open



1. Nevil Shute, *On the Beach* (London, Toronto and Melbourne: Heinemann, 1957).
2. Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 56.
3. Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 56–57, 85–86.
4. Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Australian Utopian Literature: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography 1667–1999', *Utopian Studies* 10.2 (1999): 138–73.
5. Denis Veiras, *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, ed. A. Rosenberg (Paris: Champion, 2001 [1679]); Denis Veiras, *The History of the Sevarambians: A Utopian Novel*, eds J. C. Laursen and C. Masroori (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006 [1675–1679]).



George Turner, 1980s.

frontier beyond capital's grasp.⁶ There are two reasons for this, the one obvious, the other less so. First, Australia remained one of very few real-world *terrae incognitae* available for appropriation by European fantasy as late as the mid-late nineteenth century. And second, although Australia is conventionally described as a continent, it is also in fact an island,⁷ possessed of all the properties of self-containment and isolation that have proven so helpful to the authors of utopia ever since Thomas More.

Most of the earlier Australian utopian fictions took the form of an imaginary voyage narrated by travellers on their return home. Such imaginings became increasingly implausible as European explorers brought back increasingly detailed accounts of Australia's climate, topography and people. The utopias were therefore progressively relocated further into the interior, until the realities of inland exploration eventually proved equally disappointing. Thereafter, in Australia as elsewhere, utopias were increasingly superseded by future-fictional 'uchronias'. Robyn Walton cites Robert Ellis Dudgeon's *Colymbia*, published in 1873, as the first Australian SF utopia,⁸ although Joseph Fraser's *Melbourne and Mars* is probably better known.⁹ In Australia, again as elsewhere, as the twentieth century proceeded utopias were also increasingly displaced by dystopias. The best-known Australian examples are almost certainly Shute's *On the Beach*, a nuclear doomsday novel, and George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*, one of the first novels to explore the fictional possibilities of the effects of global warming. Both make powerful, albeit often scientifically implausible, use of Australia's self-contained isolation.

Much SF has been both deliberately intended by its authors and deliberately received by its readers as value-relevant. Some, but not all, science fiction consists in future stories; and some, but not all, is concerned either to advocate what its authors and readers see as desirable

possible futures or to urge against what they see as undesirable ones. In short, the future story can be used as a kind of futurology. SF of this kind is intended to be politically or morally effective, that is, to be socially useful. 'We badly need a literature of considered ideas,' Turner himself argued in 1990: 'Science fiction could be a useful tool for serious consideration, on the level of the non-specialist reader, of a future rushing on us at unstoppable speed.'¹⁰ Three years earlier, in the 'Postscript' to *The Sea and Summer*, he had written that: 'We talk of leaving a better world to our children, but in fact do little more than rub along with day-to-day problems and hope that the long-range catastrophes will never happen.' This novel, he explained, 'is about the possible cost of complacency.'¹¹

Much radical SF scholarship exhibits a certain antipathy to dystopia, essentially on the grounds that it tends, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, 'to denounce and [...] warn against Utopian programs.'¹² But many dystopias, including some of those most disliked by Jameson, actually function as implicitly utopian warnings rather than as 'anti-utopias' in the strict sense of the term. This is true, I would argue, for *On the Beach* and *The Sea and Summer*. Writing in the Australian newspaper *The Age* in January 2008, Peter Christoff, the then-Vice President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, observed that *On the Beach* had 'helped catalyse the 1960s anti-nuclear movement'. Comparing the threat of nuclear war in the 1950s with that of global warming in the early twenty-first century, he warned that: 'we are [...] suffering from a radical failure of imagination.' When Christoff connected *On the Beach* to climate change, he did so precisely to urge the need for a parallel contemporary effort to imagine the unimaginable. 'These are distressing, some will argue apocalyptic, imaginings,' he admits: 'But without them, we cannot undertake the very substantial efforts required to minimize the chances of their being realised.'¹³ *The Sea and Summer*, it seems to me, had attempted more or less exactly this two decades previously.

Turner was born in Melbourne in 1916 and published

6. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970 [1867]), 768.

7. This is not true for North America or South America, Europe or Asia or Africa. Of the six commonly recognised inhabited continents, only Australia is truly an island.

8. Robyn Walton, 'Utopian and Dystopian Impulses in Australia', *Overland* 173 (2003), 7.

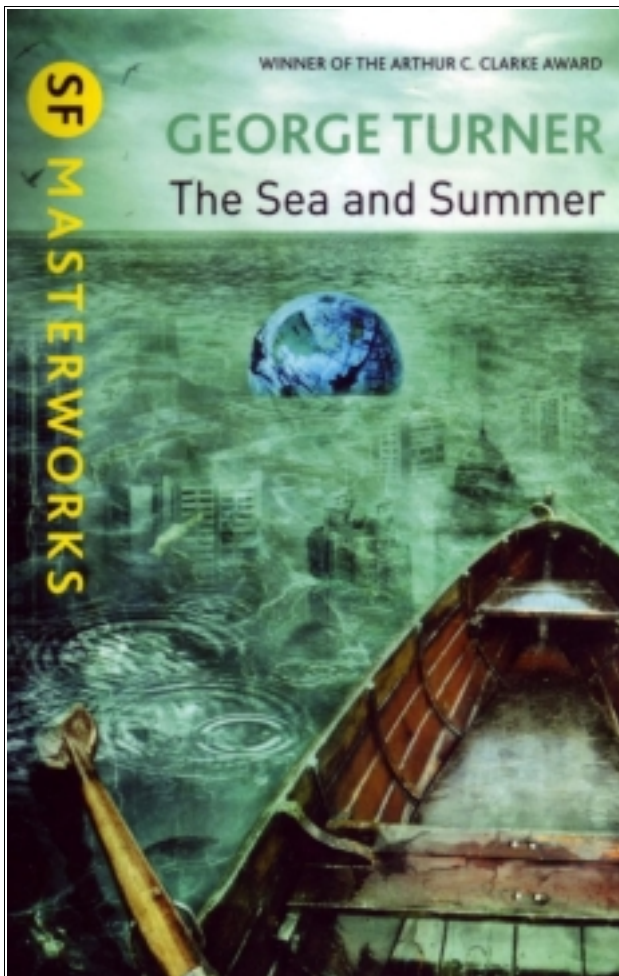
9. Joseph Fraser, *Melbourne and Mars: My Mysterious Life on Two Planets. Extracts from the Diary of a Melbourne Merchant* (Melbourne: E. W. Cole, 1889).

10. George Turner, 'Envoi', in *A Pursuit of Miracles: Eight Stories* (Adelaide: Aphelion Publications, 1990), 209.

11. George Turner, *The Sea and Summer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 318.

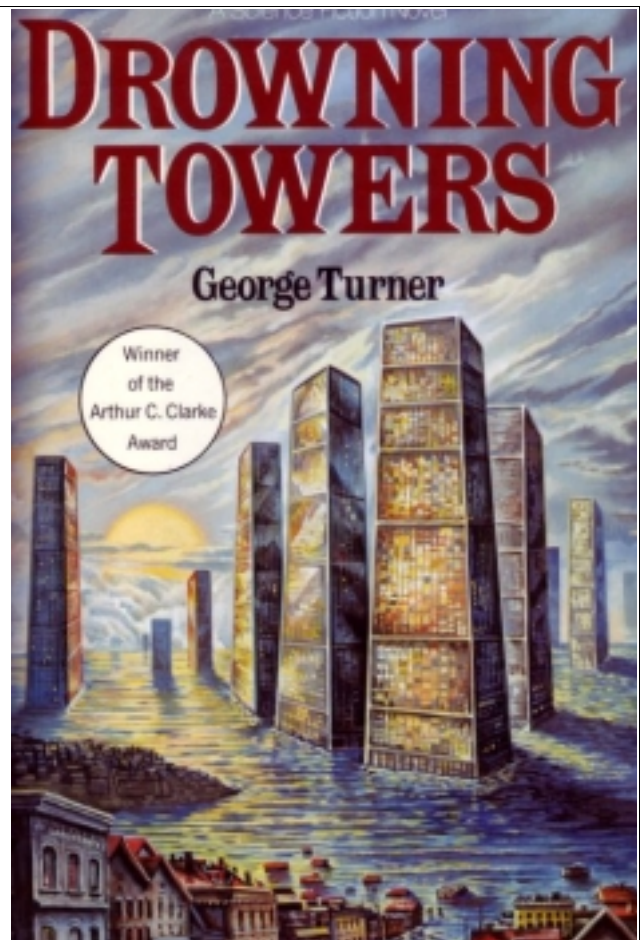
12. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 199.

13. Peter Christoff, 'The End of the World as We Know It', *The Age*, 15 January 2008: 13.



the first of five non-SF novels in 1959. He began reviewing genre fiction for *The Age* during the 1970s, produced his first SF novel *Beloved Son* in 1978, which was followed by sequels in 1981 and 1983,¹⁴ and by the time of his death in 1997 had become in effect the genre's Australian elder statesman. He published four further SF novels between 1987 and 1994, a collection of SF short stories in 1990, and two posthumous works, an unfinished novella *And Now Time Doth Waste Me* in 1998, and the novel *Down There in Darkness* in 1999.¹⁵ All were essentially exercises in futurology, all preoccupied with the ethics of socio-political action, all distinctively Australian in tenor. By far the most critically successful was *The Sea and Summer*, which in 1988 won both the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award for the South East Asia and South Pacific Region and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best SF novel published in Britain (the previous year's Clarke Award had gone to Margaret Atwood for *The Handmaid's Tale*). In 1985 Turner had published a short story, 'The Fittest',¹⁶ in which he first began to explore the possible effects of global warming on his home city. He quickly expanded this story into a full-length novel that was published in 1987 as *The Sea and Summer* in Britain, and as *Drowning Towers* in the United States.¹⁷

Like *On the Beach*, *The Sea and Summer* is set mainly in and around Melbourne, a vividly described place, terrifyingly transformed into the utterly unfamiliar. The novel is organised into a core narrative, comprising two parts set in the mid twenty-first century, and a frame



narrative, comprising three shorter parts set a thousand years later among 'the Autumn People' of the 'New City', located in what are today the Dandenong Ranges to the east of Melbourne.¹⁸ The core narrative deals with the immediate future of our 'Greenhouse Culture', the frame narrative with the retrospective reactions to it of a slowly cooling world. The latter depicts a utopian future society, which uses submarine archaeology to explore the drowned remains of the 'Old City', but which is also simultaneously aware of the imminence of a 'Long Winter' that might well last a hundred thousand years.

14. George Turner, *Beloved Son* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978); George Turner, *Vaneglorry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981); George Turner, *Yesterday's Men* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983).

15. Turner, *The Sea and Summer*; George Turner, *Brainchild* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); George Turner, *The Destiny Makers* (New York: William Morrow, 1993); George Turner, *Genetic Soldier* (New York: William Morrow, 1994); Turner, *A Pursuit of Miracles*; George Turner, 'And Now Time Doth Waste Me', in Jack Dann and Janeen Webb (eds), *Dreaming Down-Under* (Sydney: Voyager, 1998); George Turner, *Down There in Darkness* (New York: Tor Books, 1999).

16. George Turner, 'The Fittest', in David King and Russell Blackford (eds), *Urban Fantasies* (Melbourne: Ebony Books, 1985).

17. George Turner, *Drowning Towers* (New York: Arbor House, 1987).

18. Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, 3–16, 87–100, 315–316.

The novel opens by introducing the frame narrative's three main characters: Marin, a part-time student and enthusiastic Christian, who pilots the powercraft used to explore the drowned city; his great-aunt, Professor Lenna Wilson, an expert on the collapse of the Greenhouse Culture in Australia, who teaches history at the University; and Andra Andrasson, a visiting actor-playwright from Sydney, researching the twenty-first century as possible material for a play.¹⁹ Together they explore the remains of the substantially submerged 'Tower Twenty-three' (6–11) and investigate the ruins of the only Swill 'Enclave' never to have flooded (93–96), debating their meaning both on-site and at the University.

The core narrative takes the form of a novel within the novel, also titled *The Sea and Summer*, written by Lenna as an 'Historical Reconstruction' of the thirty-first century's real past (15). In form it is polyphonic, tracing the development of the Greenhouse Culture through a set of memoirs and diary extracts written during the years 2044–2061 by six main protagonists: Alison Conway, Francis Conway, Teddy Conway, Nola Parkes, Captain Nikopoulos, and Arthur Derrick. The only silent voice is that of the Tower Boss, Billy Kovacs, the novel's central character and also, perhaps, its central enigma, the remains of whose flat Lenna and Andra explore (9). This core narrative is counter-chronological, beginning and ending in 2061, but moving through the 2040s and 50s as it proceeds. The sections set in 2061 might therefore be considered a frame within the frame. In the first of these, Alison recalls her own childish delight in play on the beach at Elwood, from the vantage point of what we will later learn to be the last year of her life. She wistfully concludes: 'The ageing woman has what the child desired — the sea and eternal summer.' (20) In the second, her son Francis records his intermittent diary entries from the period February 2056 to March 2061, concluding with that for 20th March:

Mum is dead ... Once, she said very forcefully, 'I've had a *good* life, Francis. So full.' Full, I thought, of what would have been avoided in a saner world ... Billy came in later, but by then she was rambling about the past, about summertime and the glistening sea. (311)

Professor Wilson's historical reconstruction depicts the twenty-first century as a world of mass unemployment and social polarisation, where rising sea levels have resulted in the inundation of the city's bayside suburbs. As it opens, the poor 'Swill' already live in high-rise tower blocks, the lower floors of which are progressively submerged; the wealthier 'Sweet' in suburbia on higher ground; the 'Fringe' in the zones between. In 2033 a third of Australia has been set aside for Asian population relocation; by 2041 the global population has reached ten billion and the cost of iceberg tows and desalinisation projects has brought the economy close to bankruptcy (29, 21, 30). On his sixth birthday in 2041, Francis and his nine-year old brother, Teddy, are taken by their

parents, Fred and Alison, to see the sea. What they find is a concrete wall 'stretching out of sight in both directions'. Francis's mother surprises him, however, by explaining that: 'This is Elwood and there was a beach here once. I used to paddle here. Then the water came up and there were the storm years and the pollution, and the water became too filthy.' 'It must be terrible over there in Newport when the river floods,' she continues: 'A high tide covers the ground levels of the tenements' (23–24). In 2044 Fred is laid off and commits suicide, leaving Allie and the boys to move to Newport (30–34). There they meet Billy Kovacs, who becomes Alison's lover, Francis's mentor, and the reader's guide to the social geography of an Australian dystopia.

In adolescence both Teddy and Francis abandon their mother in pursuit of upward social mobility, although both will eventually be returned 'home'. For Teddy, mobility comes through formal education, leading to Police Intelligence Recruit School (48–49) and thence to a career as a Police Intelligence Officer. For Francis, it comes by way of an unusual aptitude for mental arithmetic, leading to a career as a 'cally that spouts answers without using a key or chip' (57), for illicit business deals. Each acquires an appropriate sponsor: for Teddy, 'Nick' Nikopoulos, a Captain in Police Intelligence (113); for Francis, Mrs Nola Parkes, the owner of a small import-export firm, who, after the collapse of the money economy, directs the State sub-department performing essentially the same function (72). Alison and the boys tell their own stories, Nikopoulos and Parkes retell the stories from different vantage points and, eventually, these are all contextualized by Derrick, a senior State official with a quite literal power of life or death over the other characters (291). 'Why don't you all go home?' he tells them. 'We're finished here' (301).

The novel is at its most compelling in its representations of the everyday horror of life in the drowning towers, and of the sheer ferocity of status consciousness within a class structure mutating into a caste system. Both are recurrent motifs in both the frame and core narratives, although in the latter they invariably prove more telling because more experientially grounded. There is a terrible poignancy, for example, to Francis's diary entries for 11 February 2056:

Five years back in the Fringe and resigned to it. Not reconciled, never that. What a hopeless, helpless lot the Swill are. (306)

And 22 March 2057:

Three times this month the water has raced through the house. Sea water, salt and cold. We pay now for our great-grandparents' refusal to admit that tomorrow would eventually come. (306–307)

In the novel's final sub-plot, Captain Nikopoulos, Billy Kovacs, and Teddy discover that Mrs Parkes and Francis are unwittingly involved in a State-sponsored conspiracy to 'cull' the Swill, by means of a highly addictive 'chewey' designed to produce infertility. 'A State that strikes its own,' Nola Parkes protests, 'at random, for experiment, is past hope' (303). Arthur Derrick's

19. Ibid., 3–6. All subsequent references will be given in the text.

response is directed at Turner's twentieth-century readers as much as at Parkes herself:

Nola, idealism was for the last century, when there was still time ... we're down to more primitive needs. The sea will rise, the cities will grind to a halt and the people will desert them ... the State has no time to concern itself with moral quibbles ... (304)

II

The debates amongst the Autumn People in the frame narrative are clearly designed to make meaningful sense of the Greenhouse Culture. For Marin, its meaning is straightforward and simple: 'They were wicked — they ... ruined the world for all who came after ... they *denied* history.' (6) Lenna, however, conceives of their distant ancestors more sympathetically, as victims of the unintended consequences of their own collective action. 'In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,' she tells Andra, 'the entire planet stood with its fingers plugging dykes of its own creation until the sea washed over their muddled status quo. Literally' (13). Andra's own underlying response is incomprehension. Attempting to grapple with the social inequalities of the Greenhouse era, he can only ask: '*How did this division arise? Why no revolution?*' (16) Lenna suggests the answer might lie in the 'rise of the Tower Bosses' to run 'small states within the State'. This allowed the poor 'a measure of contentment', she explains, 'by letting them run their own affairs.' Moreover, she continues, the Political Security executive was also able 'to convince the Tower Bosses that only a condition of status quo could preserve a collapsing civilization'. (93) Ultimately, however, Andra remains as uncomprehending as ever and, after 'three years and a dozen attempts', abandons his play (315).

A primary effect of this frame narrative is to blunt the force of dystopian inevitability driving the core narrative. 'We're very well equipped to endure a million years of cold,' Lenna tells Andra. [...] We have knowledge and we have the Forward Planning Centres. We'll make the change smoothly' (12–13). A secondary effect, however, is to suggest how little control humanity can actually exercise over its destiny. 'It is history that makes us ...' Andra observes in his closing letter to Lenna: 'The Greenhouse years should have shown that plainly; the Long Winter will render it inescapable' (315). Much the same is true of the frame within the frame when it moves forward into the late 2050s. For here we learn how Teddy, Nikopoulos, and Kovacs, and eventually even Francis and Derrick, become involved in an attempt by the 'New Men' to organise the Swill in preparation 'for the dark years coming' (310). The crisis will not be averted, we know from the thirty-first century, but 'little human glimpses *do* help', Lenna will conclude, 'if only in confirming our confidence in steadfast courage' (316).

The least persuasive aspect of the novel is in its understanding of how the crisis developed. In the 'Post-script' Turner identifies six 'major matters' of futuro-logical concern: population growth, food shortage, mass unemployment, financial collapse, nuclear war, and the Greenhouse effect, only one of which — nuclear war — fails to feature in the novel, because it

seemed to him increasingly unlikely in any foreseeable future (98, 317–318). Empirically, Turner's predictions have often proven surprisingly close to the mark. In the novel, world population reaches ten billion during the early 2040s (21); according to the 2010 biennial revision of the United Nations *World Population Prospects*, it will reach between 8 billion (low projection) and 10.5 billion (high projection) by 2050.²⁰ In the novel, 'two-thirds of the world starves' by 2045 (158). This might have seemed hopelessly pessimistic during the 1980s and 1990s, when world hunger rates were persistently trending downwards. But the numbers of hungry people increased from 825 million people in 1995–97 to 857 million in 2000–02, 873 million in 2004–06, and were projected to reach a historic high of 1020 million, or a sixth of the world's population, by the end of the decade.²¹

In the novel, the Australian and world unemployment rate has reached 90 per cent by 2041 (25). Again, this must have seemed an extraordinarily gloomy prognosis on the book's first publication, as indeed it still is for Australia, where the unemployment rate was as low as 4.9 per cent early in 2012.²² But the situation is very different across much of the European Union, where Spain has an unemployment rate of 23.6 per cent, Greece 21 per cent, Portugal 15 per cent, Ireland 14.7 per cent and France 10 per cent.²³ Moreover, youth unemployment rates are higher still: in the fourth quarter of 2011, the figure was 49.3 per cent for Greece, 48.9 per cent for Spain, 34.1 per cent for Portugal, 30.5 per cent for both Ireland and Italy, 22.7 per cent for France, and 22 per cent for the United Kingdom.²⁴

In the novel, the financial crisis that bespeaks the collapse of the international monetary system comes in the 2040s; in reality, something like it almost certainly began during the Global Financial Crisis, of 2007–2012. In the novel, there have been no nuclear wars, but the 'armaments factories' nonetheless continue 'belching out weapons ... for a war nobody dared start ... and an industry nobody dared stop' (71); in reality, we have indeed been spared nuclear war, but nonetheless, as at

20. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects, the 2010 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2010). <http://esa.un.org/wpp/Other-Information/faq.htm#q3>.

21. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, *More People Than Ever are Victims of Hunger*, Press Release (Rome: FAO Media Centre, 2008): 1.

22. Turner would almost certainly have been surprised by how easily Australia withstood the GFC (to date, it is the only OECD country to have escaped recession), as also by the probable cause: the long-term restructuring of Australian trade relationships away from America and Europe towards China and India.

23. 'List of Countries by Unemployment Rate', Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_unemployment_rate.

24. European Commission, *Unemployment Statistics* (Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2012). http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics.

January 2011, eight states possessed between them about 20,530 nuclear warheads, 5000 ready for use and 2000 on high operational alert.²⁵ In the novel, average temperatures have risen by 4 degrees and sea levels by 30 centimetres between 1990 and 2041 (74–75); the current projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are less dramatic, pointing to temperature increases of between 1.1 and 6.4 degrees between 1980–99 and 2090–99 and rises in sea level of between 18 and 59 centimetres.²⁶ But there is near-consensus amongst climate scientists that current levels of atmospheric greenhouse gas are sufficient to alter global weather patterns to disastrous effect and also strong evidence that recent increases in extreme weather events, such as heat waves and flooding, are related to climate change.²⁷ The experience of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 tends to confirm these suspicions.

Nonetheless, neither Turner nor his characters have any sense of which, if any, of these processes is the driver of the catastrophic crisis that overcame the Greenhouse Culture. One suspects his own answer might well have been essentially Malthusian. Mine, by contrast, would be Marxian, that is, that all six — including the nuclear arms race, if not nuclear war itself — are likely outcomes, within a world of finite resources, of any system of unregulated competitive capital accumulation akin to that sketched in *The Communist Manifesto* and analysed in detail in *Capital*.²⁸ No doubt, the days are long gone when one could take a creative writer to task simply for being insufficiently Marxist. One might, however, still object to the implausibility of a thousand years of hindsight failing to provide the history profession with any generally accepted account of so significant an event as the collapse of an entire social order.

This isn't entirely fair: Professor Wilson has, in fact, written a 5000-page *Preliminary Survey of Factors Affecting the Collapse of the Greenhouse Culture in Australia* (13). But she decides to offer Andra her fictionalised account because he lacks the 'general historical and technical grounding' necessary to understand the longer work (14). Three years later he still appears not to have read her *Survey*. So we do not know what, ultimately, drove the system into crisis. We do, however, know how Turner thought it could best be avoided, that is, by rational planning based on scientific advice. The epigraph to the novel, repeated in the 'Postscript', is taken from Sir Macfarlane Burnet, the Australian virologist, immunologist, and public policy activist, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1960: 'We must plan for five years ahead and twenty years and a hundred years' (317). Lenna Wilson gives Andra Andrasson essentially cognate advice:

Keep up as well as you can with the scientific information and you could be able to think usefully if the time for action should arrive. Otherwise, live as suits you. Be like the Swill, aware but unworried. (99)

The obvious question to ask is why, when faced with the incontrovertible evidence of impending catastrophe, not only the Swill, but also the Sweet, the Fringers and, the State, should have failed to plan adequately. The

novel is clear that science had indeed sounded warnings. 'As I understand it,' Andra observes to Lenna, '... they knew what was coming [...] Yet they did nothing about it.' 'They fell into destruction,' she replies, 'because they *could* do nothing about it; they had started a sequence which had to run its course in unbalancing the climate' (13). What neither she nor Turner adequately explain, however, is *why* they were unable to do anything about it, why they had started this sequence, and why it had to run its course. Logically, the answer can only be that some social power prevented them from acting on the scientific advice.

Yet, Turner is at pains to insist that his fictional Australian elites were essentially well motivated. As Marin tells Andra:

The idea was not oppression but preservation. The Sweet, educated and by and large the most competent sector of the population ... were necessary to administer the State. With the collapse of trade and ... industry the Swill became a burden on the economy, easier and cheaper to support if ... concentrated into small areas. (91)

When Derrick, the most senior representative of Turner's Australian State, defends the cull to Nola, he does so in similarly benevolent terms:

If there has to be a cull — and you know damned well that sooner or later there has to be — let's at least

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25. Stockholm Institute for Peace Research, *SIPRI Yearbook 2011: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 319–320.
 26. 'Summary for Policymakers', in S. Solomon, D. Qin, M. Manning, Z. Chen, M. Marquis, K.B. Averyt, M. Tignor, and H.L. Miller (eds), *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 13.
 27. Gabriele.C. Hegerl, Francis W. Zwiers, Pascale Braconnot, Nathan P. Gillett, Yong Luo, Jose A. Marengo Orsini, Neville Nicholls, Joyce E. Penner and Peter A. Stott, 'Understanding and Attributing Climate Change' in Solomon et al., *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis*, 727; Stephen H. Schneider, Serguei Semenov, Anand Patwardhan, Ian Burton, Chris H. Magadza, Michael Oppenheimer, A. Barrie Pittock, Atiq Rahman, Joel B. Smith, Avelino Suarez and Farhana Yamin, 'Assessing Key Vulnerabilities and the Risk from Climate Change', in Martin Parry, Osvaldo Canziani, Jean Palutikof, Paul van der Linden and Clair Hanson (eds), *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 796.
 28. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 [1848]), 80–90; Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 612–648; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. III, ed. Frederick Engels (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972 [1894]), 211–231.

learn to do it with a minimum of suffering for the culled. (297)

How could an elite so well educated, so competent, so concerned to minimise suffering — in short, so much like the one Macfarlane Burnet had hoped for — have failed to prevent such preventable catastrophe? The answer must be that it, in turn, had been confronted by social powers more powerful and also less rational than itself. No doubt, there are a range of possible candidates available in the real world, but none within the novel. The competition between global capitalist corporations fits the bill rather nicely, however, as explanation for this peculiar combination of historically unprecedented power with historically unprecedented irrationality.

Which leads me, finally, to the linked questions of Turner's representations of the State and of Australian insularity. The novel is clear that, when the world financial system collapses, the nation state takes over the administration of the economy. So Francis Conway recalls that:

I was fifteen when the money system collapsed worldwide. That, in a single sentence, records the passing of ... private-sector capitalism ... The commercial Sweet had spent months preparing for the change-over [...] With forgetful speed it became *convenient* to present an allocation card at a State Distribution Store ... (71)

This is also the moment at which Mrs Parkes's import-export company becomes a Government sub-department. At one level, Turner is very astute here, recognising the way conventional left-versus-right disputes over public versus private ownership actually obscure the more fundamental continuities in management and structure that persisted, in both western and eastern Europe, through both the socialisations of the

1940s and 50s and the privatisations of the 1980s and 90s. But, at another, he ignores the likelihood that truly global corporations might not be as readily devolved into state subsidiaries as are national firms. No matter how convenient the fictional device of insularity might be to utopian writers, one is left wondering what had happened to the international parent companies, to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the United States Federal Reserve Bank, the European Central Bank, the People's Bank of China, and so on. Did the economy simply wither away, much as Engels had imagined the state might?²⁹ It seems unlikely.

Turner's *The Sea and Summer* is clearly not the game-changing climate change dystopia for which Christoff might have hoped. It has been out of print for over a decade and, unlike *On the Beach*, has never been adapted for film, television, or radio. As Verity Burgmann and Hans Baer recently observed: '*The Sea and Summer* is an extraordinarily well-crafted and gripping novel that received international awards and critical acclaim but has not received the popular attention it deserves.'³⁰ It has its flaws, no doubt, not least an underlying failure to acknowledge the deep contradictions between the emancipatory potential of scientific research and the political economy of late capitalism. Nonetheless, Turner's novel is long overdue positive critical re-evaluation and, hopefully, this essay will make some small contribution to that effect. I for one have very selfish reasons to hope so, for I live in Elwood, only a few minutes walk from the beach where Alison Conway used to play as a little girl.

