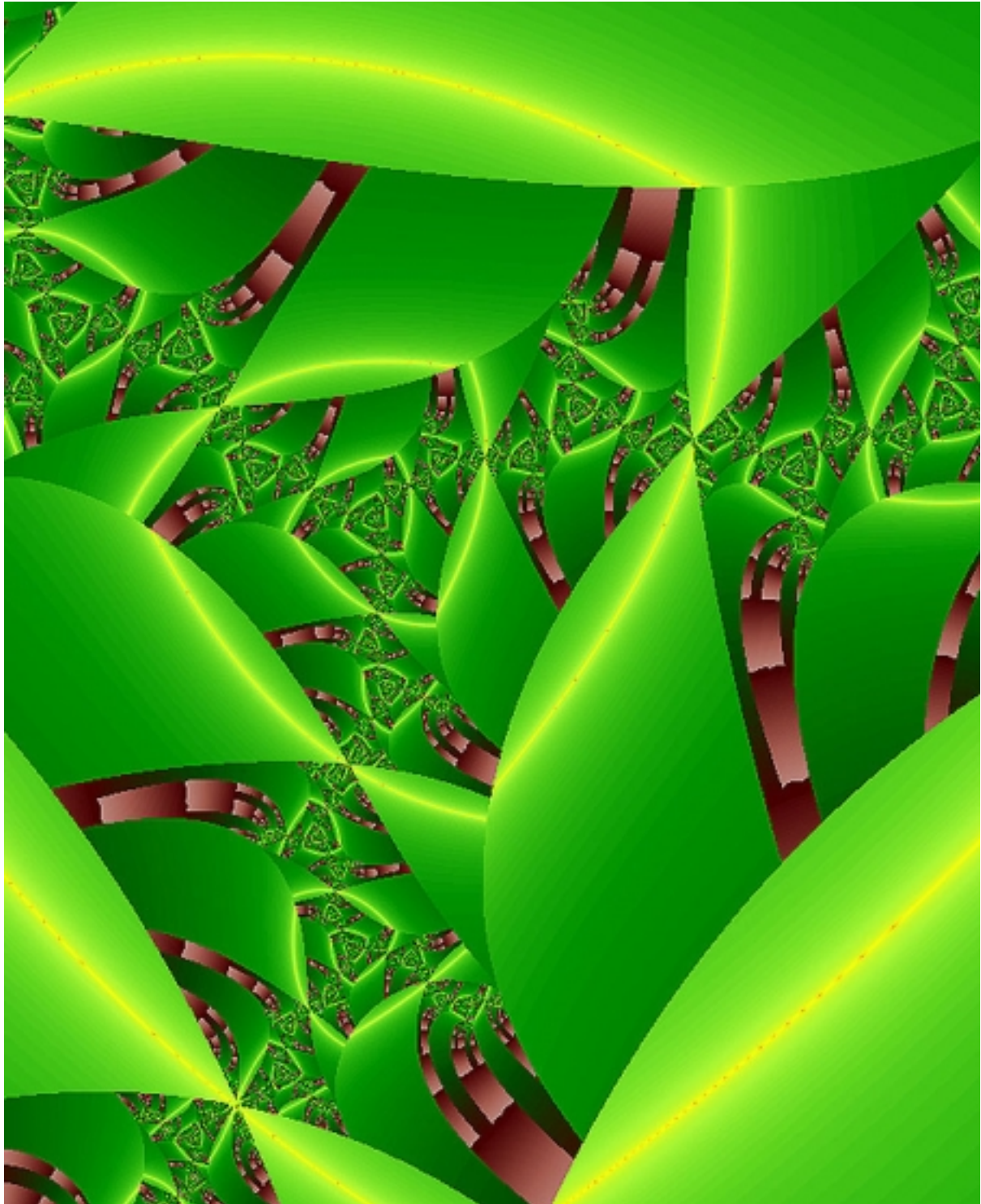


SF Commentary 102

July 2020 80 pages

2019 — THE YEAR BEFORE THE DELUGE

BRUCE GILLESPIE * JENNIFER BRYCE * DAVID GRIGG * PERRY MIDDLEMISS *
DITMAR (DICK JENSSEN) * HENRY GASKO * LEIGH EDMONDS * COLIN STEELE *
DENNY MARSHALL



Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Beyond Infinity'.

Cover notes

Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)

Beyond Infinity: SF is larger than the physical universe

The cover is a Mandelbrot from djFractals, which adds a plethora of bells and whistles to the basic scheme. As is obvious, the ‘jungle’ contains a multitude of spirals — and since this is a fractal, one can dive into the centre of any spiral, continually enlarging the field of view, and never touch bottom. The nature of the fractal is that it can be expanded to the limits of space (the Planck distance of 10^{-35} metre) and still have a mathematical structure.

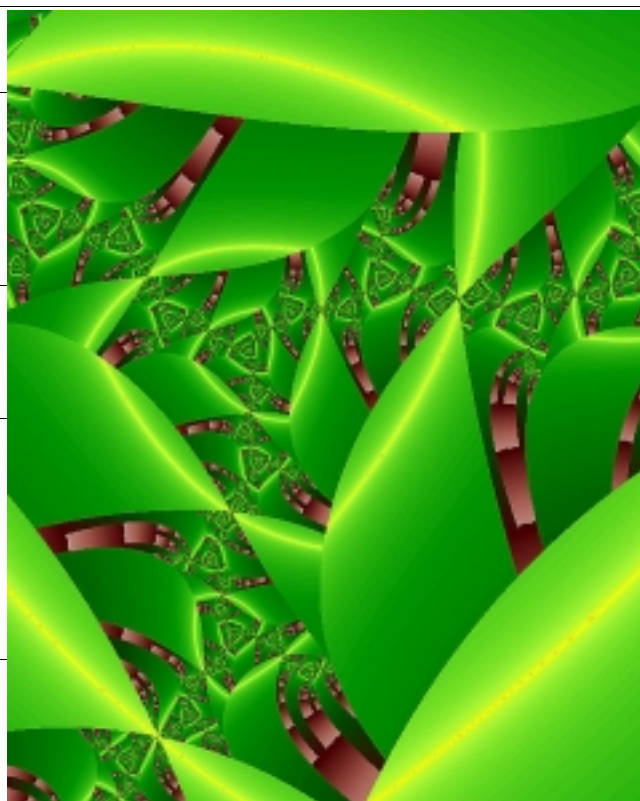
But, looking at the image it is clear that there is a brown ‘curtain’ behind the greenery — a curtain which thus is *beyond infinity*.

And here we touch on the concept — no, surely the fact — that *the mathematical universe is larger than the physical*. The latter is a part, perhaps a minuscule part, of the former.

Consider the *Koch Snowflake*. Take a triangle, put a kink, an inverted v, in each side, then kink each straight line, and then kink every straight line again, and then ... and so on to infinity. If that doesn’t make sense, look at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koch_snowflake.

What is finally created is an object — a *fractal* — with an infinite perimeter, enclosing an area 1.6 times the original triangle area, and for which no point has a definable tangent (that is, it’s non-differentiable). Note that the generative algorithm is perfectly straightforward, and is mathematically valid, and yet the snowflake *cannot* be constructed in the physical universe — it’s impossible to carry out an infinite set of kinks. But it can be *imagined* — that’s mathematics — and the final properties can be *determined* (an infinite perimeter enclosing a finite area and not having a tangent anywhere) — that’s mathematics again.

When Koch and other mathematicians produced these objects (Weierstrass, for example), many mathematicians were not at all happy, and dubbed these creations: ‘*Monsters*’. Take a look at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weierstrass_function.



[org/wiki/Weierstrass_function](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weierstrass_function).

But mathematics is even stranger. Consider the *Banach-Tarski paradox*. As Wikipedia states: ‘(t)he Banach-Tarski paradox is a theorem in set-theoretic geometry, which states the following: Given a solid ball in three-dimensional space, there exists a decomposition of the ball into a finite number of disjoint subsets, which can then be put back together in a different way to yield two identical copies of the original ball. Indeed, the reassembly process involves only moving the pieces around and rotating them without changing their shape. However, the pieces themselves are not “solids” in the usual sense, but infinite scatterings of points. *The reconstruction can work with as few as five pieces*’ (my emphasis).

And now for science fiction at the cutting edge. The dissection into five pieces was proved by Raphael M. Robinson in 1947. Two short years later, that dissection/reconstruction was used by Henry Kuttner in his novel *The Time Axis*. The universe, our universe, is threatened with extinction. A team of scientists, thankfully equipped with a time-machine, staves off the inevitable by using the Banach-Tarski paradox, with Robinson’s analysis, to create a perfect, unflawed copy of the universe.

What cannot be accomplished in our reality is perfectly feasible in science fiction. Which clearly demonstrates that SF is larger than our reality.

— Ditmar (Dick Jenssen), January 2020

SF COMMENTARY 102

July 2020

80 pages

SF COMMENTARY No. 102, July 2020, is edited and published by
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Email: gandc001@bigpond.com. Phone: 61-3-9435 7786.
DISTRIBUTION: .PDF FILE FROM EFANZINES.COM.

FRONT COVER: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Beyond Infinity' (and p. 2).
BACK COVER: Denny Marshall 'Zazzled'.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Leanne Russell (pp. 7, 8); Leigh Edmonds (pp. 9, 10, 11); Cath Ortlieb (p. 20).

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 2 | COVER NOTES:
DITMAR (DICK JENSSEN)
'BEYOND INFINITY':
SF IS LARGER THAN
THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE | 19 | TRIBUTES: |
| 4 | I MUST BE TALKING TO MY
FRIENDS | 19 | BRUCE GILLESPIE
LEIGH EDMONDS
FAREWELL, MERV BINNS |
| 4 | BRUCE GILLESPIE
THE YEAR OF THE JACKPOT | 21 | TRIBUTES TO EARL KEMP,
IAN COVELL,
FRANK LUNNEY |
| 5 | HENRY GASKO
VYRUS, VYRUS | 23 | 2019 — THE FINAL YEAR? |
| 7 | BRUCE GILLESPIE
LEIGH EDMONDS
BEFORE THE DELUGE:
STEPHEN CAMPBELL AT THE
WARRNAMBOOL ART GALLERY | 23 | BRUCE GILLESPIE
2019: BEST OF EVERYTHING |
| 12 | BRUCE GILLESPIE
LET US NOW PRAISE GREAT FANZINES
BOOKS ARRIVE IN THE MAIL | 37 | JENNIFER BRYCE
MY FAVOURITES FOR 2019: TEN BOOKS,
TEN CONCERTS AND TEN MOVIES |
| | | 47 | DAVID GRIGG
2019: A YEAR IN READING |
| | | 49 | PERRY MIDDLEMISS
READING NOTES FOR 2019 |
| | | 51 | COLIN STEELE
THE FIELD |

I must be talking to my friends

The year of the jackpot

What seems like a lifetime ago (four months ago) I speculated merrily about what I would do if I were the dictator of the world ('I Must Be Talking to My Friends', *SF Commentary* 101, February 2020). I proposed genius solutions to solving the climate change crisis. I did not even consider the possibility of a crisis that would make my tinpot dictator ambitions irrelevant. It did not enter my mind that within a few weeks we would all be part of an immense experimental event, one that could kill any of us, or all of us, long before global warming does.

At the beginning of February the coronavirus crisis was barely glimpsed on the Chinese horizon. By the middle of March, 2020 has become the Year of the Jackpot.

How many *SFC* readers have seen a copy of Heinlein's story 'The Year of the Jackpot'? I've never found a paper copy of the *Galaxy* magazine in which it first appeared, although Murray MacLachlan has sent me a link to a PDF copy.

H. Bruce Franklin, in *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction* (1980), writes: 'Universal death and destruction are almost the whole story in "The Year of the Jackpot" (*Galaxy Science Fiction*, March 1952). This comes not, however, through some holy war against aliens, but rather through the senseless, predetermined, inflexible fate of the human race caused by its own madness and a hostile universe.' Yes, the label fits. At the end of the story, two characters cling together as the sun explodes.

For some countries it has been the year of the jackpot. Suddenly the human race has been faced with a pandemic, an attack by a virus, intent on killing us all. Worse, it spreads most quickly when least detectable — during the first two weeks of infection. Scientists have had only a few months to study the virus. We know how it affects older people (that's me), but we still don't know why it affects younger people much less severely than predicted — but does maim and kill many of them. We don't know why some countries have found it easier to control its spread than others, but good old political stupidity (USA and Brazil) or canniness (New Zealand) are deciding factors.

And then ... and then ...

In late May 2019 a policeman arrested a man in Minneapolis, USA, by sitting on him long enough to kill him. The killing represented everything that had been done by American authorities to African-Americans ever since they had been dragged across the ocean from Africa to become slaves. 'Freedom from slavery' has solved few problems since 1865. Legislation during the 1960s seems to have solved few of the underlying problems. It's all continued: arbitrary killings by police of African-Americans who might have been guilty of some misdemeanour or other. Worse, the people who felt most under attack are those who have most felt under attack by the covid-19 virus. No wonder the underlying conflict burst out upon the streets. The damage done by protestors and looters to shops, businesses, and dwellings seems incomprehensible to Australians. That's mainly because the equivalent situation in Australia is situated mainly in rural and remote areas of the country.

So little ol' would-be tinpot dictator Gillespie, given infinite powers, could have had little this year except listen to his medical advisers. The only way to contain the pandemic seems to be to rely on an entire nation's sense of mutual obligation. That's largely worked in Australia, so far. But we're only half way through 2020. We feel a vast numb sympathy for our many friends who are under threat overseas. Best wishes, everyone everywhere.



Henry Gasko

Vyrus, Vyrus (with apologies to William Blake)

Vyrus, Vyrus spreading wide
Across the heedless countryside.
What demon or almighty power
Inflicts you upon us in this sad hour?

On what anvil were you forged
To become this, our deadly scourge?
Is it retribution for some grievous sin,
That has left us in the state we're in?

Did the great almighty Lord
Roar with anger, raise his sword,
To smite the wicked in his ire
The daring theft, the forbidden fire?

No 't was but a bat on a bough,
Dribbling spittle on some poor sow
Which soon was sold and sooner eaten,
That sparked this contagion, still unbeaten.

So, not Allah's curse or Satan's wrath,
Nor childish gods having a laugh.
No rhyme, no reason, just plain bad luck,
'Cause the Cosmos doesn't really give a fuck.

[Thanks to Henry Gasko for permission to pre-print this poem.]

Bored? Who's bored?

Much of the discussion I've seen about the current viral crisis has been on Facebook. The greatest surprise to me have been the complaints from people who report being bored while confined to their homes. I can understand this complaint from friends who live in areas or countries where they are not allowed on the streets for any purpose other than buying necessary supplies. In places like New York, the death statistics have been so alarming that few people would want to tread the streets, even if allowed to.

But throughout the post-16 March crisis in Victoria, Elaine and I have been allowed to shop for necessary supplies. Elaine now does two shopping expeditions a week. The Greensborough Plaza has stayed open, because that's where all the food shops are. Only Woolworths is separate from the Plaza. I've been able to walk for at least an hour a day. I meet a few dog-walkers, and a few walkers of my own age. Occasionally I meet families out for a walk. I circle carefully around them. I'm lucky; I live in a 'leafy outer suburb', with lots of hills. Long walks around here offer me plenty of up-hill exercise.

Elaine had been work-free for a long time, but has been completing two huge freelance editing projects for clients during the last few months. I haven't been offered any paying work (book indexing) since last September.

Once it became clear that the virus had become virulent in Victoria, the first urgent job for Elaine and me was to re-make our wills. The most recent wills we had on file are dated 1982. First we had to decide what should go in the new wills. In my case, an essential feature is the provision for handing on the rights to the George Turner Literary Estate. Then we had to find a local lawyer who could write up the wills correctly. We found a bloke

who works from an office on Main Street, Greensborough. When we presented our proposed list of provisions, he seemed confused. He stayed confused for awhile. His first drafts were filled with typos and factual mistakes, but gradually all the corrections have been made, and we remain friends with our lawyer. After several weeks of to-ing and fro-ing via the internet, the job is finished.

What to do about ANZAPA? Decisions had to be made quickly in early April. Thanks to Gary Mason for fielding the discussion and David Grigg for providing the method of 'going PDF'. Members of ANZAPA seem to have enjoyed producing fanzines that don't need to be printed. We have been unable to return to print-only mailings because the overseas mail service remains frozen.

What to do about *SF Commentary*? The *black black* cloud that has hovered over me during the last few months has had nothing to do with The Virus. It is the fact that on 16 February, the day before my birthday, my 21-year-old Gateway/Windows 98 computer stopped working. Bora, our tech guy based at Centre.com in Bundoora, took it away. He had to remember how computers were built in the late nineties (very differently from today's PCs). He thought he had solved my problem, and returned the machine to me. Two days later it stopped working again. Then the viral curtain came down (16 March). I could only get back to Bora in late May. He has been crazy-busy installing and repairing home computer set-ups because half of Melbourne's workers have been forced to work from home via the internet, and all of the children were home-learning for more than two months.

My favourite program, Ventura 4.1, does not work on any Windows past 98. Later versions of Ventura were stuffed up by Corel, so I didn't particularly want to instal

Corel Ventura 8. What desktop publishing program should I buy instead? A friend gave me a copy of Quark XPress 7 about 10 years ago. Surely that would not instal on Windows 10? A week ago, I tried — and it works! Now to re-learn everything I knew about Quark 20 years ago. At least the menus make sense, which is more than can be said for the ribbon-style menus used by Word 2013.

Meanwhile, as you can see from the layout of this issue, Bora has been able to restore the old computer again. He warns that its hard disk could die at any time. Sooner or later I will have to change desktop publishing programs, but I do not like technological change.

The secret of non-boredom-during-house-isolation is to have a Project that keeps me occupied all day. It must be sufficiently time-filling and ambitious that when I wake up in the morning I can look forward to the day ahead.

I've already talked about the Making of the Will. With David Grigg's mighty help I also had to switch ANZAPA from print-only mailings to PDF-only mailings. To them I have added two other long-term projects. The first is looking through all the newspaper cuttings of the last 20 years, and boxing and archiving them. It's a big job, but it has forced me to consider a much larger job — what else can be found in the large archive cupboards in my workroom? I drew up two sets of diagrams, one for each cupboard. Cupboard 1, shelf 1. Shelf 1, front row; Shelf 2, back row. Six shelves in each cupboard; back and front rows. What is actually stored there?

I started making lists of what I found. The result? (a) Archives of stuff that I had quite forgotten existed. They include 10 files of my first attempt 20 years ago to make sense of the letters of comment that fill an entire filing cupboard in the living room. (b) Archives of stuff that I knew were somewhere in the house, but I knew not where. For instance, often I have wanted to look up entries in my print copy of *Fancylopedia* 2, but I could not find it. The current search turned up my copy, hidden behind a lot of other stuff. (*Fancylopedia* 3 contains far more information, but is available only as files on the internet.)

I found my large diaries from 1962 onward, in clip folders. Now I can bore Jonathan Strahan on Facebook with lists of my favourite SF books and stories from the Good Old Days. (He is much better organised than I am, and can produce such lists at the drop of a 'Like'.)

For the first time in years I can take a look at all those hit parades I collected during the 1960s.

Cupboard 1, Shelf 2, contains about 40 manila folders of material I really want to keep, but I had no list of categories of contents. They contain a lot of fannish history, of course, some of which I should scan and send to Leigh Edmonds and Kim Huett. (But in the case of a huge file of photocopies of pages from early Sydney fanzines, did Kim send them to me in the first place?)

One rarity that turned up is the treatment and partial script that Brian Aldiss wrote for a proposed eight-part British TV version of Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*. He sent it to me about 30 years ago after the project was shelved. Should I attempt to send it back to the Aldiss Collection? Nobody from the Collection has ever been in touch with me, and the heirs seem uninterested in Aldiss's science fictional legacy. Nah. If ever anybody

asks, at least I now know where to find the file.

There are lots of files marked 'Important Historical' or 'Very Precious Documents'. Lots of miscellaneous stuff, with not much order to the material yet. It needs lots more work to reveal the jewels and polish them.

Shelf 4 of Cupboard 1 produced real treasure: all the ANZAPA mailings I've put together since I've been OBE (Official Bloody Editor) (that's 16 years), as well as multiple back files of my fanzines. This solves a problem. I thought I had only one copy in the house of *SF Commentary* 62/63/64/65/66 from 1982, the last issue for seven years. Fortunately, I did find some duplicates. However, I discovered that I have only one copy of *The Metaphysical Review*, No. 18, March 1993. It has a purple paper cover, and contains Yvonne Rousseau's amazing report on our 1992 fannish Garden Party, the complete details of which she gained by phoning people from Adelaide. I went looking for it because it also contains a copy of 'Mabe and Jenny See the World', the first travel article Jenny Bryce wrote for me. I have no digital file of the article — because I did not become part of the internet until 1998. (Fortunately, my friend Alex Skovron found a copy in his files and sent it to me (2 July)).

On Level 5 of Cupboard 1 I found right at the back of the shelf my entire file of *Vision of Tomorrow*, Ron Graham's famous 1969 attempt to publish a pro magazine in Australia and Britain. It died at the end of 1970 because W. H. Smith in Britain would no longer distribute it.

More valuable (to me) is my near-complete set of the large-size glossy issues of *New Worlds* (1967–1970), the flagship of the British New Wave. The serials include Brian Aldiss's *An Age*, Thomas Disch's *Camp Concentration*, and Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron*. Spinrad's serialised novel led to five issues of *NW* being banned from Australian import. I have copies of those five issues only because Giampaolo Cossato, Italian fan who was living in Britain at the time, sent the issues to me in plain envelopes. Giampaolo and I still send emails to each other. (He owned and ran the Solaris Bookshop in Venice for many years.) The rest of the issues of *New Worlds* were bought from the front counter of McGills Newagency in Melbourne, behind which stood the looming presence of Mervyn R. Binns.

How could anybody be bored, given the chance to do all those archival and writing tasks that have been waiting around for years? People complain on Facebook about having watched everything on Netflix. Thanks to technical issues, I can't watch Netflix. Worse, my eyes have been giving me some irritation so I've watched hardly any of the umpteen DVDs and Blu-rays that are sitting around here. The shelves are full of CDs I haven't yet listened to, so Elaine and I have been playing at least two a day. The house is full of as-yet-unread books. I get enough exercise on non-rainy days. Elaine is teaching me to cook (I've forgotten much of what I knew back in the late eighties and early nineties when she was still working at an office job and I had the job of preparing dinner).

I might even regret the end of lockdown. Will I actually have time to go into town and talk to people?

Before the deluge: Stephen Campbell at the Warrnambool Art Gallery

Bruce Gillespie



Once upon a time, none of my actions was based on the words 'coronavirus' or 'covid-19'. In that far-off past — 21 February 2020 — I boarded the country train from Melbourne to Warrnambool. I had been invited by David Russell and Stephen Campbell, two artist friends, to visit Warrnambool to take part in the launch of Stephen's single-artist exhibition at the Warrnambool Art Gallery.

Warrnambool is a coastal town 256 km to the west of Melbourne. It is the terminal station of one of the few remaining country rail lines in Victoria. The line does not travel around the coast itself. That privilege belongs to the famous Great Ocean Road, which winds between cliff and cliff, sometimes high on cliffs, sometimes through river valleys, from Geelong to near Warrnambool. The train, with its 40-year-old carriages and somewhat primitive catering facility, heads south through Geelong, then travels west over the Western District



**A selection of Stephen Campbell's paintings, Warrnambool Art Gallery, February 2020.
(Photo: Leanne Russell.)**



**Stephen Campbell (l.) and Bruce Gillespie (r.)
during the launch of Stephen's paintings.
(Photo: Leanne Russell.)**

plains to Terang, from where it heads south about 70 km to its destination.

I had not expected to find the landscape interesting. However, the woman who sat next to me started a conversation that continued more or less as a monologue to Camperdown. It did not occur to her that I might not be in the least interested in her extensive family history. My only relief was to look away out over the Western District plains, in the hope that she might stop talking. I had expected to be able to read or snooze for most of the four-and-a-half-hour journey.

At Warrnambool I was met by David Russell, whose organising skills remain excellent. No sign of Stephen yet. We went to the hotel/motel, left my bag, then to the Warrnambool Art Gallery, whose re-launch night coincided with the launch of Stephen's exhibition. Stephen was still involved with talking to friends and setting up the final details of the exhibition.

Stephen's original ambition was to become a comics artist, way back in 1969 when we met. I introduced him to the world of science fiction fandom, and hence the world of SF and fanzine illustration. You can find his work already on the covers of early *SF Commentaries*. Over the years and after many adventures, his ambitions extended. He began painting in oils when he was with Micheline Cyna-Tang in the 1970s and early 1980s. He became a very good commercial artist, forming a business partnership with Rowena Cory and Chris Johnson (GASSP) for some years. During the last 20 years, since moving to Warrnambool, he has been building a stockpile of oil paintings, always hoping that he could stage an exhibition. After many delays (including the renovation of the Warrnambool Gallery during 2019), the opportunity arrived. Three other artists also launched their exhibitions on the same night, 21 February.

I got the impression that anybody who was anybody in Warrnambool turned up on launch night. I knew nobody except Stephen, David and his sister Leanne ...

and Claudia Mangiamiele! One of Melbourne's most famous fans in the 1970s ('the legendary princess of MUSEFA', as Yvonne Rousseau once called her), she and Gerard had recently moved to the district, after living for many years in an eastern suburb of Melbourne. Claudia has been a volunteer worker at the Gallery for some time.

The mayor launched the opening of the gallery, and various people made speeches. David's sister Leanne took photos, and some are included here.

Stephen had hoped to sell a few paintings on the night, but it was rather hard to find the prices information notice. Indeed, I received the impression from the speeches that the whole point of the exhibitions was not to sell artworks but to magnify the greater glory of Warrnambool's reputation as a centre of the arts.

David took us to dinner at Proudfoot's Boathouse, near where the Hopkins River outflows to the Southern Ocean. Claudia arrived later, and as we trooped out after a fine meal we took the walkway along the river's edge. David had already arranged that I could stay at what he had described as a motel called Eight Spence. I expected little, but then, I was only staying the night.

If ever you are passing through Warrnambool, stay at Eight Spence, if it has survived the travel restrictions of recent months. I've never been in a motel room as comfortable and facilitative as that room. 'Motel accommodation' has gained a whole new meaning to me.

Next morning David showed me around the bustling metropolis of Warrnambool (it seemed a lot more lively than our suburban Greensborough does most of the time), and I boarded the train about 11 a.m. I was not bothered this time by a natterer, but four and a half hours still seemed a long a journey. David made the whole experience of visiting Warrnambool as enjoyable as possible, but did not convert me to the joys of travel.



Three weeks later, a change in world history made my entire experience an ancient artifact. We all became self-isolating. Since then Stephen has been holed up in the caravan where he has been living since he had to move out of a rented house. The Gallery had to close abruptly on 16 March, and Stephen's paintings might still be there. His other stash of paintings are in storage, and Stephen does not have the physical freedom to paint for the time being. But he seemed happy enough when I talked to him a few weeks ago.

David is a bit more accustomed to self-isolation, since he lives with his father and sister in a suburb of Warrnam-

bool travels to Melbourne seldom. However, a week before, he had taken Elaine and me and the Handfields to dinner at the Flower Drum restaurant. A very enjoyable evening for all of us. He still draws cartoons, and you can find some of them in the special Binns edition of *Ethel the Aardvark*.