— Andrew Milner, 2014

29. Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959 [1878]): 387.

30. Verity Burgmann and Hans A. Baer, *Climate Politics and the Climate Movement in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012): 37.



Randy Byers: 'King-sized Pine Cones'. Copyright The Literary Estate of Randy Byers.

This article first appeared in *Science Fiction Eye* in 1993; editor Stephen P. Brown calls it a 'critical fiction'. **Ron Drummond** writes: 'The friend of mine that I quote in the second-to-last scene [page 31, column 2], is Randy Byers, recently lost to us. At the time, given the context, I felt the speaker of those words should remain anonymous, and Randy agreed.'

Ron Drummond

The Frequency of Liberation

Steve Erickson, trapped in a concrete bunker with only the twentieth century for company, has just been unearthed at an archeological dig in Los Angeles.

In *Arc d'*X Steve Erickson gathers all the force of his many visions into a final frenzy of self-immolation, a pyre that reduces the calculus of his own liberation down to the image of a black moth rising from between the lips of a dead man.

The grey-faced police lieutenant, who belongs to no racial group I can think of, excepting perhaps the quick-and-the-dead, won't tell the pink-fleshed archeologist in charge of the excavation why the LAPD insists on imposing its jurisdiction on this site; he just mutters something about keeping out the homeless and pushes past the spluttering academic. He steps down the broad terraces of packed dirt and broken concrete and pauses before the shadowed doorway of the bunker, so many contrary impulses tugging at his features that the result seems more the work of a deranged cosmetic surgeon than actual emotion, mixed or otherwise.

I'm watching from inside the bunker, crouched in the rubble. In my hands I'm holding two halves of a ship, fore and aft, or a model of a ship anyway — though in the last minutes I've grown quite certain it isn't a model at all. Given what's happened here in the last hours — given what has yet to happen in the hours immediately ahead — my certainty at that moment ends up being the strangest phenomenon of all.

The ship when whole must have had the bloated, broad-beamed look of any Ark in any child's book of illustrated Bible stories — room for a cast of thousands. Broken, you can see the baker's dozen ark decks inside, each one crowded with a menagerie of emaciated toy animals. Or so at first I thought.

One half of the ark I set aside, in the dust next to the rusty kitchen knife. The other half I heft for a closer look: I can't see her anywhere among the thirteen decks stretching the wishbone cross-section of hull. The upper decks are crammed, not with toys but dead animals in perfect miniature, though the birds on one deck are no more than a feathery pulp. There are elephants with shriveled trunks, broken-necked giraffes; wolves and monkeys and kangaroos. All dead, all exuding desicca-

tion's musk.

Of the lower decks, one is filled with nothing but dunes hardened to sandstone. Another is thick with jungle sucked dry of all green. Several are empty, though covering one deck are paintings of the charnel decks above. And on the narrow bottom deck, just above the keel, railroad tracks run the length of the ship.

Reaching between the two most widely spaced decks, I carefully pull out from among the close-packed animals a dead panther. But the panther has long since been impervious to any care I or anyone else could muster — it crumbles between my thumb and forefinger with a sound like ripping parchment. I can feel the cracking of a thousand tiny bones. The panther's papery husk, draped across my fingertips, is as dusty and fragile as a black moth's wings: with my exhaled breath, it dissolves completely. Patches of brittle fur — all sheen gone — drift away in the sunlight slanting through the shattered wall behind me. I rub its thick dust between my fingers, until nothing of the panther is left.

I pick up the other half of the ship and try to fit the broken ends together. But something is missing, some unknown middle stretch of the ship's hull, gone. Then I notice the waterline, and the barnacles. Now how could I have missed that? Couldn't have, really, not in the world I knew. But then, none of this had ever belonged in any world I'd been to, unless it belonged in all of them.

The barnacles aren't tiny like everything else about this ark. No, they're normal in size, which means that on this ship they're monstrous, ugly jagged volcanoes erupting from the upper hull. Yes, you heard right: the upper hull. Below the waterline, the hull is naked, scabrous wood. But above the waterline, thickest at prow and stern but spread in patches everywhere in between, across much of the upper deck, encrusting the wheel house and climbing the masts to cluster at crows' nests, are barnacles. As if for long years this ship had sailed upside-down, to and fro on the endless ethereal airs of Rubicon Sky, while Noah and his despairing brood searched the murky ocean depths for any sign of the land forever drifting mere fathoms above their heads.



"There's someone in there?" a gruff voice calls, and I look up and out the bunker door at the grey police lieutenant nodding sightlessly in my direction — though it's clear his question is directed at the archeologist standing on the ridge above. The archeologist, his face looking like the suddenly exposed underbelly of a trapped animal, shakes his head in panicked denial of his inability to voice unambiguously the simple word "No".

If he'd managed to get that word out, the archeologist would have been telling the simple truth: there isn't anyone in the bunker. I'm not really here at all. Then again, neither is Steve Erickson, newly awakened from the dead. Erickson is curled up in the darkest corner of the bunker's front room, covered head-to-ankles in fine grey ash, feet encased in blocks of clear ice, which, melting, tick away like an unwinding clock.

Erickson stares at me from hooded eyes, though there's nothing hooded in the gaze itself.

If reality ticks to the clock of memory, as Steve Erickson demonstrates so profoundly again and again in his work, then for me (or for anyone) his books are no less and no more than the sum of our memories of reading them, which is to say the memories we have of the visions his books set to ringing in the bell curve of the inner eye. Black words and white paper fall away like dead leaves, and are, in the end, meaningless before the colors that remain.

A child, easefully and wholly in the present moment and unaware of the tyranny of consequences, nevertheless naturally understands that every moment is potentially irrevocable. Steve Erickson hasn't forgotten this. He

understands that a child doesn't end at the limits of her skin; her being fills the world and the world changes according to the color, texture, and portent of the moments that mark her. In *Rubicon Beach*, three-year-old "Catherine", born to a family in the jungle estuaries of the South American coast, sees a man lying face down in the sand. Her sense that there's something wrong with the man doesn't arise from the man's unnatural stillness, it's that he gazes into the earth, "in the way she had seen her brothers gaze into the rivers looking for fish. To the corpse at her feet the small child explained, Nothing swims in the dust."

This blending and imbuing of the world with the coordinates of one's own experience is central to Erickson's vision. But the implications of this run far deeper than mundane transference. It has to do with time, that time which obeys the dictates of no clock, but ebbs and flows to the changeable tides of memory, and the ways in which singular moments endure, altering every moment that follows. Thus Fletcher Grahame in *Days Between Stations*, who as a small boy is sitting in his father's study gazing out at the St. Lawrence River when his father accidentally fires an antique flintlock right behind his head. "As the sound rose in his ears to become the sound he would hear off and on for the rest of his life, the roar of the river matched that sound and the two became inseparable for him; long after that he would hear the crack of the flintlock whenever he gazed too long at the water's ongoing flow." Catching sight first of his own expression in a mirror on the study wall, and then of the expressions on the faces in his father's paintings scattered on easels about the room, it becomes immediately clear to Fletcher that "the flintlock's report had seared all of them; all the faces in all the paintings looked as though they couldn't stand the ringing in their ears."

Fletcher Grahame will carry that moment through every moment to come; in the face of everyone he meets he will see the fading echo of a gun blast, in every river he'll hear the maddening retort. In this way he knows never to assume that any moment is safe from sudden, violent dislocation; he knows that dislocation itself is coiled at the heart of every certainty, of every continuity, waiting to spring. When, years later and an ocean away from that moment in his father's study above the river, Grahame comes face to face with the ultimate dislocation, it's delivered to him by a crowd enraged — the roaring of its many voices a river of water and metal. Fletcher Grahame accepts his death calmly and without surprise. The bullet he's secretly waited for all his life arrives at last, though transformed, and the span of that life collapses to the duration of a thunderclap.

The kitchen knife's thin edge, when new, would have glided through cucumber. Now it's dissolving in rust, edge ragged with nicks, point broken. Who's to say the darker fractals spreading the blade aren't old bloodstains? The handle's wood is pitted, grey with the dust of tumbled concrete.

The knife first appears in *Days Between Stations*. It's a changeling blade, spinning through Erickson's books with the deadly precision of a circus performer's final, fatal trick. Sometimes it's a saber wielded by a woman

who opens up the necks of men foolish enough to think no choice is ever irrevocable. Sometimes it's an island, stiletto-long and stiletto-sharp, that slices the river of the twentieth century in twain. And where again the two shall meet, falling beyond the island's southern point, a drop of blood in the form of a shack built on stilts over the water. In the shack a big man sleeps, and dreams that no knife-blade of choice ever descended upon him at a moment when he held another man's life in his hands, that the choice — to let the man escape, or to draw the net closed and end all possibility of escape — had never been his to make. But it is in the way of dreams to turn masks inside out, to bring pink inwardness face to face with more abysmal possibilities. The big man, dreaming, discovers that the knife cut his life in half, that he in fact made both choices, has lived two lives in the lengthening shadows of mutually exclusive and irrevocable acts. Two lives that have now come round again; whole once more, the big man sleeps, while outside someone in a boat douses the pilings with gasoline and lights a match. In the doubled darkness where one man's two shadows meet, history collapses into the black hole of the human heart.

There was no river. No passage. No vast, inland sea, no easy road from there to here . . . Such dreams as the dream of the Passage are only very slowly and reluctantly released. They never really die, fading instead into a melancholic wonder, a wonder that lingers, driving the dreams of generations, rolling down time.

— Sallie Tisdale, *Stepping Westward*

To have a dream — as individuals, as lovers, or as a country — is to subject yourself to the law that your very dream will reach out to destroy you if you fail its demands . . . Our society is being demolished from within by the force of the dreams it has betrayed.

— Michael Ventura, "Steve Erickson's Phantasmal America"

"Over all of my novels hovers the ghost of America," writes Erickson in an essay in *Science Fiction Eye* No. 12. In his political memoir *Leap Year*, "a traveller searches the country for America only to find the United States." This is key. By any objective measure, America has always and only been just the United States. This isn't to suggest that America doesn't exist; rather, of the many countries that are America, not one is coextensive with the United States. Not one has borders any two people could agree upon. (And of the myriad borders we agree upon so incessantly, not one limns any America I or anyone would happily choose to live in: for too many people, crossing into the United States means leaving America behind forever.) And yet these many Americas, Erickson suggests, do hold one of two heartlands in common: the heartland he calls America One or the heartland he calls America Two.

"It is in the land of the dreamers," says Lake in *Rubicon Beach*, speaking not with his voice but from the silence at the back of his tongue, "it is in the land the dreamers dream that dreams of justice and desire are as certain as numbers. It is in the land of insomniacs that justice and

desire are dismissed as merely dreams. I was born in the first land and returned to the second: they were one and the same. You know its name."

In America Two, they don't want to hear about America One.

In *Days Between Stations* there's a street in San Francisco that vanishes, a street unknown to the vast majority of the City's plugged-in residents. Lauren, who lived on Pauline Boulevard years before, returns one day to visit her old street only to find it gone. This stairway, here: between the bakery and the Post Office: walk up steep steps and come out on a shady street a block long, lined with Victorian apartments, dead at both ends. Though there is no other outlet, no other street leading onto Pauline, old cars sit at the curbs, gathering rust from autumn San Francisco fogs. Narrow stair at one end, steep hill at the other: and not even the suggestion that any earlier configuration of the City could have included access from another street. Once Lauren imagined helicopters lowering cars to the curbs on long cables in the dead of night. Returning years later, she walks the row of shops on the street below looking for the stairway up. She finds the bakery; she finds the Post Office. But between the buildings there is no opening, no stairs; no way back to where she once belonged.

Reading Steve Erickson is like living on Pauline Boulevard. And if sometimes the stairway out is missing, and you're trapped on Pauline, still there is, in the eucalyptus shade, in the silence intermittent with cats, in the whispering of a child in a room where a cold click severs an open telephone line, something that impregnates the world with meanings unrevealed but hovering in the sky, as imminent as helicopters dangling cars that drive nowhere.

And if the stairs reappear one day and you follow your passion down the worn stone steps and away, you can never feel secure in the assumption that anything left behind will still be there when you return.

In colonial Virginia, a slave woman is burned at the stake for murdering her master. On a plantation miles away, five-year-old Thomas can smell her burning. He smells her in his hair, his clothes, his food. That night he becomes delirious with fever; lying in bed he's transfixed by visions of the slave woman's ashes gathering in the darkness above his bed, clinging to the rafters like black snow. For the rest of his long life the darkness in Thomas will be waiting for the slave woman's ashes to fall. Until well past the midpoint of his life, the saint in him will remain shackled to the dark of him, and the dark to the saint. Only in Paris in 1789, in the nethermouth of the woman he owns, is Thomas able to release his darkness, to give it rei(g)n. By doing so the saint, too, is liberated.

"The invention of America sprang from men of furious sexual torment," Erickson writes in *Leap Year*. "Jefferson with his forbidden slave mistress; Washington who loved a woman who was not his own wife but the wife of another man; Patrick Henry who kept his insane wife locked in his basement at the very moment he pleaded for death if not liberty; Thomas Paine whose first wife died in childbirth so that he believed he'd killed her, and thus was impotent with his second wife who chose to

advertise his failure throughout the community, and in the shame of which Paine wrote his fiercest pamphlets. The invention of America by these men was meant to spring them loose from the bonds of afterlife, it redefined us not as instruments of God or heaven but rather as the incarnations of our memories of our own selves.

"... America is where only memory divides the present from the future, and where the unconscious dreams of the people who live here understand that the Declaration of Independence was signed after Hiroshima, not before, and neither has yet happened."

That Sally eventually comes to love Thomas doesn't begin to lessen her desire to kill him; if anything it sharpens it. At night, when he sleeps, or perhaps only pretends to, Sally pulls the stolen kitchen knife from beneath her pillow and holds it to his neck.

Wherever it appears, whatever or whoever it cuts, whoever wields it (whoever it wields), it's a knife that severs No Return from No Risk, it's a knife that carves away choices from those who hesitate (or refuse) to choose; it cuts off avenues of escape to those who assume a safe retreat, whittles the denied options of free will down to the whims of undeniable fate. It's the dream betrayed returning to destroy the dreamer.

Adolphe Sarre, foundling son of whores, grows up in the century's opening decades in a secret room without windows, a room filled with a sourceless light. Only during the Parisian twilight does the light in the streets, a "swirling smoky mix" of Seine riverdusk and gaslamps smoldering along the rue de Sacrifice, match the room's light — precisely the time when young Adolphe is exiled to that room for the duration of the pleasure house's evening entertainments. The way the room's perpetual dusk flattens all perspective imbues Adolphe with the sense that dimension is an illusion, "that in fact everything he saw was a flat surface, like a screen..." A candle on a shelf or a gaslamp above the street are merely punctures in that surface, and "beyond everything he saw there was an entire realm of blazing sunfire..." The colors and forms, objects and people that fill Adolphe's sight are the merest shadows of people and things behind the screen.

Years later, gone to the Great War and temporarily blinded by a bomb's flash (sight coming home to him again in an army hospital and bringing with it the flatness of screens), by Armistice Sarre is ready to march with the triumphant French army back into the streets of Paris. During the days of celebration that follow, he finds himself in a theater, transfixed, watching the spectacle of *Birth of a Nation*. He cannot leave. Trapped in a way he never was in the secret room at Number Seventeen, he watches as the projector's slash of light rips open a window into the world behind the screen. Again and again he watches the film, and sleeps in the projection booth, his army uniform rendering any eccentricity acceptable. Eventually a stringer from Pathé arrives with the newest films, and Sarre begs a ride to the studios.

From the moment the police lieutenant steps into the shadow of the bunker doorway, his face begins to

change. The white drains out of it, and with it all grey has fled. The stasis of conflicted emotion flees too. His skin darkens. The nose flares wider, and his lips thicken almost imperceptibly; the face grows rounder, the forehead broadens. Grey irises turn coal black and spark with the light of intelligence and feeling. His expression, for just a moment, is the blank openness of a childlike innocence. Then a question begins to form there, an uncertainty.

The lieutenant steps over the threshold and his fingers begin to twitch, to curl and stretch at his sides. But it isn't as if he's preparing to go for the gun at his belt, rather his motions are those of a man discovering for the first time that he has hands at all. Another step, and his face continues to change: black fades to freckled white; the profile narrows; cheekbones move up and in. Eyes gone hazel, brow smoothing, chin narrowing, lips thinning to a pencil line, nose to a ski-jump. But even these features haven't taken hold before they change again. The eyes grow long at the corners ...

Through all this he remembers, and forgets, and remembers again the reason he's here: whatever reason that might be. He looks around the rubble-strewn room, gaze passing right over me, squinting briefly into the dark corner where Erickson still sits — feet almost free of the ice that continues, for the moment, to imprison them — and looks away again. The policeman doesn't see us. We aren't here.

Erickson shudders, clearly aware that one of the LAPD's finest is rushing life-bent through all the races of man only twenty feet away from him. Still, Erickson's gaze hasn't shifted, he's still looking right at me, though to be frank it's finally starting to dawn on me that he might not see me, which only makes me wonder who else might be sitting or standing here with us in this room that I'm not seeing but that Erickson or the lieutenant see plain as day.

Whoever that person might be, the lieutenant (now Chinese, now shifting rapidly to Amerindian) has seen her at last: the expression on his face is unmistakable: there isn't anything remotely ambiguous or conflicted about it. His eyes start to bug out a little — he's clearly riveted by the sight of her. He's staring into the space directly between me and Erickson (no, Erickson wasn't looking at me at all), though why the lieutenant didn't see her on his first visual scan of the room I don't know. Maybe she wasn't there. Maybe, when he first looked, he didn't have the genes to see her; maybe he had to cycle through all the races of man to have genes enough for the sight of her. Whatever race she is, or was, or will be, whatever quality of unknowing darkness it is that lights up her face, the police lieutenant is rendered shit-faced with terror by the sight; a black man, features entirely unlike those of the black man he first became on entering this bunker, the lieutenant backs away, almost trips in the shattered rock; sprouting a blond beard from chin and cheeks gone suddenly white, he turns away, runs from the bunker into bright Los Angeles light, scrambles up the embankment to a grey freedom devoid of uncomfortable questions.

Across from me Erickson looks away from her at last, and starts to laugh.

Tours of the Black Clock begins in the year 1989 (a fact adduceable only from information provided much later in the book). It ranges over the width and breadth of a twentieth century sliced down the middle by the irrevocability of individual acts, end-gaming into years as late as 2007, “after the century has long since run out of numbers but only begins to understand it’s doomed never to die,” and ends, closing the loop on novel and century both, in the year 1901. The young man we meet on a riverboat at the beginning becomes the old man who dies on an ice floe at the end. Traditional numeric measures of time are rendered gobbledy-gook on the black clock’s face. On this tour, a singular moment can last longer than years or decades.

Of all Erickson’s books, *Tours* remains ungrounded the longest: the events of the first thirty pages unfold almost completely divorced from any framing context. This frameless, fog-bound time and place, where a young man named Marc ferries tourists back and forth from the mainland to a long narrow island that cuts the nameless river in two, itself provides the frame by which the book’s central narrative grounds us. (And for all the accuracy — given its brevity — of the preceding description, it doesn’t begin to convey those thirty pages’ desolate eroticism, its magic and mystery.) Two hundred pages on, by the time we return to the divided river and its dividing island, the context has grown so precise, so richly resonant that every event on those shores, on those waters, becomes a dance along the knife’s abyss.

After fifteen years of sailing daily between home and escape, Marc finally takes on a passenger who unknowingly cuts him free of his endlessly repeated self-betrayal: Kara, the young girl introduced in the closing pages of *Days Between Stations*, who finds buried in the sands of Kansas a cognac bottle with two blue eyes floating inside. Now, on the boat, mid-crossing, with the fog closing in, she “was probably not more than fifteen years old; she could have been born the night he assumed this post on the river.” On the river the sun and both shores have vanished; Kara is the first passenger in all those years to notice along with Marc their entry into the timeless, countryless moment. And, for the first time, he asks of a passenger, But why have you come here?

To bury something, Kara answers.

We know it’s the bottle of eyes she’s come to bury, eyes grown old and sad and nearly blind with the weight of all the dreams they’ve seen betrayed. In *Days Between Stations*, when Lauren and Michel, nearing the end, find one another in their own timeless moment, the intricacy of the web of dreams in which they’re caught and to which they’ve added their own dark weave stands revealed with a clarity it may never have again:

“ . . . Tell me about your dream, she said. He shook his head. I don’t have a dream, he said. Once you did, she said; and he answered, It was someone else’s dream born in me, at the moment it died in someone else. And then it died in me, and I don’t know where it went, I don’t remember it at all. Lauren told him, I know where

it went. She said, It was born again in my child, and it killed him . . . And now the dream is out there sailing the seas in a bottle, for anyone to find.”

Years later, plucked from the railing of a moon bridge buried in the shallow dunes of the Kansas desert (nothing swims in the dust), Kara finds the bottle of eyes a curiosity only and not for her; yet she instinctively knows she must carry it to its resting place.

But even dreams gone to ground carry a charge. Kara’s passage shakes other, stranger dreams loose from the betrayals that bind them.

Anyone with courage enough to listen to the knife’s song without flinching will discover its edge can liberate as mercilessly as it can destroy; mercilessly because one price of genuine liberation is the loss of easy outs, of excuses and comforting lies. All ropes fray and fall away.

A friend of mine recently explained to me why he didn’t care for Erickson’s work.

I want books that hold faith with the idea that there’s a way out of the maze, he said.

He said, Don’t get me wrong. I’m not interested in tidy, phony little endings, happily-ever-after and all that crap. It’s just that I believe in the human capacity to transcend the mazes that trap us, and the writers who inspire me the most have a way of evoking that capacity.

Don’t get me wrong, he said. Erickson’s a brilliant writer. He explores the twistings and turnings, the nooks and crannies of the maze better than anyone I’ve read. But it seems as though his characters not only fail to find the exit, they surrender to the understanding that there’s no exit to find. And that scares the hell out of me.

Listening to him, observing the matter-of-fact way he tells me this, with some dismay I realize that this is perilously close to what scares him about me, which is to say it’s perilously close to what scares him about himself. And while I recognize my maze in Erickson’s map, while I recognize in my friend’s words the way the exit eludes us both, I say to my friend now: Yours is an understanding I refuse to surrender to.

After the lieutenant’s retreat, the ark changes. A tiny woman appears, tied by her hair to the prow; her eyes shine the way to a distance I know well. The trunk of an upper mast grows twisted, sprouts many spreading branches. Where the hull is broken, I finally recognize the severing hack-marks of a kitchen blade.

All the ice has melted.

Free at last, Erickson gathers all the force of his many visions into a final frenzy of self-immolation, a pyre that reduces the calculus of his own liberation down to the image of a black moth rising from between the lips of a dead man.

I shut the book, and walk away.

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Ray Sinclair-Wood

SF poetry

Ray Sinclair-Wood writes: Thanks to those who wrote about my article 'Poems of the Space Race' (*SF Commentary* 92, July 2016). I was very interested in Leigh Edmonds' comments (*SF Commentary* 94, pp. 31–2), and thank him especially for going into such detail. I was not so sure about Bruce's saying, 'You will probably set Ray off on another of his longer articles', but in fact something in most of everyone's comments did set me off, as you can see from my heading to this.

1

I was attracted by Robert Day's comment (*SF Commentary* 94, p. 47) that 'The Western mind-set seems to be determined to disconnect itself from its own mythology and legends; I see this a lot here in the UK, where folk tales and local legends that I was brought up on are now almost completely unknown to the modern generation. I'm not advocating a return to superstition; but a sense of our history as a culture is being lost.'

I think that loss — at least here in Australia — is partly due to the pursuit of relevance in education these days, and to how instead of schools trying to pull students up to our best culture, they now instead try to pull culture down to the age of the students. That is, instead of 'educating up', today it's 'educating down'. (I'm thinking specifically of what Robert's talking about here, and not of all the subjects taught in our schools.)



Walter Benjamin, 1928.

Perhaps the direction Children's and Young Adult Literature has taken is partly to blame too. Such books these days all too often deal with 'relevant' subjects, such as coping with divorcing parents, with drug use, with bullying, and so forth — the attempt to turn literature away from imaginative story-telling towards psychological self-help homilies instead.

I also think that Walter Benjamin's 1936 article 'The Storyteller' says something relevant to this loss:

If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with *explanation*. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits *information*. [My italics]

Something else Benjamin says earlier in the same essay seems to me relevant to Robert's disconnection 'from its own mythology and legends':

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella — is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular.

Yeats, in his 1888 *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, quotes from a poet whose name he says he forgets — saying imagination is finer than reality (i.e. than 'Nature'):

Mysterious are thy laws;
The vision's finer than the view;
Her landscape Nature never drew
So fair as Fancy draws.

('Fancy' is an older term for the 'imagination'.) And perhaps the realm of imagination is what Benjamin thinks we've lost. So it may be this replacement of imaginative power by 'explanation' and 'information' that's led to the disconnection Robert sees. And has led to our schools becoming immured in explanation and information instead of imagination.

2

But what most interested me in the comments about my article is what so many said about poetry itself. Patrick McGuire (p. 53) says, 'My brain seems not to be wired for any great appreciation of poetry'. Leigh Edmonds (p. 31) says he doesn't have 'the poetry gene', and (p. 32) that he doesn't 'have the background knowledge and experience that is necessary to understand poetry in the way that Ray apparently does'. And Robert (p. 48) says, though with a rider, 'Poetry beyond the core "classics" isn't something I engage with very much (with a few honourable exceptions)'. Then there's Bruce's own comment, 'I find that very few SF fans or readers can read poetry these days — based on reactions at a Nova Mob to an exposition that Tony Thomas and I did about Thomas Disch's poetry' (p. 31).

These comments reminded me of how baffled I've been for a long time by the SF poems published in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *F&SF*. They seem scarcely like poems at all to me. If Bruce is right, then perhaps even the editors of those three magazines have given up publishing 'genuine' poems because they know their readers are no longer able to respond to them — hence the unpoetic nature of their poems; hence their poems' substitution of information and explanation for imagination.

Coincidentally, in the September–October 2017 *Analog* is a Letter to the Editors from a Bob Dye. He writes:

It would seem that I'm a bit of a fuddy-duddy as I have been reading *Analog* since September of '61. I haven't always enjoyed every story or editorial or science fact article, because I know that I don't share everyone's taste. But, I can truthfully say that I have not enjoyed the poetry — after reading a selection, my typical response is, 'Huh?' or 'What?' I wonder how your other readers feel about the poetry selections (205).

Analog's Editor, Trevor Quachri, replies to this:

I'm going to make a confession: I'm not a big poetry guy either. I like the epics and I developed an appreciation for poets like Dryden, Pope, and Johnson while I was in college, but that's about where my personal enthusiasm ends. It's no sleight to the form; it just doesn't speak to me the way other things do, or the way it does to others.

But he does go on to say how and why *Analog* contin-

ues to publish poetry — his Associate Editor 'has extensive experience as a poet', and presumably chooses the poems for *Analog*.

3

Of course, there are probably as many definitions of what a 'poem' is as there are poets, and you can argue endlessly about those, too. But let me try an experiment. Read the following two passages aloud:

So what's the big deal? The history apps say this is a passage between east and west, lusted after by John Jacob Astor wannabes, a passage chock full of fragile animals, death and ice. But look around — the only ice to be found is in the odd drink glass. Islands are covered by summer homes made to look like huge igloos. And there are no baby seals. And why did all those explorers sink their ships and die in the same waters where cruise ships full of schoolchildren steer themselves effortlessly? Were they incredibly clumsy?

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine, with a cargo of ivory, and apes and peacocks, sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine. Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus, dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores, with a cargo of diamonds, emeralds, amethysts, topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores. Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack butting through the Channel in the mad March days, with a cargo of Tyne coal, road rail, pig lead, firewood, ironware, and cheap tin trays.

The first is a poem, 'Northwest Cruise' by Sophie M. White, in the recent July–August 2017 *F&SF* (p. 222). The second I presume many people will recognise as the 1902 poem 'Cargoes' by John Masefield. All I've done to them is to run their lines together like prose, and to



Edwaard John Masefield, 1916.

remove the caps that begin each line — I've altered nothing else.

Well, it *is* an artificial and somewhat arbitrary exercise. But I hope reading the two aloud might help show what I want to say. And that is: the first doesn't even sound poetic, but the second does.

I didn't go looking for an especially unpoetic SF poem. If you read the poems in those three magazines for all of 2017 to date, you'll find that most of them are just as unpoetic as 'Northwest Cruise'. In my 'Poems of the Space Race' article I mentioned two much older anthologies of SF poems, *Frontiers of Going: An Anthology of Space Poetry*, sel. John Fairfax (1969), and *Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age*, ed. Robert Vas Dias (1970). If you glance through them, you'll find that most of their poems are much more like 'Northwest Cruise' than like 'Cargoes', too.

It takes more to create a poem than merely arranging ordinary, everyday prose into roughly equal-length short lines, and using (sometimes) capital letters for the first words of each line, as SF poets like Sophie White do. You may perhaps appreciate how ordinary and everyday the prose of these unpoetic poems is by looking at prose passages whose prose is not ordinary and everyday at all. This is from John Donne's 1623 Seventeenth Devotion, which you may know:

No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

Back then funeral processions walked along the streets, tolling a bell. So you might hear the bell, and send a servant out from your house to ask who has died.

I modernised the Seventeenth Century spellings, and used full stops instead of Donne's semi-colons, though I didn't modernise 'thee' and 'thine' because — especially the final word — they're part of the passage's power. You see, that passage is wonderfully poetic.

Another that's also as far from ordinary and everyday prose as Donne's is Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address, which is also magnificently poetic.

You don't have to go any further than his opening words. Why didn't he begin with 'Eighty-seven years ago'? After all, he didn't *have* to begin with 'Four score and seven years ago', did he? The obvious reason is that Lincoln wanted right at the start to let his listeners know that what he was going to say would be more than merely prose. He wanted to lift it out of the ordinary. Nor would you say that his final words are merely prose either, would you? — 'and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.' It's those last words' poetic nature that ensures they're known by heart by so many people around the world, despite maybe many of those outside the US not even knowing where they originally came from.

Those two prose passages are poetic because their words are musical, or musically arranged. The term 'word-music' is often used of poetry. And if you look at Sophie White's and John Masefield's poems as I've set them out above, surely you can see that Donne's and Lincoln's prose passages are more akin to the Masefield than to the White.

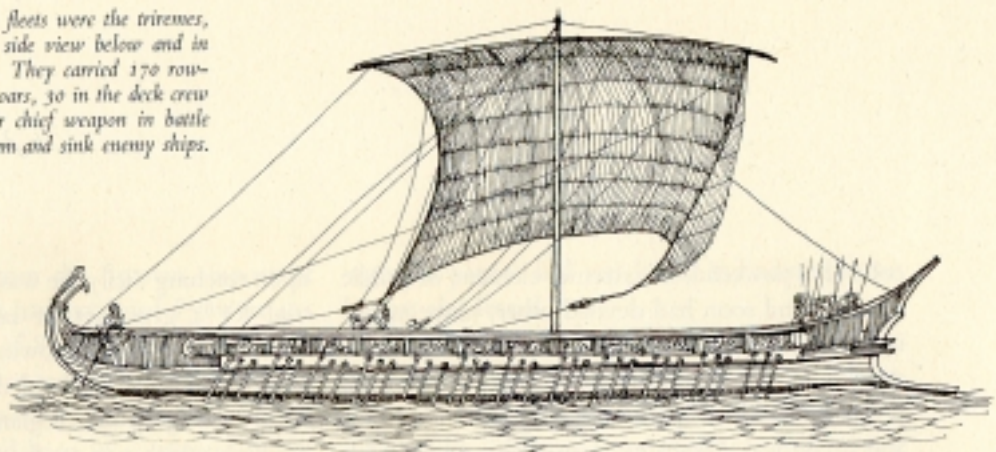
It isn't only the choice and arrangement of musical words that turns prose into poetry. It's rhythm too — that is, the patterned arrangement of soft and loud syllables. For example, read slowly and aloud the words:

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine

The very sound of that first line echoes the slow, almost clumsy effort of such a huge ship that has five (highly improbable) banks of oars, starting to move awkwardly from its anchorage. Then it gets up to speed and the oars now work more smoothly in the second line, with only the one rowers' slip-up at '[hav]en in'. And at the end of its journey in Palestine you have the sublime rhythm of 'sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine'. That 'sandalwood, cedarwood', each with a loud syllable followed by *two* soft syllables, is the ship moving even faster and now completely smoothly, than it was when 'rowing home to haven' with its balanced rhythm of a loud syllable followed by only *one* soft syllable over and over, except for the one jolt of 'en in'. Finally, the ship throws out its anchor at its journey's end, with the emphatic three loud sounds of 'sweet white wine'.

Now *that* is poetry, where every word, every syllable, every sound has been chosen and arranged with the

SHIPS OF THE LINE in Greek fleets were the triremes, one of which is shown in a side view below and in cut-out on the opposite page. They carried 170 rowers on three banks of 14-foot oars, 30 in the deck crew and 10 to 18 soldiers. Their chief weapon in battle was a metal-tipped ram, to ram and sink enemy ships.



greatest care. It's like a sheet of music that, when played, hasn't a single discordant note.

If you think the rhythm of that stanza as I've described it is too fanciful, if you think that poets can't be *that* precise, try substituting the word 'Trireme' for 'Quinquireme', and read the words aloud instead. You should notice if you do, that the rhythm is no longer perfect. Yet historically a trireme was far more likely than Masefield's improbable quinquireme, so that also tells you with what great care he chose it.

'Poetry' is often distinguished from mere 'verse'. 'Verse' is language that's laboured and clumsy, or simply ordinary, or even dull. Sometimes 'poetry' is said to be words that instead of being used in an ordinary way, are words used at their ultimate.

The words 'song' and 'music' are often used in defining poetry:

The problem of defining poetry is the problem of defining its extraordinariness — the difference between prose and poetry — perhaps arises from, and certainly in many of its forms it is sustained by, the association of poetry with music; for one of the most obvious directions in which speech can deviate from the ordinary is that of song.

That's from James Craig La Drière's entry, 'Poetry and Prose', in Joseph T. Shipley (ed.), *Dictionary of World Literature*.

The musicality of poetic rhythm is one thing; another is the sound of words themselves. In 'Cargoes', Masefield wants to contrast the romance of the quinquireme and the galleon and their cargoes with the lack of romance of the British ship and its cargo. So say aloud, 'Quinquireme of Nineveh' and then 'Dirty British coaster'. The sound of the first is soft and gentle, but the sound of the last is hard and brutal, with its thudding 'D', 'B', and 'k' (the hard 'c'). And so the contrast is not merely in the meaning of the poem's words but also in their sound.

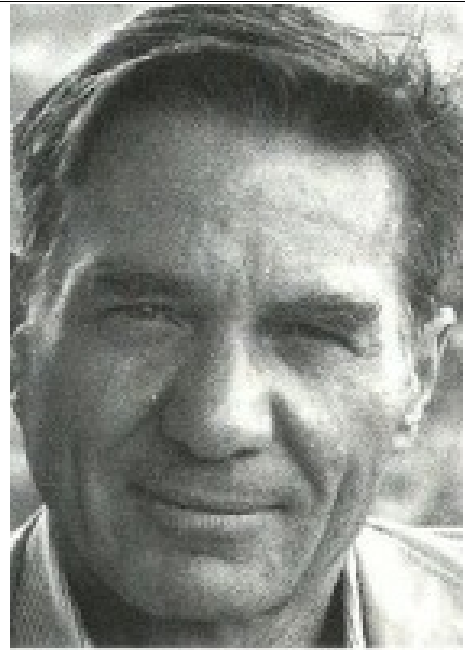
How can you ever read aloud from the 1819 'Ode to a Nightingale' by John Keats: 'Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/To toll me back from thee to my sole self' without hearing the musical and bell-like use of its vowels? There's almost a carillon of bells in that.

4

One clue as to why readers of poetry don't appreciate it lies in those words I've used several times: 'read *aloud*'. Poetry isn't intended to be read silently, it's meant to be read *aloud*, even *performed*.

I remember seeing and hearing Roland Robinson, the Aussie poet, performing one of his poems at the first ABC School for Writers in May 1963 at Adelaide University. He had a magnificent rich voice, and I believe he had sung professionally in opera. He was standing, and as he recited he used his whole body, every one of his movements echoing his words. He roared and he whispered, he danced and he gestured, he chanted and he sang. It was how he introduced the School's Poetry Lecture series. It was stunning.

One of the invited poets was a mallee farmer from the



Galway Kinnell.

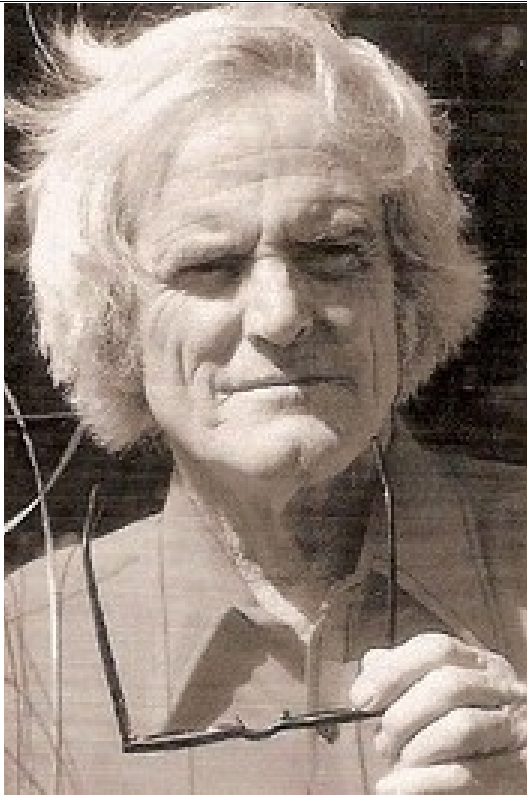
West Coast of South Australia, who had never before been away from his small town, and had never had anything to do with poets either, but had happened to have some poems published. After the School ended his wife rang me in distress, because he hadn't come home. He claimed he'd been hypnotised by Roland and, ever since that performance, he'd been unable to get that poem out of his head. He was being treated by a psychiatrist. She asked me if her husband could come to see me, in case I might be able to help him. I did see him and talk with him, but have no idea whether I helped him.

Such is the power of poetry *when read aloud, when performed!*

At the 1978 Adelaide Festival of Arts, I was sitting near the back in the audience for the poetry readings. Poets from around Australia and from overseas read their poems at these Adelaide Festivals. This year the readings were held in the Adelaide Town Hall. The giant figure of a US poet Galway Kinnell came stomping out onto the stage. He planted his boots wide, and slammed his fists into his sides, and roared out his 1967 poem 'The Bear'. I remember when he began it, how all of us seated in the audience swayed back, as if blasted back by his voice.

In June 1979 I saw that he was to give a public reading and talk at Adelaide University, so I eagerly took my high school students along. It was held in a rather small room. When he came in I got a shock, because he was only a very short man. Where was the giant I'd seen in the Town Hall? The answer was obvious, of course. It had been his tremendously powerful performance of his poem that had turned him into a giant.

In 1964, I think it was, two of us were sitting in a large tin shed with a rainstorm outside hammering against it. We were huddled over a small fire. My companion was the Western Australian writer Donald Stuart, best known for his 1959 novel *Yandy*. He was a swaggie from age 14, and had worked as a station hand, and knew and wrote more sensitively about Aborigines back then than most writers of that time.



Donald A. Stuart.

I don't know how we came to talk about poetry, but he recited from memory the 1913 poem 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand' by the English poet James Elroy Flecker. It's set perhaps a millennium ago. In it a caravan of merchants is about to set out from Baghdad's Gate of the Sun. And each merchant in turn describes his merchandise.

With rain drumming on the iron roof and walls, with the wind howling and battering the hut outside, with the small fire sometimes spitting out sparks, but little warmth, Stuart performed that poem. And I'll never forget the magic of his voice. When he'd finished, he said about the words of the Chief Grocer he'd performed, that for him they were the finest poetry ever written (read them aloud, and sloooowly, tasting every word):

We have rose-candy, we have spikenard,
Mastic and terebinth and oil and spice,
And such sweet jams meticulously jarred
As God's own Prophet eats in Paradise.

They certainly have a similar ring to the cargoes in Masfield's poem! (That Grocer's list always reminds me of how the Aussie poet, Robert D. Fitzgerald, in a TV interview, was asked how he judged the worth of a line of poetry. All he said was, "I count the number of nouns and verbs in it.")

What Stuart said about those four lines reminds me of Rudyard Kipling's 1903 science fiction short story "Wireless". In it the narrator thinks this: 'Remember that in all the millions [of lines of poetry] permitted there are no more than five — five little lines — of which one can say: "These are the pure Magic. These are the clear Vision. The rest is only poetry."' Three are from the

1797 'Kubla Khan' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon lover!

And the other two are from Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'. They come immediately before the two bell-like lines from it that I quoted earlier:

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

('Faëry' is pronounced as three syllables; it's not the same word as 'fairy'.) If I were to add my own choice of two lines that are 'the pure Magic', 'the clear Vision', to the five in Kipling's story, they'd be from T. S. Eliot's 1930 poem 'Marina'. They also have more allusive power concentrated in them than any two lines of poetry or prose that I know:

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and
hurrying feet
Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

But that, about the greatest lines of English poetry, is an aside.

I think that the modern habit of reading fast and silently has lost us the power of poetry. Poetry *is* music, and if you think of instrumental music, what's better: music you remember silently only in your head? or hearing the same music being performed?

I also think that the worst place for poetry to be performed is in school classrooms. And the worst introduction to poetry may be hearing it read indifferently like a school circular, read by teachers who are themselves not interested in or don't respond to poetry much at all.

For three decades almost every year I took large parties of high school students on hikes in wild country such as the Gammon Ranges in the northern Flinders Ranges. We'd be entirely out of touch with the slightest sign of civilisation for 10 to 12 days, carrying everything we needed with us. And often at night we'd sit around a campfire, and talk and sing. And I'd perform a poem or two. To be — as these adolescent girls and boys often said it seemed to be — so far from civilisation that, in their own words it was as if they were on the Moon; to sit around a fire reflected off the towering red walls of sheer cliffs close each side of us; and to watch performed and listen to the tremendous power and music of such a lyrical poem as 'Kubla Khan' or Tennyson's dramatic poem 'Ulysses', or anything similar — now *that's* one of the finest places for poetry! So too is a vast desert on a moonless night by the light of a myriad stars. So too is the shore of a forest-edged tarn surrounded by mountains capped with snow.

Well, that's one point about SF poetry. But there is another.

5

I said above that poetry is sometimes described as prose

at its most intense. But this is misleading, because it supposes that both kinds of language — as used in prose and also in poetry — are the same, only one kind is simply a finer version of the other. However, it isn't only the language itself that makes poetry different from prose. It's the difference in *what* they're about.

It may surprise you to know that the antithesis of poetry is not usually regarded as prose, but as Wordsworth says, it's *science*. Coleridge too, says in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, 'A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth.'

Look back at the two passages I quoted from Walter Benjamin at the start of this article. He writes about 'the dissemination of information' and how 'no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation'. Notice again those words, 'information' and 'explanation'. Even back in ancient times the distinction was already made between writing that presents information, and writing that inspires — that is, writing that teaches you, and writing that moves you, that exalts you. Two thousand years ago Longinus said in his *On the Sublime* that in prose the aim is 'clarity', but in poetry it's 'enthralment'.

La Drière, whom I quoted above, says about this in more detail:

In general it may be said that the modern critic insists much more than the critic of former periods upon the fact that poetry exists not to give information or practical direction, but to present a meaning the value of which may consist precisely in its not being informative and its abstention from practical concerns ... Related to this thought, though not identical with it is the notion that the meanings of poetry are irreducible to concepts. Whereas prose exists only to present concepts. (Since immediate intuition of individual reality is commonly regarded as non-conceptual, this means that *the reference of poetry is to experience as experience rather than to experience reflected upon and abstracted from ...* [My italics])

I feel that one way of understanding this is to think of listening to music. Let's say you go to a performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto in C Minor — or to any purely musical performance for that matter. Do you go to it expecting to come away with *information* in the same way you would from a lecture by Stephen Hawking?

I presume SF fans are on the whole more science-oriented than non-SF readers. And scientific writing is probably information to an extreme. So would it be too far-fetched to wonder if this has something to do with both what Bruce says: 'I find that very few SF fans or readers can read poetry these days'; and with the far from poetical nature of almost all the 'poems' published in Asimov's, *Analog*, and *F&SF*? Perhaps it's more in the nature of SF fans to be unable to experience poems than

it is for non-SF fans, because those fans may be looking in poems *for the wrong thing*? And perhaps the Editors of those three magazines for a similar reason publish poems *that are not poems*?

Of course it's obvious that you might declare any writing of any kind a 'poem', if you want to. Of course you might claim that SF poetry is a specific sub-genre of poetry in general, just as SF stories are a sub-genre of stories in general. You might even claim that SF poetry is a poetry particularly of similar concepts as those in SF stories, and throw out the idea of poems as experience rather than concepts.

Of course there *is* information in 'Cargoes' — that modern times are not as romantic as ancient times (very fanciful information at that!) But it's so trite, so slight, and even foolish, contrasted with the rhythmic and musical enchantment of the poem, with the *experience* of the poem.

And of course you can be moved by a piece of informational prose such as a lecture, too. I certainly have been from time to time. But that's secondary: the lecture's primary purpose is to transmit information. On the other hand, the primary purpose of a poem is experience.

Nor would I ever expect all SF fans to be indifferent to poetry. Bruce obviously is not. Nor you'd have to conclude is Bob Dye, who wrote that letter to the Editor of *Analog*. I myself have loved SF since 1948, but I've also loved poetry all my life, from even earlier than 1948.

And of course, I imagine Alex Skovron loves poetry, and his SF poem 'On the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Moon Landing' is in *SF Commentary* 94, too (p. 50). Now *there* is a poetic SF poem! And as well, I admire that he's prepared to tackle a difficult poetic form such as a villanelle. Thank you for that, Alex. SF poetry is usually so formless. (There are all kinds of specific poetic forms, perhaps the one most known in English poetry being the sonnet. For anyone interested, the book to check out about this is Lewis Turco's 1986, *The New Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*. Two-thirds of it is a 177-page dictionary of hundreds of poetic forms such as the villanelle and the sonnet.)

But what I've been fascinated by above, is asking myself *why* so many SF fans find themselves indifferent to poetry in the first place, and wondering if it's because for one thing they've never been exposed to poetry being performed, and chanted aloud; and for another thing, because they've been so much more exposed to scientific exposition than other people, and are therefore more prone to expecting poetry to be information instead of experience, that is, to find in poems concepts instead of ecstasy. Is it a fair generalisation to say that science is to be studied; poetry is to be lived?

— Ray Sinclair-Wood, 2017

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. **Review copies should be sent to him at ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University, Room 3.31, Beryl Rawson Building #13, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia.**

Colin Steele

The field

Books about books

THE DIARY OF A BOOKSELLER

Shaun Bythell (Profile Books; \$29.99)

Shaun Bythell runs The Bookshop, Scotland's largest second-hand bookshop, in Wigtown, whose book festival

attracts thousands of visitors each year. Bythell's *Diary of a Bookseller*, comprising just over 300 pages, is a fascinating account of a year, February 2014 to February 2015. An Epilogue dated 1 November 2016 was roughly 15 years after Shaun bought the shop at the age of 30.

He paid £150,000, and says he is still paying back the bank loan. In his diary, he notes how many customers he's had each day and how much he's made. On one bad day he writes, 'One customer. Till total: £5.'

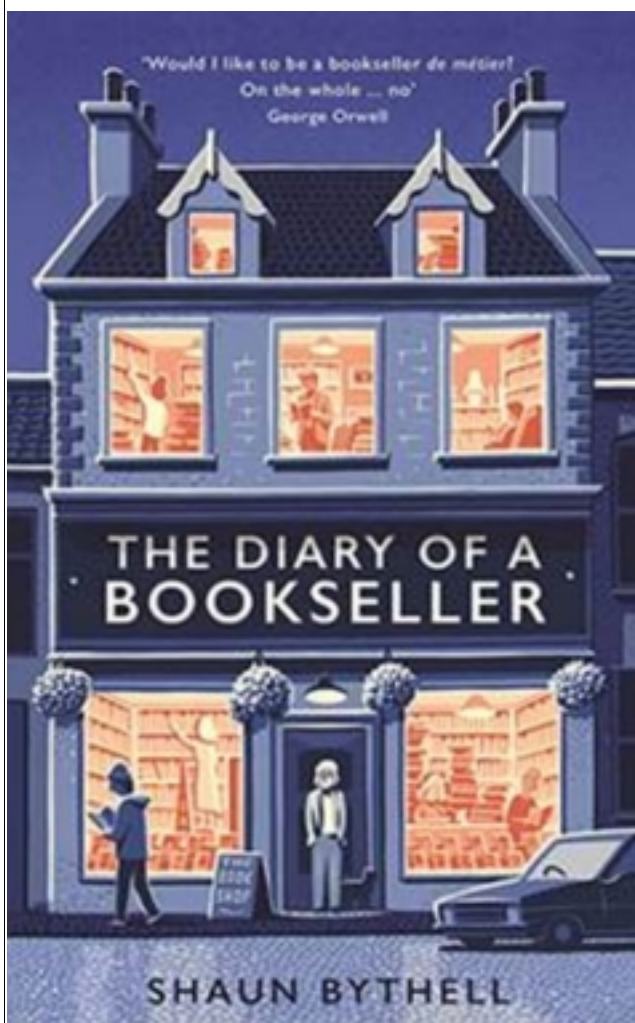
In an interview, he has said, 'The shop turns over about £100,000 a year but you've got a lot of overheads, from your stock and I usually have someone working for me in the summer. And I still owe the bank about £30,000 on the building.' He does, however, reflect the business is slowly picking up after the global financial crisis slump and people wanting to buy print books again.

Will he still be there in 10 years? He hopes so. 'I definitely think there is a resurgence and people have started to appreciate that they don't want an empty high street — boarded-up windows, charity shops and cafes. Yes, there are still people who will come into the shop, look at a book, and then download it or buy it from Amazon, but there are also people — lots of them actually — who appreciate that if you want bookshops to survive, you have to go to them and perhaps pay slightly more.'

Publisher publicity has echoed the similarities of Shaun's book with the TV series *Black Books*, but Shaun often has reason to be grumpy, given some of his customers and the pressures of online retailers, not least Amazon. A prominent feature of his shop is a Kindle, which he has shot up and hung up on the wall as a trophy.

Shaun is ultimately realistic, however, and writes, 'Kindle sales have plateaued or even started going down, but there will always be a market for e-readers — I think you'd be a fool to think for a second that they're going away. I think you have to accept that you have to cohabit with them.'

Regular customers include 'Bum Bag Dave', who uses *The Times* as his source for books. Another customer, 'Sandy the tattooed pagan', allegedly the most tattooed man in Scotland, brings in handcarved walking sticks to trade for books. One day, an elderly customer compli-



mented Shaun on his window display, 'mistaking the pots, pans and mugs (which are there to catch the drips from the leak) for a cookery themed display'. On March 18, 'a tall, emaciated man in a hoodie came in and asked if we had any books on pharmacology because "they've just put me on this new heroin substitute and I want to find out more about it".'

Bythell says 'I price my books to sell, not to be knocked down on.' On 8 October, a customer offered 10 pounds for a book priced at 80 pounds. When told he could have it for 70 pounds, 'he slammed the book down on the counter and walked out in disgust.' Shaun decided to hide, and read *Kidnapped*, 'a fate I would quite happily have seen befall that last customer'.

Eccentricity extends to Shaun's main assistant, Nicky, a Jehovah's Witness who is often rude to Shaun, eats sell-by food she finds in a skip, and wears a ski-suit for half the year to protect her from the Wigtown rain and cold. Shaun says the one-piece ski suit makes her look like a 'lost Tellytubby'.

The diary entries are sprinkled with references to literature, references often extended to customers. On Tuesday, 8 April, 'a woman walked in ... waddled about the shop like a "stately goose", as Gogol describes Sobakevich's wife in *Dead Souls*. Predictably, she didn't buy anything'. Another customer the same day insisted on speaking French to Shaun, even though Shaun comments 'he wasn't even French; he was Scottish'.

On Monday, 10 November, a customer argued strongly that Thomas Hardy's printers got the title *Far from the Madding Crowd* wrong; it should have been *Far from the Maddening Crowd*. Shaun reflects, 'I ought to be grateful: he has given me an idea for the title of my autobiography should I ever be fortunate enough to retire.'

Shaun reminds us that good health is necessary for booksellers when viewing deceased estates in often dank houses, apartments, and even castles, then boxing and heaving books back, often in the rain, to the shop. Bythell says, 'You become desensitised over time, but dismantling book collections can feel an act of vandalism — you are responsible for erasing the last piece of evidence of who they were.'

His purchasing brief is wide, and he recounts buying collections that range from aviation to maritime history, and the seemingly endless theological collections. He will not, however, buy anything by Dan Brown or Tom Clancy: 'They're worthless and there are millions of them. So don't even bother to bring them into the shop if you know what's good for you.'

Shaun's diary entries contain much dry humour. He cites an Australian woman whom he can't understand whether she's asking for 'Noddy books' or 'naughty books'. It's only when he has escorted her to the erotica section that he realises it was an Enid Blyton book she was seeking. When a customer came to the counter with a copy of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Shaun pointed out that the customers fly was open. The customer took no notice, replying 'a dead bird can't fall out of its nest', and left the shop 'fly still agape'.

His observations on book purchasing are astute and reflect global trends. 'On the whole (in my shop at least) the majority of fiction is still bought by women, while

men rarely buy anything other than non-fiction ... I hate gender stereotypes, but on the whole female customers buy books about crafts and arts and fiction and men on the whole it's history, engineering.'

Diary of a Bookseller deserves a wide readership. Booksellers will clearly empathise, but Shaun's description of life in the bookshop, and Wigtown in general, provides many wry observations on the nature of humanity and its decided diversity.

JACOB'S ROOM IS FULL OF BOOKS

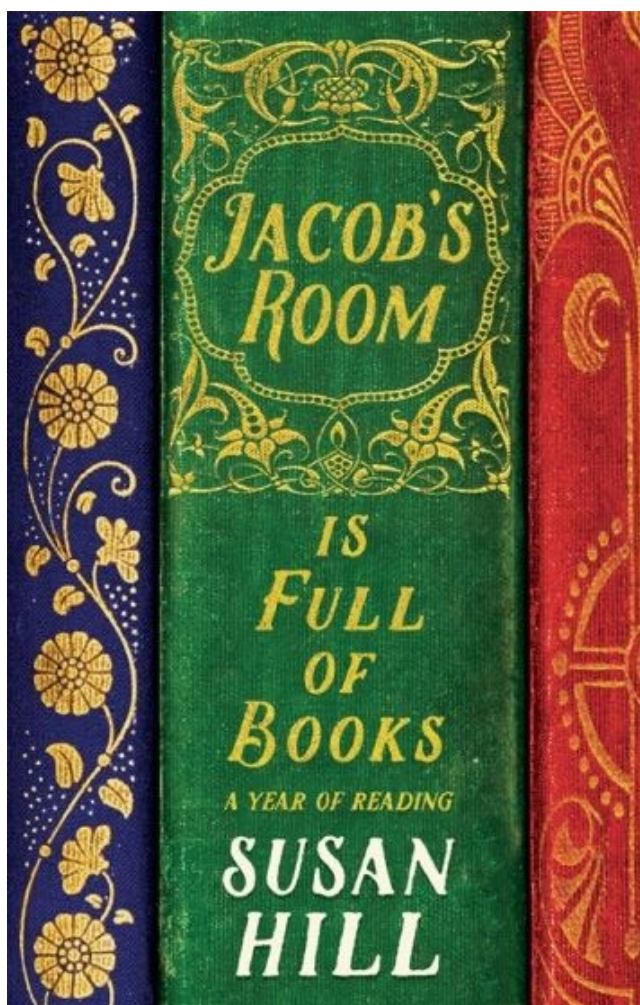
by Susan Hill (Profile Books; \$29.99)

Susan Hill's *Jacob's Room Is Full of Books*, a celebration of books, reading and living, follows on from her previous literary memoir, *Howards End is on the Landing* (2009).

Hill's writing and reading is frameworked by the calendar year and the changing seasons. She reflects from a garden chair on her French summer holiday to her Norfolk kitchen in the depth of winter. Hill covers a diverse range of topics and books and writers to reflect on politics and religion as she watches the seasons change, and the reflections in horticulture, agriculture, and bird and animal life.

Hill reaffirms that reading is a slow pleasure, which allows reflection, rather than instant mobile gratification. She writes at one stage, 'Reading is magic. Books are magic.'