Will history recommence? Will the Warrnambool Art Gallery reopen soon? Will Stephen's paintings be seen once more? Will any of us return to 'normal' any time soon?

— Bruce Gillespie, 18 June 2020

Leigh Edmonds

[*brg*: 'Stef Campbell' is a nickname given to Stephen Campbell by Micheline Cyna-Tang in the 1970s. Although he has not answered to this name for many years, Melbourne fans tend to remember him by this name. And Leigh Edmonds and Valma Brown were part of the same Melbourne fandom as Stephen during the 1970s.

These days, Leigh and Valma live in Ballarat, about 150 km due north of Warrnambool. Their neighbour is Robin Johnson, famous Aussiecon chairman, and recent

new owner of a car that he shares with Leigh and Valma.*]

A couple of things came together so that I found myself last Saturday (29 February 2020) at the Warrnambool Art Gallery looking at some paintings of Stef Cambell and listening to him talk about them.

First was Robin Johnson's new black Kia SUV. It would be nice to take it for an extended run rather than just pottering around Ballarat, which is its main purpose. We



Seen from the road leading to Warrnambool. Two ancient volcanoes are on the horizon.
(Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)



The assembled multitude. The table in the middle contains a selection of the many art objects Stephen has created throughout the years. (Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)

shared the drive on the two-and-a-bit-hour long drive from Ballarat to Warrnambool so it would not be too much for us. I've already driven this new car a little bit around town but it was good to get it out on the open road hurtling along at velocities over the speed limit because it goes so well that you don't realise how fast you are going until you look at the digital display. The car has cruise control, but we haven't got to that part of the manual yet.

Having written a couple of histories about road-making 20 or so years ago and gone driving with several old maintenance supervisors who explained to me what they were looking at, I often find as much to interest me in the road surface as I do in the passing scenery. On the current state of some of the roads we drove over, I can only say that if the workers I talked to back then were still in charge of the roads they would be ashamed of the state that they have fallen into. More than once the government has solved the problem of poor maintenance and shoddy repairs by putting up signs to slow down the traffic rather than fixing the roads themselves. So much for the state of modern society.

Robin's new car talks with Robin's mobile phone which meant we could use it to give us directions about how to get where we were going and entertain us as we drove along. Having a voice to tell you directions is useful and I can easily see how we will grow to rely on it. The car has a rather largish display screen in the middle of the dashboard on which a rolling map is displayed along



Stephen Campbell thinks great thoughts about his paintings. (Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)



In front of the Wangaratta Art Gallery are (l. to r.) Claudia Mangiamele, Stephen Campbell, and David Russell. (Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)

with notification about how far it is until you need to do change direction. Very useful and it only took us the long way around rather than the direct route a couple of times.

The other thing the interface between the phone and the car gave us was an audio book that Robin has been listening to. It was your standard stf, probably the kind of thing that you still read in *Analog* these days. It if wasn't written by an engineer it was written by somebody who thought they were writing for engineers so it plodded along, taking us into a whole stack of side issues that did not seem to have any relevance to the narrative drive of the story at all but were there, I guess, to add a touch of verisimilitude to the story. This distracted me in two ways: it made me wonder that the author could not have made these diversions a bit more lifelike; and it made me impatient for the author to get on with the story. There were several short chapters to describe what the main character felt about being turned into a metal man which seemed to me more like a film script than an actual exploration of that character's feelings, and if I'd been the editor I would have cut them out. Listening to this made me appreciate why many people don't hold most stf writing in high regard. It was very interesting in an *Astounding Science Fiction* kind of way, but very ponderous.

Those things filled in the time between Ballarat and Warrnambool. In addition we dropped in to visit my old friends Wayne and Yvette, who live on the road between the two places, for a cuppa and a chat.

Warrnambool for some reason reminded me of a

mini version of Geelong. I'm not quite sure why, because all I really saw of it was the road and streets leading to the art gallery. We parked a couple of hundred yards from the museum just below the war memorial that is built on a headland overlooking the coastline, so while we didn't see the sea itself we could smell it in the air. As we were pulling up we passed local fan David Russell who had also just arrived. Acting as native guide he showed us where we needed to go, through the entrance to the back of the gallery itself to a large square room festooned with some of Stef's paintings, reaching up to the ceiling at one point. I thought it was a clever arrangement because it made the room look dynamic rather than the usual stuffy lining up of paintings in a row. It was also possible because the paintings are all big and bold so it was still possible to take in the works even though you had to look up to do it.

There were introductions, mostly to people I hadn't met before and will probably never meet again. For all I know they were members of Stef's family.

There was Claudia, who I haven't seen since Valma and I moved to Canberra in 1979, and Michelene Tang's son, who I remember as a toddler and is now middle aged.

We wandered around looking at the paintings for a while and then somebody came with chairs that they set out. We sat in them and the gallery manager introduced Stef, who then talked about what had led him to paint the pictures that were on display and then went on to talk in detail about the thinking behind each of the paintings. This was interesting to begin with, but by the time he had described about half the paintings I was starting to lose interest. Fortunately, I was by the door so I snuck off and took a look at the rest of the gallery, which is relatively small but very tasteful and elegant in the style of most modern galleries. In it you have a bit of almost everything from your obligatory Victorian-era Victorian landscapes, a few old style portraits, a couple of hyper realism pieces, still lifes, an installation here, and a large model of a naked man in another room. All in all, a good representation of art in many of its forms, but not enough to detain you for more than an hour, so if you find yourself in Warrnambool put aside a little time to have a look.

After having seen the rest of the gallery, going back into Stef's room was a startling experience. Unlike the rest of the gallery, his paintings were stunning, fully alive and completely unrestrained in the way that just about everything in the gallery was not. Stef will be the first to admit that he is no van Gogh, but walking from the rest of the gallery into his room gave the intense feeling that the van Gogh aesthetic is alive and well in Stef. No holding back here. All the emotions and thoughts are on display here.

So, a little about the paintings themselves. (I've

already chatted to Stef about them so there is nothing new here for him.) My first thought was 'This guy can't paint'. Everything looks as though it has been thrown together. There is almost an ugliness to some of the paintings, and the way that the figures are arranged on their canvases is often uncomfortable to look at. Then, after looking at them for some time, it came to me that here was a person who was a very good artist but one who chose deliberately to paint in this style. On the wall that you are not likely to be attracted to, and set out in traditional gallery format in a line along the wall, are four or five much more modest pieces which I thought, at first, were by another artist. They are elegantly arranged, carefully crafted, and finely detailed. In themselves and in comparison to Stef's paintings they are beautiful. Stef has not deteriorated as an artist. At some stage he decided to swap from producing art that pleased others to art in which he attempted to express himself. He has, I think, succeeded, and the Stef that is revealed in the paintings is an interesting and deep-thinking person.

I was struck by the contrast between the earlier and the later Stef. To use a musical analogy, turning from his earlier work to his painting was like turning from the elegance of, if not a Mozart to at least some of the Mannheim school, to the blaring boldness of Bruckner and the thundering complexity of the Strauss tone poems. In other words, a switch from the era of the classical to the late romantic in the turn of the head. Now, I am no fan of the Strauss tone poems but that does not mean that they are not great works, and so it is with Stef's paintings. If I were buying paintings for our new house I wouldn't have any of Stef's paintings because they are too brazen for almost any ordinary house. Not only are they too big physically for a house, they are too big in conception and execution. Along the right hand wall as you entered was row of tall nudes of a variety of physical and mental qualities. (All the paintings are nudes, did I mention that?) If I lived in a mansion I would have bought the lot and lined them up in my own gallery, but I don't have a gallery so I'm afraid Stef will have to keep them. I don't know that any of Stef's painting have sold and I doubt that they will. They are not the kind of

thing you expect to find in a regional gallery and certainly not one in a gallery in the Western District, which is not renowned for its tendencies towards radical thought expressed in any format. This is a pity. That this gallery was bold enough to put Stef's bold paintings on display is a credit to it. It is also a pity that, being in such a remote corner of Australia, so few people will have had the opportunity to see this interesting and impressive display.

After milling around for a while a few of us decided to head off for a late (3 p.m.) lunch. On the way I fell into conversation with Stef about what I'd seen and heard and what I thought. I told him about what Valma and I had seen at the Louvre and the Musee d'Orsay and he said he'd love to go and see it too, to which I replied he'd have to go back to his old elegant ways if he wanted to be able to afford a trip to Paris. But he's not interested in doing that. I can understand Stef's journey of internal exploration and expression through his paintings, but I'm afraid that it has been and will be a solitary journey and that events like his display and talk will be one of very few opportunities to communicate the meaning of his journey to others. I gather from our conversation that he is content with that.

We became so wrapped up in talking, standing in Warrnambool's main street on a Saturday afternoon, that somebody had to come and remind us that others were waiting for us. What followed was a pleasant lunch, chatting and eating, with a light sea breeze to cool the air. It could have been anywhere in the western world where a few friends with an interest in art and a smattering of high culture are having lunch.

After a while it was time for Robin and I to hit the road back to Ballarat. The car hummed along, keeping it under the speed limit being the main challenge. The road had got no better, and neither had the story. If I ever use the word 'whereupon' in anything I have published you are free to take me out into the yard and give me a good thrashing.

— Leigh Edmonds, 29 February 2020

Bruce Gillespie:

Let us now praise great fanzines

Here are reviews of the last of the print fanzines that were sent to me before lockdown. Airmail delivery rates have slowed throughout the world, because of the absence of jet planes to deliver the mail. I've just received (23 June) a letter sent by John Hertz in Los Angeles on 1 April. A parcel sent from Australia to San Francisco on 14 April still had not arrived, last I heard.

I guess few people will be bothering to post fanzines in future. Let us celebrate great fanzines, the printed ones, for now at least. Other great fanzines can be downloaded from <http://efanzines.com>.

BANANA WINGS 76

Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer

59 Shirley Road, Croydon CR0 7ES, England
(fishlifter@gmail.com)

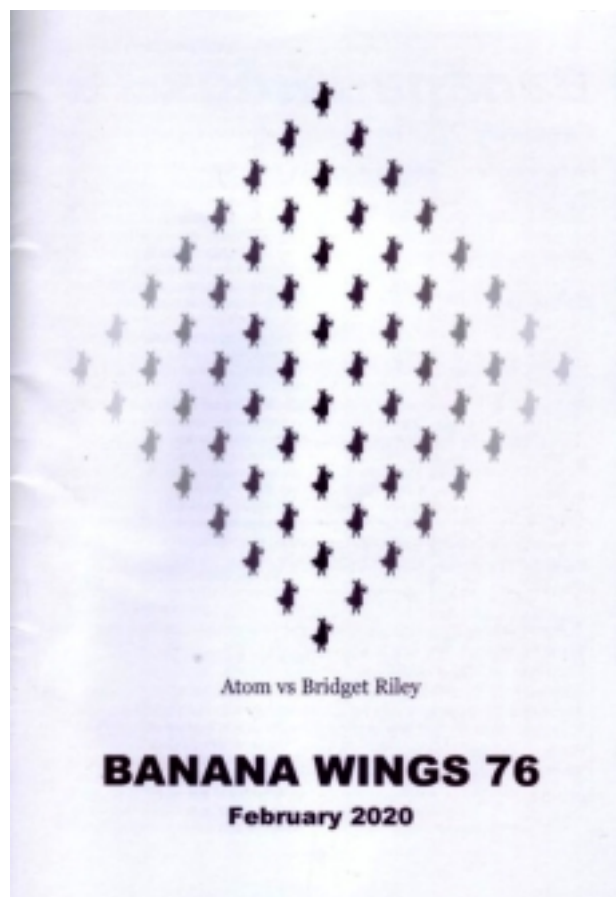
I met Caroline Mullan at Aussiecon 3 in 1999, and have kept in touch, more or less, since then. I knew her as a friend of Mark and Claire, and that she is the partner of Brian Ameringen, their favourite book dealer. But somehow I have not really noticed Caroline's own work in fanzines, and for this I must apologise (and google her name). The mailing comments in *Banana Wings* 76 contains quite a bit of discussion about Caroline's introduction to the life and work of James White, famous Irish fiction and fan writer, who died in 1999. It appeared in *BW* 75, but I realised when reading the letters of comment in 76 that I had not really *read* Caroline's article. Not really. Yes, it's exactly the sort of article I would most welcome for *SF Commentary*, as I said in my comments on *BW* 75, but somehow it had not hit me how very much it's the kind of article about SF and its writers that is rarely published these days. Its aim is to introduce us as readers (originally, listeners to a program item at the Dublin world convention in 2019) to a person named James White who lived his life in war-torn Belfast, whose friendship was expressed principally in what he wrote, although everybody says he was a very engaging man to meet in person. I've just looked at our book shelves. Caroline's article made me realise to my horror that although we have a copy of nearly all of James White's novels, we have only three books that contain his 'Sector General' short stories. It's probably now impossible to collect the other ten volumes, but maybe somebody has a spare set for sale.

So, back to *BW* 76. Here Caroline Mullan stars again, with her account of 'Dublin 2019: An Irish Worldcon'. I didn't enjoy this article as much as her James White article, because she is all too accurate in describing the sheer exhaustion of total immersion in a world SF convention. She and Brian arrived in Dublin on the Tuesday, but they seemed to have done as much as I do in four days of any convention by the time the worldcon began officially on the Thursday. It ended officially with the Dead Dog Party on Monday night, but Caroline and Brian stayed another day in Dublin. Caroline tells us everything she did and all the people she met, including all the queues for program items she needed to stand in to attend because the convention attracted nearly twice as many members as were planned for. I would like to have met all those fans and writers, and taken part in all those activities, but Caroline's article leaving me profoundly grateful that I did not attend the Dublin Worldcon.

There are quite a few splendid letters of comment in *BW* 76. One that might well have appeared as an independent article is Paul Skelton's tale of trawling through the journals of American fan Redd Boggs (who once joined ANZAPA, for a few mailings, in the early 1970s), who was famous for the elegance of his prose, the width of his interests, and the wit of his approach to life and fandom. When visiting Jeanne Bowman in Glen Ellen, California, who had inherited Boggs' journals, Paul was dismayed to find a miasma of mundanity rising from

them. 'He wrote everything out on paper first before copying it neatly into the journals ... which are full of tedious day-to-day repetitive trivia. Every day we are told what time [his wife] Gretchen's alarm went off, then what time she arose ..., what doctors' appointments she had ... and eventually what time in the morning she finally went to bed.' Redd himself barely appears in his own journals, and he rarely mentions SF or fandom. My thought while reading this: what if my own journals were as blindingly uninteresting if and when anybody reads them after my death? Not that I've ever kept a 'journal' — a detailed account of my daily life — except in 1961 and 1962, the years I was in Forms 3 and 4 at Oakleigh High School. I have kept a brief-notes diary most of my life since I was in Grade 4 in 1956, with the exception of the seven most interesting years of my life (1965–70), during which time I was too busy to remember to keep a diary. I doubt if anybody except me would be able to read my handwriting, let alone find much meaning in the notes. In my case, anybody who wants to know about me would need to read my fanzines (including all the personal and fannish material in otherwise 'serious' fanzines such as *SF Commentary*) and any letters that other people might have kept from the days when we all wrote letters to one other.

It's not often that the editorials by Mark and Claire are overshadowed by some of their contributors, but it happens in this issue. However, I did note (as Mark knew I would) that his list of good things that happened during 2019 included: 'The Craft Beer Cabin at Norwood Junction; the Bridget Riley show at the Hayward; Arabica in Borough Market, Bruce Gillespie fanzines; Charlie Parker and GoGo Penuin records', and many others.



RAUCOUS CAUCUS 7



Mark might be struggling to write a similar list at the end of 2020, but I hope he still enjoys Gillespie fanzines.

RAUCOUS CAUCUS 7

Pat Charnock, 45 Kimberley Gardens, London N4 1LD, England (PatCharnock@gmail.com)

Pat Charnock, who lives in London with husband Graham Charnock and loquacious cat Ruff, was quite taken with a stray remark of mine to Graham on Facebook. 'The wonderful Pat Charnock ... has a delicious natural style and a way of seeing the world around her that is delightful'. I can repeat that remark after reading *Raucous Caucus* 7, February 2020. Her contributors sound as cheerful as she does. The article I find most interesting is Curt Phillips' 'Seven Different Kinds of Scone: A Corflu Fiawol Report from the Consuite'. As I showed a conspicuous lack of organising skills for the Le Guin Workshop in August 1975, I can appreciate what a mighty effort Curt and his wife Liz put into the organising the consuite for Corflu 36 in May 2019. Curt changes a story of stress into an account of triumphs (with some slip-ups, such as inadequate supplies of coffee) (coffee, of all necessities!), and also offers to any future consuite organiser a very useful checklist of Things to Do. The article is all the more interesting to me because we don't have consuites at Australian conventions. Australian hotels demand that every bit of food and drink supplied anywhere in a hotel should be provided by the hotel and paid for at exorbitant prices. But a well-run consuite at an American convention, especially one as cozy and friendly as a Corflu, can keep everybody happy for the whole convention with food, and drink, and a gathering place.

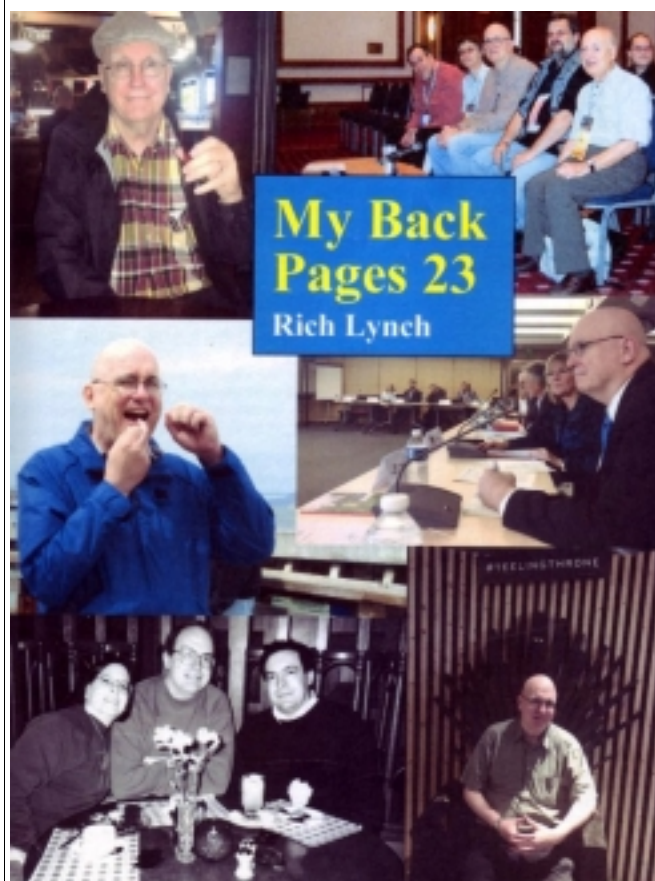
The letter column includes enlightening and entertaining additions to the discussion in *Raucous Caucus* 6 about the ancient art of duplicating fanzines. And if you want rude talk, read 'Ruff Talk', where the Charnock cat tells what it's really like in Harringay ('this is a bit shit'). Liz Phillips finishes with a piece on 'The Pleasure of Tea'. My dad would have agreed with her, but I'm allergic to tea.

MY BACK PAGES 23

Rich Lynch, PO Box 3120, Gaithersburg, MD 20885, USA (lynch@yahoo.com)

Rich Lynch has devoted previous issues of *My Back Pages* to compiling a variety of articles he's written over many years in many fanzines, including his own. In No. 23, he concentrates on a brief period of time — the last two years. Rich and his wife Nicki like to travel a lot, so I'm wondering how they are enjoying (or not) staying at home during recent months. 'Four Days in the City' tells of hitting museums in New York City (with photos of some of the artworks they looked at), plus their visit to Broadway: the musical *King Kong*, which originated here in Melbourne a few years ago.

Rich then tells us that he had 'A Damn Fine Time Down Under', but doesn't seem to have caught up with any fans. Why visit a country unless you catch up with as many fans as possible? True, Rich was part of a business





trip, but I'm disappointed. Rich did visit parts of Melbourne and Victoria that usually escape my attention. For instance, Elaine and I should visit the Melbourne Museum regularly, but we don't. (In July we did see *Apollo 11* on the super-IMAX screen, which lives on the west side of the Museum.) I'm not keen to travel the Great Ocean Road, as I get woozy on all those curves in the road, but it would be interesting to see the Twelve Apostles again. This is unlikely to happen, since Elaine and I don't own a car or drive. Rich's photos are impressive, as his photo of the fireballs that explode at regular intervals outside the restaurants on the South Bank of the Yarra River in Melbourne. (Visitors to Aussiecon 3 in 1999 would remember this spectacular example of gas wastage.)

There are some articles that didn't interest me (for instance, a story about the Betterdays, a 1960s Beatish group about which I've never heard), but Rich does finish with a remembrance of where he was on the day the *Apollo 11* astronauts landed on the Moon.

I wish Rich would provide captions for the photo montages on his front and back covers. But hey! there's Irwin Hirsh. Hi, Irwin!

INCA 17

**Rob Jackson, Chinthay, Nightingale Lane,
Hambrook, Chichester, West Sussex PO18 8UH,
England (robjackson60@gmail.com)**

Rob Jackson has been publishing *Inca* for many years, but disappeared for quite awhile until attracted back to

fanzine publishing by the opportunity to publish the PDF edition on efanzines.com. He also revived the print edition. I feel very privileged to receive the print edition, although I can no longer afford to send back printed copies of *SFC*.

Rob is also an active member of InTheBar, an e-list where people take up long-running discussions. He has collected correspondence from these discussions under the heading 'Looking Back from the Bar' 'an anthology reminiscence ... written by divers hands'. So here you have the glitterati of fan writers, some of whom (like Ted White) no longer post elsewhere, and include familiar names such as Graham Charnock, Bill Burns, Robert Lichtman, Curt Phillips, Gary Mattingley, S&era Bond, Nigel Rowe, John D. Berry, Mary Reed, Mark Olson, Pat Charnock, Rob Hansen, and Jim Linwood. The pieces collected by Rob here often tell me more than I've ever been told about people I thought I had known for the last 50 years. Contributors tell about their ambitions, their actual (non-fannish) careers, and unexpected directions their lives have taken. I'm not the only one whose mundane 'career' never became a career, merely a precarious way of earning a living, while my fan career, unblest by financial reward, has given me endless satisfaction. John D. Berry's story is particularly interesting, as is Graham Charnock's. Pat Charnock writes, 'My life is probably of "no real consequence". My ambition was to travel.' Nearly all those who write about growing up in the 1950s had the same experience as I and my family had: few modern conveniences or comforts. Only John D. Berry admits to having had a privileged upbringing. Like me, fans rarely if ever 'ate out' in their youth. My parents would never have considered eating at a restaurant. Sometimes we bought takeaway fish and chips or Australian-style hamburgers.

Rob Jackson's 'Craic and Coincidence' is his account of travelling to and surviving the Dublin World convention last year. He met many people, but no Australians except Justin Ackroyd. (There were 120 of us attending.) As with my friends who returned from Dublin, his strongest memory is of negotiating 5800 attendees in a space anticipated as handling 3500.

Inca finishes with a nice letter column, but unblest by Australians. Write to Rob and ask to be on his mailing list, or be notified each time *Inca* appears on efanzines.com.

Inca's cover, by Venetia Jackson, is magnificent.

PORTABLE STORAGE 3

William Breiding (portablezine@gmail.com)

Is it possible to write and read about one city, San Francisco, for the length of one densely packed issue (172 pp. + colour cover) of **William Breiding's *Portable Storage***? Even after only two earlier issues, *Portable Storage* has become a power in the land. ('The land' is the world of fanzine fandom.) Perhaps inspired by Michael Dobson's *Random Jottings*, William has adopted the Lulu-style Print on Demand format, perfect bound, 179 mm wide by 255 mm deep, with lots of text, photographs, and cartoons. He is building a stable of writers.

Portable Storage 3 is both a paperback book and an elegant fanzine, with letters of comment and editorial

material. William concentrates on a single topic, 'San Francisco', but retains a sense of vigorous fannishness. (I'm consumed by jealousy of his production values, but am unwilling to resort to the print-distribution model offered by Lulu/Amazon.)

The subject matter worries me a bit. When I visited San Francisco in 2005, I became aware when attending two conventions (Corflu and Potlatch, a week apart) that the city today still relies on acute sense of nostalgia for the 1960s. Most of the contributors to this issue of *PS* grew up in SF in the late sixties and throughout the seventies and eighties. Most contributors are male, who remember best the years of freely available sex, available drugs, especially LSD, and a huge number of music, cinema, and music venues. Somebody once called the hippie era the era of consumption. For many contributors, this was the high point of their lives — because their lives seem to have come adrift during the decades since. In telling their stories, some of William's contributors rise above the pack, especially Grant Canfield ('My San Francisco Century: Part One: 1970–2020'), and Michael Breiding's 'The San Francisco Adventures'.

Curiously, these articles offer only hints of the city's radical history. James Ru tells of the importance of the gay rights movement in radicalising the city. Others met the famous gay mayor, Harvey Milk.

My real problem with the 'San Francisco' project, though, is that if I had not visited the city in February 2005 I would have had no idea of its geography. The hotels where the Corflu and Potlatch were held were close to the town hall on one side of Market Street and footpaths full of homeless people on the other side. I did take the cable car over to Fisherman's Wharf, which is now a tourist trap that resembles most St Kilda's Luna Park area. However, everybody seemed to be too busy to show me the famous areas of San Francisco, such as Haight and Ashbury, and the area around City Lights Bookshop. My only real sense of San Francisco came from a whirlwind trip arranged by Bill Burns and Earl Kemp for we out-of-towners (Pete



Weston and me). We visited the oceanside park, stopped under the Golden Gate bridge, and took a side trip south of the city. During the week after Corflu Art Widner invited me to visit his house in the hills, 80 miles north of San Francisco, and on another day Pete Weston and I took the train out to Charles Brown's *Locus* house. But I still have not visited Mountain View (Silicon Valley), as seems to happen to other international fan travellers.

The beautiful cover is by Frank Vacanti.

Books arrive in the mail

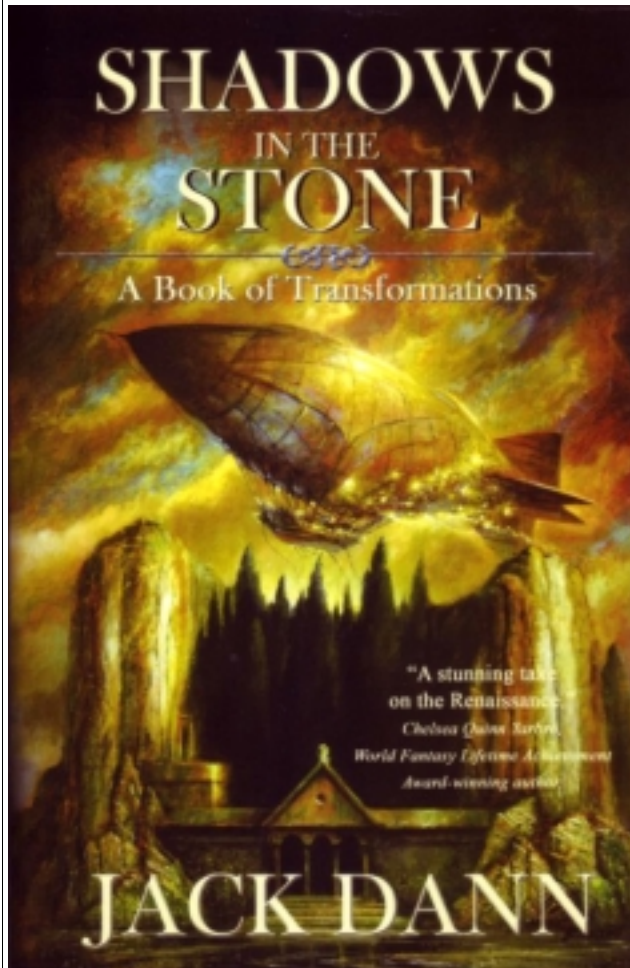
A few books have arrived unannounced in the mail. I'm not talking about the gifts that kind people send me over the year, or books I've bought. Thanks to all of you. These days I seldom receive actual review copies, usually from small publishers. Here are a few that might interest you.