Jacobs Room mixes personal views, sometimes radical,



with observations on writers Hill has either met or read. She encourages readers to either discover new authors or rediscover old favourites. She ranges over a vast and diverse selection of authors, such as Edith Wharton, Vladimir Nabokov, Muriel Spark, Alan Bennett, Ian Fleming, Raymond Chandler, Somerset Maugham, Virginia Woolf, as well as categories such as the Ladybird books and Beano annuals.

These are writers she likes. Those she doesn't strangely include Jane Austen and Graham Greene. While genres like science fiction leave her cold, she acknowledges she should have read some of Ursula Le Guin's novels.

Hill likes dropping names, especially from the early years of her literary career, such as Pamela Hansford Johnson and C. P. Snow, Iris Murdoch and J. B. Priestley. Of Martin Amis, 'Mart', she notes that he writes 'like an angel ... I will never give up on him'. Similarly, she was very friendly with the Duchess of Devonshire, whose book *Counting My Chickens* (2001) was published by her small publishing firm. Her descriptions of friends such as John and Myfanwy Piper reflect the passage of time as Hill juxtaposes memories and relationships.

She laments the passing of many secondhand and antiquarian bookshops in England, partly because of high rentals, but also because of the numerous charity shops. She recounts her own experience in taking books to a charity shop, including some of her own, where she found that signed copies of some of her books were already available at 10p more.

She reflects, in amazement, 'increasingly I meet creative writing students who do not read ... read, read, read is the only advice I give ... in the end that is the only way you will learn.' Do seek out and read *Jacob's Room Is Full of Books*.

Books about television and film

WONDER WOMAN. THE ART OF MAKING THE FILM Sharon Gosling (Titan Books; \$59.99)

Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (2014) is the definitive analysis of one of American popular culture's most iconic figures. The 2017 film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* provides cinematic background to the main *Wonder Woman* creator, Harvard psychologist William Moulton Marston, and his female relationships, which Lepore explores in detail.

Wonder Woman: The Art and Making of the Film by Sharon Gosling is an excellent, oblong folio hardback, background book to the successful *Wonder Woman* film from director Patty Jenkins. It does not attempt to explore the subtext of Marston's imaginative fantasies, but, at least, did break away, for a substantial part of the film, from the CGI banality and violence of recent superhero movies.

Gosling's official companion, which is far more than a coffee table book, has a foreword by director Patty Jenkins, includes new photos of the film and behind-the-scenes details, and is great value at \$59.95. Gosling provides insights from key figures, such as producer/story writer Zack Snyder, costume designer Lindy Hem-

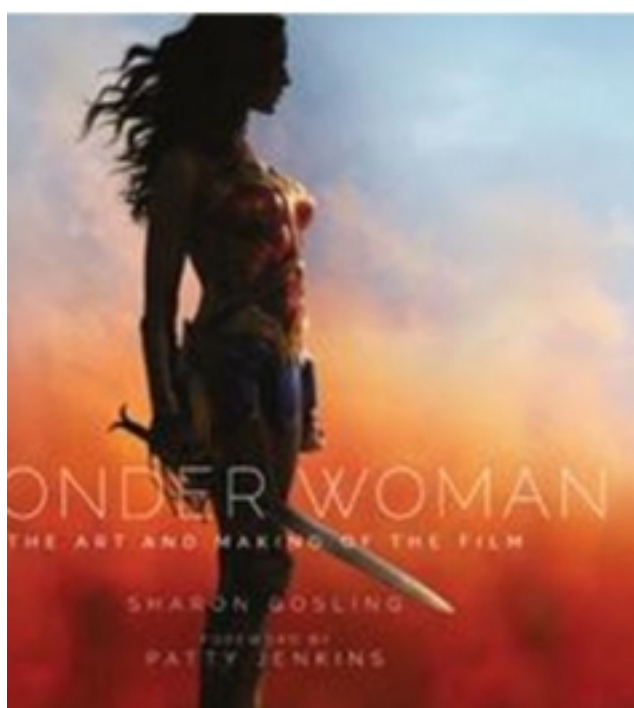
ming, production designer Aline Bonetto, and, not least, *Wonder Woman* herself, Gal Gadot. Additional commentary focuses on set and costume designs, storyboard sketches, and background detail of the filmmaking, including the complex CGI integration.

Gosling generally follows the chronological sweep of the film, with full, and often double-page, colour photographs of characters, weapons, clothes, and places. For example, the reader can examine details of clothes worn by the leading characters, including *Wonder Woman* and the German military. Locational details and photos range from the beaches of Themyscira, to the streets of London and World War I battlegrounds.

Fans of the film will undoubtedly want Gosling's impressive book as a permanent memoir. And as a bonus, inside the back cover, there is an envelope from Wayne Enterprises, which contains a negative print of the photo that Bruce Wayne sends *Wonder Woman*.

JUSTICE LEAGUE: THE ART OF THE FILM Abbie Bernstein (Titan; \$59.99)

Justice League: The Art of the Film is a large, beautifully illustrated book from Titan Books, documenting the artwork, design, costumes, locations, and characters of the *Justice League* film. The Foreword by Geoff Johns, Chief Creative Officer for DC Entertainment, includes his 'ultimate hope' that the Justice League characters 'will bring light and sincerity back to our definition of hero when it comes to DC. This art book is a glimpse of that rediscovery'. Charles Roven, the producer of *Justice League*, notes that the book allows fans 'a look behind-the-scenes of the creative process that goes into making a movie about these aspirational characters'. It certainly does that, with full colour illustrations on every page roughly following the story of the film. It includes storyboards, sketches, and film frames, as well as behind-the-scenes shots from the set. Short blurbs illuminate the text with comments from production designers, and espe-





cially the characters, such as Gai Gadot, who plays Wonder Woman. Thus, Jason Momoa on playing Aquaman, notes that Zack Snyder had the idea for the tattoos 'for the eyes. I always liked that Van Gogh green color. You can get lost in it, it draws you in, but you're also scared by it'.

As with the previous *Wonder Woman* companion book, \$59.99 is excellent hardback value when compared to the price of text-only C paperbacks currently on sale in Australia.

US science fiction

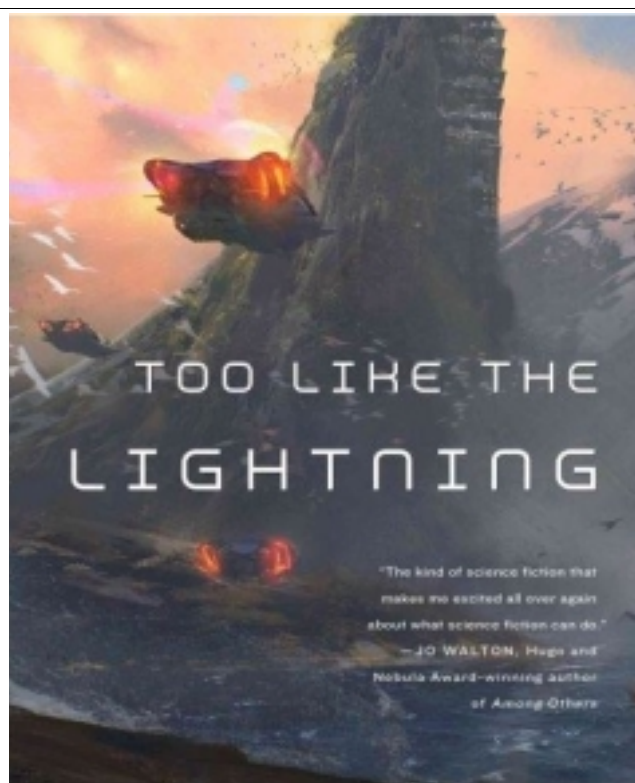
TOO LIKE THE LIGHTNING

Ada Palmer (Head of Zeus; \$29.99)

Ada Palmer is a Professor of History at the University of Chicago. Her first novel, the first of a quartet, *Too Like the Lightning*, was a finalist for the 2017 Hugo Award.

Palmer's academic background shows strongly in this book, which is inspired by the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment. The book's subtitle, *A Narrative of Events of the Year 2454*, is laid out at the start of the book in the style of an eighteenth-century title page, noting it is 'Written by Mycroft Canner, at the Request of Certain Parties' and is 'Certified NonProselytory by the Four-Hive Commission on Religion in Literature'.

Palmer has commented in an interview: 'Another way I use history is that I look at this future's relationship with its own past, and the lines we draw between ancient and medieval, between modern and what lies before, as well as our judgments about which historical leaders were great and which terrible, are every bit as certain to change in the next centuries as our vehicles and computers. So, much as the Italian Renaissance was explosively transformed by its obsession with classical antiquity, my 25th century is obsessed with the French Enlightenment, and that cultural fascination is itself one of the drivers of the changes chronicled in the books, every bit as much as economics or national rivalry. Perhaps my most visible focus on historical change is in how my narration reproduces the alienating voice of another time. The narrator



through whose histories we access the events of 2454 is a product of his century.'

Mycroft Canner, the narrator comments, 'You will criticize me, reader, for writing in a style six hundred years removed from the events I describe, but you came to me for explanation of those days of transformation which left your world the world it is, and since it was the philosophy of the Eighteenth Century, heavy with optimism and ambition, whose abrupt revival birthed the recent revolution, so it is only in the language of the Enlightenment, rich with opinion and sentiment, that those days can be described. You must forgive me my "thees" and "thous" and "he's" and "she's", my lack of modern words and modern objectivity. It will be hard at first, but whether you are my contemporary still awed by the new order, or an historian gazing back at my Twenty-Fifth Century as remotely as I gaze back on the Eighteenth, you will find yourself more fluent in the language of the past than you imagined; we all are.'

Palmer's Terra Ignota is a utopian world in many respects, with longer lifespans, flying car transportation, and a hard-won global peace, although the seven 'Hives' into which the world is divided have their own tensions, making it a somewhat fragile utopia. Less resolved are issues of gender and religion, while protective censorship is the norm. Citizens have to take a weekly meeting with a 'Sensayer', a spiritual counsellor, although collective religious practice has disappeared in favour of the private.

Mycroft Canner is a convict and, as a 'Servicer', has to help all those he meets, but when he gets drawn into investigating a theft, he is drawn into a wider conspiratorial situation, which gets only more complex when he meet Bridger, a boy who seems to have supernatural powers.

Too Like The Lightning is, without doubt, a complex novel, both linguistically and intellectually, but it is an

ultimately rewarding mix. This initial volume ends abruptly, but readers should certainly follow Palmer in the succeeding volumes, as her narrative continues to juxtapose the eighteenth and the twenty-fifth centuries for an exploration of the nature of human civilisation and the structure of society.

ARTEMIS

Andy Weir (Del Rey; \$32.99)

Artemis is the second novel from **Andy Weir**, author of *The Martian*, which sold 5 million copies in the English language alone, and the Ridley Scott film starring Matt Damon amassed over US\$630 million worldwide. The big question, as with all second novels, is: can Weir repeat that success? Yes and no would have to be the answer.

Artemis is set on the moon roughly 70 years in the future. Artemis is a five-dome moonbase, funded by a private megacorporation, but relying heavily on moon tourism. The main character is 26-year-old Jasmine Bashara, aka Jazz, of Saudi Arabian descent, who has been on the moon since she was six. Her cultural background doesn't impinge, however, on her getting drunk and having casual sex, which infuriates her Muslim father.

Jazz scrapes by financially as a tourist porter supplemented by some illegal cigar smuggling from Earth. She lives in a minuscule apartment and eats the cheapest algae-grown food. But when she is promised a huge financial reward to sabotage one of Artemis's aluminum factory harvesters on the lunar surface, her life begins to unravel.

Naturally, the sabotage goes awry, her employer gets murdered, and no payment ensues. Hot on her heels are the lunar authorities and, more ominously, a gangland syndicate killer. Jazz has stumbled into a struggle for Artemis itself, which will not only put her life in peril, but have a dramatic impact on the relationship of Earth and Artemis.

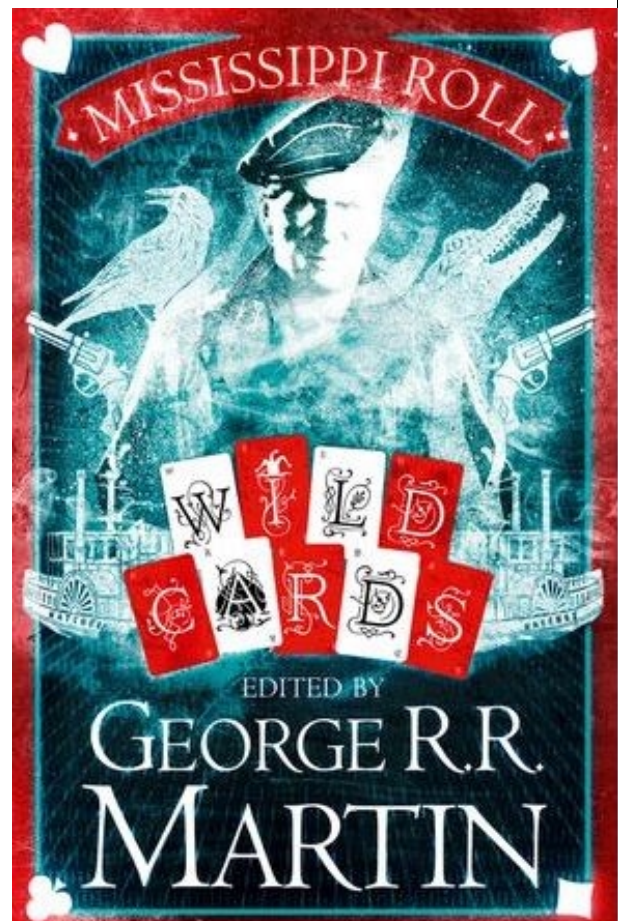
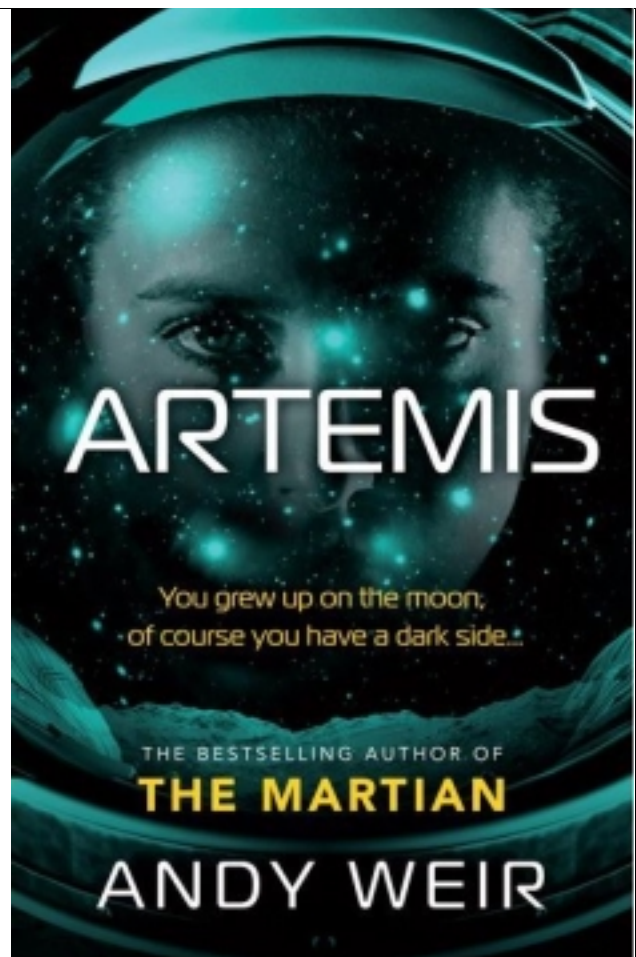
Artemis reworks a number of detective noir themes, from the girl on the run, to nerdy sidekicks and corrupt authorities. *Artemis*, despite some limited characterisation, is a fast-paced, often humorous read. Weir's scientific detail is again inventive. Can't wait for the movie.

MISSISSIPPI ROLL

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

George R. R. Martin does not make his own contribution to *Mississippi Roll*, the first in a trilogy, and the twenty-fourth book in the 'Wild Cards' universe. The six chapter authors are: Stephen Leigh, John Jos. Miller, Kevin Andrew Murphy, Carrie Vaughn, Hugo-Award winning author David D. Levine, and Hugo and Nebula Award finalist Cherie Priest.

As the title *Mississippi Roll* implies, the book is set in the near future on the Mississippi River, where the steamboat *Natchez* is heading on its last voyage to Cincinnati. The crew believe that the steamboat is to become a docked casino. But what is the real intention of the



owners?

The book is advertised as 'perfect for new and veteran readers alike'. New readers, however, may take a little while to become familiar with the characters and their past histories, especially in the context of the Wild Cards virus. This is the alien virus that devastated humanity in 1946. Those who didn't die ended up as 'wild cards'. Aces are those with 'clean' superhuman powers, while the Jokers' powers are accompanied by physical and mental disfigurements.

When a mysterious death of a crew member occurs, a retired NY police detective investigates the secrets of the current captain of the *Natchez* and, more particularly, the presence of his ghostly predecessor.

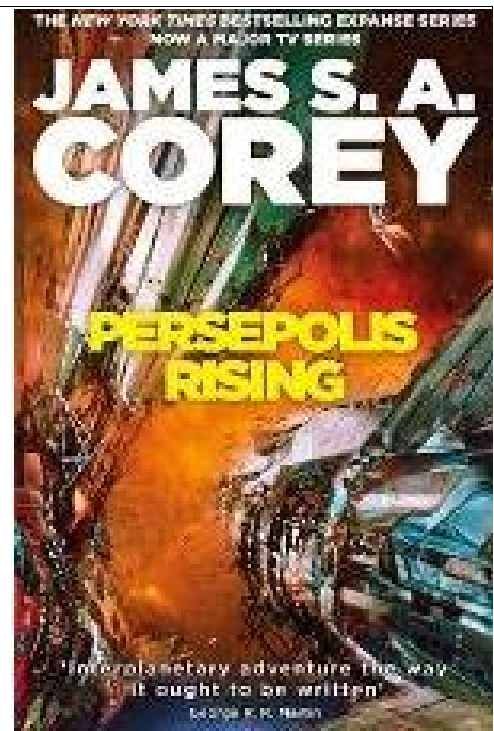
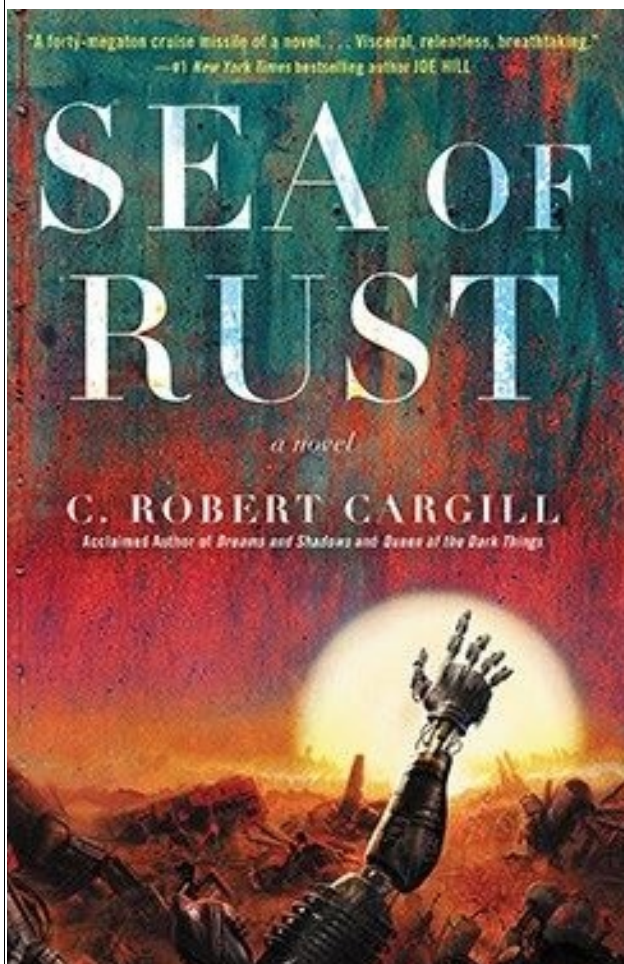
Like other books in the 'Wild Cards' series, *Mississippi Roll* addresses contemporary political and social issues. A major plot strand tells of the Kazakhstan Joker refugees on the *Natchez*. Disputes about their fate reflects current attitudes to refugees in America and elsewhere.

PERSEPOLIS RISING

by James S.A. Corey (Orbit; \$32.99)

James S.A. Corey is the pen name for Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham. They began their Expanse series with *Leviathan Wakes* in 2011. It is also now a successful TV series, with slightly changed plotlines.

Their future world begins in a solar system rife with political divisions, which are reflected in microcosm through the crew of a space ship called the *Rocinante*.



'Belters', working the outer planets and asteroid belts, are in conflict with both Earth and Mars as the series begins. Subsequent books show the impact of an interstellar portal on the original plotline as humanity expands through the galaxy.

The authors have said that the last three books in the series would be 'one big plot arc coming to the finale'. *Persepolis Rising*, the first of that trilogy, is set three decades forward, which may be a bit of leap too far for newcomers to the series.

The solar system has reached a sort of political equilibrium. The Belters now provide, through the Transport Union, supply lines to 1300 planets across the galaxy. Earth and Mars have reconciled in the Earth-Mars Coalition, while the crew of the *Rocinante* are still performing tasks, although two key, considerably older, characters are looking to retire.

The overall peace is dramatically changed when a technologically advanced force, Laconia, returns to the solar system bent on war under the leadership of the brutal High Counsel Duarte. Comparisons can be made here with many regimes in Earth's history, such as the Nazis. The Laconians are perhaps too much of a stereotypical evil empire, but the reader can empathise in the resistance struggle at the individual characters' level. An unexpected twist can be found in the conclusion, as a deeper threat emerges, calling for new alliances and setting the scene for the next two volumes.

SEA OF RUST

by C. Robert Cargill. (Gollancz; \$32.99)

C. Robert Cargill's *Sea of Rust* describes a future world with no human beings after robots destroy their human creators. Conflict, however, has not disappeared. The robot world is dominated by competing two OWIs (One World Intelligences), whose mission is to absorb individual robots into their collective mind.

The main character, so to speak, Brittle, one of a dwindling number of 'freebots', was once a 'Caregiver' to humans. But now, Brittle scavenges in the 'Sea of Rust', in the American Midwest, for replacement machine parts to ensure her survival. But she is not the only one scavenging, and other robots are after her for parts. It's robotic kill or be killed; if you survive you are always in imminent danger from the OWIs.

Brittle embarks on a necessary but dangerous journey as a pathfinder for 'OWI wanted' robots through the sea of rust. Brittle's promised reward is to gain access to vital replacement core parts, but only if the group survived the journey and the attacks of the OWI.

The reader empathises with Brittle, as she tries to protect her machine individuality. Increasingly, Brittle reveals human traits, which detract somewhat from the potential impact of Cargill's machine-only world. Nonetheless, *Sea of Rust* is a fresh and tense story of survival in an AI world.

US horror and dark fantasy

STRANGE WEATHER

Joe Hill (Gollancz; \$29.99)

Joe Hill made his reputation as a horror writer before it became known that he is the son of Stephen King. *Strange Weather* comprises four novellas of varying quality and length: 'Snapshot', 'Loaded', 'Aloft', and 'Rain'. The tone of the novellas ranges from the philosophical to humanity at its darkest.

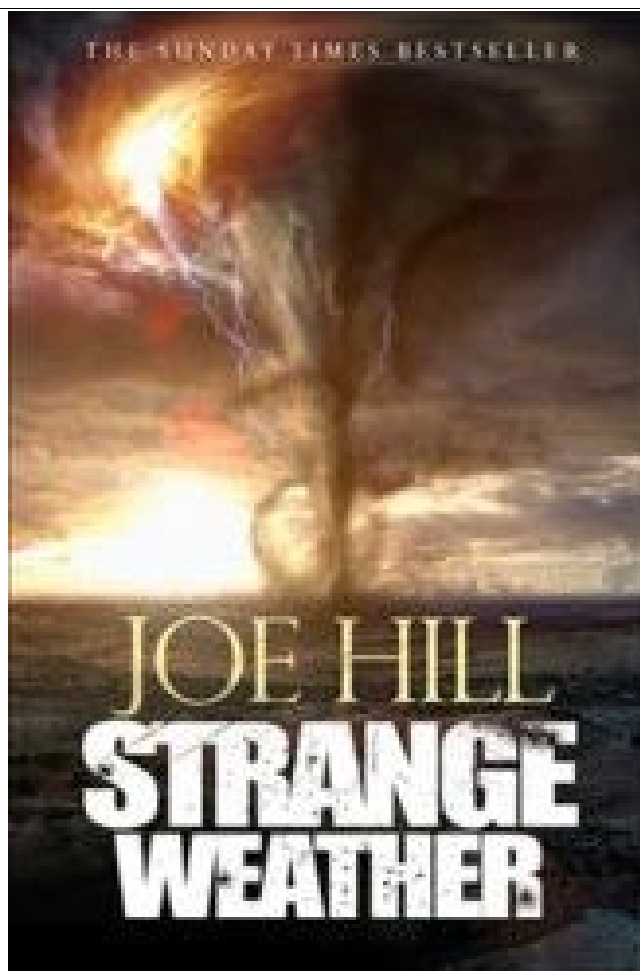
Hill has said in an interview that he has a 'look around at the different facets of modern life, takes it, and exaggerates it into the fantastic in a grotesque way. Throughout *Strange Weather*, a lot of what I've done is simply take metaphor and make it literal.'

'Snapshot' begins in the 1980s with a young 'fat and lonely' boy, Michael Figlione, who believes his neighbour Mrs Beukes is senile. It turns out, however that her memories have been stolen by the 'Polaroid Man', whose photos lead to people losing their memories. The story serves as a metaphor for Alzheimer's, and Hill captures the personal tragedy of Mrs Beukes and her husband, who is unable to understand the nature of her illness.

Michael's confrontation with the Polaroid Man brings resolution, but also a technological segue for Michael's IT success in the twenty-first century. This story juxtaposition does not quite cohere, but the image of the Polaroid Man will linger long.

'Loaded' comes closest to a story of contemporary reality, with its background story of actual American gun atrocities. Hill has said, 'I wanted to write about every single facet of gun violence that we're aware of as a culture, and that we seem to be helpless to respond to: you have an unarmed black youth who was shot by law enforcement and no repercussions. You have suicide by gun, which is one of the leading causes of death among white males. You have the mass shootings. So "Loaded" kind of looks at all of this stuff and says something like, "Wow, things are pretty crazy."'

'Loaded' juxtaposes stories and timelines over a number of years in a Florida town. The central character is



George Kellaway, a troubled mall security guard who is estranged from his wife. He panics when a shooting takes place in a jewellery store, and ends up shooting a Muslim woman and her baby, which Kellaway thought was a strapped-on bomb. The first responders turn Kellaway into a hero, not realising his role in the shootings, but during subsequent investigations Kellaway's story begins to unravel, precipitating an even darker conclusion.

'Aloft' is a lighter affair, with a reluctant twenty-something skydiver finding himself stranded on a strange cloud that seems as if it's made of 'acre after acre of mashed potato'. His time on the mysterious, sentient cloud enables him to reflect on life and his relationship with his girlfriend, whom he had wanted to impress through skydiving.

Rather more horrific clouds come in 'Rain', when razor-sharp crystals fall from the sky instead of rain, instantly killing those caught in the storm. Hill has said the story 'is about climate change, where the climate changes so that instead of raining water, it rains nails. I did that not to be preachy, but because incremental changes in temperature, or slightly more powerful hurricanes, happen so slowly. What you can do with fiction is say, "Okay, let's put this under a magnifying glass, exaggerate it, and present it to you in a hopefully entertaining form".'

The rain of nails doesn't fall initially in Spain, but rather in Boulder, Colorado, where Hill follows the personal story of Honeysuckle Speck, whose girlfriend has been killed by the 'rain' and who acts as a microcosm



of the global disaster that ensues. And one wonders who is that President, in a secure location, who thinks it is all down to terrorism and constantly sends out Twitter messages!

Strange Weather is a mixed collection, but its subject matter, ranging from human induced horror to the supernatural and apocalyptic, provides much that is satisfying for all Hill and horror fans.

British children's fiction

FATHER CHRISTMAS'S FAKE BEARD

Terry Pratchett (Doubleday; \$29.99)

The 11 short stories collected in the late Sir Terry Pratchett's *Father Christmas's Fake Beard* are largely taken from the numerous short stories he wrote for the Bucks Free Press in the late 1960s, under the pseudonym Uncle Jim. They are supplemented by his 1996 short story, 'The Computer Who Wrote to Father Christmas', and an appendix which reprints the first chapter of Pratchett's young adult novel, *Truckers*.

This is the third collection of stories from the Bucks Free Press. Pratchett has written about an earlier volume, *Dragons At Crumbling Castle* 'that I wrote as a teenager, mostly as they were first printed, although the grown-up me has tinkered just a little with a few fine details — the odd tweak here, a pinch there, and a little note at the bottom where needed and all because the younger me wasn't as clever back then as he turned out to be. But that naive young lad on the motorbike, and the grown-up me with my black hat and beard are the same person — and all we both ever wanted to do was write for people who are old enough to understand.'

Many of the stories are located in the fictional Lancashire town of Blackbury, which is where Pratchett's later Johnny Maxwell books were set. All the stories in *Father Christmas's Fake Beard* have a Christmas theme, with Blackbury seemingly affected by dramatic climate change, as each Christmas involves extensive snowfalls.

'Good King Wences-lost' gets himself lost in a typically

snowy winter, while in 'The Abominable Snow-baby', Albert Scruggins' 98-year-old grandmother, whose expletive is 'great bags of peppermint', saves a young abominable snow baby who has been trapped in the snow.

The Blackbury weather is further influenced in 'The Weatherchick', in which strange golden birds change the weather patterns and also save the day.

In 'The Blackbury Pie', the people of Blackbury make the biggest pie ever — 'it was still coming down on Boxing Day, just in time to be warmed up and none-the-worse for its trip into the sky — although a large flock of wild geese were nearly shot down by flying crust.'

'The Computer who Wrote to Father Christmas', while somewhat dated technologically, tells of a neglected computer wondering why it can't celebrate Christmas. The deus ex machina to allow the after-Christmas rebooting turns out to be a teddy bear.

While this collection is intended for the younger reader, it will appeal to all Pratchett fans, as even his early stories reflect his wit and humour, albeit without the satirical undertones of the later novels. Numerous black-and-white illustrations by Mark Beech add to the enjoyment of the collection.

British science fiction

AMERICA CITY

Chris Beckett (Corvus; \$34.99)

In *America City*, British author **Chris Beckett**, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, moves back to a time that precedes his award-winning trilogy, *Dark Eden*, *Mother of Eden*, and *Daughter of Eden*.

America City takes place in a ravaged-climate North America in the twenty-second century. Large areas of the southern half of the mostly isolationist United States have been devastated. The United States is also recovering from an unexplained war traced back in 'the Tyranny'. Is the 'T.' significant with reference to today's world?

Refugees stream north from the South, but the 'dusties' are not always welcome, and some northern states want to close their borders. Stark comparisons with the contemporary Mexican border issues and unwanted refugees into Europe can be seen.

Right-wing US Senator Stephen Slaymaker, who has amassed a trucking fortune, makes a bid to become President, enlisting Holly Peacock, a young British public relations person, to assist with his Reconfigure America program. Holly is adept at using the 'whisper-stream', where truth is often not the objective. How much is she willing to compromise in order to achieve the program's goals? Certainly her writer husband Rick is increasingly horrified by her political manoeuvrings. Rick and Holly are part of the privileged class, the 'delicados'. Spanish terms are rife in this novel, given that 40 per cent of the population are now Hispanic.

If the past is a foreign country, the future might be one across the Canadian border. Climate change has changed the Canadian landscape to one that is much more temperate and productive.

Holly responds when the 2000-mile Mexican wall and minefield are referenced to the American demand for an open Canadian border: 'We don't let homeless Mexicans in for the simple reason that so many of our people are already homeless. Probably Canada should take in Mexicans; I don't know, but we certainly shouldn't.' Holly believes that the end justifies the means, whatever the liberal feelings of the *delicados*, and consequently, in a Faustian power deal, shapes Slaymaker's politics, as US/Canadian tensions escalate.

America City is an engrossing, disturbing novel, which poses important questions about contemporary society.

PLACES IN THE DARKNESS

Chris Brookmyre (Orbit; \$32.99)

Chris Brookmyre, award-winning Scottish crime author, has followed in the steps of the late Iain (M.) Banks by publishing in two novel genres. In Brookmyre's case, he has moved from the Edinburgh of his Jack Parlabane novels, which have sold more than one million copies in the UK alone, to SF.

Brookmyre's setting is a space station, Ciudad de Cielo ('city in the sky'), known as CdC, where Earth's first interstellar spaceship is being constructed and other cutting edge neural research is taking place.

Brookmyre has said in an interview, 'Location is always important in my stories, so I thought this would be a great way of exploring the relationship between character and environment. I was intrigued by the idea of somewhere that is at the cutting edge of human achievement and yet also permanently on the edge of existence, with only a few inches of metal between life and instant death in the cold vacuum of space. I wanted to explore the ways in which technological advances might alter human behaviour, and more importantly the ways in which they would not. I also liked the idea of being able to create my own city with its own history, its own subcultures and its own rules.'

CdC is run by Quadriga, an megacorporation that uses its own police force, Seguridad, to maintain order. Standards have lapsed, however, and crimes such as smuggling, drugs, and prostitution are tolerated by police, especially by one of the main two characters, former LA police officer Nikki 'Fixx' Freeman, who has her own past demons to contend with.

The Earth Government, known as FNG, the Federation of National Governments, sends Dr Alice Blake in to clean up the corruption. Alice finds that the first ever murders have taken place on CdC. Nikki's troubles escalate as Alice probes Nikki's role and activities and possible involvement in the murders.

Alice and Nikki come together as an unlikely and unwilling duo, although with vastly different moral perspectives, to confront the violent gang warfare that has erupted, and also to uncover the secrets of the mysterious Sentinel project, which could affect the whole of the future of humanity.

Places in the Darkness is an excellent mix of SF and crime novel. Brookmyre has said, 'I created CdC with the intention of writing a series, and having given it a history; this means I can write about its past as well as its future. This all depends, of course, on whether anybody actually

'Beckett should be on the radar of anyone who professes concern for science fiction as a literary form' **Alastair Reynolds**

CHRIS BECKETT



AMERICA CITY

PLACES IN THE DARKNESS

CHRIS
BROOKMYRE
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

likes it.' Many undoubtedly will.

British young adult fiction

LA BELLE SAUVAGE: BOOK OF DUST, VOL. 1

Philip Pullman (David Fickling Books; \$32.99)

Philip Pullman has described winning the 2017 Waterstones Book of the Year prize for *La Belle Sauvage: The Book Of Dust: Volume One* as having 'cream as well as apple pie'. Pullman's much-anticipated return to the world of his bestselling 'His Dark Materials' trilogy takes place 10 years before *Northern Lights*, with Lyra as a six month-old baby.

In some ways this is an origin novel, which Pullman regards as an 'equel', rather than a prequel, saying that it 'doesn't stand before or after *His Dark Materials*, but beside it'. The next two volumes will jump forward beyond the chronology of the original trilogy and follow Lyra as an Oxford undergraduate.

Pullman has said in an interview that the new trilogy should be called 'His Darker Materials ... It is a darker book, I don't deny that, but that's the story that came to me and wanted to be told.' In *La Belle Sauvage*, 'Lyra is a baby, and being a baby, she is not able to speak or walk, she hasn't got very much agency, but she's certainly at the centre of the action. Her very existence forms one of the central McGuffins of the plot.

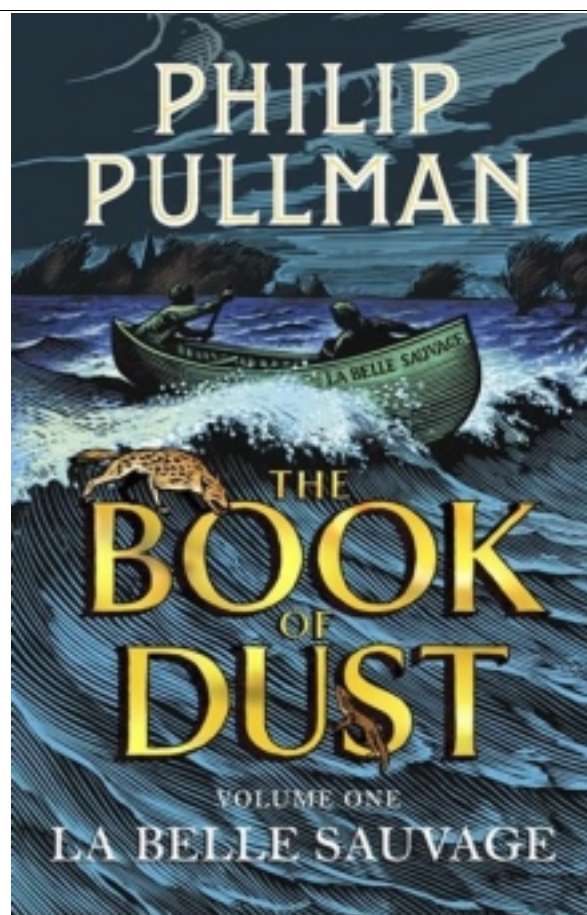
The central character is 11-year-old Malcolm Polstead, who works in his parents' Oxford riverside pub, the Trout, an actual Oxford pub. Pullman's again mixes the real and the fictional in his Oxford settings, for example, in juxtaposing real and imaginary Oxford colleges such as Balliol and Jordan.

Pullman creates a framework of ecclesiastical and bureaucratic oppression in the first half of the book, with issues that reflect on contemporary society. The current wave of closure of public libraries in England is reflected in the fact that there are no free libraries in Oxford, corrupt businessmen rule, and free speech is dampened, while climate change is rampant. The struggle is 'between a despotic and totalitarian organisation, which wants to stifle speculation and enquiry, and those who believe thought and speech should be free'.

This plays out, in microcosm, in Malcolm's school, where teachers are removed if they fail to toe the ecclesiastical line of the Magisterium, the church's ruling body. Malcolm has to be particularly careful, as he passes on information from overheard conspiratorial conversations at the Trout tables to an Oxford female don. Pullman engages in some minor tradecraft here, and has acknowledged his love of the novels of John Le Carré.

As the novel begins, baby Lyra is in the care of the nuns in Godstowe Priory, near the Trout, but she comes under increasing danger when her presence is detected by the forces of the Magisterium, who are in league with Lyra's mother, the machiavellian Mrs Coulter.

Malcolm's prize possession is a canoe called *La Belle Sauvage*, which plays a key role in the second half of the novel, when the narrative pace picks up dramatically. Malcolm and his Trout companion Alice, a 16-year-old servant, flee with Lyra, through almost biblical floods,



from the various forces trying to capture Lyra. Not least in this context is a disgraced dangerous particle scientist, Gerard Bonneville, accompanied by a hideously three-legged hyena daemon. They pursue Malcolm, Alice, and Lyra to the end.

Pullman particularly enjoyed writing about Bonneville: 'Is he a psychopath? He's a nasty piece of work. I enjoyed him very much. There's nothing more fun than writing about villains. I loved writing about Mrs Coulter in *His Dark Materials* and greatly enjoyed him in this.'

Malcolm intends travel by river to London and deliver Lyra to her father, Lord Asriel, but the journey in the canoe is far from easy. For more than half of the book, rain falls incessantly: 'And the rain had set in with a fury. It fell not in drops but in sheets, and the ground was running with it, so that you couldn't see anything solid: just flowing fields of bitter cold water.'

Their Odysseyan like journey, replete with some fantastical creatures, is full of danger, not only from the physical floods, but also from their pursuers. The journey will involve loss and sacrifice, and will also be a journey out of childhood for Malcolm, who must, like Alice, take on many new responsibilities.

Pullman has acknowledged his debt to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, concluding the book with a quotation. *La Belle Sauvage*, however, reaffirms that Pullman is an original. His books will undoubtedly continue to be read by successive generations, like those of his Oxford compatriots, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

— ColinSteele, December 2017–March 2018

I must be talking to my friends (continued from p. 18)

JOHN LITCHEN

PO Box 3503, Robina Town Centre QLD 4230

Colin Steele reviews *The Wanderers*, which I have also read and written about for the expanded version of the Mars file. If you haven't read it, it's well worthwhile.

I have read so many more Mars books since completing that article and have continued working on it to the point where it is now book length. Early next year I will gather the whole thing into a book. I'm just waiting on a couple more novels that date back quite a few years. I will also cover a lot of the ebooks that have been published in the last two years.

I see occasionally pictures from the football game at

the Ponderosa still turn up. The one you used here was taken by me (along with many others) on that day we spent on the farm west of Melbourne in 1973, at that time home to Elizabeth Foyster (now Elizabeth Darling) and John Foyster.

I gave a few copies of some of them to various people. It's nice to see them pop up now and then.

(28 November 2017)

Ah Bruce, I wasn't suggesting that you publish any more of my Mars material. I was just letting you know that I have read a lot more and expanded it with the object of putting it in a book. I wouldn't attempt to do anything regarding films on Mars, since there is a brilliant book that covers every one ever made from 1910 up to 2016: *Mars in the Movies* by Thomas Kent Miller. Production notes, lists of actors and directors and scriptwriters with positive and negative comments from critics regarding each film, as well as a synopsis and the author's review of the film. He also covers TV series, as early serials that later were turned into films. He even discusses *Destination Moon* and how it was pivotal in launching films about Mars and space films in general. That's a book you should get.

I used to be a member of the Bulldogs (Footscray) skindiving club, and among the photos of club members there is only one person whose name I remember. None of the other people in the pictures is familiar to me at all. I was 16 or 17 then and that was 60 years ago. I didn't write down names on the back of the photos. I suppose

Some of John Litchen's photos of the Fannish Football Match (Aussie rules, of course), September 1973, the Ponderosa, Kyneton, Victoria. Top left: Robin Johnson, John Litchen, Paul J. Stevens. Middle left: Stephen Campbell, Michael Creaney, Peter Millar (seated), Ken Ford, Merv Binns, Tony Thomas. Bottom: Robin Johnson, Carey Handfield, Lee Harding, Peter Millar behind him, Leigh Edmonds, Paul Stevens. Some of these people have disappeared from fannish sight since 1973: Paul Stevens, Peter Millar, Peter House, Michael Creaney, and Ken Ford.



I thought I wouldn't forget them.

My mum left a box full of old photos, most of which date back long before I was born. No doubt they were of family friends, or maybe even relatives in the 1920s and 1930s. She knew who they were, but did not write names or dates on the back of them either. Why would she when she knew them? Most of them will remain a mystery forever.

Love the cover. Dick Jenssen certainly gets better and better every time.

(29 November 2017)

STEPHEN CAMPBELL

52 Aitkins Road, Warrnambool VIC 3280

Ho! Ho! Surprise and delight! *SFC*! Another excellent cover by Dick Jenssen enveloping knowledge printed in text on fine paper: a tactile artifact worthy of archival collection for children to discover in the future (after the machine reaches its expiry date) and learn of after the enquiries of mankind from the past at the height of civilisation when the mysteries of electricity and magnetism were unfolding. Congratulations on another high effort, Bruce, and I'm honoured to receive your art in a time when the meaning of 'publish' is 'prepare and issue copies of'. In a computer, the copy is singular even though it can be seen by many (those who have the technology). Forgive me for being oldfashioned (as witness this hand-written letter) in my attitudes towards matter, but I don't see data as part of it; rather as something ephemeral as a lightning bolt and lasting just as long, never to be seen again.

Congratulations to Bill Wright and his worthy receipt of the A. Bertram Chandler Award. I remember the football match in 1973 where we see him with John Foyster on page 19, and was surprised at his enthusiasm to play. John, of course, was concerned with things being done just right.

It's always interesting to read John Litchen's point of view, and his precis of the Mars books was clear enough to me to understand that I don't wish to read them, although I did read Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* and *Green Mars*, and was astounded at his botanic goethermal observations. Many of the books John talks of seem like propaganda and gung-ho adventures that look at the political and military preparations to rape the new land, so disgust me. I'd rather read about a trip to a place that is nothing like we think it is, and quite surprising (Earth?). 'A Planet Named Shayol' by Cordwainer Smith is such a work, and I still think of that story with wonder and dread. I get the same feeling about concentration camps (of any sort) that are part of our reality.

You must feel honoured that Colin Steele writes his solid and critical reviews only for *SFC* now. I was especially interested to read of examples of Australian science fiction, not for any patriotic reason but I'm curious as to the effect this land has on its writers when they explore some of its real history and place it in the context of a science fiction. I'm still waiting for a story written from an Aboriginal point of view where the full mythology of the Dreamtime is exposed and the magical engagement with the land is explained and how technological science

is affecting that. Meanwhile, 'Rotherweird' sounds like a good trilogy to curl up with.

Thank you for printing my letter with the illustrations. Sorry if I tend to be a bit pedantic in my opinions about the genre, but I still have a passion for science fiction as a phenomenon: it's another way of seeing or, if you like, art. I think art — Art — is indefinable, and should remain so to preserve its potency. Science fiction is not a static writing that remains in its own century, because it almost always feeds on ideas of a future, ideas that often become a reality, especially where technology is concerned, and are the propulsion for the writers to speculate more, or refeeds the notion of itself with the future in mind, knowing that it has already affected the past. Perpetual motion literature.

I have a painting that has the title *Dear Diary*. David Russell suggested that it would make a good cover for *SF Commentary*, and I agree. We will organise to take a good photograph of it (it's 5 feet high) and I'll get that to you.

[*brg* A photo of your cover has arrived, but will have to wait until next issue. Carol Kewley has been waiting quite awhile to see her cover published.*]

Thank you for the card of sympathy that you and Elaine sent to me after Mum's departure. I had written a cursive and forlorn letter to you, but your card arrived on the day I went to post it. I assume you were told by David Russell. Mum always liked you, Bruce, and her taking me to meet you was one of my life's profound events. We live on, and our work is not yet done.

(11 December 2017)

LEIGH EDMONDS

Ballarat East VIC 3350

I thought Dick Jenssen's cover for *SFC*95 was particularly fine, and I enjoyed his explanation of its origins. I was looking for one of his early computer-assisted pieces recently, and found one he did for Bill Wright about 15 years ago. There is a significant improvement in quality between that one and this. I wonder whether it has to do with Dick's ability as an artist or the improved software he is using — it's probably a combination of the two. (He has done me excellent front and back covers for No. 13, the annish of *iOTA* — he even added an ornithopter to one of the works for old times sake.) I was particularly taken by his comment, 'fiddling with my fractal-generating program', which would have slotted nicely into almost any sfnal story of the 1940s, though it might have had something to do with multi-dimensional transmissions or something equally fantastic.

Your material on Brian Aldiss was much appreciated. It would be a great disappointment to let such a great and influential writer slip away from us without some memorial. Having not read much sf in the past 20 years or so, Aldiss remains my favourite author. Asimov comes second, mainly because he has that 'Golden Age' character to his writing. I recall seeing Aldiss at that convention you mention, but I don't know that I ever met him or had the opportunity to talk to him. Probably just as well; apart from gushing, there wouldn't have been anything of note I could have talked to him about.



One of my other favourite authors is Chris Priest, but I did get to talk to him. There's a lot you get to talk about over a game of Scrabble.

Of the letters, I thought you did well in putting Stephen Campbell first. In a few words he encompasses some of the strengths of stf. I was interested that he found 'the world very frightening'. I can't say that I have that experience. My experience of the world is one of confusion, because it doesn't seem to make much sense to me. Perhaps that senselessness is what Stephen finds frightening. Perhaps I should be frightened too, but I suspect that most of the time I'm too confused to realise that I should be frightened. Perhaps I've written a dozen or so history books to try to make sense of the world. It hasn't worked very well, though it's given me something to do that is a distraction.

I've forgotten what I said that led Doug Barbour to tell me not getting the Argerich Chopin Nocturnes is my loss. I've just dipped into YouTube and found her playing four Nocturnes. They sit beautifully under her hand, but they do seem a bit fast to me. I have a complete set played by Claudio Arrau, which I enjoy immensely, and which seems to suit my ageing mentality very nicely with his slow and languid playing. On the other hand, one of the pieces I really love is Argerich's version of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, which is nice and slow so the listener can take in all the details of the writing, does all the repeats sensitively, and gives the whole piece a grand sense of the architecture of the theme and variations. I haven't heard the Maria Joao Pires Nocturnes either. I will have to listen into that.

I was also delighted to read Gerald Murnane's letter. Living in Goroke, eh? It's a tiny place and I was amused to read your question about hotel accommodation there. Still, I imagine that even if people couldn't find some kind local to take them in for the seminar, they might find somewhere to stay nearby — even Horsham, which would be a fair distance away by city standards, but it would be a very pleasant drive from there to Goroke. I hope Gerald writes to let us know how the seminar went. I'm sure that I would find people reading academic

papers about my writing very unnerving.

Goroke is on the other side of the Little Desert from Dimboola where I came from, but is still part of the Wimmera, which will be the subject of the history after the two I'm working on at the moment, if I get the chance to do it. One of the reasons for thinking on this project is that it would give me the opportunity to travel to all those places in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee that I visited with my father on his work when I was little. In many ways I envy Gerald his life in Goroke, surrounded by farming land and living in a farming community. It would have the ups and downs of all communities, but I'd like to think that it would be a more pleasant and reflective lifestyle than even we folks in sleepy old Ballarat enjoy.

Milt Stevens' passing was very sad. A lot of trufans seem to be heading off to the great convention in the sky at the moment. (Talking of which, I had completely missed that David Lake and Jack Wodhams had died too.) I can't resist the temptation of passing just one (or perhaps two) comments about Milt's comments on history. He asks, in passing, if 'Fandom is defined by conflict?' I would say not. The problem is that conflict generates sound and motion, which attract attention. This happens from time to time, but most fanac has and is the result of friendly co-operation between fans. The trouble is that most of that goes unnoticed and unremarked. Looking at it from an Australian perspective, the trouble with Vol Molesworth's *A History of Australian Fandom* is that he saw and recorded nothing but conflict, which is one of the reasons for the generally accepted idea about the feuding in Sydney in the 1940s and 1950s. The opportunity I had recently to spend a long time chatting with Doug Nicholson about his experiences of Sydney in the 1950s leads me more to feel that it was much more like Degraives Tavern in Melbourne a decade or two later — but with Graham Stone and Molesworth as unwanted irritants.

Valma has just reminded me that it is tea time. This is a mighty excuse for me to stop now and not burble on as I have in this issue of *SFC*.

(8 December 2017)

I had sort of formed the impression that you had printed and posted out hundreds of copies of *SFC*. Given my puny experiences at publishing stuff in the past year, producing fanzines would be well outside my financial abilities. Just as well for the interweb; otherwise I'd be silent.

There's no reason why you couldn't visit Gerald Murnane in Goroke, though it is, of course, highly unlikely. The V-Line website shows what appears to be a daily bus that passes through Goroke on its way to Naracoorte and Edenhope. The site also tells me that you'd have to leave Melbourne at about 9 in the morning and arrive six and a half hours later after a train trip to Ballarat, then a bus trip to Horsham, and then another bus on to Goroke. It's a reminder that even though Victoria is a tiny part of Australia, it's still a pretty big place in the experience of most people.

I'm not surprised that Goroke was once the centre of a thriving farming area. It is still probably a fairly prosperous farming area but Goroke has been bypassed by

technological developments. Almost all the little towns in the Wimmera were created to serve surrounding agricultural areas that were established as the land was opened up to Selection. This was made feasible by the construction of railway lines running up from Geelong, Ballarat, and Bendigo, so you can see the Selector settlements spreading up to the north and west as the railways were built. I looked at Goroke on Google Earth and was surprised not to see a railway line and wheat silos there. The little town is laid out as though there had once been a railway line and I found, looking at Dr Google, that there had been a railway line there built towards the end of the 1800s. Perhaps it had been ripped up in the excitement of building a bulk grain-handling facility on the coast at Portland and plans to send all the grain down to Portland on roads — which didn't do the road network much good and may be the reason why a lot of the railway network survives further north. So much for historical speculation.

Looking at Goroke on Google Earth, particularly the road view, suggests that it is a fairly normal little Wimmera town. I don't know what it is like to live in one these days, but my sister and her family still live in the Wimmera and seem to find it agreeable. I see a fair bit of her these days. Since her husband died she has liberated her love of the kinds of shows you see in the big theatres in Melbourne so she goes down to see them, staying with a friend there and dropping in to say hello on her way through Ballarat.
(10 December 2017)

I'm glad you're giving the notion of mining your own material some consideration. You have important experiences and knowledge that would enrich the world of the study of stf and it would be a real shame if you didn't make the contribution you can.

The reason I suggested a Master's or PhD is simply because it gives you a qualification that people take note of in the outside world and it is a challenge that I know you have the intelligence and stamina to achieve. The reason I suggested these ways of approaching the process is because they would provide you with very useful support along the way and they would also give you access to circles of resources that you currently don't have. Besides, setting out to do one of these things is like having APA deadlines; you have to write reports, give presentation and submit drafts to deadlines which means that things really do happen.

Don't worry about what qualifications you don't have; universities aren't as strict as they used to be. And besides you have more Ditmars (and Hugo nominations?) than most people doing postgraduate work in this field can imagine.

If you decide not to go this way you need to find ways of 'value adding' to the effort that you've already put into *SFC*. You are not going to do yourself much good by slaving over a hot scanner to the benefit of others. In many ways, if you have the only surviving copy of an issue of *SFC*, even the better, write about it and explore its content and context in a way that will make others want to read it.

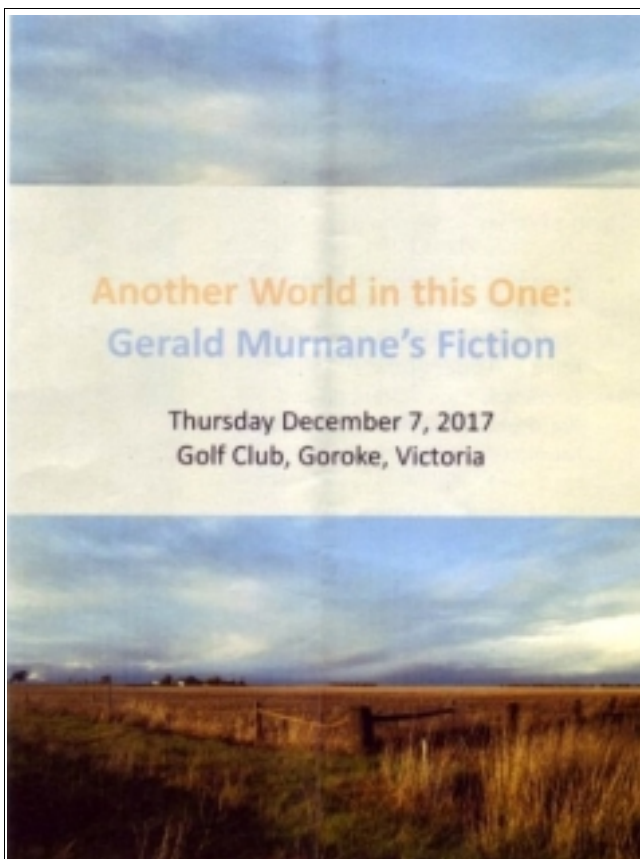
Whatever happens and whether or not you do it as a postgraduate, using *SFC* to do it is an excellent idea. It is established and has an enviable reputation. It has, as they

say, runs on the board. However, you should try to find ways of broadening your audience to include the academics and students of stf so that the things you have to say reach those people rather than your old chums. Think about building a reputation for being a key player in this area of stf studies and aiming to find the people who are interested and will be of some benefit to you in doing that. I know this sounds mercenary and a bit unfannish, but that's what I've done over the years in the field of civil aviation history and it might be on the verge of paying off. Of which more later, depending on how things turn out.

[*brg* The idea of doing a PhD seems bizarre to me, although a few years ago Ian Nichols did suggest to me the same course of action. I publish fanzines for the sake of it. That's what fandom is all about — doing things for the sake of doing them. I've spent a huge amount on my fanzines over the years, but earned little. It has become too expensive to print my magazines. The result of that is that very few libraries in the world hold stocks of *SF Commentary*, *The Metaphysical Review*, and *Steam Engine Time*. So my real task is not to waste time doing something for which I don't have the intellectual or physical resources (i.e. a PhD), but to scan all issues of all my magazines so that people can read them. This is the only way I can do justice to the hundreds of fine writers and artists who have contributed over the last 50 years.*]

On Thursday 14 December there were some preliminary sessions to the three-day conference that Monash and Warwick Universities were holding on fantastic literature. I spent time chatting to some of the people there: all young, intelligent, and motivated youngsters, just like neofans but with the desire to become academics rather than BNFs. They have a journal of 'sort of' cultural studies, a postgraduate thing that is properly refereed and supported by the academy. I mumbled about a possible article to someone on the editorial board about the writing about science fiction in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s which would basically be about *ASFR* and *SFC* and their interaction with the global stf network at that time. They sounded fairly interested. Reflecting on this, I think it would be something you're much more qualified to write than I am. If you don't do it for them, do it for yourself.