***Shadows in the Stone: A Book of Transformations*
by Jack Dann (IFWG Publishing Australia; 2019;
345 pp.; order from ifwgaustralia.com)**

I've read enough of Jack Dann's *Shadows in the Stone: A Book of Transformations* to assure you that's very different from anything else he has published. It's very different from any novel that I've ever tried to read. I was sand-bagged by the vast cast list of angels, daemons, aeons, and Invisible Spirits who populate this novel. I would have had no idea what Jack was talking about if I hadn't read at the same time John Barton's recent *The History of the Bible*, which includes an account of 3000-year-old heavenly and other aerial creatures that didn't quite make it into the Old Testament. Until I read Barton's book I had no idea that the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, was considered in some quarters as a relatively

minor god, answerable to the True Creator, the First Principle. The story itself is an adventure story involving human and semi-divine people caught between various vast forces. I must admit I became lost halfway.

But I quote a quite different opinion from Rob Gerand (on Facebook): 'Jack Dann's new novel, *Shadows in the Stone*, is a masterly exploration of the nature of innocence and knowledge, set in a Florence at the time of the Borgias, where this earthly world is a creation of Satan, and the battle rages between humans, aeons, and angels for the souls of all. It's also an enthralling adventure: a wonderful book, in both senses of the word. could well be enthralled.'





In the Time of Breaking: New Directions in Scientifiction

by Andrew Darlington (Alien Buddha Press; 2019; 369 pp.; andydarlington@talktalk.net or from [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

Andrew Darlington is a British writer whose article about the early novels of John Brunner is about to appear in *SF Commentary*. During his life he has written an enormous number of SF stories and poems, as well as articles about the field. *In the Time of Breaking* is his attempt at what he calls 'retro-*Weird Tales*, part classic SF, all slipstream sense of wonder'. It reaches back to a fantasy/SF era that was popular long before I began reading SF. 'Berelia's age-flecked copper disc is tarnished with blemishes. The largest in a necklace of five suns chasing each other around the world ...' The language is ornate. The plot is pure melodrama, in the much-admired pre-World War II pulp style. It's a style that doesn't suit me, but will appeal to many readers.

Orphan Warriors: Children of the Otori 1

by Lian Hearn (Hachette Australia; 2020; 366 pp.)

Sibling Assassins: Children of the Otori 2

by Lian Hearn (Hachette Australia; 2020; 335 pp.)

Liam Hearn is the pseudonym that has now been used for many years by **Gillian Rubinstein**, a South Australian author whose 1970s and 1980s YA science fiction novels were excellent. The first two volumes of the 'Children of Otori' series are written in that clear, no-nonsense style we've come to expect from twenty-first-century fantasy



writers. Set in medieval Japan, the books tell the story of 'Sunaomi and Chickari, sons of Arai Zenko' who 'face death after their parents' treachery. Their aunt, Kaede, is able to save their lives on condition they become novice monks and never leave the temple at Terayama'. The novels include ghostmasters, enemy warlords, worlds of 'spirits and supernatural beings, rebels, pirates, and saints'. Not my type of fiction, but Hearn writes heroic fantasy as skilfully as anybody else in the field.

TAFForensic Report: A Cold-Case Investigation 1987

Jeanne Gomoll (Union Street Press; jg@unionstreetdesign.com)

I didn't receive **Jeanne Gomoll's** 1987 TAFF Report for free. I contributed to TAFF (Trans Atlantic Fan Fund) when I received it, but I might never have known about it if it hadn't been for the efforts of **Irwin Hirsh**. Thanks, Irwin.

There have been quite a few TAFF, GUFF, and DUFF reports published in recent years. They all benefit from gorgeous computer page design (Jeanne's profession is computer design). *TAFForensic Report* is one of the best. Jeanne is a very fine fan writer. She recalls every day of her triumphant tour of Britain in 1987, including whooping it up at Conspiracy, the World Convention held in Brighton that year. She took many many photos, proving that some fans barely change appearance in 33 years while others become unrecognisable. Unlike some other authors of fan funds reports, she provides captions for all photos.

A luscious publication, that offers the illusion I was there at the time.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 3 July 2020

Tributes

Bruce Gillespie: Farewell, Merv Binns

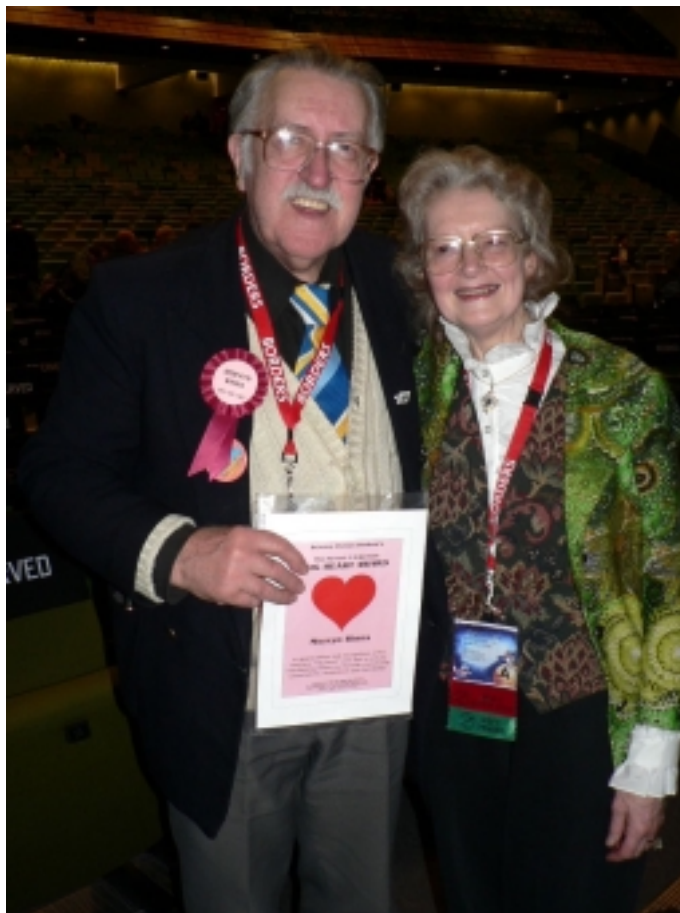
Mervyn R. Binns died at the age of 85 on 7 April after a final heart seizure. He had been in hospital for a month, but because of the viral crisis, only Helena had been allowed to see him. She could not hold a funeral when he died, but she hopes that we might all gather for a celebration of his life when it is safe to do so. If you want to send cards, letters, or fanzines to **Helena Binns**, send them to 11 Ward Avenue, Oakleigh South VIC 3163. She can be phoned on 0402 441 739, but she might take a while to get back to you.

LynC, Melbourne Science Fiction Club's magazine editor, has published a wonderful tribute to Merv Binns in the MSFC's *Ethel the Aardvark* 203. Download this issue from efanzines.com — or, better still, join the Club.

A few years ago, Merv Binns received the Eternity Award at the annual Continuum convention in Melbourne. This recognised not only the fact that Merv kept the Melbourne Science Fiction Club operating during many difficult years, but also that his contribution will continue while we still have recognisable SF fan activity in Melbourne and Australia.

As the news of Merv's death spread, people from outside the SF community also remembered with great affection the importance of **Space Age Books**, in Swanston Street, to the Melbourne cultural community. From 1971 to 1985 Space Age stocked an amazing variety of books and magazines, both local and imported, that were unobtainable anywhere else. Nothing has ever replaced Space Age for me, although Justin Ackroyd at the Slow Glass bookshop did his best for some years.

For some of us, Merv's importance as a bookseller began in the 1950s and 1960s while he was behind the counter at **McGill's Newsagency** in Elizabeth Street from the 1950s to the end of 1970. In 1959, when I was 12 years old, on the front counter at McGill's I found my wonderland — science fiction paperbacks and magazines. In 1966, I found, with awe and wonder, my first copies of the such great fanzines as *Australian Science Fiction Review*. There was always a rather imposing man standing behind the counter, but I never dared strike up a conversation



Merv and Helena Binns, Aussiecon 4, 2000, as Merv receives the Big Heart Award.

with him. But without that man, Mervyn Binns, my real life might never have begun. Indeed he deserved that Eternity Award, plus all the other awards he has received over the years (especially the international Big Heart Award in 2010).

— **Bruce Gillespie**, June 2020



Melbourne SF Club Lifetime Members celebration, 2009 (l. to r.): James 'Jocko' Allen, Bruce Gillespie, Helena Binns, Dick Jenssen, Merv Binns, Bill Wright. (Photo: Cath Ortlieb.)

Leigh Edmonds: A note on Merv Binns

Only a months or so ago Merv Binns committed the ultimate act of gafia. His health had been on the decline for several years and I was pleased to be able to catch up with him for one final time at the event that Jean and Eric hosted in Melbourne the February before last when he revealed to me something that I had not known before, his devotion to the Collingwood Football Club.

I must have met Merv for the first time towards the end of 1965 or early 1966 when I turned up to a meeting of the Melbourne SF Club. Merv put slips of paper advertising the Melbourne SF Club into every book and magazine he sold through McGills and I found out about the club because of one of those pieces of paper not long after I arrived in Melbourne at the beginning of December. I knew almost nobody in Melbourne and knew that I had to get to know some people so, when I found this slip of paper it attracted my attention and I resolved to join up. (My other interest was scale model making, and I read an item in the Melbourne paper about the launching of a branch of the International Plastic Modellers Society which I also joined around the same time, but

fans were much more welcoming than IPMS members so my association there did not last so long.)

My only real memory of my first venture into the MSFC in Somerset Lane was apprehension about having to enter the rather suspicious, dark, and dingy lane, where I found a couple of other people hanging around a closed door. I was told that the person who opened the club would be along soon and the people seemed unthreatening, so I stayed. It must have been Merv who came along and opened the door, ushered us into the hydraulic lift and then introduced me to the club library, which was a treasure trove even in 1966.

I came to know Merv quite well over the next few years at the regular club meetings, screenings of the Fantasy Film Group, and at conventions. He always seemed to be being put upon by others or by the state of the world or his personal circumstances but he was nevertheless a cheerful soul. His life seemed to revolve around the club and science fiction in general but on several occasions I joined Paul Stevens (my great friend at the time) and went out to where Merv and his father, Ernie, lived on a

large plot of land and helped in putting dahlia bulbs in plastic bags for sale at plant nurseries.

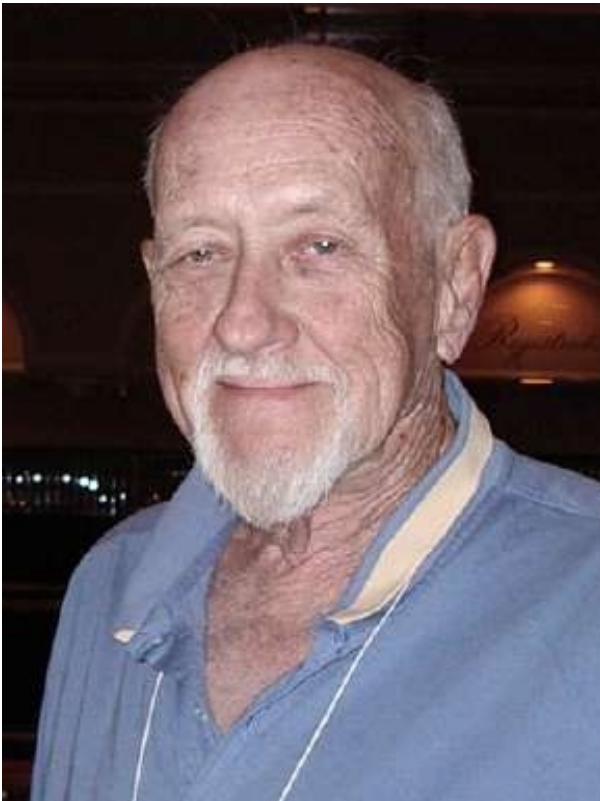
Without Merv there would have been no Melbourne SF Club. He carried it on his back with the help of a few helpers and the support of Paul, who became his faithful off-sider. I have memories of spending a couple of days over one weekend helping to paint the clubrooms (perhaps in preparation for some forthcoming event) and on another occasion being present and perhaps helping after the hydraulic lift was closed and a corridor had to be built connecting the stairs up from the ground floor and the stairs up to the next level where the club was. I must have been of some help to Merv on occasions, but overall I think Merv was more help to me by keeping the club going, letting me use the duplicator there, and being a constant presence in the Australian sf commu-

nity.

There are three or four people I owe my presence in fandom to, and the pleasure which I have gained from it. Merv is the first of those. In many ways he was an unremarkable person in comparison to others, but he had stamina and perseverance in a way that no other person I've known. He had set his path in life from an early age and he stayed with it through the good times and the bad. He sometimes complained that he had given up a lot for science fiction and fandom, but I hope that, in the end, he felt that he had also been repaid for his endurance and fortitude. I hope that one of the things the history I'm writing will show is that Merv was a, if not the, central figure in our history.

— **Leigh Edmonds**, *iOTA* 17, June 2020, pp. 1–3

Earl Kemp (1929–2020)



Earl Kemp. (Photo: John-Henri Holmberg.)

Earl Kemp, born 24 November 1929, died in his home from a fall on 6 February 2020. His son **Erik Kemp** writes:

‘The very last email my father, one of the most prolific writers of all time, sent out was at 3:56 p.m. and he died after getting up from the computer and falling on the corner of his desk and cracking his head open, and from

all indications it was a sudden death.’

I knew little about Earl Kemp when I arrived at Corflu, held in San Francisco in 2005, probably because I've never received a fanzine from him. I had seen his fanzine *i*E* posted regularly on efanzines.com for some years, and had always meant to catch up reading what is effectively Earl's autobiography. Earl was a great friend during the convention, and arranged the whirlwind trip around San Francisco that Bill Burns, Pete Weston, and I took on the afternoon we arrived in town. Earl also was in Las Vegas when Billy Pettit and I visited Arnie and Joyce Katz a few weeks later.

Famous Swedish fan **John-Henri Holmberg** emailed the following when he heard the news about Earl's death:

‘Earl was chairman of the 20th Worldcon, Chicon III in 1962. He was a prolific fanzine editor, last with his 2002-2012 monthly *e*I*. He was one of the founders of Advent:Publishers, devoted to nonfiction about sf, and the company that published Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* and James Blish's *The Issue at Hand*, as well as Harry Warner Jr's *All Our Yesterdays* and Alexei Panshin's *Heinlein in Dimension*.

‘As primary editor of William L. Hamling's Greenleaf Books in Chicago, Earl from 1961 and on possibly published more erotica than anyone else in the world; his most famous book, however, was probably *The Illustrated Presidential Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, published in 1970, a shortened version of the actual report, but illustrated; the book had both Earl and William Hamling sentenced to jail time for “conspiracy to mail obscene material”, but neither served more than the minimum of three months and one day.

‘Earl was a first-rate editor, a prolific writer, and expert on pulp fiction and writing, a funny and fascinating man. Not only the science fiction community is lessened by his death.’

Ian Covell (1953-2019)

I knew **Ian Covell** only through his posts on the Fiction-mags e-list, and the fact that every month he compiled the list of 'British Books Received' for *Locus* magazine. He liked a dispute, especially as his tastes in SF were rather old-fashioned by current standards. Nevertheless, his bibliographic information was always on offer for those who need SFnal information.

The *Locus* tribute: 'Longtime *Locus* contributor Ian Covell, 66, died 11 December 2019 in Middlesbrough, England. Covell began compiling *Locus*'s monthly

"British Books Received" column in 1994, providing our readers with a view of UK publishing for 25 years. He wrote bibliographies *J.T. McIntosh, Memoir and Bibliography* (1987), *An Index to DAW Books* (1989), and *A.E. van Vogt: Master of Null-A* (1997, with Phil Stephenson-Payne), and co-edited issues of *The Time Centre Times* in 1995 and '96 with John Davey, Maureen Davey, and D.J. Rowe. He occasionally wrote short stories, including "The Stars My Fornication". He worked as a bookseller, for charitable organizations, and as a university administrator.'

Frank Lunney

Mike Glyer writes in *File 770*, 3 March 2020:

'Fanzine fan **Frank Lunney** died 28 February 2020 due to a coronary event. Early on, Lunney's *Beabohema* was competitive with the very best sercon zines of its day, gaining a Best Fanzine Hugo nomination in 1970 when it shared the ballot with Richard E. Geis' *Science Fiction Review*, Charlie Brown's *Locus*, Leland Sapiro's *Riverside Quarterly*, and Peter Weston's *Speculation*. Wikipedia says his contributors included 'a then-obscure fan named "Gene Klein" who would later become famous as Gene Simmons of KISS'.

'In the early seventies he switched over to publishing *Syndrome*, the reasons for which he explained in an interview published by Dan Steffan and Ted White in *Blat!*: "The real thing that made me decide to change was being at the Boston worldcon in 1971 with the Katzes and the Kunkels. They had some hashish that made me *hallucinate*. (laughs) And they loaned me *A Sense of FAPA* with *Ah! Sweet Idiocy* in

it, and I read and I realized that not writing about science fiction was a lot more interesting than being concerned with science fiction at all ..."

'Although he considered what he was doing before to be fannish, from that point on other fans also identified his output as fannish. Or even faannish. In later years he would often attend Corflu. Indeed, Lunney is credited with originating the Corflu practice of paying \$20 to have one's name removed from the choosing hat, taking away any risk of being drafted to give a GoH speech at the Sunday banquet.'

— **Bruce Gillespie and friends**, 3 July 2020



(l. to r.): Murray Moore, Tom Becker, Doug Bell, Pat Virzi, Frank Lunney, John D. Berry, Alan Rosenthal: Corflu 2016, Chicago. (Photo: Geri Sullivan.)

2019 – the final year?

I was not the only person to list of my Favourites for 2019. I've read quite a few lists, either in emails or on Facebook. Some kind people have allowed me to reprint their lists here. It's as if we all had an intuition that 2019 might be the last year for some time in which Australians would have easy access to the world's books, music, and films. Several of my suppliers have told me that they cannot source the good stuff from overseas for the time being. Planes aren't flying; international freight rates have gone up 1000 per cent. A friend tells me Amazon Australia won't import films on disk.

Things may never return to 'normal'. When after two months I went into my local JB Hi Fi store, I found that almost no CDs had been released. The only DVDs released are of films that were in cinemas when they closed. You might be able to buy overseas books from BookDepository, but you will need to wait two months for your parcel to arrive.

It's good to indulge in a bit of nostalgia for the period before 16 March 2020 when we all went into lockdown. So, back to 2019 ...

Bruce Gillespie

2019: Best of everything

Favourite books read for the first time in 2019

* Books read thanks to the generosity of Jenny Bryce.

** Book read thanks to the generosity of Iola Mathews.

*** Book read thanks to the generosity of Tim Train.

****Book read thanks to the generosity of Dick Jenssen.

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- | | | | |
|---|--|----|--|
| 1 | LOVE IS STRONG AS DEATH (2019) ed. Paul Kelly (Penguin/Hamish Hamilton) | 7 | THE SKY FALLS DOWN: AN ANTHOLOGY OF LOSS (2019) ed. Terry Whitebeach and Gina Mercer (Girrindera Press) |
| 2 | A SEASON ON EARTH (2019) Gerald Murnane (Text) | 8 | THE ANIMAL DOCTOR: A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE (1973) P. C. Jersild (Pantheon) |
| 3 | PILGERMANN (1983) Russell Hoban (Jonathan Cape) | 9 | THE ONE HUNDRED YEAR OLD MAN WHO CLIMBED OUT OF THE WINDOW AND DISAPPEARED (2009) Jonas Jonasson (Allen & Unwin) |
| 4 | TELL ME WHY: THE STORY OF MY LIFE AND MUSIC (2019) Archie Roach (Simon & Schuster) | 10 | *LILY CAMPBELL'S SECRET (2019) Jennifer Bryce (Rightword Enterprises) |
| 5 | HER SMOKE ROSE UP FOREVER: THE GREAT YEARS OF JAMES TIPTREE, Jr (1990) Arkham House | 11 | CLOUDSTREET (1991) Tim Winton (Penguin) |
| 6 | MEET ME AT INFINITY: THE UNCOLLECTED TIPTREE: FICTION AND NONFICTION (2000) ed. Jeffrey D. Smith (Tor) | 12 | LET THE OLD DREAMS DIE (2011) John Ajvide Lindquist (Quercus) |

- 13 TALES OF THE QUINTANA ROO (1986) James Tiptree, Jr. (Arkham House)
- 14 OFF ON A BOAT (1938/1988) Neil Gunn (Richard Drew)
- 15 GROUP FEAST (1971) Josephine Saxton (Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press)
- 16 THE GRAMMARIANS (2019) Cathleen Schine (Farrar Straus Giroux/Sarah Crichton Books)
- 17 THE LOVE OF A GOOD WOMAN (1998) Alice Munro (Chatto & Windus)
- 18 **WINNING FOR WOMEN: A PERSONAL STORY (2019) Iola Mathews (Monash University Publishing)
- 19 GOOD GIRL BAD GIRL (2019) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia)
- 20 TIME WAS (2018) Ian McDonald (Tor)

Other four-star contenders (in order of reading):

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF ALTERNATE HISTORIES (2010) ed. Ian Watson and Ian Whates (Robinson)

BOOKS THAT SAVED MY LIFE: READING FOR WISDOM, SOLACE AND PLEASURE (2018) Michael McGirr (Text)

***HANGOVER MUSIC (2018) Tim Train (Ginninderra Press)

REFLECTIONS AND REFRACTIONS: THOUGHTS ON SCIENCE FICTION, SCIENCE AND OTHER MATTERS (1997) Robert Silverberg (Underwood Books)

GREEN SHADOWS AND OTHER POEMS (2019) Gerald Murnane (Giramondo)

THE WRECKAGE (2011) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia)

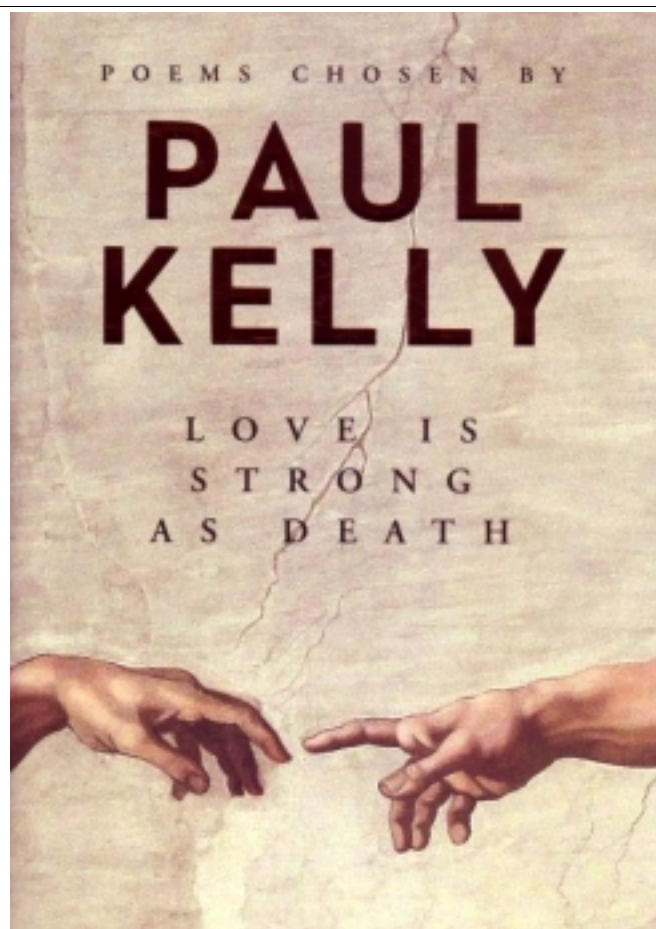
PLACES IN THE DARKNESS (2017) Chris Brookmyre (Orbit)

EXHALATION (2019) Ted Chiang (Picador)

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TIME TRAVEL (2018) Kate Mascarenhas (Head of Zeus)

FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD (2013/2018) Ahmed Saadawi (Oneworld)

****INSOMNIAC CITY: NEW YORK, OLIVER SACKS AND ME (2017) Bill Hayes (Bloomsbury)



FEARSOME MAGICS: THE NEW SOLARIS BOOK OF FANTASY (2014) ed. Jonathan Strahan (Solaris)

EPISODES: A COLLECTION (2019) Christopher Priest (Gollancz)

HARDBALL (2009) Sara Paretsky (Putnam)

PEACE (2019) Garry Disher (Text)

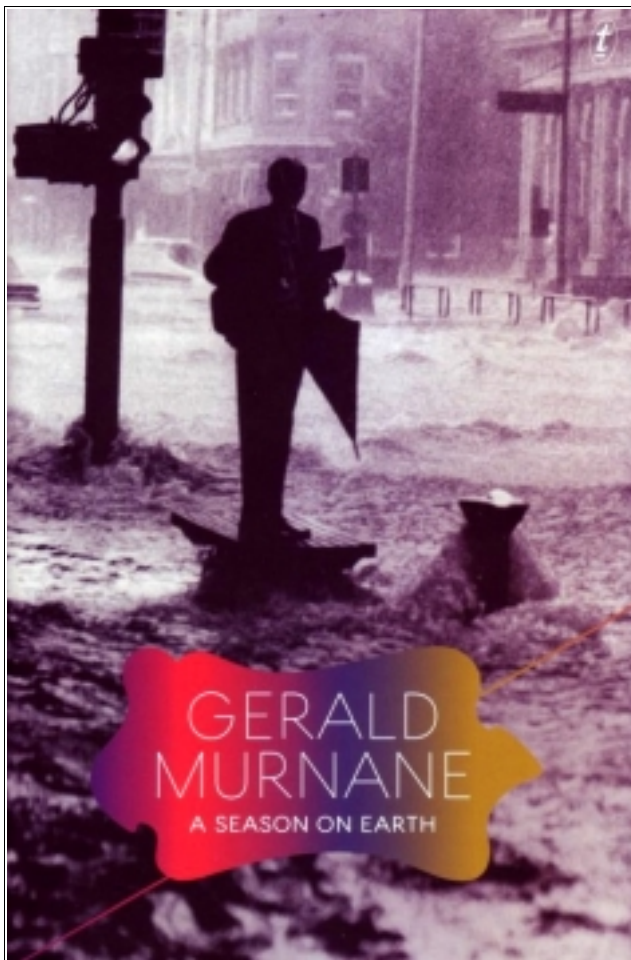
THE MAN WHO CAME UPTOWN (2018) George Pelecanos (Orion)

Favourite novels read for the first time in 2019

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 A SEASON ON EARTH (2019) Gerald Murnane (Text) | 5 *LILY CAMPBELL'S SECRET (2019) Jennifer Bryce (Rightword Enterprises) |
| 2 PILGERMANN (1983) Russell Hoban (Jonathan Cape) | 6 CLOUDSTREET (1991) Tim Winton (Penguin) |
| 3 THE ANIMAL DOCTOR: A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE (1973) P. C. Jersild (Pantheon) | 7 GROUP FEAST (1971) Josephine Saxton (Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press) |
| 4 THE ONE HUNDRED YEAR OLD MAN WHO CLIMBED OUT OF THE WINDOW AND DISAPPEARED (2009) Jonas Jonasson (Allen & Unwin) | 8 THE GRAMMARIANS (2019) Cathleen Schine (Farrar Straus Giroux/Sarah Crichton Books) |
| | 9 GOOD GIRL BAD GIRL (2019) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia) |
| | 10 TIME WAS (2018) Ian McDonald (Tor) |

Love Is As Strong as Death: this is the first time I've listed a book of poems as my favourite book of the year. Not that the poems are written by Paul Kelly, although for

some time he has been Australia's most astute writer of lyrics for pop songs. Paul Kelly is your very intelligent ordinary bloke who happens to have read a huge amount



of poetry in his lifetime. He is not an academic. He is not a recognised poet. If he were, he would probably be squeezed within one of the many confining groups that divide poets in Australia. He's just you and me, but much brighter and better read — and with deep feelings that he's not afraid to draw upon. He does not confine himself to choosing poems he thinks we will know and love already. Instead, he leaves me in a state of constant wonder and surprise at the range of poetry that exists, particularly in the twentieth century. A list of my favourites from this collection would fill the rest of this page. Paul Kelly confronted me, for the first time in many years, with the overarching power of Shakespeare, particularly his sonnets. I need to brush up my Shakespeare. Also, Kelly makes a judicious selection of those major passages from the New and Old Testaments that contain universal truths. Thomas Hardy's 'Afterward', from early in the collection, is my favourite poem from the volume, as well as several Les Murray poems. All the poems by Wislawa Szymborska have a dark immediate power. A small number of song lyrics appear: Archie Roach's 'Took the Children Away' is powerful, even if you don't know the tune. The 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' still has not been read by every Australian.

The introduction to the Text Publishing edition of **Gerald Murnane's** *A Season on Earth* tells the tortured genesis of this fine novel. In 1976, Gerald submitted the complete novel to Heinemann in Melbourne, after the success of his first novel *Tamarisk Row*. It was cut in half, with changes demanded and made to the ending, and published as *A Lifetime on Clouds*. Heinemann promptly

folded its fiction program from some years, thus preventing the publication of the second half. *A Lifetime on Clouds* is a fine comic novel, but obviously truncated. Only in the last few years, as Gerald's work has become better known overseas and in Australia, has Text offered to publish the original novel. It now has all four parts instead of two. The comic novel about teenage fantasies in part 1 gradually becomes an in-depth exploration of all the intellectual paths that an introspective young man in Australia 70 years ago might have explored on the way to a true path. *A Season on Earth* is not, however, a mere psychological study of an earlier self, but a path through dark woods, especially in parts 3 and 4.

After all these years, I tried reading **Russell Hoban's** very famous novel *Riddley Walker* but failed to get past the first 50 pages. But I have collected quite a few of Hoban's other books, such as *A Mouse and His Child* and *Turtle Diary*. *Pilgermann* is quite different from anything else of his I've read: a strange, tortured pilgrimage novel, full of primal religious and psychology imagery.

Tell Me Why, by **Archie Roach**, on the other hand, tells in simple prose a story that will twist the heart of any reader. Archie Roach is known as Australia's finest Indigenous song-writer and singer, famous in particular for a song called 'Took the Children Away'. *Tell Me Why* gives some insight into the effect of being taken away from one's parents at a young age and treated as somebody else. The aim of the infamous program to remove Aboriginal children from their parents seems to have been to remove all memories of their heritage as well as improving their domestic circumstances. Many people who have been interviewed about this process describe living divided selves. Once he discovered something of his true self, Archie Roach deserted his white parents and departed on a pilgrimage that took quite a few years.

I spent much of 2019 thinking about the works and personality of **James Tiptree, Jr./Alice Sheldon**. I wrote a long article to be delivered to the Nova Mob, and published it in my ANZAPAZine. I need to amplify and clarify it, which is why it still does not appear in this issue of *SFC*. *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* is a very fine collection of Tiptree's best stories, leaving out only a few major pieces. It's not clear who edited the collection. My first edition from Arkham House includes an introduction by John Clute; the later Gollancz edition also includes an introduction by Lucius Shepard.

Of equal importance is **Jeffrey Smith's** collection *Meet Me at Infinity*, which I should have read in 2000 when it appeared. The fiction selections are uneven in quality. Of much greater interest is the correspondence between Alice Sheldon, both as 'Tip' (James Tiptree Jr) and 'Allie' (after the revelation he was Alice Sheldon), with Jeff Smith; as well as other articles and correspondence. As you will see from my article when it appears in *SFC*, a comment that Tiptree made in an article in 1972 for Jeff Smith's fanzine set me on the Tiptree pilgrimage.

The Sky Falls Down: An Anthology of Loss is another fine anthology, both of poetry and prose, that could well sit beside *Love Is Strong as Death* on your shelf of favourite anthologies. Edited by **Terry Whitebeach** and **Gina Mercer**, this anthology went through a difficult gestation, as described to me by **Jennifer Bryce**, one of the contributors. It took years to get published. As I wrote to Jenny,

the title of the anthology might not help sales. The anthology's authors cover almost every variety of loss, but the results are made enjoyable because of the quality and precision of the writing in many of these poems and stories. This anthology did not receive newspaper or magazine reviews, as far as I can tell, but it's worth searching for. (Jenny's own story, 'Benjamin', is very powerful, and will be reprinted in a forthcoming anthology. Another *SF Commentary* contributor, **Alex Skovron**, contributes a fine poem.)

During the last two years I've been trying to read many of the books that have been sitting unread on our shelves for a very long time. **P. C. Jersild's** *The Animal Doctor* (*Djurdoktorn*) appeared in 1973 in Swedish and 1975 in English. Its story is basically the same as that told by James Tiptree Jr in 'The Psychologist Who Wouldn't Do Awful Things to Rats', but Jersild's Kafkaesque take on the story is much more European than Tiptree's, and is at novel length. A fine SF novel that has been forgotten since 1975, but has lost none of its bite.

Somewhat more fun and fantastical is *The One Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* — yet the novel is a fantasy only because we

know the events could not have happened. **Jonas Jonasson's** 100-year-old man has a fine sense of humour, and has led a life of high adventure and low escapades. Of course he didn't give the atomic scientists the idea for The Bomb. Of course he didn't become chief adviser to the North Korean government during the Korean War. Of course. But Jonasson's story is so delightful that we keep hoping every word is true. (This novel was made into a film, but I've never had the opportunity to see it.)

I wrote about **Jennifer Bryce's** *Lily Campbell's Secret* in *SF Commentary* 100 (November 2019), but I can always quote myself: 'Lily Campbell's Secret tells of the years before, during, and after World War I. Lily, whose parents and family are very 'respectable' (i.e. rich and self-righteous), falls pregnant to, then marries Bert Campbell, a stablehand. Dispossessed by her family, she, Bert, and her new daughter Emily move into a cottage near Woodend. From then on, events do not take the path that most readers might expect. Lily shows great courage in adversity, and some foolishness, as the direction of her life slips away from her command. At the same time, her musically gifted daughter becomes a centre of the story, although we never hear her thoughts.'

Favourite films seen for the first time in 2019

*Films seen thanks to the generosity of Dick Jenssen.

**Films seen thanks to the generosity of Geoff Allshorn.

***Film seen thanks to the generosity of Lee Harding.

****Films seen thanks to the generosity of John Davies.

- 1 NEVER LOOK AWAY (2018) Florian Henckel von Donnersmarch
- 2 THE LUNCHBOX (2013) Ritesh Batra
- 3 LISBON STORY (1994) Wim Wenders
- 4 *BORDER (2018) Ali Abassi
- 5 PARASITE (2019) Bong Joon-ho
- 6 *STEAMBOAT BILL, Jr (1929) Charles Reisner and Buster Keaton
- 7 *OUR HOSPITALITY (1923) Buster Keaton and John G. Blystone
- 8 UNDER THE SILVER LAKE (2017) David Robert Mitchell
- 9 **A DOG'S PURPOSE (2017) Lasse Hallstrom
- 10 TOP END WEDDING (2019) Wayne Blair
- 11 ***THE MAN FROM LARAMIE (1955) Anthony Mann
- 12 ****THE MISSIONARY (1982) Richard Longrine
- 13 **THE FIRST GRADER (2010) Justin Chadwick
- 14 HUDSON HAWK (1991) Michael Lehmann
- 15 THE FAREWELL (2019) Lulu Wang
- 16 THE MAN WHO KILLED DON QUIXOTE (2018) Terry Gilliam
- 17 THE MAN WHO KILLED HITLER AND THEN THE BIGFOOT (2018) Robert D. Krzykowski
- 18 SOMETIME ALWAYS NEVER (2018) Carl Hunter
- 19 THE HANDMAID'S TALE (1990) Volker Schlöndorff
- 20 KNIVES OUT (2019) Rian Johnson

Other four-star contenders (in the order of viewing):

OKLAHOMA (1955) Fred Zinneman
 *RAMROD (1947) Andre de Toth
 AGATHA (1978) Michael Apted
 HOUDINI AND DOYLE (2016)
 STAN AND OLLIE (2018) Jon S. Baird
 *ESCAPE TO VICTORY (1981) John Huston
 MORTAL ENGINES (2018) Christian Rivers
 THE MEANING OF LIFE (1983) Terry Jones
 *KING'S ROW (1942) Sam Wood
 MARY POPPINS RETURNS (2018) Rob Marshall
 SUBMERGENCE (2017) Wim Wenders
 THE OLD MAN AND THE GUN (2018) Robert Redford
 ****HUMAN DESIRE (1954) Fritz Lang
 ORDEAL BY INNOCENCE (2018) Sandra Gold
 HIGH LIFE (2018) Claire Denis
 **THE MARTIAN CHILD (2007) Menno Meyjes
 *STATE SECRET (1950) Sidney Gilliat
 FIRST MAN (2018) Damien Chazelle
 DUMBO (2019) Tim Burton
 SENSE OF AN ENDING (2017) Ritesh Batra
 THE PRISONER (1955) Peter Glenville
 AND THEN THERE WERE NONE (2015) Craig Viveiros
 *THE TESTAMENT OF ORPHEUS (1959) Jean Cocteau
 ***ARIA (1987) prod. Don Boyd; various directors
 AD ASTRA (2019) James Gray
 TOY STORY 4 (2019) John Cooley
 WHAT WE DID IN THE SHADOWS (2015) Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi
 **FRAU IM MOND (WOMAN IN THE MOON) (1929) Fritz Lang

In Jennifer Bryce's 'Favourites' column you will find a much more articulate review of **Florian Henckel von Donnersmarch's** *Never Look Away* (2018) than I can offer. The film is about art and the people who create it, and the destructive influence of both political systems and artistic ideologies on talented artists. As a boy, the main character sees the effect of Nazi ideology on art just before World War II, then as a young man after the War he has to mirror East German ideology to keep painting. When he and his wife escape to West Germany in the 1960s, he finds equally strong figures who want to tell him how to paint. The story is much more complex than this, as Jenny's review indicates. The film is very long, but seemed quite short when I was watching it at the Nova Cinema in Carlton. (Remember watching films in cinemas?)

In 2019 I became more and more sick of the thuggish atmosphere and ideology that one now finds in most American and British films. Film-makers seem determined to make viewers hate themselves as well as the characters they see on screen. Therefore I kept putting off watching films with titles like *Killing Me Softly*, and trying to find films about people who are interesting and not trying to kill each other. I fronted up to the Nova Cinema in order to find strange, quirky films that had as little to do with superhero films as possible.

The best of these, recommended to me by my podiatrist, is **Ritesh Butra's** *The Lunchbox*. Set in Mumbai, it begins with the army of cyclists who roam the city every morning and evening. They all live in one village, and pick up from their clients' homes every morning the lunchbox for the worker in the family (usually male), deliver it to the place of work, and pick it up every evening. They pride themselves on never making a mistake, despite the chaos of the traffic in the streets they ride through. In this one case, the wrong lunchbox is delivered to a rather lonely, non-social man whose wife

has died. The lunchbox contains messages from the woman who prepares the lunch. Our hero begins to answer these notes. The film is very amusing in an understated way, its mood both celebratory of human possibilities and melancholy as well.

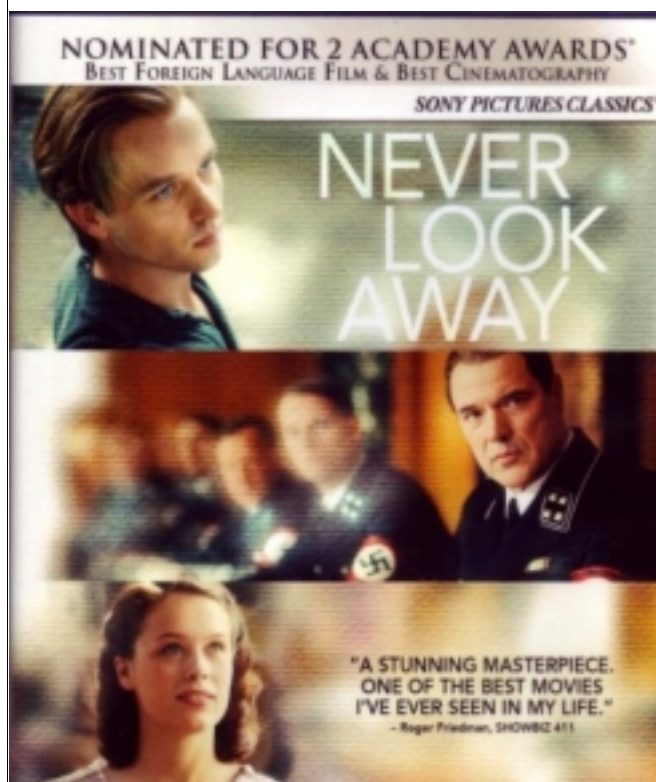
Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Story* is one of three road movies that he made, both before and after his great success with *Wings of Desire*. His main character has been asked to complete a film with a friend of his who lives in Lisbon. When he arrives in Lisbon, he finds no one at home. The house is open to anybody who wants to enter. The main character moves in, then finds that a music group uses it for rehearsals. The lead singer is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen on screen, and her folk-singing voice is extraordinary. The main character and every person who meets her (including the director, I suspect) fall in love with her immediately, but she remains very cool and distant with everybody. If 'romance' is the genre of unfulfilled desires, then this is one of the most romantic films ever made. (But that can be said of most of Wim Wenders' films, especially *Wings of Desire* and *Paris Texas*.)

Ali Abassi's *Border* is another of those films that appear very seldom: a totally original riff on life and love, with a powerful transgender theme thrown in. A woman most people regard as ugly works as a security guard in an airport checkpoint in Sweden. She prides herself on being able to sniff out contraband goods in the luggage of any international traveller. She is quite sure that one man who passes through the checkpoint is hiding something illegal in his case, but she can't find it. When she meets him again, their similarities dissolve the boundaries between them. Each has greater bonds with the other than with the rest of the human race. And that's just the beginning of the story. This is a very strange but satisfying love story, based on a novella by John Ajvide Lindquist (*Let the Wrong One In*). Thanks to Dick Jenssen for pointing me towards it.

***Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho)** is the first non-English-speaking movie to win the Oscar for Best Movie, although Cuarón's *Roma* should have achieved the honour the year before. *Parasite* could so easily have been brushed aside by the distributor as one of those quirky movies destined to be seen by three people in a New York arthouse. It begins as the members of a Korean family down on their luck pretend to be house staff in order to take over the lives of a rich family. But surprises keep destroying their plans and changing the direction of the movie. The last two scenes are so startling that nobody who sees this movie will forget them.

Not as coherent or memorable as *Parasite* is **David Robert Mitchell's *Under the Silver Lake***, a movie of constant surprises and startling disclosures. It's a strange odyssey taken by a young man down on his luck in Los Angeles. Nothing that happens at the end of the movie could have been predicted at its beginning.

In 2019 I not only went looking for quirky movies but also for sentimental, warmhearted movies like ***A Dog's Purpose***. It's one of those movies that should not have worked, but does. The voice-over is provided by a dog who keeps losing his life and being resurrected in a different doggy body each time. In some bodies he is deliriously happy, sharing fully in the lives of his people. In another body, he is left out in the cold and eventually



dumped by the side of the road. I won't tell you how it all works out, but it had me sobbing. A movie for *all* viewers, from very young kids to oldies like me.

My other favourite weepie of 2019 is the Australian romcom movie *Top End Wedding*. **Wayne Blair's** earlier great success *The Sapphires*, about an Aboriginal girls' singing group who performed in Vietnam, had a script that was a bit sketchy and underdone, but in *Top End Wedding* all the pieces fit: the two (played by Miranda Tapsell and Gwilym Lee) who want to get married in the Top End, the mother who disappears, therefore stopping the elaborate wedding in its tracks, the hard-going journey of the two lovers through Australia's greatest scenery in order to find her, and the very powerful reunion scenes towards the end. At least somebody can still make entertaining movies without scenes of carnage.

Also warmhearted, but sharp and hard as well, is **Justin Chadwick's** *The First Grader*. Maruge (Oliver Litondo, who looks exactly like Morgan Freeman), 84 years old, arrives at school in Kenya in the year when all the children were promised a basic education. Every force of bureaucracy and public opinion is determined not to allow him to take a desk in class, but his teacher Jane Obinchi (Naomie Harris) is determined to beat the bastards. The story is simple, and even predictable, but the steps along the way are not, because everybody remembers that Maruge was a member of the Mau Mau, who fought the British to a standstill in the 1950s. Wonderful photography, direction, and acting. Thanks to Geoff Allshorn for bringing along this film to our little film group.

Everybody who has seen **Buster Keaton's** *Steamboat*

Bill, Jr and *Our Hospitality* will agree with me that these are two of the best 'silent' movies ever produced, and contain some of the funniest routines and most breathtaking stunts in cinema. Buster Keaton was famous for doing his own stunts, but nothing quite prepares the viewer for his astounding athletic performances, especially when he and his heroine are washed down dangerous rapids in *Our Hospitality*. The Blu-ray format comes into its own for revivals of films such as these; the black-and-white prints are absolutely clear, as if they had just been released.

I must mention **Michael Lehmann's** *Hudson Hawk* because there are people who really hate this comedy caper, and others, like Melbourne fan Terry Frost, who have been recommending it to me for 30 years. It's light stuff, designed for the comedic and athletic talents of Bruce Willis, but it is very inventive, and (now on Blu-ray) photographed and directed superbly. Comic-book violence, it's true, and with no redeeming social value, but it would still have to be counted among Willis's best films.

An also-must-mention: **Volker Schlöndorff's** version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, made 25 years before the TV version. It is far better in every way than the TV version with its turgid colour palette and mind-numbingly slow pace. It's a while since I've read Marion Atwood's novel, but I think the movie departs from its plot towards the end. Not that I care. Miranda Richardson is magnificent in the movie, and the colour photography is some of the best I've ever seen. (The use of reds in particular reminds of the splendours of François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*).

Favourite films seen again in 2019

- 1 *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968) Stanley Kubrick
- 2 IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946) Frank Capra
- 3 *ORPHÉE (1950) Jean Cocteau
- 4 WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1957) Billy Wilder
- 5 MY FAVOURITE YEAR (1982) Richard Benjamin
- 6 *TWELVE MONKEYS (1995) Terry Gilliam
- 7 **WAR GAMES (1983) John Badham
- 8 *THE GENERAL (1926) Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton
- 9 *THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (1942) Orson Welles
- 10 ****HIGH NOON (1952) Fred Zinnemann
- 11 ****THE LAST PICTURE SHOW (1972) Peter Bogdanovich
- 12 FRENCH CANCAN (1954) Jean Renoir
- 13 THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD (1939) William Keighley and Michael Curtiz
- 14 PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET (1953) Samuel Fuller

Other four-star contenders (in order of viewing):

****THE ASSASSINATION BUREAU LIMITED (1969)

Basil Dearden

*BEAT THE DEVIL (1953) John Huston

*THE THIRD SECRET (1964) Charles Crichton

*BLOOD OF A POET (1930) Jean Cocteau



No surprises here. I've watched recent remastered Blu-rays of most of these films, thanks either to **Dick Jensen** or **John Davies**.

2002: A Space Odyssey keeps being issued in new Blu-ray editions. The most recent version is no better than the previous Blu-ray, but has a slightly different colour profile. Still, once I started showing it, I had to watch it all over again, didn't I?

It's a Wonderful Life, my second favourite movie, is finally receiving the Blu-ray treatment, with some improvement of the image. The latest version includes a useful documentary about director Frank Capra.

I was beginning to give up on ever being able to watch again **Richard Benjamin's** sublime comedy *My Favourite Year*. I walked into Melbourne's only specialist Blu-ray

store, Play DVD around the corner from 55 Bourke Street, and there it was! It's my favourite Peter O'Toole film after *Lawrence of Arabia*. All the other actors can be seen to be having a great time. 'My favourite year is 1954' says the voice-over at the beginning of the film. I thought it was a pretty good year too, but I didn't live in New York and I was only seven at the time.

About all I can say about the rest of these films is that superb new Blu-rays are available of them, so don't be content with second best (YouTube or wherever). In particular, watch again **Peter Bogdanovich's** *The Last Picture Show*, with the saddest line in all cinema and John Surtees' astonishing black-and-white photography that looks much better on the Blu-ray than it did in the cinema in 1972.

Favourite documentaries and music films seen for the first time in 2019

- 1 *APOLLO 11 (2019) Todd Douglas Miller
- 2 WORKING CLASS BOY (2018) Mark Joffe
- 3 *CANDIDE (1991/2008) Humphrey Burton, cond. Leonard Bernstein
- 4 PAVAROTTI (2019) Ron Howard
- 5 JEFF BECK: LIVE AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL (2017) Jim Yukich
- 6 ROLLING STONES: STICKY FINGERS LIVE AT THE FONDA THEATRE 2015 (2015) Paul Dugdale
- 7 ROLLING STONES: BRIDGES TO BUENOS AIRES (1998/2019) Jim Gable and Dick Carruthers
- 8 MOSE ALLISON: EVER SINCE I STOLE THE BLUES (2005) Paul Bernays
- 9 GLASS: A PORTRAIT OF PHILIP GLASS IN TWELVE PARTS (2007) Scott Hicks
- 10 BASTARDY (2008) Amiel Courtin-Wilson
- 11 JONI 75: A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION (2019) Jon Weisbrodt
- 12 ALONE WITH CHRISSIE HYNDE (2016) Alex Jones and Nicola Roberts
- 13 AMAZING GRACE (2019) Alan Elliott/Sidney Polack

- 14 **MONTY PYTHON: ALMOST THE TRUTH: THE LAWYER'S CUT (2009) Bill Jones, Alan G. Parker, Ben Timlett)
- 15 HITSVILLE: THE MAKING OF MOTOWN (2019) Gabe Turner and Benjamin Turner

Other four-star contenders (in order of viewing):

JACO (2015) Paul Marchand and Stephen Kijack
NORAH JONES LIVE IN NEW ORLEANS (2003) Jim Gabour)
GURRUMUL (2017) Paul Damien Williams
COWBOY JUNKIES: LONG JOURNEY HOME: LIVE IN LIVERPOOL (2008) Paul M. Green
*McKELLEN: PLAYING THE PART (2018) Joe Stephenson
*THE HAMSTER FACTOR AND OTHER TALES OF THE TWELVE MONKEYS (1996) Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe

Elaine and I saw *Apollo 11* at Melbourne's mighty IMAX cinema, then later on Blu-ray. I've seen reviews of many other documentaries and music films that I would like to have seen, but they have been available only on streaming services.

Apollo 11 features much new footage, including 70 mm film that was taken during the launch in 1969 but not discovered until recently. **Todd Douglas Miller** tells the story in a riveting way, as if you didn't know the outcome already. And of course we saw the film as close as possible to the actual day of the celebration of 50 years since the first Moon landing. **Geoff Allshorn** gave a fine talk about the event at Continuum in June, and a few weeks later at a meeting of the Nova Mob. He saw the film at IMAX a week later than we did.

In 2019 my favourite film about music was **Mark Joffe's** *Working Class Boy*, a biography of Australian rock singer Jimmy Barnes (Cold Chisel). It features the stage performance of *Working Class Boy* that toured Australia in association with Barnes' autobiography of the same name. Barnes tells in an amusing and matter-of-fact way a story of an early life of privation and violence unknown to most of his listeners. The film-maker also interviews many of Barnes's friends and relatives. The story becomes larger than the music; Barnes's experience propels him toward the abrasive style of rock that Cold Chisel made so popular in the 1980s and 1990s. (Fifteen years after the group broke up, they were still selling 100,000 CDs per year.) Jimmy Barnes is possibly not someone I would want to meet in person, but I was very



glad to meet him on film.

Candide is a performance of a rather different type of music. **Leonard Bernstein** wrote the first version of this musical 50 years ago. It has been revised several times. The film shows a concert performance of the musical, not a full-dress version, but it's highly effective on screen. Bernstein introduces it, and conducts the performance. Every performer seems very sparkling — but Bernstein relates at the end of the film that almost every performer was afflicted by a terrible flu that night!

Ron Howard's film *Pavarotti* features much great music from **Luciano Pavarotti**, but probably does not tell the whole story. For instance, his midlife change of wife is glossed over as skilfully as possible, even by the wife and daughters who were left behind. What is examined in clear-eyed detail is the process by which two entrepreneurs took Pavarotti the great opera singer and made into a world-famous cultural symbol, with a following and career more than like those of Mick Jagger or Paul McCartney than that of his one-time co-star Joan Sutherland. The 'Three Tenors' concerts are what we remem-

ber best, but they were merely a step on the way to the deification of Pavarotti the Star. For the performances alone, it's worth watching the movie on a great sound system.

Lots of good concert performances are among my favourite documentaries of 2019, including concert videos that show that the **Rolling Stones** are getting better and better on stage although they grow older, and despite the fact they've written almost no good new songs for 35 years.

Scott Hicks' *Glass: A Portrait of Philip Glass in Twelve Parts* is not as pretentious as it sounds. **Scott Hicks** virtually lived with the Glass family for a year while he made this film about composer Philip Glass. The film includes some fine performances, but it is not primarily a concert film. Its aim is to show Glass at work. When his wife says grimly at the end of the film that about all he does is work, we sense the advent of the divorce that happened after the film was made. Other former wives are interviewed. I looked up Philip Glass's discography: he has written and recorded as many compositions since the interviews were filmed as he had until then. Glass is now 80, but in the film he appears to be only in his late fifties.