Now, I'm writing as I'm thinking, so this might not be such a good idea. Would you consider writing such an article for *iOTA*? It is one of the significant things that I need to include in the history of Australian fandom, and it is the area that I am least qualified to write on. It would be similar in many ways to your piece on your involvement in fanzine fandom (I did think of asking you for permission to include in *iOTA* to complete the record, but this issue is going to run to over 100 pages as it is). I've already got Doug Nicholson's agreement to write about his experiences of Sydney fandom, so commissioning new articles might become a bit more common in *iOTA* in the future. The only problem in writing something for me is that it would have a very limited circulation in the circles that I think you should be trying to find an audience in. What do you think?



[*brg* Yes, that is a good idea, but only after I've published *SF Commentary* 96. It could even be the backbone of the 50th Anniversary edition of SFC, scheduled for January next year.*]

I don't know that I would have much to say to most old-time fans either. Most of them have been fairly passive in their earlier lives anyhow, so I don't know that they would have much to say for themselves now. Even though I'm a historian by trade I also don't get much enjoyment about talking about the old times without a purpose and find conversations around 'remember when we did this or that' quite uninteresting. What I do find interesting is what we're doing now and what we're going to be doing next, and it seems to me that a lot of people at our age aren't doing much now and plan to do even less in the future.

Enough for now. Lily Bell is telling me it's time I was going to bed, so she can snuggle up next to me. Jo-jo is snoozing on my lap at the moment but as soon as I lie down he will turn up and want to sit on my pillow. I've given up arguing with them about it. They are insistent little buggers when they set their minds to it and even if they're not in bed when I go to sleep, they certainly are when I wake up.

(18 December 2017)

GERALD MURNANE PO Box 40, Goroke VIC

I seem to be safe from my prostate cancer for the time being, but my bladder continues to be badly affected by the radiation that I had early in the year. I sometimes have twenty or thirty trips to the toilet during a twenty-

four hour period. I haven't had more than ninety minutes of unbroken sleep for the past ten months. My health is otherwise excellent but I have no urge to write letters, let alone any sort of publishable item.

The Goroke Conference was an outstanding success. Visitors were invited. I had not known that presenting papers was a spectator sport. Thirty and more folk turned up at the Goroke Golf Club. The Goroke hotel is presently closed and for sale, but accommodation is conveniently available at Nhill, Natimuk, and Horsham.

I presented a paper of my own that ran for forty-five minutes. I'm not especially proud of it ... as I said, I'm too tired these days to think straight.

I'm told all papers will be published in due course, where I don't know as yet. I'm told also that my own paper is to be published in the *Sydney Review of Books*, whatever that is.

The interview by the man from the *New York Times* is a goer, late January. Text are ready to sign a contract to publish *A Season on Earth* to coincide with my eightieth birthday in early 2019. Giramondo will publish my volume of poetry at the same time. After that, the cupboard is bare.

I'd willingly swap some of my latest good fortune for a few hours of unbroken sleep tonight.

(19 December 2017)

[*brg* Update time, 8 April 2018. Mark Binelli from *The New York Times* did indeed visit Goroke to interview Gerald. His article appeared 27 March 2018 as 'Is the Next Nobel Laureate in Literature Tending Bar in a Dusty Australian Town?: With the publication of two new books, Gerald Murnane might finally find an American audience'. *The Paris Review* also featured a short article 'Scenes from Gerald Murnane's Golf Club' by Tristan Foster, on 26 January 2018. Gerald's reply to the assembled critics can be found on the website *Sydney Review of Books*, as well as video/sound from the six critics' talks.*]

ROB GERRAND 11 Robe Street, St Kilda VIC 3182

Of all the losses in the SF community this year that you report, to me the most significant is that of Brian Aldiss, one of the titans of English literature, not just of SF. He wrote so beguilingly that surely he was a Siren of Titan.

He was also a good bloke and very generous. When I edited *Transmutations* for Norstrilia/Outback Press, he wrote a fine Foreword, even though I had to bounce the story he sent me. (I had decided to only include new Australian writing; the Literature Board played a role in that decision.)

How many others have given so much to the SF field — superlative fiction, criticism, anthology editing and networking the various international bodies to help raise the understanding and status of SF?

Of his many books, I think the *Helliconia* Trilogy is his most consummate work, and my favourite. Is it the first real novel about climate change? It and the *Squire Quartet* are my favourites; it is hard to pick when there are so many jewels. And he was writing at his top right to the end. *Jocasta*, *The Cretan Teat*, *HARM*, *Walcot*, and



L. to r.: Greg Benford, Brian Aldiss, and Robert Silverberg (Worldcon, 2014).

Comfort Zone are all superb.

It is a great loss, but what a life — lived so very very well.

(14 December 2017)

GREG BENFORD

**84 Harvey Court, Irvine,
California 92612-4070, USA**

I last saw Brian Aldiss at Worldcon 2014 London (see photo from there). I remarked to him that I too had seen the Calcutta banyan, origin of *Hothouse* imagery he said inspired the novel. I was drawn to Aldiss early on with *Hothouse*. Its dynamics make no sense, but its imagery works. (Larry Niven and I are finishing our 'Bowl of Heaven' three-novel series with a similar bridge connecting tide-locked planets, as Pluto and Charon are in our system — a deliberate Brian tribute.) With him our field as a whole has lost one of its widest-ranging geniuses: universe-spanning imagination (*Galaxies like Grains of Sand*), Joycean psychedelia (*Barefoot in the Head*), beautiful decay (*Hothouse/The Long Afternoon of Earth*), alternatives to humanity (*The Malacia Tapestry*), world building (*Helliconia*), history of the field (*The Trillion Year Spree*), and even mimetic bestsellers (*The Hand-Reared Boy* series), an idiosyncratic memoir (*The Shape of Further Things*, a meditation on diverse topics written around the time of the moon landing).

The process of writing *Hothouse* gave Aldiss a new life, a vigorously independent spirit, and the basis of his later success and his only Hugo Award.

I liked John Litchen's summing up of Mars novels. He asks, '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?' Yes, but I wanted to stress how it could be done soon, if determined. Plus I wanted to do a hard SF novel, including the 'pork chop' orbital diagrams NASA uses for mission

planning — but could only get NASA to do one for the 2020s time interval, so went with that.

More important, he omits what I think is the book's major point — subsurface Martian life. I was led to conclude that it may well exist by the deep bio-communities that utilize H₂ (produced by radiolysis of water) as an energy source (reducing CO₂ to CH₄).

These communities thrive at 2–3 km depth in the Witwatersrand Basin of South Africa, and have been isolated from the surface (and photosynthesis) for millions of years. It might be possible for analogous biota to survive for eons below the cryosphere boundary on Mars, where water is again liquid, radiolysis can supply energy, and CO₂ can provide carbon. Gases accumulated in such zones might be released to the atmosphere if pores or fissures open seasonally, connecting these deep zones to the atmosphere at scarps, crater walls, or canyons. Then NASA discovered sporadic methane emissions on the surface! The only plausible explanation is same as happens here: biological emissions.

That's why I think the major scientific issue of life elsewhere should focus on Mars, where a rover into the many caves we have mapped there could make the discovery. Yet NASA has no plans to ever do such — the geologists run the Mars program, alas.

And we lost Jerry Pournelle recently as well. A single moment encapsulates Jerry's many-faceted self.

My brother Jim and I came to Corona, California in June 1963 to do research at the US Naval Surface Warfare Lab. We noticed a Los Angeles SF Society (LASFS) meeting was next Thursday in LA. In this era, a mile was a minute in the LA Basin, so we jaunted over.

Approaching the public building in a park where LASFS met, I saw a tall man leaning on a cane, hotly debating something with a shorter but more massive man. Jerry used logic, the LASFSian used emotion, and was plainly losing. Jerry's opponent got physical, advancing on Jerry with raised fists.

Jerry grasped his cane and — presto! — slid out a short-sword with an evil sharp gleam on its edges. 'And

so I better you again!’ Jerry cried. The fan slunk off.

I went over and shook his hand, once the sword was safely back in the cane. ‘Your accent is ...Tennessee? Or Texas? I’m from Alabama.’

He nodded, head tilted in that self-deprecating way he had. Thus are friends made.

(30 December 2017)

YVONNE ROUSSEAU Reservoir VIC 3073

Thank you for interesting information and for cheering Getting In Touch. I’m sorry to have been slow in answering emails, but I do currently feel great fatigue and the need to sleep heavily, immediately after lunch and sometimes after breakfast as well, so that it’s hard to make arrangements to eat out. Today and tomorrow there’s also the prediction of 40-degree heat — when I’m staying at home with the air conditioning and reading Connie Willis’s *Crosstalk* (which I borrowed from the Reservoir Library this Monday).

On the other hand, there is one item of good and almost unbelievable news: my left ankle, now that I’ve become used to the orthoses, is no longer hurting. My next appointment with my general practitioner is on 22 January.

Jenny Bryce and Tony Thomas have now visited, and have presented me with a copy of Brian Aldiss’s *Comfort Zone* (2013), which I thoroughly enjoyed — though I was startled by what seems a great difference in the procedure of colonoscopy in Britain compared with Australia. I am actually comforted by Aldiss’s account of the encroachments of age and degenerative illness. In addition, it’s relevant to a query I long ago published in Van Ikin’s *Science Fiction* about Helliconian hoxneys, which I paste in below:

Brian Aldiss’s *Helliconia*

Science Fiction 25, Tenth Anniversary Issue, 1987, Letters, pp. 33-4: **Yvonne Rousseau**, North Carlton, Vic

In the ‘Tutor’s Desk’ of *Science Fiction* 24, examples were given of ‘Lost Opportunities’ or ‘Writers Who Let the Big One Get Away’. For me, the most striking recent example was Brian Aldiss’s *Helliconia* trilogy. *Helliconia Spring* raised expectations of a total work comparable (although set on another planet) to John Crowley’s *Little, Big* or Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun*. The evolution of a binary biology — two distinct types of animals and vegetation, suited to the different climatic ‘worlds’ that *Helliconia* became during its centuries long orbit around its suns — was an idea whose mysterious implications would surely be made more relevant to Earth conditions during the next two books. And the narrative voice contained anomalies which also surely promised some unguessable revelation and denouement in a later

volume. Consider this passage, on page 219 of the Jonathan Cape edition of *Helliconia Spring* (London, 1982):

At first, the hoxneys had no fear of the hunters.

They galloped among the men, snorting with glee, tossing their manes, throwing up their heads, showing wide teeth made crimson by chomping veronika, raige, and scarlet dogthrush. The hunters stood perplexed, caught between delight and the lust of the hunt, laughing back at the sportive beasts, whose rumps zithered with fire where the light of the sentinels touched them. These were the beasts that drew the dawn across the plains.

The narrator clearly intends readers of these lines to recollect the following:

From the dark woods that breathe of fallen
showers,
Harnessed with level rays in golden reins,
The zebras draw the dawn across the plains
Wading knee-deep among the scarlet flowers.
The sunlight, zithering their flanks with fire,
Flashes between the shadows as they pass
Barred with electric tremors through the grass
Like wind along the gold strings of a lyre.

(Those are the opening lines of ‘The Zebras’ by Roy





Campbell — a pro-fascist and anti-Bloomsbury South African poet who fought for Franco in the Spanish Civil War and was personally esteemed by C. S. Lewis.)

In Crowley's *Little, Big*, similar references are an essential part of the world of Correspondences; of a world where people without esoteric knowledge may yet have lives 'full of quiet drama, full of vague yet thrilling signs that life was not as the common run supposed it to be', so that they [p. 34] 'watch life as though it were a great drab curtain which they are sure is always about to rise on some terrific and exquisite spectacle, and though it never did quite rise, they were patient, and noted excitedly every small movement of it as the actors took their places, strained to hear the unimaginable setting being shifted.' (Bantam, New York, 1981, p. 117) In a work of art like *Little, Big* or *The Book of the New Sun*, one could swear that the 'great drab curtain' did shift, perhaps more than once — that one really did catch a glimpse behind it — but Aldiss's second and third *Helliconia* books indicate that the author brushed against the stage machinery and twitched the curtain without even noticing that it was there; his attention was fixed on another and lesser production, and the initial promise of *Helliconia Spring* was dissipated.

— Yvonne Rousseau, 1987

Returning to January 2018 — I'd ever afterwards

wondered why Aldiss should quote so directly from Roy Campbell's account of zebras drawing 'the dawn across the plains'. In *Comfort Zone* (p. 293) Justin Haydock is thinking about the 'extinction ending the Cretaceous era': 'That extinction had evidently provided a chance for things that were to become human beings to take the stage. A chance for zebras, too. But they had refused the stage and remained zebras.'

On pages 166–7, Justin Haydock had recalled for Kate Standish the poem about zebras written by Roy Campbell.

He took refuge in pedantry, trying to escape suspicion of what had gone on in that tent. 'The shots of the zebras confirm what I was told about them. Did you notice that the animals outside of the pack were pure black, without white stripes?'

'What does that signify?' asked Kate, coldly.

'It's only recently — well, perhaps twenty years ago now — that an answer was found to a long-standing question, whether a zebra was a white animal with black stripes or a black animal with white stripes. The latter was found to be the case. The zebra is a black animal with white stripes.'

Kate showed signs of impatience but he pressed on with his exposition. 'Sometimes, the animals are born without white stripes. It's rotten luck for them. They are pushed to the outer ring of the herd. They are most likely to be attacked and least likely to find a mate. Owing to this colour prejudice, they lead very sad lives. You see the analogy with human life? The older you are, the less likely you are to find a mate.'

Kate said, 'It's not really an analogy, since you are supposed to have mated by the time you are old. Anyhow, what did you think of the work of the Aten Trust Centre?'

'Very good. It's a tribute to all your work through the years, Kate.'

'So it fucking well is!' she hissed in sudden spite, as if contradicting him.

Backing off, Justin said, 'There's a poem by Roy Campbell about zebras. How does it go? I've forgotten. I know it ends, "But round the herd the stallion wheels his flight, Mammal of beauty and delight, To roll his mare among the trampled lilies ..." I always Liked that last line.'

Her response was largely negative. 'Who's Roy Campbell, anyway?'

He sighed. 'A now-forgotten poet. Famous long ago.'

Kate made no answering comment. She rose and carried their cups over to the dishwasher. She spoke again in a while. 'You're feeling a bit sorry for yourself tonight, Justin, aren't you?'

Returning to Yvonne in 2018: Justin has indeed failed to remember the brilliant second-last line of 'The Zebras':

While round the herd the stallion wheels his
flight,
Engine of beauty volted with delight,
To roll his mare among the trampled lilies.
(18 January 2018)



RAY WOOD
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I was most interested in Patrick McGuire's comments on 'Poems of the Space Race' in *SFC* 94 (p. 53), and I do thank him for them. Among them, this that he said particularly intrigued me:

I am surprised and a bit perplexed by Ray's statement, 'In a single day *Sputnik* made SF respectable, because we were now living in what up until then had been a science-fictional world.' In histories of anglo-phone SF, this change is near-universally attributed to the atomic bomb in 1945, not to *Sputnik* in 1957.

I accept what he says, but do have some thoughts prompted by it.

Of course, I should have said in my article that what I meant by 'we' in 'we were now living in what up until then had been a science-fictional world' was the general public, and not SF fans and readers. (I've never been an SF fan or had anything whatsoever to do with SF fandom, until I got on the *Eidolist* by happenstance for a while in this century's first decade. And at that time you asked if you could publish some of my emails to it. I didn't then even know what the word 'fanzine' meant, and my only exposure to it since then has been through your fanzines. I still feel like an intruder when you include something of mine in *SFC*. So I've always been writing from the viewpoint of one of the general public, except that I happen to read SF too. Which explains but doesn't excuse my mistake.)

Anyway, I wonder about the impact of the atom bomb on the general public. I remember very well when the first one was dropped on Hiroshima. It was the first time I'd ever seen a photograph on the front page of a newspaper that filled almost the entire page — back in 1945, photos on the front pages of newspapers were very small.

But it was a *bomb*. And bombs weren't new. They date from 1588 as far as I know. And after 1914 the world was



certainly used to them, and was suffering and dying from them too. And they kept on getting more powerful all the time. Before Hiroshima they'd reached ten tons in size.

Certainly the atom bomb created a hugely bigger explosion, but even bombs obliterating entire cities wasn't new — think of the thousand-bomber raids over Germany; think of the destruction of Dresden in a single raid. The only difference the atom bomb made was that now one bomb could do what had taken thousands of bombs to do before.

You may argue that the atom bomb was spectacularly new because of the nuclear technology it embodied, which it was. But again, that was new to experts, and not to the general public — all that was new to the general public was the name: *atom* bomb.

What I'm getting at is that in the minds of the general public, bombs, even atom bombs, were not SFnal in 1945. And in 1957, although satellites in orbit around Earth were not a shock to SF fans, they certainly were to the general public, to the non-SF-reading public.

I think it's worth a reminder of what the non-SF-reading public saw in all the many stores back then in their racks of magazines and paperback books (in Australia every deli had racks like that in those times). I've attached covers from early 1950s SF magazines — admittedly some of the more lurid ones! And of course, there were SF films too. But all of it was no more than improbable fiction to most of the general public: vampires, werewolves, blobs, slimes, dragons, fairies, mummies, and space ships.

You might argue that the general public were used to rocket-driven missiles as well, dating from the V1s and V2s of the Second World War. However, the general public didn't see them in the light of SF's spaceships flying to other planets and to the stars, often with bikini-clad non-space-suited women floating alongside them, at least on many magazine covers.

But until *Sputnik*, in the minds of the general non-SF-reading public, anything in *space* was nothing but improbable fiction, or at the best something that might



happen in the next century. If I remember correctly, even a top US scientist told Congress in the late 1940s not to bother trying to get into space until the following century.

So this is why I say the shock of *Sputnik* was a different kind from the shock of the atom bomb.

After the first moon landing, to the SF fan the question one reporter asked Asimov in an interview was ridiculous. I have to paraphrase it, but it was something like, 'Mr Asimov, now that we've landed on the Moon, what else is there for you science fiction writers to write about?' I'm fairly sure I do remember Asimov's answer accurately — he said, 'Only everything.' The question was absurd to you and me, but a natural question from many a non-SF reader to ask, even as late as 1969.

As I said, I accept what Patrick says. And I should have said 'to the general public', too.

But I'd be curious to hear any comments about my thoughts above.

(12 December 2017)

I had my usual Xmas lunch on top of The Dutchman's Stern — it's only a 4.2 km climb up. I had a bottle of red wine, a proper wine glass, cold chicken and salads, and of course, the spectacular view all around: the south end of Lake Torrens and the plain reaching across to the Gawler Ranges to the west, Wilpena Pound far to the north, and the Horseshoe Range to the east, and a pleasantly warm day.

The wine meant I had to descend afterwards pretty slowly and carefully, of course. Now I'm old, if I begin to

fall over, I find I fall all the way down before my reflexes kick in!

You can see how antiquated I'm getting in the attached pic. (It's not of the top of The Dutchman's Stern, though, but of the Bald Hill Lookout on the Mt Brown Trail.)

One problem hiking at my age is that, when the only place you have to rest is sitting on the ground, you have great trouble getting up afterwards. So I'm anxious to see us instal more seats along our trails like the one in the pic, which we've only just set in concrete before the pic was taken. So, fortunately I was able to have my Xmas lunch sitting on a similar seat on The Dutchman's Stern, one that we installed in 2016.

(11 January 2018)

In the most recent *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* (January–February) is an article by the now 94-year-old James Gunn, 'Space Opera and the Quest for Transcendence', and I read the following in it:

Jack Wiliamson, my collaborator in one of my two first 1955 novels, wrote that space travel was to science fiction what the Trojan War was to the Greeks — a defining myth.

And he continues to discuss early SF's huge 'Focus on space', and that 'Space travel was its central dream. It was not the only dream, but it was the one that dominated the science fiction imagination'.

Which also has me still wonder if the atom bomb in the public eye didn't make SF as respectable as *Sputnik* did. And has me wonder about what Patrick says: 'In histories of anglo-phone SF, this change is near universally attributed to the atomic bomb in 1945, not to *Sputnik* in 1957. I wonder if this is one of those 'truths' that continues to be perpetuated generation after generation, in this case perhaps only among SF fans — and one that perhaps might be re-examined.

Not being an SF fan myself, though I read SF (among all the other fiction genres that I read), admittedly not until after 1948, but being one of the general public as far as SF went, I do remember the attitudes of the general public (also admittedly the Australian general public that I knew) in the post-atom bomb era, and in the post-*Sputnik* era.

But I'm very happy to be proven wrong. It's merely that I'm curious about all of this.

(8 February 2018)

PATRICK MCGUIRE
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To my chagrin, I find that despite your return to paid indexing, you managed to get *SFC* 95 out before I had locced *SFC* 94 (beyond the few stray comments you included in No. 95). I thought I had managed at least a partial draft loc before getting distracted, but I have failed to find even that on any of my computers. I suppose I had just started to compose it in my head. Anyway, it could have been worse, since you had earlier

locs of mine to include in both issues 94 and 95. I will earnestly strive to get a response done in reasonable time to *SFC* 95, but probably not until after the busy holiday season. (I am at this point in at least marginally better shape than usual about doing tax-related stuff that I have to accomplish by year's end. We shall see if I manage to fritter away that lead.)

The only significant indexing I have ever done is for the book version of my dissertation on Soviet SF. I assiduously followed the guidance contained in Barzun's *The Modern Researcher*, and I think I did a pretty good job, better than in a lot of indexes I've consulted since, even in academic books. If a vague memory serves, I had scheduled a week off from my job to get the thing done, but I ended up having to take a second week to finish. (Even if I misremember the time spans, I definitely had to take off more time than originally planned, and I was lucky to have enough accrued leave time banked already.) I daresay I would have gotten faster with practice.

(7 December 2017)

I don't know what your chances are (probably low) of getting compensation from the tax accountant who so badly informed you about your pension obligations. However, I am glad that despite everything you are scraping along financially. I think that in the face of all obstacles, you have been impressively productive in fannish terms over the past year. Meanwhile, in my case, as noted, I completely missed locating *SFC* 94 and I have gotten very little done on an article I am theoretically writing for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. At least half of it is already written, but then I stalled out for various reasons, some better than others, and I still have not gotten back to it. I did publish in *NYRSF* a little squib on my discovery of what may have been Anthony Boucher's inspiration for 'The Quest for Saint Aquin', namely a real (although human) nineteenth-century Benedictine missionary named Isidore Robot. (I first found out about him from a photograph of a historical marker in a magazine, but he does have a Wikipedia entry, and he is mentioned in the Oklahoma entry in the original *Catholic Encyclopedia*, in Boucher's time a standard reference work.)

As usual, there is little overlap between your list of best books read in a given year (here 2017) and what I have read myself in the same year, although in one year or another I have indeed read a few books showing up in your 2017 list. I periodically reread Dorothy L. Sayers's mysteries (and also her essays and one or two of her plays). The late Susan Wood brought Sayers to my attention in 1971 or 1972 via her fanzine, which I think it was called *Aspidistra* at that point. This was before the Wimsey television versions starting showing up in the US. Sayers was relatively obscure here, but fortunately I was then in grad school with a major research library at my disposal, and it held some of her mysteries. Slightly later in grad school, during the summer of 1972 I was trapped for (I think) 17 hours in a small departure lounge in Paris waiting for a delayed charter plane. (We had cleared customs already, so we were not allowed to go anywhere.) Fortunately, I had with me some British paperback editions of Sayers books that I had found at an English-

language bookstore in Vienna, and they helped me to survive the wait. I have also read a number of George Orwell essays, but the collections were different from those you read, so I am unsure how much the contents overlap. I did read the Harry Harrison auto-biography. While I have read some Michael Dirda (and have seen him at several local sf conventions), I don't believe I have read *An Open Book*.

Once more, *SFC* contains tributes to the long list of all the sf writers and fans we have lost. The post-World War II expansion of the field is catching up with us, with so many more folks reaching advanced age.

And as I was touching up this loc prior to sending it, word came of the death of Ursula Le Guin, a major loss. Jerry Pournelle died not long ago, too. It will be the turn of our own Baby Boomer generation pretty soon; grim thought. Indeed the death rate among our coevals is already picking up.

In your Aldiss appreciation, in discussing the '1978 Melbourne Eastercon', you imply that there was a pre-existing animus between Aldiss and Zelazny. You refer to it as if even in Australia, half a world away from the US and Britain, the con committee should have known about it. That animus was news to me; not that I have any deep familiarity with either author.

[*brg* Aargh! Not an implication I intended. Any animosity would have arisen from the fact that both had been invited to a convention that at most should have accommodated one well-known overseas pro guest of honour. In the case of Brian Aldiss, he had been pissed off by at least three convention committees in Britain who had asked him to be Guest of Honour, only to ask him to stand aside at the last minute for someone considered more important! Being dragged all the way to Melbourne, only to share the stage with an author whose work Aldiss does not seem to have admired, looked awfully like being sidelined another time. It could have been much worse: the 1978 convention committee had actually asked four different overseas guests (instead of waiting for one to refuse before asking another), and all of them could easily have accepted!*]

Literary fantasy with an sfnal veneer does nothing for me, so in discussing your article on Aldiss's *Hothouse*, I will ignore Aldiss and concentrate on the initial paragraphs. As I mentioned in *SFC* 94, I recently reread *The War of the Worlds*; however, I have not done the same for *The Time Machine* in a while, and I had forgotten that Wells already understood that the Sun was scheduled to expand into a red giant. Current estimates, even so, are that the expanded Sun will reach most or all of the way to Earth's orbit, so that unless technologically advanced intelligent life hauls our planet out of the way in time, Earth will be fried. This would destroy the planet by a sort of fire, probably satisfying any Biblical literalists out there. However, I strongly suspect that you are vastly overestimating the number of literalists to be found among Wells's readers. (Literalism had a mild resurgence later, circa the 1920s, and has moved repeatedly up and down a bit since then, but is consistently rejected by most Christians.) Next, although Wells had training in biology, at least for purposes of the story he



evidently was accepting the word of the physicists (who among other things did not understand about nuclear fission and fusion yet) over that of the biologists and geologists on what kind of timescales were involved in Earth's history, and by implication in that of the universe itself. It is now understood that 30 million years is a blink of the eye and will mean nothing to the Sun. I know, and Wells evidently knew, that Earth's rotation is gradually slowing down, but I do not think the slowdown will amount to much in a few tens of millions of years either. I did remember the crab-like creature, but it had never struck me as, in your words, 'probably humanity's remote descendant'. Why would a post-human look so much like a crab and so little like a mammal? I would see the creature rather as a successor, in much the way that we today joke about turning the world over to the cockroaches. From his biological training, Wells must have known that the existence of so large an animal as his table-sized crab implies an entire rich ecology to keep it alive, so it can hardly be 'the world's last living creature'. It is merely the only one in the Time Traveller's view. By the time of Stapledon, astronomers and the educated public were at least coming closer to our contemporary understanding of the scale and age of the universe.

I enjoyed Tim Train's essay, even though I had to look up not only *donnée* but 'MOT test'. The Oxford Dictionary bundled with my Kindle, newer than whatever Tim was using in 2008, does list *donné* as a variant spelling. An MOT test turns out to be a vehicle inspection — presumably if you fail badly enough, your car is removed from

the road. Aldiss thus rather confusingly seems to be mixing up the state of being dead and the state of dying, perhaps one more sign of his writing too fast and rewriting too little. Notwithstanding, I have tended to like Aldiss's nonfiction more than his fiction, and I perhaps should seek out more of his short nonfiction than what I have managed to read so far.

In LynC's citation for Bill Wright, the author carefully footnotes various fanspeak terms that I would think would already be familiar to almost anyone attending an sf convention or reading *SFC*. She then leaves unexplained 'GFC', an abbreviation unknown even to my British Kindle dictionary. I had to google it to learn that it means the downturn of 2008, an event that in the US is more usually called the Great Recession, or occasionally the unabbreviated 'global financial crisis'. And the Wikipedia confirms my recollection that Australia took a much milder hit from the recession than did Europe or the United States. So why did the Meteor Fund suffer so badly?