If *Glass* is as much about Scott Hicks the film maker as it is about Philip Glass the subject matter, the effect is much more noticeable in **Amiel Courtin-Wilson**'s *Bas-tardy* (2008). Courtin-Wilson first met Aboriginal actor **Jack Charles** seven years before the film was finished, and filmed him from time to time during the intervening seven years. Although he had a reputation as a fine Aboriginal actor as early as the 1970s, the film shows him bunked down in a corner of a building, burgling houses to raise money for heroin and food. Various friends try to help him, and from time to time offer him a flat to live in. But he always takes to the streets again. Only in later life does he return to the stage and perform in a few films; and eventually decides to give up the life of a petty criminal. He is a chatty chap, fond of explaining himself, but you can tell that he does not really know why he led his underground life. These days he has become a senior elder of his people, and tries to give guidance to people who seek his help.

Favourite television (seen on DVD or Blu-ray) in 2019

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | COUNTERPART, Seasons 1 and 2 | 8 | PIE IN THE SKY, Season 2 (1995) |
| 2 | THE CITY AND THE CITY (2017) | 9 | LOCH NESS (THE LOCH), Season 1 (2016) |
| 3 | MAIGRET, Season 2 (st. Rowan Atkinson) (2017) | 10 | BROADCHURCH, Season 1 (2013) |
| 4 | MAIGRET, Season 1 (st. Rowan Atkinson) (2016) | 11 | SHETLAND, Season 4 |
| 5 | THE BRIDGE, Season 4 | 12 | VERA, Season 8 (2018) |
| 6 | ENDEAVOUR, Season 6 | 13 | INSTINCT, Season 1 |
| 7 | PIE IN THE SKY, Season 1 (1994) | 14 | PRIME SUSPECT, Season 1 |

Counterpart is fairly close to the best TV series I've ever seen. (My favourite TV series remains *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, in which Alec Guinness dominates the screen for six

hours or so). I would have missed out on *Counterpart* altogether if Duncan Campbell, a member of the Friday night group, had not alerted me to it.

Its story line has gained special extra significance in 2020's Year of the Virus. Two alternative side-by-side versions of the world have been revealed to each other. Limited human traffic between the two worlds takes place at a portal in Berlin. Some years earlier, a virus had depleted the population of one of these worlds. Some people in that world believe that it was introduced deliberately from 'our' world. Our world is represented by a crowded, harried Berlin. We meet a man of our world, played by J. K. Simmons, who holds a mundane job in a bureaucracy that resembles that of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. His wife has been the victim of a hit-and-run accident and lies in hospital. A man visits him. Also played by J. K. Simmons, he brings warnings from the 'other side'. Somebody has been sent from there to finish the job of killing the wife. We then explore the 'other side', where the wife, played by Olivia Williams, is alive and well. Whenever the two actors are shown in the same frame, either Simmons or Williams, we can tell which character is which. As the plot becomes more complex, switching backwards and forwards between worlds, we can still tell which is which. This is character acting of the highest order, made possible only by a script that varies between intense character studies and violent action. You need to see both seasons for the entire story to be revealed, although Season 1 is satisfactory in itself. This is science fiction told without the need for special effects. Our-world Berlin is cluttered and busy; other-world Berlin is clean and uncluttered.

Counterpart was hidden away on SBS network in Australia, and I saw it on DVD. The astute TV viewer will immediately recognise the resemblance of the basic idea to that of *The City and the City*, which was well publicised when shown on ABC TV. In this fine detective drama, which also needs few special effects, the two alternate cities are divided by perceptions. One half of the City's population can see only one alternative; the other half see the other. The breakdown of this system threatens both cities, all of which is revealed during the murder mystery. China Miéville wrote the novel that is the basis for the TV series.

The other series I list I found absorbing enough, episode by episode, but were hardly a match for *Counterpart* and *The City and the City*. Watching the three series



of *Broadchurch* was a particularly depressing experience, where the downbeat ending of Season 1 become ultra-downbeat in Season 2, followed by a scarcely more uplifting Season 3. Still, watching Olivia Colman and David Tennant as the detectives and a host of other top British actors kept me interested. But I wouldn't watch it again.

Somewhat more delightful is Richard Griffiths and his kitchen crew in *Pie in the Sky*. Geoff Allshorn gave me four seasons out of the five. The set-up is highly improbable; the main character wants to give up being a detective to set up his own restaurant. He does so, but his boss finds a way to retain him as a detective. What shouldn't work, but does, is the combination of comedies provided by restaurant-running and catching various petty criminals. Again, good old British TV golden age script-writing and acting win against low production values and occasional stodgy direction.

Favourite popular CDs heard for the first time in 2019

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | Brandi Carlile: BY THE WAY, I FORGIVE YOU (2018) | 11 | THE ROLLING STONES (2017) |
| 2 | Tom Russell: OCTOBER IN THE RAILROAD EARTH (2019) | 12 | Herbie Hancock: THRUST (1974) |
| 3 | PATTY GRIFFIN (2019) | 13 | Miles Davis: DOO-BOP (1992) |
| 4 | Shovels and Ropes: BY BLOOD (2019) | 14 | Felice Brothers: UNDESS (2019) |
| 5 | THE MAES (2019) | 15 | Loudon Wainwright III: SURVIVING TWIN (2017) |
| 6 | THE HIGHWOMEN (2019) | 16 | Neil Young: COLORADO (2019) |
| 7 | Paul Kelly: LIVE AT THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE (2 CDs) (2019) | 17 | Archie Roach: TELL ME WHY (2 CDs) (2019) |
| 8 | Leonard Cohen: THANKS FOR THE DANCE (2019) | 18 | BETTER OBLIVION COMMUNITY CENTER (2019) |
| 9 | Willie Nelson: RIDE ME BACK HOME (2019) | 19 | Ezra Furman: TRANSANGELIC EXODUS (2018) |
| 10 | Various: STONED: CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF | 20 | Miles Davis: RUBBER BAND (2019) |
| | | 21 | Kevin Welch: DUST DEVIL |
| | | | Carla Olson and Todd Wolfe: THE HIDDEN HILLS SESSIONS (2019) |

- 22 Calexico: EDGE OF THE SUN (2015)
- 23 Various: JONI 75: A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION (2019)
- 24 Ronnie Wood & Wild Fire: MAD LAD (2019)
- 25 THE CARTRIDGE FAMILY REUNION (2019)
- 26 Various: IF YOU'RE GOING TO THE CITY: A TRIBUTE TO MOSE ALLISON (+ DVD) (2019)
- 27 Nils Lofgren: BLUE WITH LOU (2019)
- 28 Rhiannon Giddens, Amthyst Kiah, Leyla McCall, Alison Russell: SONGS OF OUR NATIVE DAUGHTERS (2019)
- 29 Oh Pep: I WASN'T ONLY THINKING OF YOU (2018)
- 30 Judy Collins: A LOVE LETTER TO STEPHEN SONDEHEIM (2017)
- 31 Paul McCartney: AMOEBA GIG (2019)
- 32 Enda Kenny: KITCHEN BALLADS (2019)
- 33 Brian Cadd: SILVER CITY (2019)
- 34 Rodney Crowell: TEXAS (2019)
- 35 Rhiannon Giddens and Francesco Tunisi: THERE IS NO OTHER (2019)
- 36 Paul Kelly, James Ledger, Alice Keath, Seraphim Trio: THIRTEEN WAYS TO LOOK AT BIRDS (2019)
- 37 Michael Waugh: THE WEIR (2019)
- 38 Kamasi Washington: HEAVEN AND EARTH (3 CDs) (2018)
- 39 PURPLE MOUNTAINS (2019)
- 40 Bonnie Tyler: BETWEEN THE EARTH AND THE STARS (2019)

Other four-star contenders (in order of hearing):

Various: COUNTRY FOLK SING MICKEY NEWBURY (2018)
 Perry Keyes: JIM SALMON'S LAMENT (2018)
 Loudon Wainwright III: YEARS IN THE MAKING (2 CDs) (2018)
 Triffids: BORN SANDY DEVOTIONAL (restored; extra tracks) (1986/2006)
 Ryan Downey: RUNNING (2019)
 CHRIS WILSON (2018)
 Various: YEP-ROCK RECORDS: ESSENTIALS OF AMERICANA (2018)
 Mavis Staples: LIVE IN LONDON (2019)
 Ray LaMontagne: PART OF THE LIGHT (2018)
 Jaco Pastorius: WORD OF MOUTH (1981)



Mercury Rev: BOBBIE GENTRY'S THE DELTA SWEETIE REVISITED (2019)
 Cowboy Junkies: LONG JOURNEY HOME: LIVE IN LIVERPOOL (+DVD) (2006)
 Black Sorrows: CITIZEN JOHN (2 CDs) (2019)
 Various: MUSCLE SHOALS: SMALL TOWN BIG SOUND (2019)
 Wilson Diesel: SHORT COOL ONES (1996)
 Gurf Morlix: IMPOSSIBLE BLUE (2019)
 J. J. Cale: STAY AROUND (2019)
 Kate Ceberano & Paul Grabowsky: TRYST (2019)
 Calexico/Iron & Wine: IN THE REINS (2005)
 Neil Young and the Stray Gators: TUSCALOOSA (2019)
 Mavis Staples: WE GET BY (2019)
 Calexico: THE THREAD THAT KEEPS US (2017)
 Santana: AFRICA SPEAKS (2019)
 Various: A TRIBUTE TO BILLY JOE SHAVER: LIVE (2005)
 Abdullah Ibrahim aka Dollar Brand: THE BALANCE (2019)
 SEEKER LOVER KEEPER (2011)
 Branford Marsalis Quartet: THE SECRET BETWEEN THE SHADOW AND THE SOUL (2019)
 John Mellencamp: NO BETTER THAN THIS: TWELVE NEW SONGS (2010)
 Chris Forsyth: ALL TIME PRESENT (2 LPs) (2018)
 Doc Watson: DOCABILLY (1995)
 Elisa Gilkyson: LAND OF MILK AND HONEY (2004)
 Broderick Smith: CRAYON ANGELS (1996)
 Little Feat and Friends: JOIN THE BAND (2008)
 THELONIOUS MONK PLAYS DUKE ELLINGTON (1955)
 Carla Olson: HAVE HARMONY, WILL TRAVEL (2013)
 John Mellencamp, T-Bone Burnett etc: GHOST BROTHERS OF DARKLAND COUNTY (2013)
 Judy Collins: JUDY COLLINS #3 (1963)
 John Coltrane: A LOVE SUPREME (1964/2005)
 Lucky Oceans: PURPLE SKY (2019)
 Neil Murray: BLOOD AND LONGING (2019)
 Seeker Lover Keeper: WILD SEEDS (2019)
 Lost Ragas: THIS IS NOT A DREAM (2019)
 Bill Frisell, Petra Haden, Hank Roberts and Luke Bergman: HARMONY (2019)
 Joseph Tawadros: BETRAYAL OF A SACRED SUNFLOWER (2019)
 Bruce Cockburn: CROWING IGNITES (2019)
 Lost Ragas: PHANTOM RIDE (2013)
 Peter Gabriel: SCRATCH MY BACK AND I'LL SCRATCH YOURS (2010/2013)
 DYSON STRINGER CLOHER (2019)
 Colin Linden, Luther Dickinson and Tennessee Valentine: AMOUR (2019)
 Bernard Fowler: INSIDE OUT (2019)
 Thelma Plum: BETTER IN BLAK (2019)
 Bill Kirchen: HAMMER OF THE HONKY-TONK GODS (2006)
 Molly Tuttle: WHEN YOU'RE READY (2019)
 Harry Nilsson: LOST AND FOUND (2019)
 Various: BIG BAND OF BROTHERS: A JAZZ CELEBRATION OF THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND (2019)
 Kim Richey: EDGELAND (2018)
 Old Crow Medicine Show: LIVE AT THE RYMAN (2019)
 Marc Cohn and Blind Boys of Alabama: WORK TO DO (2019)
 Richard Thompson: ACROSS A CROWDED ROOM: LIVE AT BARRYMORE'S 1985 (2 CDs) (2019)
 Ry Cooder and V. M. Bhatt: A MEETING BY THE RIVER (1993)

I know what you will think when you see the list: More of the same! More of the same popular music that's never played anywhere on III or II or any other ABC stations or any commercial stations. More of the same sort of music that I always recommend. My main listening source is Brian Wise's program, 3RRR Melbourne, Saturday mornings, but there must be some other programs on Melbourne alternative stations that include the music I like. I just haven't discovered them.

The great new star of Americana (which is the current name for The Music I Love) is **Brandi Carlile**: strong melodic songs, rich contralto voice (countryish equivalent of Rhiannon Giddens' more bluesy style), brilliant musicians, and attitude to spare. *By the Way, I Forgive You* won four Grammy Awards in 2019. She has made five earlier CDs, which I've never seen. She also forms one quarter of **The Highwomen**, a supergroup of country stars who made one of the most enjoyable CDs of last year, and has produced a recent album by **The Secret Sisters**. I'm looking forward to Brandi Carlile's new album; I just hope it is distributed in Australia.

Tom Russell's latest CD *October in the Railroad Earth* is at Number 2 for the year, although in most years it would have been Number 1. Tom Russell has the richest voice in country blues, and writes by far the most interesting lyrics.

I've been collecting CDs by **Patty Griffin** for 20 years, but her latest, self-titled CD is her best yet. The songs she writes match the quality of her voice.

Although I recommend many CDs that waver between country and blues, my favourite sort of music is still uncomplicated rock and roll. Almost nobody makes music in this style anymore, but the group **Shovels and Ropes** (a duo) come closest. *By Blood* pounds as hard as any of their previous albums, and the lyrics are brilliant.

Prompted by Melbourne fan/expatriate New Zealander **Murray MacLachlan**, I've taken more notice of duos and trios by women singers in recent years. **The Maes** is Australia's finest such group at the moment, but it took more than a month for my CD shop to prise a copy out of the group itself. That seems to be the prob-

lem with groups that work without a record company; they don't realise that record companies actually distribute and promote CDs. (The other great women's group from Melbourne is **OhPep**; their 2018 CD *I Wasn't Only Thinking of You* is also high on my list.)

I try not to stick within my own listening limits. I've been trying to find jazz records that don't sound pedestrian — those jazz records that sound as if they are recorded at 2 a.m. in a smoky bar and everybody is a bit high on something and each track lasts 10 minutes and consists of each performer taking a solo.

Herbie Hancock is an exception. Murray MacLachlan gave me one of Hancock's ground-breaking jazz-funk records from the 1970s. Then I found that his other great records from that period are slowly being released on CD. Each song jumps out at you. The attack is as fierce as that on a Miles Davis track from the same period. *Thrust* happens to be one I listened to most often, but I have others on the to-be-listened-to shelf. Like Miles Davis's work, this is jazz for the rock fan as well as the jaded jazz fan.

Talking of **Miles Davis** ... I finally got around to listening to his *Doo-Bop* from 1992, his last studio CD. Here's Miles having fun with pop-jazz, and almost getting me to my feet to dance. Not sure why I didn't buy it in 1992 when it first appeared, but recently I picked it up in one of those little five-CD boxed sets.

The album that would have followed it, but was unfinished when **Miles Davis** died, is *Rubber Band*. The critics have been a bit sniffy about it, for reasons unclear. I assume some production work had to be added, but it still sounds like pure Miles Davis to me. It is just as enjoyable as *Doo-Bop* or any of Miles's records from his last decade.

Some CDs were hard to get from local distributors, even for my friend Dave at Readings: **Neil Young**'s *Colorado*, for instance, or **Kevin Welch**'s *Dust Devil*. But if you come across anything on my lists, including the 'Other four-star contenders', give them a listen. Music is what life is all about.

Favourite popular boxed sets bought during 2019

- 1 Gene Clark: NO OTHER (remastered; extra tracks) (2 CDs)
- 2 Ronnie Lane: JUST FOR A MOMENT: MUSIC 1973–1997 (6 CDs)
- 3 Judy Collins: THE ELEKTRA ALBUMS Vol. 1 (8 CDs)
- 4 Archie Roach: THE CONCERT COLLECTION 2012–2018 (3 CDs)
- 5 Rolling Stones: ROCK AND ROLL CIRCUS (remastered; extras) (2 CDs)
- 6 Keith Richard: TALK IS CHEAP (reissue; extra tracks) (2 CDs)
- 7 Rolling Stones: VOODOO LOUNGE TOUR complete

- (2 CDs + DVD)
- 8 Bob Dylan: THE ROLLING THUNDER REVUE: THE 1975 LIVE RECORDINGS (14 CDs)

Other four-star items (in order of purchase):

Eric Bogle: THE LIVE COLLECTION (2 CDs)
Thelonius Monk: FIVE ORIGINAL ALBUMS (5 CDs)
Jaco Pastorius: TRUTH, LIBERTY AND SOUL (2 CDs)
Rolling Stones: HONK (Deluxe edition) (3 CDs)

Herbie Hancock: 3 ESSENTIAL ALBUMS (3 CDs)
 Various: AMERICAN EPIC: THE SOUNDTRACK/THE SESSIONS (3 CDs)
 Various: FOLK AND BLUEGRASS GOLD (2 CDs)
 Dr John: THE MOJO OF ... (2 CDs)
 Government Mule: RING ON THE MUSIC: LIVE AT THE CAPITOL THEATRE (2 CDs + 2 DVDs)
 Fairport Convention: WHAT WE DID ON OUR SATURDAY (2 CDs)
 Various: KING OF THE ROAD: A TRIBUTE TO ROGER MILLER (2 CDs)
 Kinks: ARTHUR, OR THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (2 CDs)
 Gerry Rafferty: WHO KNOWS WHAT THE DAY WILL BRING? (2 CDs)

Again, no surprises. The only surprise is that boxed sets (with booklets and lots of photos and other information) are still being released. In particular, it's a privilege to be able to buy *Just for a Moment: Music 1973–1997*, a well-curated six-CD set tracing the life and music of **Ronnie Lane**, fine song-writer, founder member of both the Small Faces and the Faces, leader of a folk music circus that toured England for some years, and collaborator on various LPs with people such as Pete Townshend. Ronnie Lane is best known for his wan wavery voice and the quality of his songs, but he was also a fine bass player and organiser — the oil that kept the Rod Stewart–Faces wheel turning as long as it did.

However, Ronnie Lane never produced a miracle album such as **Gene Clark's** *No Other*, full of magnificent harmonic singing by Clark and extraordinary playing from some of the best studio players of 1972. It was supposed to be the album that would launch Gene Clark's solo career after leaving the Byrds. It failed com-



pletely, and neither Gene Clark or his career recovered. I found a deleted copy of the LP in Discuro in the mid 1970s. Now it regularly appears on lists of the great albums of the last 50 years. The repackaged set includes a CD of extras and alternative takes.

Eagle Rock keeps turning out fine Rolling Stones packages, either remastered-tracks-plus versions of classic albums, or Blu-rays of recent concerts. And just to show that **Keith Richards** never took a back seat to Mick Jagger, his first solo album *Talk Is Cheap* has been re-released, and remastered, and with extra tracks. Keef doesn't really sing, but he and his band make a great rock and roll noise.

Favourite classical CDs heard for the first time in 2019

- 1 Wanda Landowska (harpsichord): Bach: GOLDBERG VARIATIONS (BWV 988)/ITALIAN CONCERTO (BWV 971)/CHROMATIC FANTASY & FUGUE BWV 903 (1933/1935/1936//1987)
- 2 Leonard Bernstein (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: BEETHOVEN: NINE SYMPHONIES (Blu-ray audio) (1980/2017) (Complete Bernstein on DG and Decca)
- 3 Vladimir Ashkenazy (cond.)/St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra: Shostakovich: SYMPHONY No 7 ('LENINGRAD') (1997) (Ashkenazy on Decca CD 47)
- 4 Karl Bohm (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: Bruckner: SYMPHONY NO. 4 (1973) (The Decca Sound CD 8)
- 5 Colin Davis (cond.)/London Symphony Orchestra: Berlioz: ROMÉO ET JULIETTE (2013/2016) (Berlioz Odyssey, CDs 1 and 2)
- 6 The Lindsays: Beethoven: STRING QUARTET NO. 7 (RAZUMOVSKY NO. 1); STRING QUARTET NO. 9 (RAZUMOVSKY NO. 3) (1984/2003)
- 7 Martha Argerich (p.)/Renaud Capuçon (v.)/Lydia Chen (v.)/Gauthier Capuçon (vc)/Mischa Maisky (vc)/Herbert Soudant (cond.)/Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana: Beethoven: PIANO CONCERTO No. 1/PIANO QUARTET No. 3/PIANO TRIO ('GHOST') (2005/2008/2013) (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 4)
- 8 Gil Shaham (v.)/Guiseppe Sinopoli (cond.)/Philharmonia: Bruch: VIOLIN CONCERTO No. 1/Mendelssohn: VIOLIN CONCERTO No. 1 (1989) (Gil Shaham Compete DG Recordings CD 4)
- 9 Leonard Bernstein (cond.)/Bavarian Radio Symphony Orch. and Choir/Arleen Auger (sop.)/Frederica von Staede (mezzosop.)/Frank Lopardo (tenor)/Cornelius Hauptmann (bass): Mozart: AVE VERUM CORPUS/EXSULTATE, JUBILANTE/GREAT MASS IN C MINOR (1990) (Complete Bernstein on DG and Decca CD 86)
- 10 Mstislav Rostropovich (vc)/Benjamin Britten (p.): Schubert: SONATA FOR ARPEGGIONE AND PIANO/ Schumann: FUNF STUCKE IM VOLKSTON/ Debussy: CELLO SONATA (1961/1968/1999)
- 11 Emerson Quartet: Haydn: STRING QUARTET: Hob.



- III:77 ('EMPEROR')/Schubert: STRING QUARTET No. 13 ('ROSAMUNDE')/STRING QUARTET No. 12 (1988/1996) (Emerson Quartet on DG, CD 6)
- 12 Bruno Walter (cond.)/Columbia Symphony Orchestra: Schubert: SYMPHONY No. 9/ INCIDENTAL MUSIC TO 'ROSAMUNDE' (excerpts) (1955/1959) (Bruno Walter The Edition CD 34)
- 13 Gil Shaham (v.)/Andre Previn (cond.)/London Symphony Orchestra: Barber: VIOLIN CONCERTO/ Korngold: VIOLIN CONCERTO/MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (1994) (Gil Shaham The DG Recordings CD 1)

Other four-star contenders, in order of listening:

- Ray Chen (v.): THE GOLDEN AGE: Robert Trevino (cond.)/London Philharmonic Orchestra: Bruch: VIOLIN CONCERTO No 1, plus Kriesler, Debussy, Gershwin etc. (2018)
- Sol Gabetta (Vc)/Candida Thompson (cond.): Vasks: PRESENCE/MUSIQUE DU SOIT/GRAMATA CELLAM FOR SOLO CELLO (2015)
- Herbert Blomstedt (cond.)/San Francisco Symphony Orchestra: Strauss: DON JUAN/AN ALPINE SYMPHONY (1990) (The Decca Sound CD 7)
- Alan Hovhaness: SHALIMAR: PIANO SOLOS (1988)
- David Hope (v.): MY TRIBUTE TO YEHUDI MENUHIN: pieces by Mendelssohn, Reicha, Vivaldi, etc (2016)
- Martha Argerich and friends: Mozart: SONATAS FOR 4 HANDS/SONATA FOR 2 PIANOS/FANTASIA IN F MINOR (2007/2011/2012/2017) (Lugano Recordings CD 2)
- Martha Argerich (p.)/Jacek Kasprzyk (cond.)/Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana: Mozart: PIANO CONCERTOS 20 and 25 (2006, 2012, 2014) (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 1)
- Gil Shaham (v.)/Pierre Boulez (cond.)/Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Bartok: VIOLIN CONCERTO No. 2/ RHAPSODY FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA, Nos. 1 and 2 (1999) (Gil Shaham Complete DG Recordings CD 2)

- Gil Shaham (v.)/Jian Wang (vc)/Claudio Abbado (cond.)/Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra: Brahms: VIOLIN CONCERTO/DOUBLE CONCERTO (2000/2001) (Gil Shaham Complete DG Recordings CD 3)
- Martha Argerich and friends: Mozart: ANDANTE AND VARIATIONS/Haydn: PIANO TRIO IN G MAJOR/ Beethoven: VIOLIN SONATA No. 8/CLARINET TRIO/ VARIATIONS ON 'THE MAGIC FLUTE' (2004/2009/ 2014) (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 3)
- Gil Shaham (v.)/Orli Shaham (p.): Dvorak: SONATA IN F MAJOR/ROMANTIC PIECES/SONATINA IN G MAJOR (1997) (Gil Shaham Complete DG Recordings CD 5)
- Willi Boskovsky (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orch.: NEW YEAR'S DAY CONCERT IN VIENNA 1979 (Johann Strauss I and II, Eduard Strauss, Josef Strauss, Ziehrer, von Suppe) (1979) (The Decca Sound CD 9)
- Martha Argerich (p.)/Renaud Capuçon (v.)/Mischa Maisky (vc)/Diego Fasolis (cond.)/Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana: Beethoven: TRIPLE CONCERTO/CELLO SONATA No. 2/CHORAL FANTASY (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 5)
- Charles Groves (cond.)/Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra: Sullivan: SYMPHONY IN C MINOR ('THE IRISH')/OVERTURE 'DI BALLO' (1968) (LP)
- Martha Argerich (p.) and friends: Bach: VIOLIN SONATA No. 4/Schubert: VARIATIONS FOR PIANO 4 HANDS/ Mendelssohn: MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (2 pianos)/Piano Trio No. 1 (2202/2009/2015) (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 6)
- Martha Argerich (p.)/Gautier Capuçon (vc)/Renaud Capuçon (v): Schumann: KINDERSZENEN/ FANTASIESTUCKE 1, 2 (2007, 2008, 2010) (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 8)
- Leonard Bernstein (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: Sibelius: SYMPHONIES Nos. 5 and 7 (1989) (Complete Bernstein on DG and Decca CD 100)
- Martha Argerich and friends: Prokofiev: SYMPHONY NO. 1 ('CLASSICAL') (piano version)/VIOLIN SONATA No. 2/Rachmaninov: 6 MORCEAUX (2003/2004/2012) (Martha Argerich The Lugano Recordings CD 17)
- Leonard Bernstein (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: Liszt: 'FAUST' SYMPHONY/Boito: 'MEFISTOFELE' PROLOGUE (1977) (Complete Bernstein on DG and Decca CD 57/58)
- Beniamino Gigli (tenor): THE INCOMPARABLE GIGLI: SONGS, OPERATIC AND RELIGIOUS ARIAS (1922-1947) (LP)
- Margaret Price (sop.)/James Lockhart (p.)/Jack Brymer (clarinet): SCHUBERT LIEDER (1971) (LP)
- Eugen Jochum (cond.)/Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Choir of German Opera Berlin: Bruckner: TE DEUM/10 SACRED PIECES (1966/ 1967/1971/1985)
- Placido Domingo (tenor): VERDI AND PUCCINI (1986)
- William Christie (cond.)/Les Arts Florissants/Guillemette Laurens (sop.): Purcell: DIDO AND AENEAS (1986)
- Benjamin Britten (cond.)/Clifford Curzon (p.): Mozart: PIANO CONCERTOS 20 and 23 (1982) (Decca Sound CD 13)
- Arturo Toscanini (cond.)/NBC Symphony Orchestra: Shostakovich: SYMPHONY NO. 7 ('LENINGRAD') (1942) (Arturo Toscanini Collection CD 22)
- Karl Bohm (cond.)/Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra: Richard Strauss: DAPHNE (1964) (2 LPs)
- Riccardo Chailly (cond.)/Gewandhaus Orch./Nelson Friere (p.): Brahms: PIANO CONCERTO No. 1/

Favourite classical boxed sets 2019

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Martha Argerich: THE LUGANO RECORDINGS (22 CDs) | ON DG (52 CDs) |
| 2 | Leonard Bernstein: COMPLETE RECORDINGS ON DG AND DECCA (121 CDs + 36 DVDs + 1 Blu-ray) | 4 Christa Ludwig: EDITION (12 CDs) |
| 3 | Emerson String Quartet: COMPLETE RECORDINGS | 5 Mandelring Quartet: Mendelssohn: COMPLETE CHAMBER MUSIC FOR STRINGS (4 CDs) (2015) |

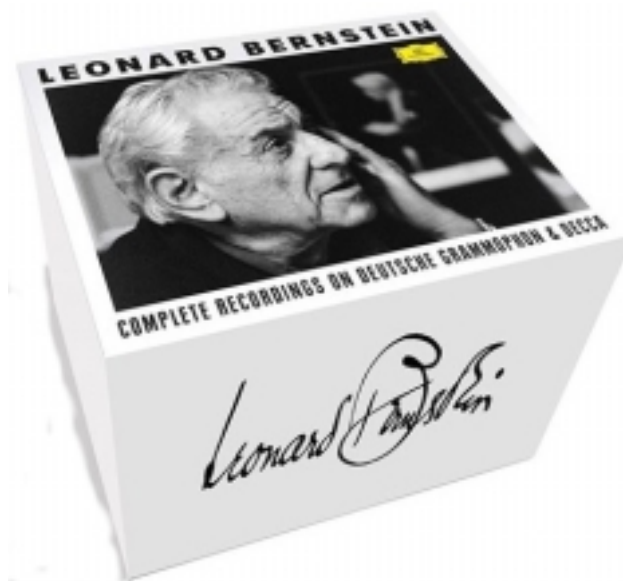
I can't talk about the items on the Favourite Classical CDs list without talking about those on the Favourite Classical Boxed Sets list. Nearly all the items on the former list are there because I have bought a classical boxed set during the last ten years or so. I was still under the delusion that I was making money in the middle of the year when I bought the *Bernstein Complete Recordings on DG and Decca* (admittedly at half price, but it was still a couple of weeks' income), *Martha Argerich's Lugano Recordings* (22 fabulous CDs from the annual concerts that Argerich has staged every year in Lugano — until 2020), and the *Emerson Quartet's Complete Recordings on DG*.