[*brg* The failure of the Meteor Fund now seems inevitable, because of a complete unavailability of Australian fans able to put in large chunks of cash to build the fund up to the required level. I won't go into details; it was a pipe dream, based in part on Bill Wright's knowledge of the history of the successful funding of such venerable buildings as the LASFS Clubhouse (Los Angeles) and the NESFA building in Boston. But Bill did not take into account that there is vastly more money around among some American fans than there is in the whole of Australian fandom. So, the failure of the Fund doesn't really have anything to do with the GFC (the term used in Australia from the beginning of the downturn in 2008). Lately, Dr Stephen Herrin, head of the Monash University Rare Books Collection, is making a valiant effort to carry out many of the functions that were planned for Meteor Inc.*]

Moving on, I come to the second part of John Litchen's Mars article. John's concentration on Mars stories may be a useful device for reducing the sf field to a manageable amount of reading. Particularly in this second part, he has brought to my attention a number of books, some of them looking interesting, that either I missed entirely or was only vaguely aware of. (I have a second cousin who limits himself pretty much to sf stories centring on Earth's oceans. Even oceans on other planets fail to qualify. That seems to me to be picking an excessively narrow subfield, but then he has less time to read than I do.)

I vaguely remember having heard of Shiner's *Frontera*, which did, I think, get a Hugo nomination. But it never generated enough buzz to convince me that it was a must-read, so I doubt very much that it 'stunned everyone'. John's summary makes it sound to me like a book with some good elements that went badly astray, thanks both to grossly implausible plot turns and to silly posited social developments. Some of the other books John discusses, however, seem to be ones I should put on my to-be-read list. Also, John's evaluation of McAuley's *Red Dust* raises a litcrit problem I have encountered elsewhere. Where is the dividing line between honest science

fantasy and just plain flawed science fiction, where the author has failed in his genre obligation either to follow existing science or to rationalise any departures? (Rationalisation, of course, can be implicit, such as when one relies on earlier sf to have rationalised hyperdrive, time travel, software duplication of personalities, etc.) John starts off by calling *Red Dust* a fantasy, but his description of the setup sounds science-fictional. Later on, he only says the novel 'borders on fantasy', and adds with no supporting detail that 'the Mars we know could never be like this Mars'. On the available evidence, this novel sounds more like flawed sf than legitimate fantasy.

Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy garnered a lot of attention and praise, certainly more than Shiner's *Frontiera*, but I don't think *Red Mars* 'stunned' the sf world as John says. That would imply that either it was mind-bogglingly excellent, or that it amazed by taking a turn that no author had taken before. I don't think it has the reputation of having risen to such lofty heights. I know that long ago I read parts of the trilogy, but I remember very little about it, and I don't believe it interested me enough that I ever read the whole thing. It might strike me differently if I gave it another try today, but I failed to be impressed by more recent Robinson books that I have read, which perhaps unjustly tends to dissuade me from going back to his earlier work.

John makes Hartmann's *Mars Underground* seem worth reading, although the fact that it incorporates the tired cliché of 'the absurdity of secret services and the paranoia these people possess' is not encouraging. I find that it is in print as an ebook (at least in the US), and that the reviews on Kindle seem very mixed: lots of high ratings and lots of low ones but few in the middle. I downloaded the Kindle sample. If that looks okay, then in view of the mixed ratings perhaps I will see if I can scrounge up a library copy through interlibrary loan. I note from the sample that the character who John calls Carter is in full Carter Jahns, which is clearly at least a callback to John Carter, and perhaps also to J'onn J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter of the comics.

Later: I have now requested Hartmann's book via ILL. I have here corrected the spelling of the author's surname, consistently given in the text as 'Hartman'. I learned this the hard way in trying to search on John's version of the author's name, but I see in hindsight that I could have found out the same thing by paying attention to the spelling in the cover photo in John's article rather than the text.

I have not read Benford's *The Martian Race*, but as summarised the premise seems very odd. It would be one thing if Benford posited the expedition members dying horribly after some time en route, and after multiple malfunctions had shown up the incompetence of NASA's contracting system. But John says the ship 'explodes on takeoff'. Does that mean it was intended to travel directly from Earth's surface to Mars? Not a likely design. Is John using 'takeoff' loosely? Does he mean that the ship departed from Earth orbit but exploded soon after engine firing? Even in that case, there would be no reason to believe that most of the design was unsound, and most of the development cost would have already gone into the design. Rather than throw up their hands and offer a prize to private enterprise, NASA would be

far more likely to identify the probable cause of the explosion, slightly modify the ship design in response, and build another ship.

I know I took Haldeman's *Marsbound* out of the library, but I may have had to return it before I finished. It sounds like it might be worth another try. An interesting play on words in the title: being bound to Mars is very different from being bound for Mars.

In defence of the 1964 *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (which I rewatched in 2012), my recollection is that when the astronaut stops both wearing an oxygen mask and living in the cave that yields oxygen, it is because he has taken some sort of 'oxygen pill' developed by the extrasolar slavers he encounters. (I'm not sure how that pill would work — possibly it allows humans to absorb much more of the low amount of oxygen posited to exist in the Martian atmosphere.) Before that, the screenplay definitely posits a much friendlier Martian environment than the reality, but I am not sure the depicted environment was ruled out by the science of the time. Conditions are much like those in several Heinlein novels set on Mars. At worst, it may be one of those situations where the accurate science was known to scientists but not 'known to be known' by even readers of written sf.

I read Sawyer's *Red Planet Blues* in 2014 but did not find it memorable and I have forgotten most of it.

Now, Weir's *The Martian* did stun the sf community and much of the rest of the public. It also became an excellent movie generally faithful to the book. After *Prometheus*, I swore never to watch another film by Ridley Scott, but I was induced to break my vow for *The Martian*. (Nonetheless, I am unlikely ever to watch anything else by Ridley Scott unless I have a comparably good reason.) It was widely reported that by the time Andy Weir published the final version his novel, he knew that although the Martian wind sometimes blows very fast, the atmosphere is so thin that the wind has little force and cannot in fact blow around objects larger than dust grains. He decided nonetheless to leave the sandstorm in for dramatic effect. Oh, well. The book and film were still a lot more accurate than *Gravity*. I am currently partway through Weir's *Artemis*. I find it a long step down from *The Martian* — readable, but not always winning out in the competition for reading time with other books I have around. It probably will go back to the library unfinished: my loan period is almost up.

[*brg* *The Martian* was an excellent film, but I wasn't going to watch Ridley Scott's latest, *All the Money in the World*, until I wandered into the wrong cinema at the local multiplex. (The numbering of the separate theatres was confusing.) And *All the Money in the World*, apart from demonstrating that Christopher Plummer is still one of the great screen actors, shows that Ridley Scott at 80 radiates more visual and kinetic energy than can be found anywhere else in the field. It looks and feels like a film made by a young director who is still trying to show the bastards how to make good thrillers.*]

I have read couple of additional Mars books recently. One is Kage Baker's *The Empress of Mars*, a rather idiosyncratic book that I barely managed to finish and that was not much liked by most members of the local sf book

club. Much of the time Baker does make an effort to portray Mars accurately. She makes the same mistake as *The Martian* about the force of the Martian winds. The other book, as I once mentioned, is S. M. Stirling's underrated *In the Courts of the Crimson Kings*, an alternate-universe novel in which the author develops a background that allows something approximating the sort of Mars depicted by Edgar Rice Burroughs or Leigh Brackett to be scientifically accurate. (This requires a background of drastic terraforming by incredibly advanced extrasolar aliens, plus repeated transfers by the aliens of flora and fauna, including humans, from Earth to Mars.)

When I wrote about the early-1960s TV show *Men into Space*, I mentioned that the discovery of extraterrestrial life was one of the few ideas that the screenwriters could come up with to hold interest in a series that tried to stick fairly close to known science. Clues kept showing up in episode after episode. (Some pointed to mere vegetable and animal life, and others dealt with evidence of intelligent aliens.) John's summaries demonstrate that the same poverty of imagination later afflicted novel-writers attempting to tell scientifically plausible Mars stories. One discovery of life on Mars after another! Note that *The Martian* managed perfectly well with no indigenous life. For my own part, I think that single-cell life on Mars is not out of the question, and I would be curious to see if any such life reflects a common ancestry with life on Earth. (Although at the speed that things are going, the odds do not look good that the issue will be settled within my lifetime.) I would be very, very surprised if Martian multicelled life is found, and almost as surprised if it existed in the past.

Onward! I am partway through Paul Kincaid's study of Iain Banks here reviewed by Colin Steele. Readers should be aware that, certainly in the US and probably elsewhere, ebook editions are available of this volume, and of others in the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series, at prices that a sane individual fan might be willing to pay. The print editions seem understandably to be aimed at the academic library market and are priced accordingly.

By the time I read Colin's review of *Terra Nullius*, I had already read the Kindle sample of the book, and, as Colin anticipates, I had indeed thought that the opening sequence was portraying 'the Australian colonial frontier', although since the book had been called sf I expected it to bring in sfnal elements at some later point. On the basis of Colin's description of the complete novel, I think the setup is far, far too contrived and pat for an sfgenre audience. Is there a gram of verisimilitude in positing that an alien invasion would be that close in its details to the European settlement of Australia? I think that *The War of the Worlds* (cited by Coleman as an inspiration) is much more plausibly read as a story about Darwinian competition for Earth's top ecological niche than as a fable about colonialism — but if, as Coleman believes, it is the latter, then she ought to see that Wells's work ventures much further from human history in the interest of verisimilitude than Coleman is willing to go. However, as quoted, Coleman says she is aiming not for the genre reader but for 'the average Australian'. This

sort of blatant allegory sometimes does go over well with the general public, as in many episodes of *Twilight Zone* or *Star Trek Classic*. So she conceivably may attain her objective. (And heaven knows that the Aborigines, like many native groups elsewhere in the world, suffered in many ways from the arrival of the Europeans.) I do think Coleman would have stood a greater chance of success if she had been more subtle about it.

On to the lettercol. Murray Moore describes his local library as 'free off-site storage of books for which I have paid through my taxes'. True enough, except that librarians (at least in my experience) are pretty ruthless in discarding books from their collections in order to free up shelf space. Jo Walton mentions borrowing books she does not want to read at the moment, just to encourage her local library to retain them. On more than one occasion I've had to buy a book I want to reread because the library has discarded all their copies. On the other hand, this strong desire to reread has come up with only a small fraction of the books I borrow from the library.

I don't know how many Americans wear cardigans, and if they are worn in torrid Texas as in the Robotham novel, it must be in deep winter, but cardigans are certainly not unknown here in Maryland during the cool months. I am partial to them myself — if you wear glasses they are easier to manage than pullovers and they allow better access to shirt pockets. Granted, I have bought some of my collection in Canada and the UK (and one in Australia), but I acquired others domestically. On American street terminology: every street has an edge, but not every street has a curb (which, even when describing the US, may turn into a 'kerb' in British spelling). In some cases the paving just stops at the grass, and in others it terminates in a shallow rain gutter whose far I edge I for one would decline to call a curb. A curb, to me, is something high enough that one would not ordinarily try to drive a car over it.

I'm very sorry to learn that Michael Bishop is battling cancer, but glad that treatment seems to be going reasonably well.

Many thanks to David Langford for clarifying C. S. Lewis's contributions to *SF Horizons*. In light of his information, I'm pretty sure that I have already read the Lewis-Amis-Aldiss discussion in one or another of its reprintings, but it was decades ago. I will keep an eye out in my chaotic book holdings to see if it turns up.

My understanding of Lovecraft's prejudices, which I derive mostly from de Camp's biography and from Richard Lupoff's novel *Lovecraft's Book*, is that Lovecraft made sweeping derogatory generalisations about non-white races and various ethnic groups including Jews, but that he was willing to declare a personal exception for any member of these classes that he happened to know himself. After all, he married a Jew, and the reasons for their eventual divorce did not appear to stem from her ethnicity. A saner person than Lovecraft might have deduced from this personal experience that there was something wrong with his generalisations, but a normal degree of sanity always eluded Lovecraft. Anyway, I doubt that Lovecraft's prejudices would have prevented him from patronising a Jewish-owned candy store, as Matthew Davis posits. (Granted, I have not followed the latest

Lovecraft scholarship.) Matthew also mentioned George P. Elliott. I have only run across one Elliott story, at least as far as I remember, but it was so striking that the author's name stuck in my memory. Now that I know there are more out there, I will have to go looking for them.

Martin Wooster mentions the Australian lawyer show *Janet King*. I have been slower off the mark than Martin, but I recently saw on public television an episode of the third season, which looked promising, so I checked the library and I am currently working through the DVDs for the first season.

My own loc: I finally did ask my acquaintance about the reaction within organised C. S. Lewis devotees to the recent tawdry revelations about Charles Williams. He said there hadn't been much, since people could separate the work from the author. However, my main point had not been Williams *per se*, but how badly the venerated Lewis seems to have misjudged his friend's character. Others do not seem to find this even as mildly surprising as I do.

Leigh Edmonds and Bruce's replies thereto: I found *All Our Wrong Todays*, a choice of my local sf book club, to be unfinishable. I don't think the author knew any more about sf than he had learned by watching *The Jetsons*. No, Elon Mastai is not, as he implicitly claims, the first person to figure out that the motion of the Earth in space raises problems for time travel. (See, for instance, Heinlein's *The Door into Summer*, 1957.) And his knowledge of actual science is of comparable depth. Shifting the position of the Earth's magnetic poles does not upset the climate. Nor would a source of free energy lead to incredibly good software. This is one more book that I would call massively flawed science fiction, although someone might attempt to use the science-fantasy card to defend it. I somewhat enjoyed Baxter's *The Massacre of Mankind*, but I thought it was too long for its plot and that we could have got by with fewer failed-marriage subplots.

I am unfamiliar with the other alt-history works that Bruce mentions in that paragraph of his reply, and I have made a note to check them out. Of the two works mentioned in a later paragraph, Whitehead's *Underground Railway* is (per reviews) clearly intended as literary fantasy. I don't know what to make of Bruce's reference to its depicting a Confederacy in the 1830s. Does Bruce just mean to say the US South, or did the novel posit a change the reviews did not make clear? As far as I can determine from reviews and the Kindle sample, Ben Winters' *Underground Airlines* attempts to be non-fantasy (except to those who would class all alt-hist as fantasy), but I found its premise of four slave-holding American states surviving into modern times to be non-credible, and I lost interest. I find it noteworthy, if inevitable, that so many people in the sf community are, like Leigh, making strenuous efforts to keep their accumulating books from crowding them out of house and home. That certainly is also my own problem, and that of other sf people I know locally.

Paul Skelton and steam engines: James White's *The Silent Stars Go By* is an alt-hist novel based on the somewhat unlikely premise that word of Heron's steam engine got to ancient Ireland and a chieftain there sponsored

development, eventually triggering an industrial revolution and making Ireland the leading power in the world. On our timeline, when it's steam engine time, multiple people invent steam engines, and when it's not, they don't (not counting Heron's toy), even though the pre-conditions seem to exist. Historians have shown that the same is true of a lot of inventions. No one quite understands why. Particularly in the form of works written as either straight speculation or pseudo-history rather than as fiction with characters and plots, alt-hist was going before Toynbee was even born, but it originally hinged more on matters political and military than on inventions, and as far as I know, the earliest fiction involving alt-early inventions also has time travellers introducing them. For all I know, Toynbee indeed might have been the first to write of spontaneous early world-changing invention. On the opposite tack, US history books widely teach that Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin enabled American short-staple cotton to be grown commercially, which put new life into the declining American plantation system, and hence into slavery. Obviously someone else would have gotten the same idea eventually, but if the cotton gin had held off for a few decades, slavery might have been abolished first, or at least the spread in the meantime of the cultivation of long-staple cotton in the tropics would have reduced the incentive to create US cotton plantations, again encouraging the end of American slavery. Despite the fact that any literate American knows about the cotton gin, I have never seen an alt-hist story about its invention being delayed. (Which isn't to say that, for all I know, such an alt-hist story has never been written, but one has never become well known.)



I am distressed to hear of Casey Wolf's housing troubles. Americans tend to have a somewhat rosy picture of Canada's social services, and I have tended to think of British Columbia as humane even by Canadian standards.

I briefly checked out the *Feast of Laughter* website on R. A. Lafferty, but I will have to go back for a closer look. I greatly enjoyed reading him back in the day and was pleased to get the chance to see him once at a Worldcon, even though the panel he was on was not particularly successful. I have not tried rereading him in a while. One more of the umpteen thousand things I ought to do with my retirement 'leisure' (which mysteriously seems to be in short supply). I don't believe I have ever written so much as an entire essay on Lafferty, although I've mentioned him in locs.

I've mentioned in the past that locs near the end of an issue seem to draw less comment from me than ones earlier in an issue. A time or two I've even tried commenting from the back to front in order to redress the balance. Here I find myself letting a few handles for possible remarks pass by, as I struggle toward the end of the issue and as I note that my word count is approaching 5000.

John Hertz expresses his preference for Blish's *The Triumph of Time* over the same author's *A Case of Conscience*. I haven't reread the former in a while, but a few images from it frequently recur to me, so the book has something going for it. As for the latter, I think I've already given you my rant about *A Case of Conscience*. Blish made up most of the book's theology out of whole cloth and it has no connection to real Catholic doctrine. That makes much of the plot a pointless exercise.

In your WAHFs you print Alexandra Pierce's offer to write for *SFC*. I follow the *Galactic Suburbia* podcast, and I would very much like to see what she can do in a written format. At the same time, since my last article for you spent something like five years in your Manuscript Bin, I understand about the backlog. Still, I think a leavening of more current pieces and of pieces by people considerably younger than either of us would be Good Thing.

Re your account of your sister's high school reunion, I had to resort again to my British Kindle dictionary to find out what a dux was in this context. The dictionary said the term was 'mostly Scottish'. Evidently it means the same as North American 'valedictorian' — the graduating pupil with the highest grade average.

In retrospect, I wonder if this is a wordier loc than my recent average because I read *SFC* 95 on my laptop, meaning that my word processing program was only a few keystrokes away. Henceforth I may have to get used to that and work to keep things to a more reasonable length. This time I will consider that I missed loccing *SFC* 94 completely, so that my average for the two is only about 2600 words!

Ah, but before sending this, I remembered the Ray Wood excerpt you emailed me for comment, in which Ray clarifies that his remarks about *Sputnik* and not the atomic bomb making sf respectable applied to the gen-

eral public, not the sf readership. I had understood this from the start. As I said in a quick-and-dirty earlier reply, it sounds as if, old as I am beginning to feel, Ray Wood has a decade or so on me. I remember *Sputnik* and the early reaction well and I even remember my very young self congratulating myself on having been interested in sf and in space travel before that event, unlike all these late-comers. However, I was too young to take notice of its impact on sf acceptance (reportedly minimal in the Anglosphere). And I have to rely entirely on written sources for the atomic bomb, which was before my time. The 'History of Science Fiction' article in the Wikipedia has the following from an sf writer who, unlike me, did live through the event: 'Asimov said that "The dropping of the atom bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable. Once the horror at Hiroshima took place, anyone could see that science fiction writers were not merely dreamers and crackpots after all, and that many of the motifs of that class of literature were now permanently part of the newspaper headlines".' The citation given is 'Asimov, Isaac (1969). *Nightfall, and Other Stories*. Doubleday. p. 93.' From my own bookshelves, I find that Lester del Rey, in discussing the publishing situation after *Sputnik*, confirms the prevalence of the atomic-bomb interpretation while casting some doubt upon it: 'Obviously, if the atom bomb had led — at least partially — to the acceptance of science fiction, real space flight should increase that acceptance.' He goes on in the next paragraph to say that in reality, there were grounds to doubt the common wisdom. The increase in circulation of sf magazines after the bomb had not been all that large. A bit later he says that expectations in the sf community about the benefits of *Sputnik* were more unambiguously dashed. 'It was a grave misreading of the public's reaction. People were suddenly interested in space, to be sure, but now it fell into the news or current-events category. It was no longer science fiction.' (*The World of Science Fiction*, NY: Ballantine, 1979, pp. 196, 197.)

Although post hoc does not always mean propter hoc, it is suggestive that soon after WWII, major publishers started establishing sf lines and there was a boom in sf movies, which latter required a mass audience to break even financially. There was also a 1956 (and thus pre-*Sputnik*) National Broadcasting Company radio documentary about the growing popularity and respectability of science fiction, which can be found at: http://www.archive.org/download/Biography_in_Sound/Biography_in_Sound_-_561204_-_69_-_Ticket_to_the_Moon.mp3. I'm confident I could turn up other citations, and that this is the generally accepted view, although of course that does not in itself make it the true view. I have little knowledge of what may have been happening in Australia at the time. Conceivably the impact was less than in the US or UK despite the prominence of UK publishers there.

(23 January 2018)

FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER
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My health still seems to be okay, more or less, and I am still doing a lot, although a work for which I wrote a lot of reviews has now also folded. But perhaps I'll combine some old reviews in a couple of books for a small publisher.

The Strugatskys are doing okay. In August 2018 there will be a new translation of *The Snail on the Slope*, and I just sold *The Limping Fate* (which includes *The Ugly Swans*) to Chicago Review Press. This will be translated by Maya Vinocour, an excellent new translator. They are also appearing in the rest in the world, from South Korea to Brazil and Turkey. And *Roadside Picnic* is selling better than ever. You should have received copies of all the new Strugatskys, up to *The Doomed City* and *Monday Starts on Saturday*.

(7 December 2017)

You still produce fascinating fanzines with a lot of stimulating reviews, and I envy you all the letter feedback. This is totally lacking in Germany, but perhaps because of the nature of *Quarber Merkur*, in which I never write about personal things. I was sorry to hear about your tax and pension troubles. I suppose that with all our high taxes and payments for health and pension insurance, Austria is a paradise; and especially for old people, even compared to the much richer Germany. And for an income that would be poor by, say, American standards, you can live quite comfortably in Austria, and without fear of getting bankrupt if you have to undergo complicated operations or suffer from a prolonged illness. And Austrian pensions are paid 14 times a year.

The satisfying thing about the Strugatskys is that their books keep selling steadily, while many other writers enjoy a few sales after publication, but then soon stop. And in some cases publication seems to be the death of a book. *Roadside Picnic* in the Gollancz SF Masterworks series sells more copies every year than many of the new releases in this series. It has developed in a real long-seller. It is too bad that Boris Strugatsky didn't live to see more than the beginning of this development.

(9 December 2017)

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
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I didn't realise that licking the top of one's head was a sign of dominance, but with my parents' cats, Sue and Bagheera, Sue was clearly top cat. He showed this by continual conversation, or at least noise, to the extent that Bagheera let Sue do all the talking for him. When Sue passed away, Bagheera decided that he could talk and let us know when he was hungry. (Although the greatest talker in cats I have known was the Siamese of an editor who either said, 'Let me out, you idiot', 'Let me in, you idiot', and 'Pet me, you idiot'. The 'you idiot' part of the message was very clear, because this cat was regal.)

I am glad John Litchen finished his interesting series

on Mars.

[*brg* Not so. John has much more to write about his reading of books about Mars, and watching of films and TV shows about the planet, but he will do this in a book he is planning.*]

I have dutifully read all three volumes of Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Mars' trilogy and *The Martians* as well. When I finished *Blue Mars*, I asked my friends if I had completed my requirements for the Kim Stanley Robinson merit badge, since I felt that reading 1800 pages of Robinson's work entitled me to a prize! The problem with Robinson is that he is a very didactic writer, and the evil but accurate summary of *Green* and *Blue Mars* is that the books consist of hundreds of pages of committee meetings about politics interrupted by lyrical descriptions of nature. About halfway through *Blue Mars*, a revelation came to me: the way to enjoy these books is to think of them as the equivalent of a great landscape painting, a static tableau that provides aesthetic pleasure the more closely you stare at it. I can't think of another writer whose great achievement is to produce large worthwhile books where very little actually happens.

There's a continuing parlour game about whether a writer from outside the field is One of Us. Andy Weir is clearly One of Us, in that *The Martian* is a hard SF novel that makes sense and is fun to read, although he gets a C- for characterisation. I think it's great that a competent hard SF novel can be a bestseller, and I look forward to *Artemis*.

I've seen *Les Misérables* on stage once and saw the film version. I thought the film version worked quite well, and I always appreciate when actors can sing. Eddie Redmayne has an excellent voice, and Russell Crowe at least tries. Of course Hugh Jackman is a great singer, as we will see in *The Greatest Showman*.

Colin Steele's reviews are no longer reprints, right? I think his reviews are the right length and I appreciate his range of interests.

(11 December 2017)

SANJAY SIRCAR
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I was thinking about you last week, and trying to rev up energy to write. I am both fragile and senile. 'Young David' Ferris sent me a copy of DJL's *Hornpipes and Funerals*, after you gave me the email contact, so thank you.

I used to know Colin Steele at the Australian National University in the 1970s. Glad to know of the recent tribute to David Lake in your journal. So glad that you found the manuscript copy of his autobiography too. When you have time to scan it, I would be most grateful for a chance to read it. Does it merit publishing as a book, do you think?

(7 December 2017)

[*brg* Not unless there is a great improvement of posthumous interest in David Lake's work. I'll try to find time to scan the complete manuscript. I've already

published a chapter about his days before he moved in Australia. Another chapter describes the beginnings of the Culture Wars at the University of Queensland, battles which ended David's career. Not sure when or where I could publish that chapter.*]

TERRY GREEN

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Re the shift to digital format: the phrase 'the Gutenberg Parenthesis' comes to mind. The implication is that our generation may have seen the end of the print era (books on paper, magazines, newspapers, etc.), which only lasted about 500 years (oral tradition before that). Folks like us became immersed in its waning years without knowing it.

Re working at 70. Welcome to lengthier life expectancies. I'm 70 and see no end in sight. Retirement? We'll likely all be working till about 80.

New topic: I'm reading Ethan Canin's work (his latest novel: *A Doubter's Almanac*). I'm very impressed and enjoying it. Maybe a new name to check out.

(11 December 2017)

I don't know where to start talking about David Hartwell. He opened the door for me to enter the Big Arena of writing and publishing back in 1994, and supported and encouraged (and shepherded) all my work enthusiastically afterward. He was a remarkable man, an SF&F aficionado of the highest echelon (John Updike, in *The New Yorker*, called him 'a loving expert' in the field). He acquired and published four of my novels — *Shadow of Ashland* (1996), *Blue Limbo* (1997), *A Witness to Life* (1999), and *St Patrick's Bed* (2001) — all published by Tom Doherty's Tor or Forge imprints in New York.

And we became friends. We both had young children in our middle/late years via second marriages, and that shared experience seemed to bond us even more closely. David visited Toronto regularly while working at Tor, because he had several authors here (myself, Robert J. Sawyer, Phyllis Gotlieb, Karl Schroeder), and because Tor's Canadian distributor at the time, H. B. Fenn, was Toronto based. He often stayed over at our house while here (dinner, wine, long talks into the evening). He was, simply, a fine man — a scholar (PhD, medieval comparative literature, Columbia), a fan, a shrewd evaluator of the field, a raconteur (a singer at conventions!), who strode the field like a background colossus, shaping it more than most know. He lived for SF & F and loved his job. It was more than a job. It was his life.

There's a void out there that likely will never be filled in the same way. He was one of a kind, *sui generis*. I owe him so much, and like so many others, I miss him.

I scouted up a few pictures for you (one of them I know you already have — used back in *SFC* 82 in my autobiographical piece: he and I and Daniel and Elizabeth, in our Toronto backyard (2003). The others, from 1997, are of Rob Sawyer and David and I having dinner at our place, and of David and Kathryn Cramer, myself and my wife (Merle Casci), taken at the World Fantasy Convention in Chicago that year.



Top (l. to r.): Robert Sawyer, David Hartwell, Terry Green.
Below (l. to r.): Kathryn Cramer, Terry Green, David
Hartwell, Merle Casci

Your readers might be interested to track down my recent *The Ashland Trilogy* (\$2.99 e-book; \$19.99). Three volumes in one collection: 'a family saga that travels through time from modern Toronto to Depression-era Kentucky, and explores how the ghosts of the past shape our history' (*Publishers Weekly*).

(29 December 2017)

TONY PEACEY

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Sorry, no paper Christmas cards this year. Still very busy settling in (yes, after nearly three months here) and coping with the maelstrom of Tablelands social life (very novel experience, delightful) and beating the jungle back from our place (which had been neglected [the jungle, that is] for three years) and organising the new shed (the concrete slab is down but the shed builders are now on holiday till January).

What a year!