It would be good to have a huge boxed set of recordings by some other chamber music groups, but obviously they don't sell like Bernstein, Karajan, and Argerich. I don't hold out much hope for, say, the best of the Takacs

Quartet or the Fitzwilliam Quartet or the Lindsays. But it has been very interesting to play CDs from the **Emerson String Quartet's *Complete Recordings on DG***.

Most of my listening has been picking the eyes out of the boxed sets I've bought, but there are exceptions. For instance, my No. 1 Classical Favourite, **Wanda Landowska's** hardsichord version of *Bach's Goldberg Variations*, is a CD I bought in 1987, in the middle of the first huge classical music CD boom. However, I've never played it right through. I own many other versions, including both Glenn Gould recordings, but this 1933 recording has a cut-through power that one rarely finds on any solo recording. The fillers, such as the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*, are also touchstone performances.

— Bruce Gillespie, 12 June 2020



Jennifer Bryce is a Melbourne writer. After a career in educational research, her first novel, *Lily Campbell's Secret*, was published in 2019. She has won awards, including the Australian Science Fiction Foundation 'Continuum' Short Story Competition, and her stories have been read on Vision Australia's radio program, *Cover to Cover*. Jennifer was a founding member of Elwood Writers (<http://elwoodwriters.com>) and has her own literary blog (<http://jenniferbryce.net>).

Jennifer Bryce

My favourites for 2019

Ten books, ten concerts and ten movies

Favourite books

So hard to say which was the very best book I read in 2019; all of the top three excelled in their different ways.

1 Esi Edugyan: *Washington Black*

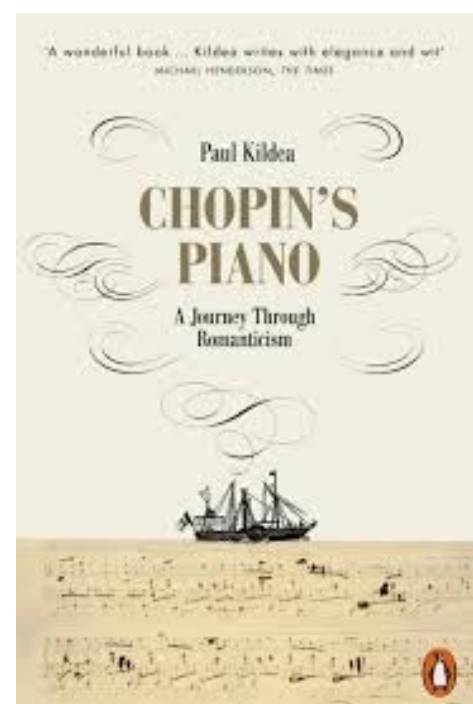
This story depicts the horrific abuse of early nineteenth-century slavery alongside a kind of reprieve for the bright young Washington Black, who has a sharp intelligence and special skills of observation that enable him to become a skilled artist. The story is told from the point of view of Washington. It starts when the 11-year-old is a slave on a plantation in Barbados. He is singled out for special duties. We escape with him in an 'aerial machine'. After various adventures, he ends up in the piercingly cold Arctic and later the muddy streets of London, then searches for and finds the father figure who helped him to escape, now dying in a hot, wind-swept desert. **Esi Edugyan** brilliantly takes us into the mind of this intelligent young man. His skills lead to him becoming an artist and assistant to a natural scientist. Even when slavery has been abolished, Washington is stalked by a bounty hunter so that we, the readers, are always anxious that he might be captured and returned to the brutal animal-like existence of his relatives. Although Washington is no longer enslaved, he finds that freedom is a state 'where one belongs nowhere and to no one'. I was transported by this brilliantly written book.

2 Paul Kildea: *Chopin's Piano*

A review in the *Spectator* gives an admirable summary of this unusual book: 'It is not a biography, nor a work of

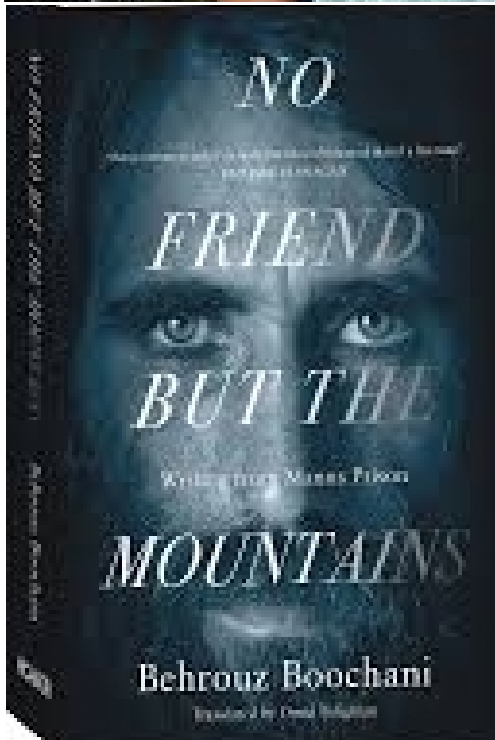
musicology. As an extended historical essay it is patchy and selective. It is partly about pianos and pianism, but would disappoint serious students of that genre. It is not quite a detective story — though there are, towards the end, elements of a hunter on the track of his prey' (<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/07/chopins-piano-is-an-eclectic-trip-through-19th-century-romanticism/>).

The detective element involves tracing the journey of a small Bauza pianino that Chopin took with him to Majorca in 1838, a journey that includes ownership by the celebrated interpreter of Bach, Wanda Landowska.





Behrouz Boochani.



The book is subtitled 'A Journey Through Romanticism', and this is certainly one of its many strands. I particularly enjoyed thinking about how styles of composition and interpretation are influenced by things like the design of a piano and, for example, the impact of the Steinway grand, the sound of which can fill a large concert hall — compared to the feebler sound of the parlour piano, which restricted performances to the drawing room.

3 Behrouz Boochani: *No Friend but the Mountains*

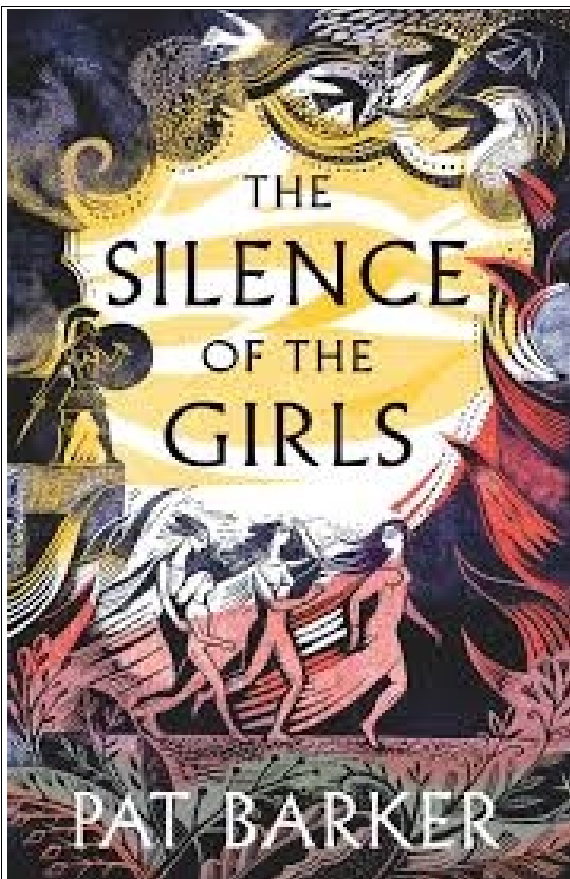
It is terribly hard to write about this book. For years, along with many other Australians, I have been deeply ashamed and humiliated by the government's treatment of refugees. But here I am, sitting at my comfortable desk at the end of 2019, groaning along with the crowd who

voted against Scott Morrison as Prime Minister — yet my life hasn't changed radically. I won't become homeless, stateless, or incarcerated.

Behrouz Boochani, a professional journalist who fled oppression via Indonesia, wrote this book using a mobile phone and Whatsapp. Boochani was awarded the 2019 Victorian Prize for Literature. I felt personally embarrassed when a self-righteous aspiring writer wrote a letter to *The Age* complaining that the rules, which she had followed assiduously, had been broken, because Boochani is not an Australian citizen. No — he was rejected by the Australian government. The book is a blending of poetry: flowers 'gasping as though in love with the cool ocean breezes' and social commentary: 'the untreated sewage spilling out around the facility [that] produces a smell ... so vile that one feels ashamed to be part of the human species'.

4 Pat Barker: *The Silence of the Girls*

Pat Barker is recognised for her perceptive writing around war — for example *The Regeneration Trilogy*, set during World War I. *The Silence of the Girls* goes much further back in history — to the time of the Trojan Wars. It has been labelled a feminist *Iliad*. Mainly through the eyes of Briseis, we experience the cost of war to women — women who survive as slaves when men destroy their cities and kill their brothers, fathers and children. Pat Barker has taken what we know of that time and looked at it through a different lens — how would the women have felt when, for example, they witnessed the teenage daughter of Priam and Hecuba being gagged and killed as a sacrifice? The characters in this book speak in twenty-first-century English, and the women, particularly Briseis, have an assurance that one might not expect of people kept in subjugation. At first I balked at the language. For example, Achilles says, 'So now I just think: *Fuck it*. He wants Troy, he can take Troy — without me. Except we both know he can't.' But I realised, firstly, that we have no idea how people spoke then, so why try to make something up? And then, more importantly, it seemed that the use of twenty-first-century English provides a sense of universality. This is a book about women and war — not particularly about Ancient Greece.



5 Adam Roberts: *The Black Prince*

The Black Prince was commissioned by the Anthony Burgess estate based on an unpublished script by Burgess, left after his death.

Edward, the Black Prince (1330–1376) was the eldest son of King Edward III of England, and thus heir to the throne, but he died before his father, so his son Richard (Richard II) succeeded to the throne instead. Edward, the Black Prince (black for his armour) was an important commander in the Hundred Years' War, mainly in France, but also in Spain. **Adam Roberts** is writing about a time so remote that people, as he imagines them, must have been profoundly different from how we are now. On his blog, Roberts argues that people today are many orders of magnitude less violent than they were in the fourteenth century because 'life is immensely less constrained and frustrating than it used to be'. It is the way Roberts has captured this profound difference that I found particularly compelling. Some of the battle scenes are so gory that readers (such as Margaret Drabble) couldn't cope with them. Roberts puts us into a constricting coat of armour when we have dysentery, he gives us the experience of having to eat decaying meat, we drink wine to quench thirst (and on one occasion when there is no water, the horses are given wine) and, out on the battlefield, we hear the arrows swishing through the air.

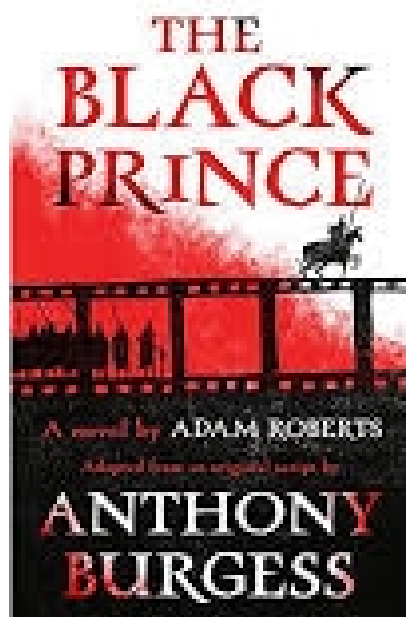
6 Ian McEwan: *Machines Like Me*

This isn't the best **Ian McEwan** novel I've read, but nevertheless, it was hard to put down. He refuses to label

it Science Fiction, but one of the questions he addresses is: what would the world be like if Alan Turing hadn't died of suicide in the early 1950s? And that, indeed, is an intriguing question. The book is set in the early 1980s and by that time — with Margaret Thatcher as PM and the 'Falklands War' — computer technology has advanced to a point where for the cost of a good London house, Charlie has been able to buy himself Adam, a robot (they have run out of 'Eves'). After the initial



(above): Adam Roberts.



plugging in and warming up, Adam comes to life and can function to a large extent like a human being — he doesn't eat, but needs to drink some water each day, he can have sex, has to be careful not to be immersed in water ... And so we see the consequences of Adam living with Charlie and Miranda, the flat mate Charlie is falling in love with. As I predicted early on in the book, Adam falls in love with Miranda. Charlie and Miranda benefit greatly from Adam's ability to process a gargantuan amount of information. But he is also unwaveringly honest and benevolent, which becomes too much for the mortals: Charlie 'kills' Adam by hitting him hard with a hammer. At the end of the book Adam is dead, but two people have more honest, wholesome lives as a result of his existence. We also learn that these robots become very distressed living in a human world — many commit suicide (for example, two 'Eves' in Riyadh).

7 Kingsley Amis: *Lucky Jim*

Everyone else in the world had read *Lucky Jim*, but not me. Beautifully paced writing — there is always some tight spot that Jim Dixon gets into that keeps one on tenterhooks. Humour bubbles away beneath the prose: the famous scene where Jim burns sheets from drunkenly smoking in bed when staying at the house of the history professor who is his boss. As a 'solution', Jim cuts around the singe marks, but that just makes it worse. Jim is frequently drunk. He doesn't hit it off with the professor's artist son, who accuses Jim of taking his girl — which he ultimately and triumphantly does, at the very end of the story. There is also a lecture Jim has to give — on Merrie England — to try to salvage his job. He of course succumbs to drink beforehand and the lecture is amusingly delivered in the voices of his professor and the university principal. What a pleasure to get lost in this rollicking good story.

8 Sonia Orchard: *The Virtuoso*

This novel is an interesting mix of fact and fiction. The fact is the life of Noël Mewton-Wood — a virtuoso Australian pianist who was highly acclaimed in London in the immediate post-war years, yet ended up committing suicide by taking prussic acid. The book is narrated by a fictitious pianist who can't hack the strain of concert performances and ends up opting out of his graduation concerto at the Royal Academy. But he is in love with Mewton-Wood and it is the time when homosexuality was still a criminal act in England. Did Mewton-Wood love the narrator (we never know his name)? They have a brief fling then, it seems, Mewton-Wood gets on with his busy life. In the way of people obsessed, the narrator assumes, for example, that one of Mewton-Wood's last radio broadcasts was dedicated to him. He assumes that Mewton-Wood would have come back to his place, but they are stopped by police and have to go their separate ways. There is a huge amount of alcohol consumed. Could Mewton-Wood really have gone out on the town and then fronted up to execute brilliant performances? What intrigued me most was the depiction of the strain



of high-level concert performance. It is believed that when Mewton-Wood killed himself, he was desolated by the fact that he had gone out to a nightclub the night his partner, Bill, died of appendicitis.

9 David Grigg: *The Fallen Sun*

This enticing book is set in a society of the future that worships and is governed by the sun. All the names, the times, the 'days' relate to the sun, which we learn late in the book is artificial. Night is a time of 'shuttering'. But there are parts of the world permanently in darkness. There has been some kind of holocaust, so the technology that we're used to living with doesn't exist. Messages are sent by a kind of Morse code. Time is announced by a system of bell ringings. And people live in what seem like medieval communities — in clans with different purposes. The underclass are 'dims'. It is intriguing to imagine what it would be like to exist in a world that isn't governed by the huge star in the centre of our solar system. But for me, it was the imagined interaction of people that was most interesting and made this book stand out as a great read. Women want independence but they must achieve it by stealth, as the clannish society demands subservience and ritual. In the end the secret of the artificial sun is revealed to the 'heroes'.

10 Kate Atkinson: *Big Sky*

This is one of **Kate Atkinson's** Jackson Brodie books. I took a while to get into it, trying (perhaps too hard) to piece together the various scenarios. In the first scene there's a runaway bride, then we jump to two Polish sisters applying for work in London to a fake company set up in a static caravan complete with recorded 'office ambience sounds'. Then there is the fairly ordinary

domestic life with Jackson and his estranged wife's laconic teenage son ... Jackson has been hired as a private investigator to keep an eye on the husband of a woman who has had a lot of 'work' done to keep her looking under 40. A little less than half way through there is a dead body, and that's when the pace got going for me. I

couldn't put the book down. I found that there were almost too many characters to keep track of. But I could smell the Yorkshire coastal town and I loved the humour, particularly topical references to Brexit and a dig at the House of Lords. As anticipated, in the end everything is linked up and justice triumphs.

Concerts

I was lazy in 2019 and didn't keep a record of every concert I attended, so I may have overlooked some gems. Here are the ten that stand out for me.

1 The Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Adelaide Town Hall, 9 March 2019

The Mahler Chamber Orchestra has its roots in the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra, founded by conductor Claudio Abbado in 1997. Members of the orchestra share a vision of being a free, democratic, and international ensemble that unites to tour across Europe and the world. On this concert program there were two symphonies: Schubert's 3rd — not well known — and Bruckner's Symphony No. 4 ('The Romantic'). During the allegro section of the first movement of the Schubert I became aware of superb clarinet playing: the principal clarinet (Vincente Alberola) plays a solo over syncopated strings — at first it is extremely soft and gradually it develops to a full orchestral sound. Whilst beautifully controlled, the playing was in an almost 'folksy' style — singing above the strings — and the player himself was far from sedate, moving as much as possible in the confines of an orchestral chair. This orchestra's sound is characterised by a chamber music style of ensemble playing. The Bruckner symphony opens with a beautiful horn solo over shimmering strings, and, in the third movement, came the cleanest, clearest pizzicato I have ever heard — the entire string section — violins, violas, 'celli, and basses — playing as one. At the end of the concert, after much applause, the members of the orchestra hugged each other. I recall that members of the Berlin Philharmonic did this after their concert in Sydney many years ago: confirmation that they are a team who love performing together.

2 Sretensky Monastery Choir, Adelaide, Town Hall, 4 March 2019

A monastery was founded in Moscow in 1397 to protect the people there from an invasion by Tamerlane (a barbaric conqueror, also known as Timur). The roots of this choir go back to that time. Manifesting the wonderful resonance we have come to associate with Russian bass voices, the choir provides an extraordinary combination of the ethereal and earthiness. The first half of

the concert presented religious music: a superb *a capella* sound, full of energy. I also marvelled at the dynamic contrasts: such a massive sound, dropping away to a hush where I'm sure you could have heard a pin drop. The second half of the concert featured Russian folk music ranging from boisterous rhythms to a mournful Cossack song. The soloists all had fine voices — particularly the bass (Vadim Zarirov) who sang the final programmed number. The audience was so enthusiastic that there were four encores.

3 Nico Muhly with Pekka Kuusisto and the ACO Collective, Melbourne Recital Centre, December 2019

I first heard the remarkable Finnish violinist Pekka



Nico Muhly.



Pekka Kuusisto.

Kuusisto in 2001 at a Huntington Music Festival — he was then in his early twenties and I remember being amazed by his versatility: dynamism coupled with tenderness. As a part of his diverse career as soloist and composer, Pekka is Artistic Director of the **ACO Collective** — described as the **Australian Chamber Orchestra's** 'regional touring and education ensemble' of 'emerging' professional string players. Pekka is also a good friend of composer **Nico Muhly** (who worked with Philip Glass), and the two came together to present a memorable concert. Highlights were a duet for two violins by Steve Reich, played by Pekka and Harry Ward, which demonstrated the idea of musical canons 'drifting out of sync' while the ACO strings shimmered away (as good strings do) in the background, and Swedish composer Andrea Tarrodi's *Birds of Paradise*, which depicted the many colours of Birds of Paradise and incorporated bird calls into large sections of the music. The final programmed piece was another world première of Nico Muhly's *Shrink: Concerto for Violin and Strings*, which had been commissioned by the ACO and Melbourne Recital Centre. As the composer tells us, each of the three movements 'obsesses' over certain intervals — ninths in the first movement, sixths in the second and in the final movement 'a tiny set of anxious intervals between unisons and fourths'. He describes the unisons as 'coming in and out of focus'.

This was indeed a mind-blowing concert. But it didn't end with the final programmed item. The concert program invited audience members to 'please get a drink and join us back for *Breaking Ground*, a special duo set that will include improvisation and Finnish folk songs'. What generosity! Nico Muhly played piano and, as well as improvising on his violin, Pekka, at times, sang and whistled. One could sense the pure joy of music-making shared by these two extremely talented musicians.

4 **Brian Cox: A Symphonic Universe, Hamer Hall, 17 November 2019**

Many of us are familiar with **Brian Cox**, Professor of Particle Physics at the University of Manchester, The Royal Society Professor for Public Engagement in Science and a Fellow of the Royal Society. We have seen him in many TV programs. Professor Cox has the enviable ability, shared with my hero, the late Oliver Sacks, to speak about complex aspects of science in a way that is intelligible to a non-scientist. In an extraordinary coming together of science and the arts, the **Melbourne Symphony Orchestra**, conducted by **Benjamin Northey**, performed and Brian Cox spoke in his easy, almost casual





Doric Quartet.

way as photographs of the limits of space and black holes were projected onto a screen behind the orchestra. The music selected was Sibelius' Symphony No. 5 and *A Brief History*, for violin and orchestra by Australian composer Paul Dean, dedicated to Professor Stephen Hawking. As Dean said, the music combines 'the power of the universe with [Hawking's] own power of survival against the odds'. A final soliloquy on solo violin is a homage to the great professor to 'wish him well as he takes flight into the unknown'. Then we heard the Adagio movement from Mahler's Symphony No. 10. Almost more significant than hearing the music was a post-concert discussion where Cox, Northey, and violin soloist **Jack Liebeck** brought together perceptions of fine artistic creation and dazzling scientific research. Cox had commented, on the significance of the arts, 'You will not find meaning at the end of a telescope' and his final comment was: 'What makes life valuable is that it is finite.'

5 Richard Mills' String Quartets, St John's Church, Port Fairy, October 2019

This was actually two concerts at the **Port Fairy Spring Music Festival**. All five quartets were performed by the youthful **Partridge Quartet** — a product of the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM). I loved the opportunity to immerse myself in the string music of this iconic Australian composer, whose extensive work ranges over opera (*Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*), concertos, orchestral work, and works for solo instruments including oboe and chamber music. Mills has written so much (and I haven't heard everything by any means) and I find that although his music is diverse it always seems to have a special Australian flavour. This is the case with the quartets. In the first concert we heard numbers 2, 3, and 4 — number 4 is Dadaesque and has hilariously titled movements such as *The Circumspect Ibis*, and *The Rise of*

the Airheads in Public Life. At the second concert we heard the first and fifth quartets — the performance of the fifth was a world première. This was a tremendous undertaking of the Partridge Quartet. They seemed to do a magnificent job, and enjoy it.

6 The Doric Quartet, Musica Viva, 15 June 2019

The English **Doric String Quartet** is brilliant. Particularly beautiful are the magical dynamic contrasts they can achieve. Book-ended between a refreshing Haydn quartet and a dramatic, twenty-first-century performance of Beethoven's C sharp minor quartet was the highlight of this program, for me: Brett Dean's String Quartet No. 3, which is a piece of music that captures the world of today. Before the performance, the composer came on stage and told us that he wrote this piece in London just recently, during the present 'democratic challenges' posed by the Brexit situation in Britain. The piece was commissioned through **Musica Viva** for the tenth anniversary of the Melbourne Recital Centre. I was on the edge of my seat most of the time. Titled 'Hidden Agendas', the piece evokes 'aspects of the strangely fascinating and invariably unsettling political climate of extreme personalities, Twitter outrage, groupthink and other challenges to the democratic process in which we seem to find ourselves as we enter the 2020s' (*Limelight* magazine).

7 Diana Doherty and the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, Melbourne Recital Centre, 23 June 2019

Diana Doherty is a brilliant oboist — a frequent soloist, she is also principal of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The **Melbourne Chamber Orchestra** is deftly led by **William Hennessy**, who often 'dances' to the music. In this program there were three concerti grossi, which showed off the orchestra's precision: Charles Avison E \flat major, Corelli C minor and Handel C minor. The most interesting item on the program for me was Joe Chindamo's *Sanctuary for Oboe, Cor Anglais and Orchestra*. The theme is refugees, and the movements are entitled 'Requiem', 'Flight', 'Saying Goodbye', 'Postcard' and 'Hope'. The cor anglais was played by Doherty's husband, Alexandre Oguey, and he matched Doherty's superb musicianship and rich mellow tone. The concert ended with Doherty playing the Vivaldi Concerto for Oboe and Violin in B \flat major — the violin part played by William Hennessy.