In 2016 Gloria and I walked the Camino de Santiago. Perhaps that was the start of it, for that certainly gets one out of one's rut. So then around September (2016) I suggested the possibility of maybe moving at sometime in the future at a leisurely pace. Gloria grabbed the torch and ran! Two days later it was a done deal; we were going, now if not yesterday! I was horrified. Many times after that I wished I had never opened my big mouth.

I always knew it would be a lot of work and upheaval.

Now the (good) old place is sold and the (better) new place is bought, we have been in residence three months

and I am *so* glad we made the move. It feels like we climbed over a huge mountain and are (almost) down the other side in the Promised Land. We drove across the continent three times and I love that drive, but it is not so easy as sitting in the sun at home. We loaded a ginormous shipping container one end and unloaded it the other (we were camping in the new place until it arrived) — we had a lot of help, thanks guys! We struggled with unbelievable red tape associated with buying and selling, and changing vehicle registration, between states.

(23 December 2017)

MURRAY MOORE

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

Glad I am that Mary Ellen and I were able to spend most of a day in Melbourne with Bill Wright, and with the youngsters, yourself among them.

Our younger son and his wife of one year, and their new cat, are here. We will foster-parent their cat for several days. She is middle-aged so she doesn't have a kitten's energy or propensity to get into trouble.

I took delivery this afternoon of new glasses, both lenses and frames. I look younger, says my daughter-in-law.

(25 December 2015)

I presume, once you begin reading a book, that you read that book to its end before starting another book? That is one explanation for the many books you have read in 2017 (and you list only your favourites) in *SF Commentary* 95.

I do not know when I became, but I am, a browser. In our house is the equivalent of a small library of books, books downstairs, and books upstairs in the bedroom, and books upstairs in the study, all of these books with bookmarks.

Lotus Blue, a title in your list, has a bookmark in my recently acquired copy, between pages 48 and 49. The *Lotus Blue* bookmark itself is a slim collection of poetry by David Clink, *The Role of Lightning in Evolution*. Yes, *Role*, too, has a bookmark, between pages 24 and 25, between 'Goodyear Blimp' and 'Birdman.'

Another author in your list is Michael Dirda. In the small bookcase behind me is his collection *Readings*. The bookmark is between pages 8 and 9. The bookmark is a ticket to the play *The Anger In Ernest/Ernestine* for 6 February 2016. My copy of William Breiding's *Rose Motel*: a bookmark between page 42 and 43. Somewhere is a slip of paper with the number of the page at which I stopped reading the Diana Wynne Jones before I returned it to our public library.

My browsing is partly a consequence of too many books that I want to read, and perhaps, partly, my lessened drive to read. My reading stamina, as is my testosterone, is dropping.

Library books are the exception. I have to read them to deadline or return them unread. Currently at hand are the 2017 Giller Prize winner *Bellevue Square* by Michael Redhill (fiction); *Trees of the Carolinian Forest* by

Gerry Waldron (non-fiction); *I am a Truck* by Michelle Winters (fiction, 2017 Giller Prize shortlist); and *Cerebus* by Dave Sim (telephone-book-thick graphic novel reprinting numbers 1 through 25 of the title's 300 issues).

The Giller is Canada's most valuable — \$100,000 — prize for fiction. I decided to start reading the short list of nominees in 2013. I am happy to have read more than a few of the nominees. But I didn't read any of last year's nominees. So far, of the 2017 nominees, I have tried, and soon stopped reading, three of the five nominees. I will finish *Bellevue Square*, the winner, however about it I could be more enthusiastic.

When I became both a teenager and a buyer of paperbacks, in the 1960s, too many books to read, of the kind that I liked. Now my list of authors and titles expands and expands — existing authors continuing to write, also new authors — versus my slowly decreasing life expectancy. And because my memory is failing, I can re-read fiction that I read in the 1960s with little memory of the first reading; not that I do much of that.

Yes, I am your junior in years, four of them, nevertheless my time becomes ever more valuable to me; none of it to waste!

So why did I buy three books yesterday? I thought I would enjoy reading them. Each of them was a remainder; new but priced less than the cost of a new paperback.

You and I both, I suggest, don't need to buy another book for the rest of our lives. We have piles of books yet to be read in our respective houses. We certainly aren't addicted to acquiring books. We can stop, any time. Maybe tomorrow. Or next year.

Am I a squirrel? By which I mean, do I buy books faster than I read them because I am hoarding them in case of a book famine?

Or am I a sensualist, by which I mean I hold a book in my hands, I consider the author, and the book's physical attributes, and its subject, its thickness, its size of type: I get such a hit from thinking of reading the book that I buy it but then I don't need to read it, because I already have had the stimulus of what I think is that book.

Let us prove, Bruce, that we are not addicts. We will remove all books from our domiciles. We will have only one book at a time in our respective homes. We can do this. You first, Bruce: inspire me, because I am weak.

Now that you are free of the tyranny of print, Bruce, how many pages will be the next issue of *SF Commentary*? 280 pages? 500 pages? You have a large inventory of articles, yes?

(15 December 2018)

[*brg* Just about. My eventual solution, made very reluctantly on 6 April 2018, has been to split *SFC* 96 into two — Numbers 96 and 97. That still leaves at least 100 pages of material urgently waiting for publication.*]

STEVE JEFFERY

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England**

I really must apologise for non-locs and non-communication for the last couple of more issues. We are not well, and have not been well for what seems like

months now, which in my case is largely due to stress and overwork, trying to bring a project home to impossible and un-realistic deadlines, which finally came home to my boss when I collapsed at the end of last week and spent most of the next four days in bed. Vikki and I seem to be passing this bug back and forth between us like a neverending and germ-riddled game of pass the parcel. (Perhaps should have warned you to boil this email before reading). Since none of the usual counter-measures are proving effective we have decided to try nuking it with a really strong curry on the basis that this may turn out to be either kill or cure, but probably a good way to go. Wish us luck.

(25 December 2017)

Sheryl Birkhead has it right. After a lengthy period of procrastination the guilt starts to take over completely and it becomes embarrassing and increasingly difficult to break the long silence.

It's a stupid reaction, I know, but 2017 was year in which, for various reasons, I was not thinking clearly or coherently for a large part of it.

And I'm going to be completely unfair and say that it's partly (although only about 0.000001 per cent) your fault and that of your regular correspondents, in that you raise the bar so high for responses and letters of comment when for a large part of 2017 I have felt that I am barely able to string a coherent sentence together, let alone a letter of comment worthy of *SFC*.

I'm looking at a couple of humongous crows on the roof opposite, which reminds me that there is now a copy of John Crowley's latest novel *Ka* sitting downstairs as part of my Christmas present from Vikki, and thence to Murray Moore's letter, in which he mentions Crowley's *Totalopia* (No. 19 in the PM Press Author series), of which I was completely unaware (or indeed of any in that series, which sounds both intriguing and fascinating).

I do have Crowley's 'Gone' though, which Murray mentions as a 'hard to find masterpiece', and is included in the collection *Novelties and Souvenirs* along with 'Snow' and 'The Great Work of Time' (Harper Perennial, 2004). Must read that again. (A promise I seem to be making and never quite getting round to more and more often about a lot of books on my shelves.)

Equally embarrassingly, Facebook decided to remind me of one of my posts from last Christmas in which I dropped a picture of our combined books to each other, and that three of them in my pile are still unread, as well as another couple from my birthday. This is bad, and another sign of both procrastination and easy distraction.

I seem to recall I made an excuse around this time last year of skipping over parts of Colin Steele's reviews column because he'd included a couple of books that I'd just got as presents and hadn't read yet, and he's done it again with Ben Aaronovitch's *The Furthest Station* and Neal Stephenson's *The Rise and Fall of DODO*, both of which are sitting in a pile of books downstairs. I love the Aaronovitch books, which are a weird and engaging blend of supernatural magic and police mystery thrillers. I'm playing a private game by alternating these with each new volume in Charles Stross's 'Laundry' series, in which Stross similarly mashes the spy thriller with supernatural

horror. (Stross's books are often darker, but Aaronovitch is not shy of including some pretty unsettling images of his own, including PC Grant's colleague and girlfriend-without-a-face, Lesley.)

For some reason I have two copies of Stephenson's massive *Seveneves*, but have been put off by reviews and comments from friends that it was all just too big, too padded, and too depressing. (I'm not a big fan of end-of-the-world SF and have avoided most of Kim Stanley Robinson's recent output on that basis.)

I'm continually astonished at the scholarship and erudition of a number of your correspondents, and here is it evidenced by Matthew Davis's letter in *SFC* 95 in unpacking similarities Fritz Leiber and William Sloane. (31 December 2017)

As with you and Elaine, Christmas was low key for both of us this year. In fact, with both of us suffering heavy and persistent colds it was almost nonexistent, and in the end decidedly non-traditional, when we decided on Christmas Eve that the strongest curry we could devise might be just the thing to either kill or cure the lingering lurgi. It took until the middle of Christmas Day to fully decide which of those two alternatives had actually occurred. We did briefly consider the idea of Brussel sprout bhajis just to make things a bit more festive, but that only lasted seconds before we broke open a pack of poppadoms and the lime pickle.

Our family Christmas occurred a week earlier, when my niece hired a small village hall near Wantage and sent both invitations and Secret Santa instructions to the whole extended family to turn up with food, party games, and gifts. Twenty of us (across four generations) turned up. (We do not argue with Izzy when she is an Organising Mood).

BBC2 at least graced us with a traditional Christmas Eve evening of M. R. James ghost stories, prefaced by a rather good documentary on the Master by Mike Gatiss, who seems to turn up in all sort of things these days, including, quite recently, a drama documentary about Elizabeth I's and James I's spy master Robert Cecil. Somewhere I must have a copy of James's *Ghost Stories of An Antiquary*. I hope so.

(1 January 2018)

GIAMPAOLO COSSATO
Cannaregio 3825, Calle Fontana,
30121-Venezia, Italy

You might or might not have received the registered letter I sent you on 9 December and the therewithin. It includes the painting, *The Clowns*, is a work of my late wife (110 by 75 cm). I've also included a copy of Byron's poem 'Darkness'. I think Byron would have deserved a Hugo as a precursor of the genre (*Walking Dead* as one of the latest) along with Mary Shelley with her *Frankenstein* and Polidori, whose *The Vampyre* was overshadowed by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

I have enjoyed the second season of *Cleverman*, and I trust we won't be left on the ledge of the all too common (especially in the States) cliff.

Many Australian productions are top notch. I have



Agnes Cossatto: *The Clowns*.

seen the three TV movies of *Jack Irish* and *The Code*'s two seasons. And I can add the brilliant performance of Richard Roxburgh and the rest of the cast in the four Seasons of *Rake*. The American version did not survive the first season.

I also value what the New Zealanders have to propose in terms of television. *Outrageous Fortune* and *The Almighty Johnsons* come to mind. The first managed five seasons and a satisfactory conclusion (against the failed American and English imitations). The second could be vaguely compared to Gaiman's *American Gods*, now in the hands of Starz with a first season already concluded. It also had a gratifying ending (thanks to an international effort by the followers).

I have come recently across an article about the Aborigines that appeared on the BBC's site, 24 May:

'Why doesn't Australia have an indigenous treaty?'. Very detailed and illuminating. Probably you are aware of it: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-40024622>

In July I noticed the news of the passing of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu. I must admit I had never heard of him so I managed to recover some of his songs. I have no idea of their meaning, but they seem to exude sadness and desolation.

I met Brian Aldiss in person only three times as I recall, but he left a lasting impression (and so did a fair number of his books in my library that I have read) and one day, in the seventies, I found in the mail an inscribed copy of his *The Shape of Further Things*.

Michael Bishop could not have given a better description of 'the man in charge' as 'loudmouthed Orange Orangutan', save for the fact that the orang-utans might find it offensive. Before he was elected, *Saturday Night Live* worked out a spoof which, unfortunately, could not have been more spot on: 'The Media's been saying some pretty negative things about Donald Trump but what are REAL AMERICANS saying? — so when people ask why you support Donald Trump you just tell the — a message from racists for Trump' (Season 41 E 14).

Again about the man with the orange tuft and the way he mocked the Puerto Ricans during his post hurricanes

visit: the launching of the paper-towels as a case in point. Samantha Bee in her 'Full Frontal' 2/21 of last October exposed very efficiently the injustices suffered by that small part (but not exactly so) of America.

Most interesting is Patrick McGuire's letter about Wells's fore-runners, among other things. The TV series he mentions, *Time after Time*, with H. G. Wells as protagonist and Jack the Ripper as his antagonist, met an inglorious end by being cancelled after five episodes. The remaining seven were made available later on line (and in some non-English-speaking countries) but never saw an end.

During this closing year health has been treating me rather poorly. In the last four months I had to visit three times the ER and in one occasion they kept me for almost 48 hours in the Intensive Care Cardio Unit to adjust an atrial fibrillation. Now Xarelto has taken the place of Warfarin. It appears to be more efficient, along with a variety of other pills. It is not cheap, but thank to our almost universal care system, there is nothing to pay. The same goes for the admission to the hospitals. Something the Americans seem unable to learn.

(1 January 2018)

ANDERS BELLIS **Stockholm, Sweden**

I am very happy to see no less than two novels by Virginia Woolf on your list of books read. I regard Virginia Woolf as the foremost author of fiction — and essays — I have ever encountered.

However, let me tell you something about *Mrs Dalloway*. It is actually a suite of stories. The suite begins with Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, where Mrs. Dalloway plays an important part in a section of the book comprising about 50 pages. Then there are two short stories, 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street' and 'The Prime Minister' (the latter unfinished, but still an important addition). Then comes the novel *Mrs Dalloway*.

The novel is followed by the following short stories: 'The Man Who Loved His Kind'; 'The Introduction'; 'Ancestors'; 'Together and Apart'; 'The New Dress'; 'Happiness'; 'A Simple Melody'; and 'A Summing Up'. The short stories are all to be found in the second edition of *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick, published as a Harvest Book by Harcourt, Inc.

(2 January 2018)

ANDY ROBSON **63 Dixon Lane, Leeds LS12 4RR,** **Yorkshire, England**

The planet is clearly under threat from virus-sized BEMs killing off all the SF fans. The mysterious monolith in the

2001 movie is simply a roll of honour for those who wanted their ashes scattered on some distant other-worldly terrain. Most people are frantically checking the WAHF columns to make sure they themselves are still around.

There seem to be too many formula melodrama novels posing as SF these days. SF writers should never give up their day job. Be a traffic warden and learn how to be despised for 10 hours a day — at least it will give you an edge on that hundredth re-write. I much prefer the earlier SF where people didn't attempt to communicate with aliens. I can't imagine it being any more successful than talking to cats. Cats know that sound only confers 'I am here'. They will scrutinise you for a long time in the hope that you may communicate by twitching your nose or narrowing your pupils. This doesn't happen, so we get dismissed as being from a low strata of creature fit only to open the tins of cat food.

Hope you have a good year without the dreaded meddlings of the taxman.

(9 January 2018)

ROBERT DAY

**Flat 2, Heatherlea, Station Road, Kirby
Muxloe, Leicestershire LE9 2EN, England**

We are pitched straight into wonderfulness with Ditmar (Dick Jenssen) talking about Klimt. I have a copy of Rachel Barnes' book, which I acquired from a remainder bookshop quite some time ago (and so paid nowhere near the UK equivalent of \$40 for it). It's good that it is such large format, because Klimt's paintings deserve to be seen at the largest scale possible; many of his canvases are quite large. I recollect visiting the Belvedere in Vienna and seeing *The Lovers* and *Judith I* — they are stunning. The Barnes book also includes some of Klimt's landscapes, which are much less well known; I found them completely evocative of the Attersee and other parts of non-alpine Austria which so few people outside Austria know about.

And now I feel nostalgic and want to go to Austria again.

It's funny how offers of work emerge out of nowhere when you least expect it. When I was out of work in 2016, I had an approach from a film production company for some technical advice work on what turned out to be Kenneth Branagh's remake of *Murder on the Orient Express*; then in the run-up to Christmas, I found myself in correspondence with a TV production company for an alpine episode of *Chris Tarrant's Extreme Railway Journeys* (showing in the UK on Channel 5). This culminated in my trying to find ways of explaining Wilhelm von Engherth's system of semi-articulating steam locomotives for a non-technical audience and actually doing a very small amount of script editing. At one point, I did point out that 'in the nineteenth century, this really was the equivalent of rocket science!' I doubt that much is going to come of this, though I was rather hoping that an offer to spend 10 days in the Alps as a knowledgeable fixer and runner might materialise ... but deep down I knew that this was almost certainly very wishful thinking on my part.

And then last week, I got an e-mail out of the blue from the guy who was publisher's editor on my railway book. He was contacting me to see if I also did local history and whether I'd be interested in effectively becoming a staff writer for the publishers he's now working for. I had to turn him down, basically saying that I do not do that much local history, especially as the areas where I come from, grew up in, and now live have all been fairly well covered already; my recent relocations have rather detached me from places where I know the local history particularly well; and in any case, I have a full-time job now and am not looking for new writing assignments. Certainly, even a regular stream of contracts for local history books would not generate anything like the income I currently enjoy. Having said that, I described a couple of projects that I've set aside for my retirement in a few years' time; but neither of the two I described at some length are really what they're looking for ('our local history books are pretty much done to a formula' was his response when I suggested that a photo book on generally unloved post-war commercial buildings, the communities that worked in them, and their decline and fall in the face of a changing economic and commercial landscape was something I'd be quite interested in doing).

Still, it's nice to be remembered; and I must have made an impression for him to come back to me nearly four years later.

Your reminiscence of Brian Aldiss was touching. I spoke to him on a few occasions; and I'm pleased that I was able to tell him how much *Report on Probability A* meant to me. (I must be one of the few people for whom that statement is even possible, for reasons which I'm certain I've described before.). His fiction really transcended genre and is something any of us with an interest in fantastic literature should be able to point to with pride.

Part 2 of John Litchen's explorations of literary Mars reminded me that I really must make time to finish of Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy. (So far, I only have *Red Mars* under my belt.) A number of the other titles he describes are on my TBR pile, but ... I still hope to see a crewed mission to Mars in my lifetime.

I've recently re-read some of Jim White's *Sector General* stories (in the Tor omnibus editions of some 15 years ago). I hadn't looked at these since I first read them in the early to mid 1970s in library copies of John Carnell's *New Writings in SF* anthologies. I wasn't surprised by the mid-Atlantic language, and the chauvinism didn't come as too much of a shock (though I did rather boggle at one character actually referring to a nurse's 'pretty little head'); and the technology was definitely a 1960s image of the future, with huge, single-purpose translation computers and spaceships that were distinctly rocket-shaped. And I was surprised to find that the giant empathic insect doctor, Prilicia, was a male of its species; I had read the character at the time of first reading as female, which probably says more about me than it does about the stories ... But all that almost completely vanished before the utter humanism (as opposed to 'Humanism') of the stories. The characters' total dedication to the principles of 'do no harm', 'save life wherever possible', and 'all sentient life is worth saving' shone out so very clearly and

showed up these fifty-year-old stories as a still fresh take on space opera. Even the military forces, the Monitor Corps, act as a police service rather than a military force of conquest, and indeed act in subordination to the medical corps when required. I enjoyed the re-read, which was a welcome diversion from the pettiness and small-mindedness of our contemporary politics and world events, and I shall happily turn to the other two volumes in due course.

I was interested in Giampaolo Cossato's loc and his take on Mussolini. I am reminded that in the 1930s, there was no assumption that Mussolini and Hitler would become allies; indeed, when Hitler was putting pressure on Austria, the nationalist Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss — later to die in an abortive Nazi coup in Vienna — sought and received political support from Mussolini in maintaining Austrian independence. European history, especially in the twentieth century, is so much more complex than the accepted orthodoxy of 'Great Powers — Great War — Rise of Fascism — A Just War — Cold War and Europe divided — Triumph of the West' that so many historians and politicians nowadays promote.

Leigh Edmonds (and possibly others) will be interested to know that I'm currently working on a model of the big Russian strategic bomber, the Tupolev Tu-95 (codenamed, quite appropriately, *Bear* by NATO); this is turning into an extreme exercise in masking for different shades of metal finish. And I've just finished a larger-scale model of the Messerschmitt Bf.110, which came to me from one of the older members of the model club I'm in, in a half-finished state. I had completed the build, and it was very nearly finished, just needing a coat of semi-gloss varnish (or semi-matt, if you prefer), a few small parts attaching, and a final spot of weathering, when I heard of the original owner's death, so I am aiming to have it finished in time for our next club competition night in five days' time and his funeral on 9 February.

Further to Skel's comments about the *Steam Engine Time* epigraph, it always seemed an elegant expression of something quite profound. I also thought it was quite obvious, but perhaps that comes from watching too much of James Burke's BBC shows in my youth on the history of science and invention and the strange connections and coincidences that threw up through history. For example; in the eighteenth century, an English gentleman inventor called Mr Puckle invented a quick-firing automatic gun which held its ammunition in easily interchangeable pre-loaded magazines. He demonstrated it to the Admiralty, who rejected it because 'it would use up the Navy's ammunition too quickly'. When I first heard of this, many years ago (I don't remember where), the impression I had was that the author was telling this as a tale of bureaucratic silliness. Only later did I realise that the ability of the Admiralty to manufacture ammunition was constrained by the industrial mass-production processes of the time (or lack thereof), and the ability of the ships of Nelson's era to carry large quantities of small-arms ammunition that would quickly have been expended, requiring ships to carry a lot of ammunition when every available space was already full of the consumables they needed. Only as food preservation (canning and later freezing) became more feasible

could the amount of storage for perishable food be reduced and increased for different types of ammunition. In other words, Mr. Puckle invented a machine gun, but it was not machine gun time.

I'm also certain you used the quote in every edition of *SET*. And it wasn't that you attracted no steam engine fans — you just didn't attract any who weren't already SF fans as well.

(21 January 2018)

SKEL (PAUL SKELTON)
122 Mile End Lane, Mile End, Stockport,
Cheshire SK2 6BY, England

'Famous British fan Paul Skelton'? Bloody Hell Bruce! I'll doubtless get some schtick over that. Why, it's even worse than Andy Hooper erroneously including my name in the 'Important groups and fans' box for the 'Trufan Rebellion era (1971–1983)' of his revised fan history chart back in *Flag* 6. (See how long I can bear a grudge?) First of all important, and then famous. The only thing I'm likely to be famous for is having the chutzpah to get an important and famous fan like you to publish, in your important and famous fanzine, recycled bits of an old LoC to *Banana Wings* which the discerning Fishlifters deemed too boring to include. If this trend is to continue I guess I can expect to hear from the Nobel Prize committee any day now, just as soon as they've agreed they need a 'Flatulence' category. Still, if you are bound and determined to famousify me, then I suppose I'd better read the rest of the bloody thing!

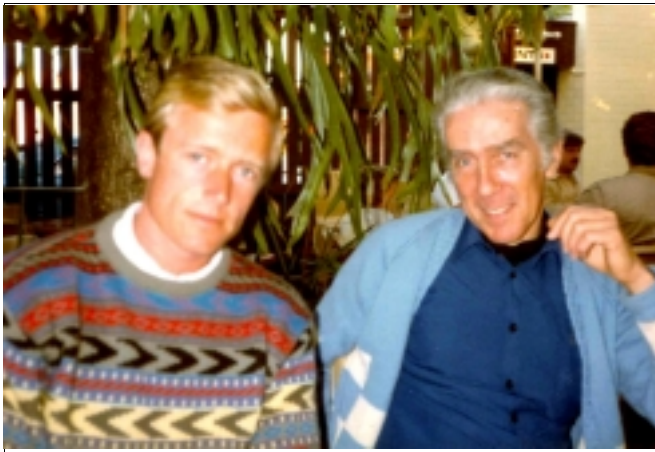
There, read it; every word. No, that was a blatant lie ... only every word that wasn't specifically about SF or Fantasy, which is no longer for me the consuming interest it was of yore. Even so, I read some of the skiffy-related stuff.

Mostly, though, I just wanted to familiarise myself with 'who's who' in the letter-column gang, so I can hopefully sort of ease myself back in. They mostly sound like a good crowd, though not all as fit as we would like. Still better off than those who are no longer around, though. Like you, I will miss Milt Stevens' letters even though, unlike yourself, I was only reading those he wrote to others. He was always interesting. I voted for him in the previous FAAN Awards and, looking at the list of candidates Nic Farey has produced for this year, I am inclined to do so again. Quite how this sits with the stated aim of the awards as being 'to distribute egoboo', I'm at a loss to explain. Maybe if he wins we can hold a ouija-board session at Corflu 35 in Toronto, and let him know. Possibly it might have to be a conference call looking at the names in some of the other categories.

The fans we've lost lately makes me realise just how lucky Cas and I were that our respective cancers were diagnosed at such an early stage as to need no other treatment than the initial surgery.

Anyway, thanks for an enjoyable read.

(17 February 2018)



Paul Collins (l.) and Jack Wodhams (r.), Breakfast Creek Hotel, Brisbane, early 1980s.

PAUL COLLINS

**Ford St Publishing, 162 Hoddle Street,
Abbotsford VIC 3067**

You have the wrong pic of Jack Wodhams in *SFC* 95. I didn't take that one with Lee Harding and Jack. The pic I sent is attached.

(2 February 2018)

[*brg* I have no idea who took the photo shown on page 77 of *SFC* 95. It was sitting in the file, but not the one you've just sent (see above).*]

I see *SF Commentary* is nominated for the Locus Awards. I've voted for you — perhaps you could let your readers know? <https://locusmag.com/2018-locus-Poll-and-survey/>

Good luck!

(8 February 2018)

[*brg* This issue probably won't appear until the deadline for the Locus Awards (thanks for the news) or Ditmar Awards. As you can see from page 3, the voters did give *SF Commentary* a Ditmar Award for 'Best Fan Production' in Perth this Easter.*]

We also heard from ...

CAROL KEWLEY (Albion, Victoria).

CHERRY WEINER (Dacula, Georgia USA).

WERNER KOOPMANN (Buchholz, Germany), who has sent letters and postcards plus many photos of his home and travels.

JOY WINDOW (Lismore, NSW).

LOUIS DE VRIES (Ormond, Victoria).

TESSA DICK (Fullerton, California, USA).

MATS LINDER (Norrtälje, Sweden).

ADRIENNE RALPH (Northcote, Victoria)

RICK KENNETT (Pascoe Vale South, Victoria): 'I'm housebound with a broken ankle and have developed vampire hours — I'm awake through most of the night and sleep through most of the day. Hope to be back on my feet by the end of January 2018. In the meantime I while away the time listening to podcasts on my phone, particularly Alistair Cooke's *Letter From America* broadcasts. Because I'm unable to get to a cyber shop to download *SFC* my only alternative is to read it off the tiny screen of my phone. Best I leave it till I'm walking again otherwise I might go squint eyed.'

RACE MATHEWS (South Yarra, Victoria): Last year Race suffered from sudden-onset severe macular degeneration, severely curtailing many of his activities. Very deepest sympathy from Elaine and me and all Race's friends. 'Thanks for the mouth-watering Christmas hamper of *SF Commentary* goodies. If it weren't for my eyesight problems I'd want to read just about everything in it, but sadly will have to settle for a selection. C'est la vie.'

DOUG BARBOUR (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada): 'I will try to get a piece put together for you. I am busy these days with both preparations for our Christmas, and radiation therapy every day for my prostate. I'm rereading a lot for healthy escapism ... I have been wearing or whatever that catheter for about 7 months now, but we are still hoping it won't be permanent — not a nice situation for anyone ...'

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 8 April 2018



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TRIBUTES TO

URSULA LE GUIN, KATE WILHELM, PETER NICHOLLS, BRIAN ALDISS

PETER YOUNG on THE INTERNATIONAL SF DATABASE

ANDREW MILNER on GEORGE TURNER

RON DRUMMOND on STEVE ERICKSON

RAY SINCLAIR-WOOD on SF POETRY

COLIN STEELE on THE SF/FANTASY FIELD

ANDERS BELLIS
GREG BENFORD
RANDY BYERS
STEPHEN CAMPBELL
ELAINE COCHRANE
PAUL COLLINS
AGNES COSSATO
GIAMPAOLO
COSSATO
ROBERT DAY
LEIGH EDMONDS
ROB GERRAND
BRUCE GILLESPIE
TERRY GREEN
STEVE JEFFERY
CAROL KEWLEY
JOHN LITCHEN
PATRICK MCGUIRE
DENNY MARSHALL
MURRAY MOORE
GERALD MURNANE
TONY PEACEY
ANDY ROBSON
FRANZ
ROTTENSTEINER
YVONNE ROUSSEAU
SANJAR SIRCAR
PAUL SKELTON
MARTIN MORSE
WOOSTER

and many others