8 Tin Alley Quartet, Macedon Music, 8 September 2019

The setting for the **Macedon Music Concert** series is a private home some 70 km from Melbourne. We sit in a living room, on a Sunday afternoon, looking out full-

length windows to an expanse of countryside — the intimacy required for chamber music, with a bonus — the serving of champagne and sandwiches at interval (all included in the ticket). The concert series has been running for 25 years, and the **Tin Alley Quartet** performed magnificently to celebrate the anniversary. The program started with Anton Webern's *Langsamer Satz* — literally, 'Slow Movement' — associated with hiking in mountains with his fiancée. Next we heard a new work, *Even the Darkest Night Will End*, by Australian composer Mary Finsterer. The piece had been commissioned by Macedon Music with funding from Elaine Smith, in memory of Glen Johnston. Mary Finsterer was present, and spoke about the work. The complete quote, from Victor Hugo is 'Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise', and the three-movement work consisted of menacing bowing of all instruments together, punctuated by moments of light and hope. The concert finished with an uplifting performance of Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 6 in F minor, Opus 80.

9 Henry Purcell's *King Arthur*, Gabrieli Consort & Players, Melbourne Recital Centre,

16 February 2019

A 'dramatick opera', this was brilliantly performed. Not all staging of Dryden's 'drama' could be accomplished in this concert performance, but the singers acted their parts to a certain extent. It was described as a 'collation' of numerous scenes. The conductor, **Paul McCreesh**, did everything from memory, as did the singers. The sopranos had beautiful bell-like voices — just right for this music. The words were very clear, and it didn't worry me that the story line was unclear as we skipped from a chorus of shepherds to cold weather, to love ...

10 ANAM Orchestra, conducted by Eduardo Strausser, Melbourne Recital Centre, 7 September 2019

The vitality of the brilliant **ANAM orchestra** was matched by this young Brazilian conductor **Eduardo Strausser**, who is only 34, but has conducted in Hanover, Basel, the Bamberger Symphony, and with the Queensland Symphony. The program showcased magnificent woodwind playing: Borodin's *Prince Igor*, Manuel de Falla's *Three Cornered Hat*, and Stravinsky's *Petrushka* ballet music.

Films

1 *Never Look Away*

This movie is well worth the three-plus hours of viewing. On one level, it follows the life of an artist, Kurt, modelled on the German artist Gerhard Richter. But it is much more than a biography of someone who grew up in the terrifying circumstances of Germany during World War II, who was forced to study Social Realism in painting in East Germany, then escaped with his young

wife to the freedom of West Germany in the early 1960s. The kernel of the story is about intense observation. The film opens with six-year-old Kurt attending an art exhibition with his young aunt, Elisabeth, whom he adores. She dares to divulge to him that she actually likes the Kandinsky that the gallery guard has been denigrating. The intent way that young Kurt observes the world has been described as 'like a camera with the shutter left open'. Although outwardly an exemplary product of 'Nazi youth', Elisabeth is ultimately euthanased for her 'insanity'. The SS doctor who authorises this is Professor Carl Seeband (he insists on being addressed as 'professor'). We, the audience, ultimately come to realise that the girl Kurt falls in love with years later is the daughter of Professor Seeband, whose grossly inhuman attitude is underlined when he performs an abortion on his daughter — supposedly because she has become pregnant to Kurt before marriage; Seeband doesn't approve of the



young man, he believes that if the couple are confronted with the distress of losing their child, the relationship will break up. The couple doesn't break up. Kurt, through his intent observation, gradually pieces together the truth that Seeband worked for the SS. And we, the audience, are taken with him on this detective journey as Kurt takes up a style of painting (that was actually practised by Richter) based on photographs. Kurt seems to confirm his significant discovery when he juxtaposes a photograph of Seeband with one of himself and his beloved young aunt. Seeband sees the painting, obviously recognises young Elisabeth, and leaves in a state of agitation. Apparently artist Gerhard Richter doesn't recognise the film (or the book on which it is based) as an accurate depiction of his life.

2 *The Irishman*

Intended for Netflix, this was another long movie where I didn't look at my watch — no way that I wanted it to be any shorter. With **Martin Scorsese's** skilful direction, we gradually enter the 'maleness' and 'male toxicity' of Mafia-style organised crime. Frank Sheeran (Robert De Niro), a seemingly salt-of-the-earth truck driver, meets up with Russel Bufalino at a service station and sets out on a road trip that leads to his being a very successful hit man. Fantastic acting. We see the two-sidedness of these men's lives: their homage to the church and family values alongside their fabulous technique with shot-guns. We are taken back (often with music) to the 1960s and 70s: these gangsters rage at JFK for not acknowledging that they helped to get him elected, and vent their anger at Robert Kennedy (then attorney-general) for his anti-corruption crackdown. And Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino) poured money acquired illegally (of course) from a pension fund into Las Vegas — and how did he die? Officially, we don't know, but this film imagines this killing — by Sheeran — a quasi-Kennedy murder. At the beginning and end of the film we see Sheeran, as an old man, in a kind of geriatric prison, wanting to go to the church to pray, not wanting the door of his room closed.

3 *Vice*

In this movie, Dick Cheney, the main subject, is shown to be even worse and more corrupt than I'd understood and George W. Bush Jr even weaker. At first I was astonished to think that a film so critical could be made while the subject is still alive, but I suppose Cheney and his colleagues would dismiss it as left-wing propaganda. The movie explores how a bureaucratic Washington insider quietly became the most powerful man in the world as Vice-President to George W. Bush, reshaping the country and the globe in ways that we still feel today. First seen as a brawling, drink-driving college dropout in Wyoming in 1963, Cheney (Christian Bale) goes on to be an assistant to Donald 'Rummy' Rumsfeld (Steve Carell), then the White House chief of staff, then a congressman, then the CEO of an oil company, and then, eventually, a vice-president who does much of the decision-making for George W. Bush (Sam Rockwell).



A still from *Non Fiction*.

There is reference to Cheney's love of fly fishing, and at the end of the movie all kinds of 'flies' are displayed and 'America' from *West Side Story* played. I took it to be some kind of cynical reference to Cheney's lack of compassion for lives lost, particularly in the Iraq War.

4 *Non Fiction*

I saw this movie, directed by **Olivier Assayas**, at the French Film Festival. It examines Lampedusa's (*The Leopard*) statement: 'Everything must change so that everything can stay the same', in the context of print v E-book v Audiobooks. The statement could also be applied to the relationships in the film. The protagonist, Leonard, writes what he calls 'auto fiction' — pretty much autobiographical — about his love affairs. At the opening of the film he is having an affair with his publisher's wife. By the end there is likely to be a new focus for his books: the affair is over and his wife is pregnant.

5 *Colette*

This is the story of French late-nineteenth early-twentieth-century writer Colette — famous for her books about Claudine, among other things. She married an author and publisher, known as 'Willy'. They lived the life of Belle Époque Paris. But Willy took advantage of having a wife who could write well and, without Colette's permission, sold the rights to her Claudine books when they were short of money. The film dwells particularly on this time and Colette's lesbian relationships during her marriage and after it dissolved.

6 *The Good Liar*

Although a lot to do with the plot of this film (adapted from a novel of the same name by Nicholas Searle) is implausible, I was carried along by the acting of Helen Mirren and Ian McKellen. How could it be that an intelligent ex-Oxford professor would be taken in by a grasping con man who links up to her through a dating internet site? At the very end of the movie we find that she knows what she's doing all the time. Even more difficult to believe is that 'Roy' should turn out to be the

man who raped this professor as a teenager in post war Germany. How did she recognise him? How did she find out his movements? Certainly, her grandson's partner is a very good historian. In World War II Germany, 'Roy', after killing the real Roy, an English soldier, obtains an easy passage to England and takes up a new identity and a new life as a con man. Betty, the Helen Mirren character, Oxford professor, was also German (wouldn't they have German accents, having become English in their twenties?) and we don't hear exactly how Betty came to establish herself in England as an Oxford professor. Without Helen Mirren and Ian McKellen this movie would have been a dud, but thanks to the superb acting I was happily entertained.

7 *Red Joan*

This is described as a 'spy drama' film. A woman in her eighties (played superbly by Judi Dench) is accused of spying (supplying the Soviet Union with nuclear secrets). Her crime comes to light when one of her former colleagues dies and her involvement is revealed in papers that are made public. The film is based on a novel by Jennie Rooney, inspired by the life of Melita Norwood. Norwood was a brilliant young scientist who studied physics at Cambridge in 1938. As Joan is questioned by the special branch, MI5, she has flashbacks to her life as it unfolded from 1938. Questioning reveals that Joan was more concerned about 'levelling the playing field' in the post-war world rather than communism. The young Joan is played convincingly by Sophie Cookson.

8 *The Eulogy*

This film is on my list mainly because it is about pianist Geoffrey Tozer, who I remember as a child prodigy. I wondered what had happened to him. The 'eulogy' is the one given by Paul Keating at Tozer's funeral. Keating believed that Tozer had been seriously overlooked in Australia. He agreed to re-enact giving the eulogy in St Patrick's cathedral for this film. What struck me as I viewed the film was the effect of Tozer's dominating mother. It is suggested that she argued with Tozer's teachers at the Royal College of Music in London (she knew what was best for her son), thus denying him entrée into aspects of the musical world there. In this way, I believe, she may have denied him a career as an internationally recognised concert pianist. Tozer became recognised as an interpreter of Medtner — a composer I hadn't heard of. Tozer must have been aware of his potential — driven to perform, yet he wasn't highly acclaimed in Australia. Given this lack of recognition, coupled with the fact that he was gay in a time when

coming out was still difficult, he took to drink, spent his money unwisely, and in the end, died of liver disease. What an utterly unforgivable waste!

9 *Marriage Story*

This was as good as a movie about a marriage break-up could be. It has all the emotional tugs — the child (young Henry, very well played by Azhy Robertson), the pull of geographical distance, the pull of career — the way these things can start amicably and then institutions, such as the legal system, seem to destroy them. The movie opens with the couple (Nicole: Scarlet Johansson and Charlie: Adam Driver) at a counselling session where they've been asked to read out their lists of the good things about the other person. Nicole refuses. Years later, at the end of the movie, Nicole's list still exists, and the son, Henry, reads it to Charlie — so poignant. The marriage has ended but there is still a concern, a shared understanding, a warmth.

10 *Cold War*

Directed by **Pawel Pawlikowski**, this movie is set at the end of World War II. There is superb black-and-white cinematography, which beautifully creates the gloom of the cold war period. Starting in Poland, where folk music is gathered so that the spirit of it will not be lost, a pianist and one of the young singer/dancers fall in love. The pianist crosses the pre Berlin wall border and ends up living in France — she doesn't follow him, assuming that the relationship can't work — although they are passionately in love. It turns out to be an impossible love story.

— Jennifer Bryce, *January 2020*



DAVID GRIGG and PERRY MIDDLEMISS are the two anchors of the SF and fantasy podcast **TWO CHAIRS TALKING**: <https://www.right-word.com/two-chairs/>. Each has been chair of an Australian world convention (Aussiecons 2, 1985, 3, 1999, and 4, 2010). Their discussion about 2019 Favourites can be found in Episode 18: 'Food for the Soul'. The following lists are based on that discussion. :: David is also the designer and producer of Standard Ebooks, a web publisher that seeks to bring back to your notice major literary works in downloadable editions.

David Grigg

2019: A year in reading

I managed to read 74 books last year, just short of my Goodreads 'Reading Challenge' of 80 books, but still pretty good. I certainly read some really excellent books during the year: I rated 15 books 9 or 10 out of 10.

7: 17 books, 23%
8: 30 books, 41%
9: 11 books, 15%
10: 4 books, 5 %

Possibly interesting statistics

Genre

SF/fantasy: 24 books, 33%
Crime/thriller: 25 books, 34%
Literary/non-Genre: 14 books, 19%
Non-fiction: 8 books, 11%
Historical fiction: 1 book, 1%
Story collections: 1 book, 1%

Gender of author

Female: 25 books, 33%
Male: 49 books, 67%
(Note: disappointing, must improve!)

Format

Ebooks: 26 books, 36%
Html (for Standard Ebooks): 16 books, 22%
Hardback: 15 books, 20%
Paperback: 16 books, 22%

Digital/physical

Digital: 42 books, 58%
Physical: 32 books, 42%

Ownership

Owned: 58 books, 78%
Borrowed from library: 16 books, 22%

Rating (out of 10):

5: 4 books, 5%
6: 7 books, 10%

Best of the year

This was all covered in Episode 18 of our podcast, but I thought it was worth recording my choices here as well.

SF and fantasy

- 1 THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF HOPE: Claire North
- 2 THE FIRST FIFTEEN LIVES OF HARRY AUGUST: Claire North
- 3 THE POWER: Naomi Alderman
- 4 NEVERWHERE: Neil Gaiman (illus. Chris Riddell)
- 5 BITTER SEEDS: Ian Tregillis

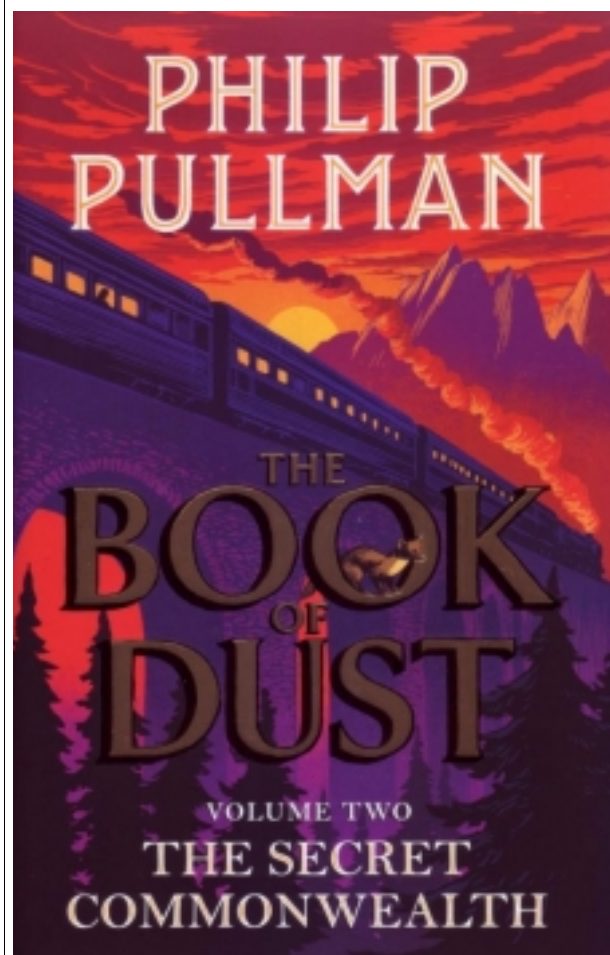
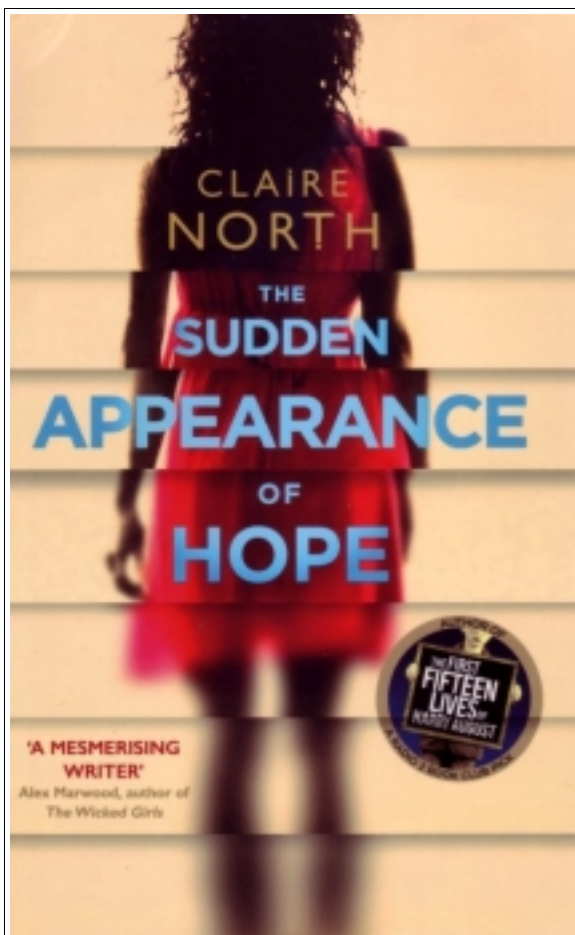
Claire North (real name Catherine Webb) was a real discovery for me this year. So far I've read only two of her books, but as you can see they went straight to the top of the list for this genre. I'm really looking forward to reading her other books under this pen-name and also to hunting up her young adult books published under her real name. Her first novel, *Mirror Dreams*, was written when she was only 14 years old!

Literary fiction

- 1 BOY SWALLOWS UNIVERSE: Trent Dalton
- 2 ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE: Anthony Doerr
- 3 THE CHOKE: Sofie Laguna
- 4 MIDDLEMARCH: George Eliot
- 5 TONO-BUNGAY: H. G. Wells

Boy Swallows Universe was great, and I'm looking forward to **Trent Dalton's** next novel, due out this year.

Two of these were productions for **Standard Ebooks**:



I guess it makes sense that most of the 'literary fiction' I read are classics which I've done for SE. *Tono-Bungay* was surprisingly good, and I liked *Middlemarch* so much that I've gone on to produce *The Mill on the Floss* for SE too.

Crime/thriller

- 1 CRIMSON LAKE: Candice Fox
- 2 REDEMPTION POINT: Candice Fox
- 3 MOSKVA: Jack Grimwood
- 4 LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET: M. E. Braddon
- 5 THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW: A. J. Finn

Candice Fox was the discovery here — a great Australian crime writer. The first two books in this list are in her *Crimson Lake* series, and I finished the third, *Gone by Midnight* early in January.

Young adult

- 1 THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH: Philip Pullman
- 2 FEVER CRUMB: Philip Reeve
- 3 A WEB OF AIR: Philip Reeve
- 4 SCRIVENER'S MOON: Philip Reeve

I can't do justice to *The Secret Commonwealth* just yet, as it's the second part of a new trilogy by **Philip Pullman** set in the same world as the 'His Dark Materials' trilogy, which is brilliant. Suffice it to say that so far the new trilogy is extremely well done. I'm also reading a collection of essays by Pullman at the moment, *Daemon Voices*, which is excellent.

Non-fiction

- 1 A MIND UNRAVELLED: Kurt Eichenwald
- 2 EGGSHELL SKULL: Bri Lee
- 3 SOUTH!: Ernest Shackleton
- 4 DOING JUSTICE: Preet Bharara
- 5 BLOCKBUSTER: Lucy Sussex

A great year for non-fiction reading. *A Mind Unravelled*, Kurt Eichenwald's memoir about growing up with severe epilepsy, is well worth reading.

Best overall 2019

- 1 THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF HOPE: Claire North
- 2 BOY SWALLOWS UNIVERSE: Trent Dalton
- 3 ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE: Anthony Doerr
- 4 THE FIRST FIFTEEN LIVES OF HARRY AUGUST: Claire North
- 5 A MIND UNRAVELLED: Kurt Eichenwald

Honourable mentions

EGGSHELL SKULL: Bri Lee
THE CHOKE: Sofie Laguna
THE POWER: Naomi Alderman
MIDDLEMARCH: George Eliot
THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH: Philip Pullman

New authors discovered

Claire North
Candice Fox

A year in viewing (2019)

Best movies

- 1 MOON (re-watch)
- 2 FIRST MAN
- 3 MORTAL ENGINES
- 4 ALIEN (re-watch)
- 5 BLADE RUNNER (re-watch)

The re-watches above are all due to needing to look at these movies again to talk about them on the podcast. I loved *Moon*.

Best television

- 1 MORNING WARS (Apple TV+)
- 2 FOR ALL MANKIND (Apple TV+)
- 3 THE EXPANSE (Amazon Prime)
- 4 GOOD OMENS (Amazon Prime)
- 5 THE BOYS (Amazon Prime)
- 6 GOLIATH (Amazon Prime)

There's so much good television around these days it's impossible to keep up. Apple certainly seems to have made a strong start with its streaming service, and Amazon Prime served up some really great stuff too.

Perry Middlemiss

Reading notes for 2019

I set myself a target of 96 books for the year. A modest figure, given I read 128 in 2018, but I had a feeling that things might be a bit slow in parts of the year, especially those months when I was travelling a lot with little time to read.

As expected, I was down on my 2018 number — 108 books completed during 2019.

I tend to keep a lot of stats about what I read (author gender, book type, book length, book genre) in order to ensure I'm not concentrating too heavily in one area, crime novels say.

I won't bore you with all of the individual categories though a few will probably suffice. My reading split was about 60–40 male to female author. I'm trying to push this towards equity, or even over on the female side, but I am finding this a little difficult. A number of the reading lists I maintain such as Booker Prize winners, Miles Franklin Award winners, 1001 Books to Read Before You Die, and the Guardian 1000 Novels, are predominantly male focused, so finding lists of best novels by women in various genres is a definite need.

I read 70 novels during the year, 19 of which were over 400 pages, with 6 of those over 600, i.e. bricks. There were 18 novellas, 13 collections and anthologies, and 7 non-fiction books. I need to work on this last category.

The category targets I set for myself at the start of the year were mostly met with deficits for horror, YA, and thriller/spy works. Must do better. Science fiction was the dominant genre, with Crime a distant second. Pretty much as expected.

I've bumped my overall target to 102 books for 2020, and I must concentrate more on the deficits above and also add in more books in translation. Something to look forward to.

Best SF (17 novels read)

BLACKFISH CITY (2018) by Sam J. Miller
RED MOON (2018) by Kim Stanley Robinson
THE CALCULATING STARS (2018) by Mary Robinette Kowal
FAHRENHEIT 451 (1953) by Ray Bradbury
EMBERS OF WAR (2018) by Gareth Powell

Honourable mentions

THE ROAD TO CORLAY (1978) by Richard Cowper
THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (1979) by Douglas Adams

Best Fantasy (9 novels read)

SUMMERLONG (2016) by Peter S. Beagle
SPINNING SILVER (2018) by Naomi Novik
FIRE AND BLOOD (2018) by George R. R. Martin
WITCHMARK (2018) by C. L. Polk

Best Horror (4 novels read)

EXPERIMENTAL FILM (2015) by Gemma Files
DOCTOR SLEEP (2013) by Stephen King

Best Crime (22 novels read)

SANDS OF WINDEE (1931) by Arthur Upfield
THE TALENTED MR RIPLEY (1955) by Patricia Highsmith
KILL SHOT (2018) by Garry Disher
THE LOST MAN (2019) by Jane Harper
REDEMPTION POINT (2019) by Catherine Fox

Honourable mentions

RATKING (1989) by Michael Dibdin
THE DAUGHTER OF TIME (1949) by Josephine Tey
THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE (1934) by James M. Cain
ROGUE MALE (1939) by Geoffrey Household
THE MALTESE FALCON (1930) by Dashiell Hammett

Best Thriller/spy (3 novels read)

SMILEY'S PEOPLE (1979) by John Le Carre
THE CHAIN (2019) by Adrian McKinty

Best Literary (14 novels read)

TO THE ISLANDS (1981) by Randolph Stow
POSSESSION (1990) by A. S. Byatt
THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHTTIME (2004) by Mark Haddon
THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA (1952) by Ernest Hemingway
THE PLAINS (1982) by Gerald Murnane

Honourable mentions

DEATH IN VENICE (1912) by Thomas Mann
THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER (1918) by Rebecca West
THE REMAINS OF THE DAY (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro
THE IRISHMAN (1960) by Elizabeth O'Connor
NIGHT BOAT TO TANGIER (2019) by Kevin Barry

All books listed in reading order.

Note: the **Randolph Stow** novel was rewritten in 1981 after the original version won the 1958 Miles Franklin Award.

Best Young Adult (3 novels read)

GIFTS (2004) by Ursula K. Le Guin
GREENWITCH (1974) by Susan Cooper

Best anthologies (9 books read)

THE YEARS BEST SCIENCE FICTION : 33RD ANNUAL COLLECTION (2016) edited by Gardner Dozois
THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR VOLUME 2 (2017) edited by Neil Clarke

THE BEST SF&F OF THE YEAR: VOLUME ELEVEN (2017)
edited by Jonathan Stahan

Best single author collections (4 books read)

THE OVERNEATH (2017) by Peter S. Beagle
THE PAPER MENAGERIE AND OTHER STORIES (2016) by Ken Liu
THE CUSTODIANS AND OTHER STORIES (1978) by Richard Cowper

Best novellas (18 novellas read)

ROGUE PROTOCOL (2018) by Martha Wells
TIME WAS (2018) by Ian McDonald
EXIT STRATEGY (2019) by Martha Wells
PERIHELION SUMMER (2019) by Greg Egan
PERMAFROST (2019) by Alastair Reynolds

Honourable mentions

THE WINTER BOX (2016) by Tim Waggoner
THE CHURN (2014) by James S. A. Corey
ALICE PAYNE ARRIVES (2018) by Kate Heartfield
THE ARRIVAL OF MISSIVES (2016) by Aliya Whiteley
IN AN ABSENT DREAM (2019) by Seanan McGuire

Best non-fiction (7 books read)

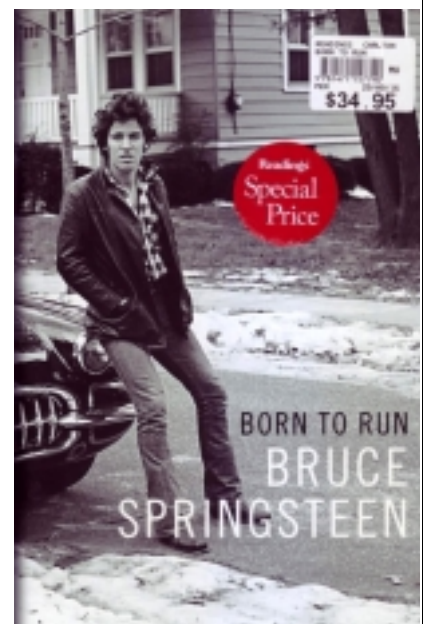
ON WRITING (2002) by Stephen King
BORN TO RUN (2016) by Bruce Springsteen
SAGALAND (2017) by Kari Gislason and Richard Fidler
UNDERLAND (2019) by Robert Macfarlane
THE SHELF LIFE OF ZORA CROSS (2019) by Cathy Perkins

Honourable mention

BLOCKBUSTER! by Lucy Sussex

Best of the year

BORN TO RUN (2016) by Bruce Springsteen
POSSESSION (1990) by A. S. Byatt
THE LOST MAN (2019) by Jane Harper
THE CHAIN (2019) by Adrian McKinty
UNDERLAND (2019) by Robert Macfarlane



COLIN STEELE is Emeritus Fellow at the Australian National University and former University Librarian. He has been a reviewer of science fiction and fantasy for the Canberra Times since 1979 and is SF Commentary's longest-serving contributor.

Colin Steele

The field

Colin Steele's best books of 2019

THE LOST BOOKS OF JANE AUSTEN by Janine Barchas (John Hopkins University Press)
EXHALATION by Ted Chiang (Picador)
POSY SIMMONDS (THE ILLUSTRATORS) by Paul Gravett (Thames & Hudson)
THE WAREHOUSE by Rob Hart (Bantam)
JOE COUNTRY by Mick Herron (John Murray)
BOWIE'S BOOKS by John O'Connell (Bloomsbury)
THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH by Philip

Pullman (Penguin and David Fickling Books)
TELL ME WHY: THE STORY OF MY LIFE by Archie Roach (Simon & Schuster)
ORANGE WORLD AND OTHER STORIES by Karen Russell (Chatto & Windus)
THE REINCARNATED GIANT: AN ANTHOLOGY OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION edited by Mingwei Song and Theodore Hutters (Columbia University Press)

Books about books and readers

THE 100 GREATEST LITERARY CHARACTERS by James Plath, Gail Sinclair and Kirk Curnutt (Rowman & Littlefield; \$74.99)

FABULOUS MONSTERS: DRACULA, ALICE, SUPERMAN, AND OTHER LITERARY FRIENDS by Alberto Manguel (Yale UP; \$36.99) (available from Footprint Books)

What are your favourite literary characters? The answer is always going to be subjective. *The 100 Greatest Literary Characters*, chosen by American academics **James Plath**, **Gail Sinclair**, and **Kirk Curnutt**, largely come from the canon of Western, and particularly, American and British literature. In *Fabulous Monsters*, **Alberto Manguel** identifies literary friends but from a wider personal and global perspective.

Plath says that he and his co-authors had difficulty in defining 'their 100 greatest fictional characters'. The title in that context is misleading, as the authors indicate that they are only covering fictional characters. Literary would imply much more, so there is no drama or poetry, no Macbeth or Beowulf or Odysseus.

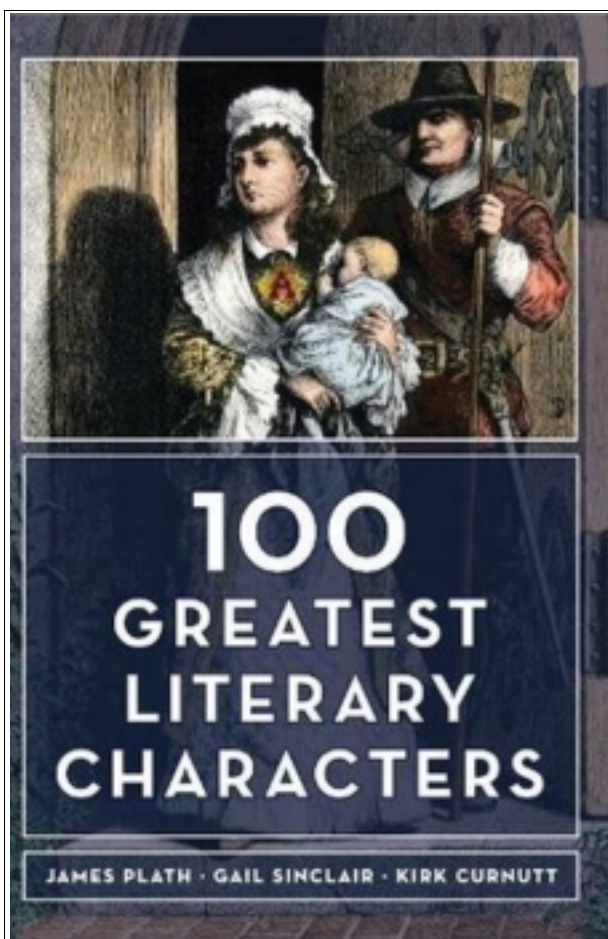
Within the fictional framework, Plath and his co-authors state: 'We decided to include not just the usual

suspects but also lesser-known characters that are so psychologically complex or richly drawn that they deserve to be in a volume such as this ... We prioritized those that have entered the collective public consciousness. That earned Ebenezer Scrooge a place on the list. Same for James Bond.'

That decision makes their selections more eclectic and personal, and may well attract a wider audience, but it will be a little confusing for readers who buy on the title alone — readers will find Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* and Daenerys Targaryen from *Game of Thrones* alongside Anna Karenina and Holden Caulfield.

Characters covered include Aladdin, Jay Gatsby, Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter, Don Quixote, Lisbeth Salander, Jean Brodie, Jean Valjean, and John Yossarian. Many will be surprised to see Philbert Bono, from *Powwow Highway* by David Seals. Plath says, 'The reason I could justify including him and not other colorful characters is that they made a movie out of the book, and Roger Ebert commented that it was probably one of the best characters he's ever seen in a film.' A rather curious selection procedure using Roger Ebert as a selection tool, and, surely, in that context there would be many other movies to come into consideration.

Plath and his co-authors adopt an A-to-Z approach, beginning with Captain Ahab and ending with Yuri Zhigago. Each character is given two to three pages of commentary, although the quality of the analysis varies considerably in approach and depth. The entry on Cap-

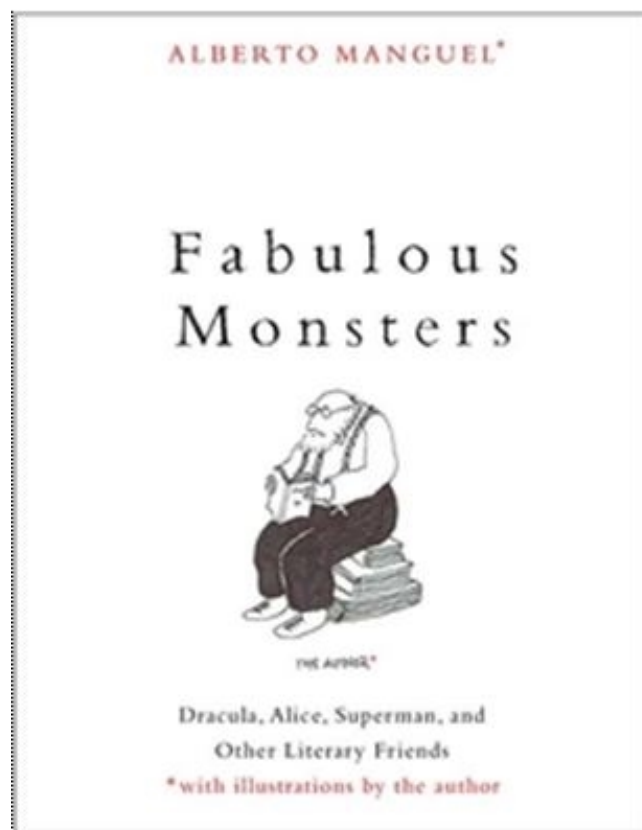


tain Ahab has an early paragraph referencing the Bushes and Saddam Hussein, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, and NFL quarterback Peyton Manning!

Plath is President of the John Updike Society, so his entry on Updike is more extensive than others. Bibliographical material is minimal for most entries, but for Updike there are 11 biographical references. The Harry Potter entry curiously begins with the pronouncement that 'only one character in this book has his own theme Park world' The authors conclude by hoping that their selections encourage readers to seek out the cited books in their local libraries and bookshops, an always laudable motive.

Author, librarian, and renowned bibliophile **Alberto Manguel** provides a richer and more reflective commentary to accompany his 40 characters in *Fabulous Monsters*. The title, taken from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, is, however, another misleading one, as not all of the characters could be termed, by any means, monsters or fabulous.

Manguel examines how literary characters live with us from childhood onwards, a format that provides fascinating insights into Manguel's own life and thinking. His coverage is globally wider than those of Plath. For example, Manguel covers Karagoz and Hacivat from the popular Turkish shadow play and Hsing-chen from Kim Man-jung's Korean literary classic *The Nine Cloud Dream*. Manguel's analysis of Hamlet is taken from the standpoint of Queen Gertrude, while Don Quixote is seen from the perspective of the Moor, Cide Hamete Benengeli.



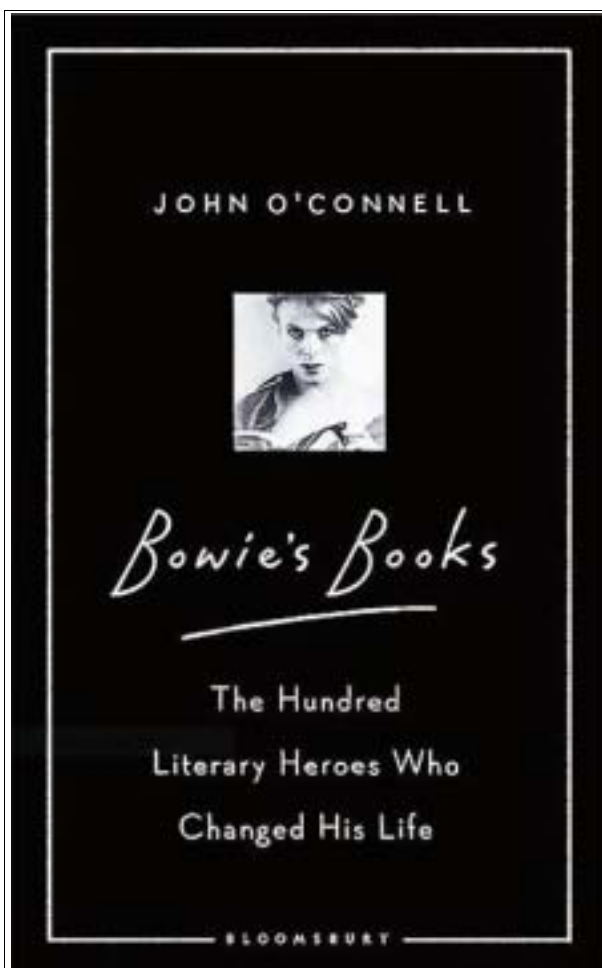
Each of Manguel's chapters include a doodle drawing of the character. Some characters overlap with those of Plath, such as Long John Silver and Dracula. On several occasions, however, different characters are chosen from the same book. So, Manguel chooses Jim from *Huckleberry Finn*, whereas Plath chooses Ma Joad from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Manguel chooses Monsieur Bovary, rather than Emma. Manguel chooses Phoebe Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye*, while Plath chooses Holden, which all adds to the subjective fun.

Manguel uses the characters to indirectly reflect on the contemporary political world. He examines the desire for money and fame in his coverage of Faust, while Lewis Carroll's Alice is a springboard for superficial rationality masking contemporary madness.

For Manguel, G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* 'magically helps me cope with the absurdities of everyday life', while 'Priam teaches me to weep for the death of younger friends and Achilles for that of my beloved elders'. Manguel in his chapter on Satan says that we resort to Satan 'to try to understand the infamous events that plague us daily, now and always'. Manguel believes that reading can keep us sane. Amen to that.

BOWIE'S BOOKS. THE HUNDRED LITERARY HEROES WHO CHANGED HIS LIFE
by John O'Connell (Bloomsbury; \$34.99)

Bowie's Books, as John O'Connell has stated, 'isn't the story of David Bowie's life ... But it is a look at the tools he used to navigate his life, not to mention a shot in the



arm for the unfashionable theory, one that I've always liked, that reading makes you a better person'.

Bowie once said that his idea of perfect happiness was reading. Books inspired his work and persona, they were 'tools he used to navigate his life'. Three years before his death in 2016, Bowie listed the 100 books that he considered the most important and influential, not necessarily his 'favourite books', out of the thousands he had read during his life. Only 13 of the books Bowie selected were by women.

Touring America in the 1970s, Bowie carried around a 1500-volume 'mobile bibliotheque'. In 2013 the Victoria and Albert Museum booked-out exhibition *David Bowie Is*, which subsequently came to Melbourne, featured a selection of his favourite books suspended from the roof.

Music journalist John O'Connell analyses the books in 100 short essays, each offering a perspective on Bowie's life, songs, films, and performances. O'Connell has said, 'I thought it would be fun to tease out connections between the titles and Bowie's life and work.'

Where did it all begin? Bowie underperformed at school, leaving in 1963 with one O level in Art. He was, however, a voracious reader, reading, as a child, comics such as *The Beano* and then moving on as a teenager to Penguin paperbacks, including *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

His older half-brother Terry encouraged him to read the Beats, notably Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, with its themes of 'freedom, escape, spontaneity and creativity'. Reading opened up a world far beyond Bowie's suburban Bromley.

British fiction of the 1950s and 1960s feature in the list, including Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar*, Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, and John Braine's *Room at the Top*, reflecting 'a working class desire for self-improvement'.

Bowie's literary tastes were eclectic, including, in no particular order, *Private Eye* and *Viz* magazines, Sarah Waters, Dante, Spike Milligan, Evelyn Waugh, Vladimir Nabokov, Albert Camus, William Faulkner, Don DeLillo, Yukio Mishima, Tom Stoppard, Camille Paglia, Angela Carter, Bruce Chatwin, and Julian Barnes.

Bowie was a prodigious reader of science-fiction, although it is sparsely represented in the 100 titles. O'Connell says 'an obsession with space, estrangement and alternative worlds' runs through Bowie's work, from 'Space Oddity' at one end to 'Blackstar' at the other. Stephen King was a favourite author who 'scares the shit out of me', but there is no King title in the list.

Similarly, many occult authors are missing, such as Aleister Crowley. O'Connell speculates that the exclusion of such titles was because Bowie didn't want to revisit his cocaine-influenced years, which 'he later came to regard as an awful, depressed period of his life'. This was a period when Bowie said he saw the devil materialising in his Los Angeles swimming pool.

Bowie's spiritual search is represented by books on Tibetan Buddhism, the Kaballah, Gnosticism, and Rosicrucianism, which provide a collective background to what O'Connell describes as 'Bowie's hazy personal cosmology'.

George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle* was his introduction to postmodernism, confirming for Bowie 'that there was actually some kind of theory to what I was doing'. O'Connell reflects that, in the early 1970s, Bowie embraced 'this newly found pluralistic vocabulary, this whole George Steiner-ism of life'.

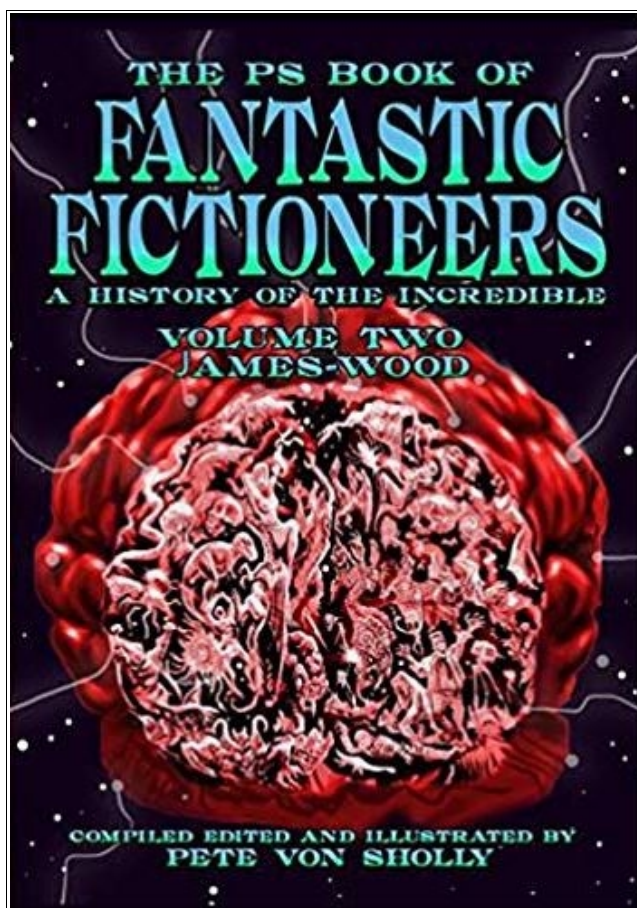
Bowie once said 'The only art I'll ever study is the stuff that I can steal from.' Bowie's artistic interests are represented by several books, including James Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* and Arthur C. Danto's collection *Beyond the Brillo Box*.

Of the 100 authors, only George Orwell and Anthony Burgess appear twice. Bowie was influenced by Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and the subsequent Kubrick movie, which impinged on Ziggy Stardust and his last album, *Blackstar*. O'Connell believes the books of Christopher Isherwood and John Rechy also influenced the creation of Ziggy Stardust.

O'Connell has great fun identifying the literary sources for many of Bowie's famous lyrics. Nadsat, the Burgess Anglo-Russian slang, features in 'Suffragette City' and decades later in 'Girl Loves Me'. George Orwell's 1984-inspired 'Big Brother', '1984', and 'We Are the Dead' in Bowie's 1974 album *Diamond Dogs*.

In 'Heroes', the line 'I wish you could swim like dolphins can swim' was inspired by a story in the memoir *A Grave For a Dolphin* by Alberto Denti di Pirajno. O'Connell locates the source for the 'Tis a Pity She Was a Whore' in Burgess's *Earthly Powers*.

When Bowie sings in 'Breaking Glass', 'Don't look at the carpet/I drew something awful on it', he is referencing the summoning of demons by drawing symbols, as mentioned by French occult author Éliphas Lévi in *Transcendental Magic*.



Some of O'Connell's links from the texts to Bowie's lyrics are somewhat tenuous, but overall he succeeds in persuading the reader that Bowie's life is an open book.

THE PS BOOK OF FANTASTIC FICTIONEERS: A HISTORY OF THE INCREDIBLE
 edited and illustrated by Pete Von Sholly (PS Publishing; 2 volumes; £90)

PS Publishing is to be congratulated for bringing together a sumptuous colour-illustrated two-volume set of *Fantastic Fictioneers*, edited by **Pete Von Sholly**, whose publicity calls him 'a writer, artist, director, and producer with a leaning toward the fantastic side of the arts'.

Von Sholly writes, 'I wanted to do a book about my favourite writers and artists, celebrating how they influenced not just me, but the world ... The 'Fictioneers project' which has culminated in these two wonderful books has a long history but mainly I just wanted to celebrate a special group of men and women who made indelible marks on our collective and individual consciousness and whose works stand as milestones in the history of fiction in culture. It couldn't be just my personal lesser known favorites, if it was going to be a history so there were obligatory entries like Walt Disney, Steven Spielberg, Ursula Le Guin, Rod Serling, Gene Roddenberry and so on.'

Von Sholly says that the best description of the two volumes is from his friend Richard Milner, who says that *Fantastic Fictioneers* constitutes 'an unprecedented, profusely illustrated compendium celebrating over one hundred men and women behind our rich legacy of

fantasy, horror, and science fiction in comic books, literature, and cinema. Major authors, directors, and artists are spotlighted with original essays on each by contributors as distinguished as their subjects'.

One hundred authors are covered by 75 contributors. The first entry is by Bill Warren on Forrest J Ackerman, the legendary collector and editor and principal writer of *Famous Monsters of Film Land*. The format of each entry comprises a short overview cum essay on the author, accompanied by numerous colour illustrations of book covers, relevant artefacts, films, and a three-quarter-page original illustration by Von Sholly of the author concerned.

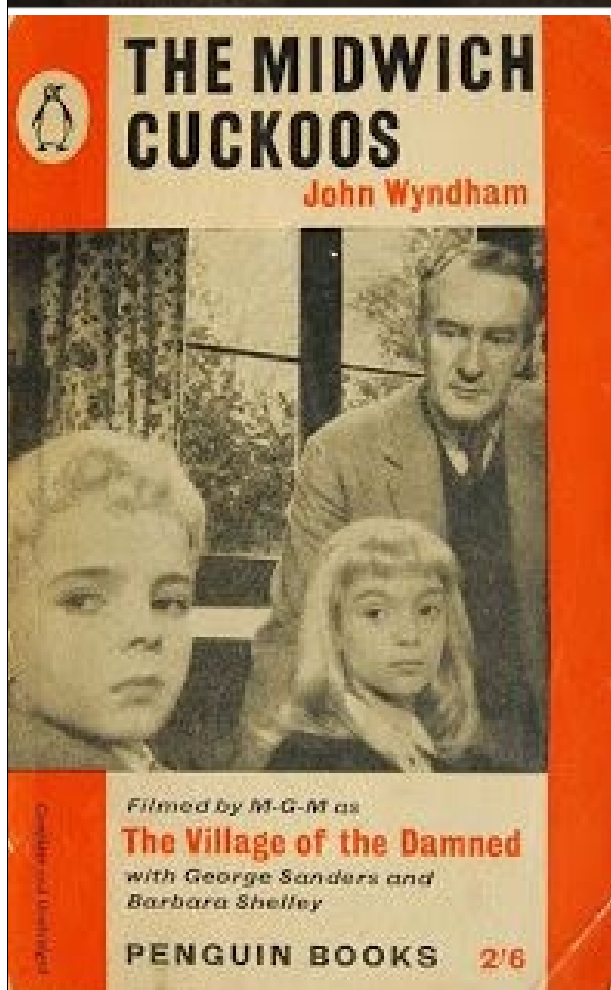
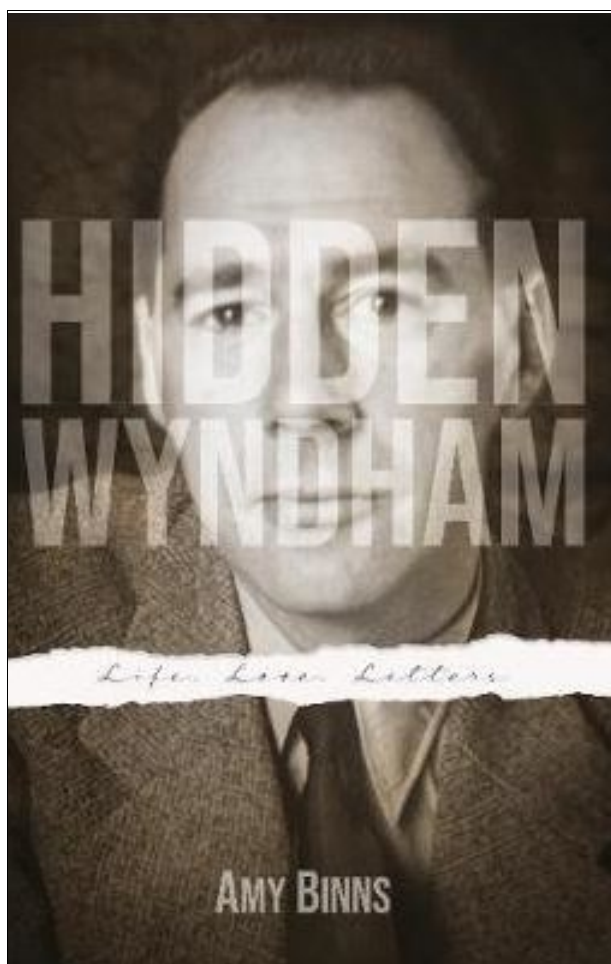
A sample of entries has Ramsey Campbell on Hans Christian Andersen and M. R. James; Richard A. Lupoff on Edgar Rice Burroughs; David Tosh on Robert Crumb, with some wonderful comic book illustrations; S. T. Joshi on H. P. Lovecraft and Washington Irving; Marty Baumann on Jack Kirby, again with some wonderful coloured comic book graphics; and Roy Thomas on Stan Lee.

Science fiction authors include Harlan Ellison on Frank Herbert; William F. Nolan on Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore; Marelizabeth Hart on Ursula K. Le Guin, in which Le Guin is quoted, 'There is a limited number of plots. There is no limit to the number of stories'; Richard A. Lupoff on Fritz Leiber; William F. Nolan on H. G. Wells, a beautifully produced entry with numerous film and book content illustrations from *The War of the Worlds*; J. K. Rowling by Steve Tatham; Jeff Morris on George R. R. Martin; George Khoury on Alan Moore; Julius Schwartz of DC Comics by Harlan Ellison; and Stephen Spielberg by Richard Milner. The last entry is one of the 'grand masters of comic art', Wally Wood by C. Courtney Joyner.

A number of the entries reflect Solly's love of the weird, such as Kerry Gammill's essay on the monsters of the artist Basil Gogos. The entries are mostly heavily concentrated on American male authors, but there are entries on authors such as British author Aldous Huxley and Japanese director Ishiro Honda. Apart from the 'obligatory' entries, Von Sholly does say that the selection are largely his subjective favourites. There will be few readers that have heard of all the writers and artists covered, which is another bonus.

The book concludes with a list of the contributors, briefly outlining their bios in their own words. Most are straightforward in biographical detail but others are delightfully idiosyncratic, such as Maria Alexander (who writes on Clive Barker), 'When she is not wheeling a katana at her shinkendodojo, she is being outrageously spooky or writing Dr Who filk. She lives in Los Angeles with two ungrateful cats and a purse called Trog'.

A review cannot really do justice to the content, quality, and sheer visual delight of the book, which owes so much to Pete Von Sholly, Pete Crowther of PS Publishing, and designer Ernest Farino. The two volumes are not cheap, but are worth every penny. Or get your local library to buy it.



Biography

HIDDEN WYNDHAM: LIFE, LOVE, LETTERS

by Amy Binns (Grace Judson Press; \$32.99)

Many people will be aware of John Wyndham's novels *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Kraken Wakes*, *The Chrysalids*, and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, which were bestsellers on publication in the 1950s and have remained in print ever since. They have also inspired several TV, radio, and film adaptations, as well as film hommages such as Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* and *Shaun of the Dead*.

John Wyndham (1903–1969) was seen as the publishing successor to H. G. Wells in 'scientific novels', but unlike Wells, a great publicity seeker, Wyndham was essentially a private man, termed 'the invisible man of science fiction'.

Hidden Wyndham: Life, Love, Letters is surprisingly the first biography of Wyndham. **Dr Amy Binns**, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire, has combed the Wyndham archive at the University of Liverpool to good effect to provide new material on Wyndham's life and especially the hidden love of his life, Grace Wilson.

Wyndham's traumatic childhood had a deep impact on his personality and beliefs. He was pretentiously christened 'John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Benyon Harris' by George, his dogmatic solicitor father with a flawed career, and his mother Gertrude, the indulged daughter of a wealthy Birmingham foundry-owning family. The fractured marriage soon foundered on George's profligate behaviour and an acrimonious divorce ensued, including a widely publicised public court case.

After the divorce, Wyndham's mother took to living in hotels and spa resorts in order to settle 'her nerves'. Wyndham was packed off to a series of boarding schools where he was very unhappy, until he ended up from 1915 to 1918 at the progressive co-educational public school Bedales.

After school, and a few low-level jobs, he began an initially precarious living as a fiction writer. He lodged for nearly 40 years at the Quaker Penn Club, in London's Tavistock Square, where he met at the age of 27 his long term partner Grace Wilson, who had studied English at Oxford. They became lovers, but they lived in separate rooms at the Penn Club and kept their love secret until their marriage when both had reached the age of 60.

Grace was a senior teacher at a girls' school and would have had to give up her career if she had married. Wyndham was not earning enough from his pulp fiction novels and short stories in the 1930s and would have had to get a day job, which he resisted, in order to support them both. Binns reveals the depth of the relationship through Wyndham's letters to Grace, especially during World War II. Grace destroyed her letters to Wyndham after his death in 1969.

Grace was the inspiration for his strong female characters, such as Josella Playton in *The Day of the Triffids*. Wyndham saw, as Binns writes, 'marriage as a bondage that diminished women into little more than brain-washed slaves. His own mother, Gertrude, acted as a terrible warning'. Mothers in his novels were shown as

incapable of caring even for themselves, let alone their children, as depicted in *The Chrysalids*.

In World War II, Wyndham was an official censor during the day, which strengthened his feelings for secrecy, and during the night a fire warden, before becoming part of the Normandy landings and subsequent German conflict. He was demobbed in 1946, but his experiences in the war, including witnessing the survivors of concentration camps, influenced his 1950s 'catastrophe novels'.

Wyndham's novels, although often lacking complex characterisation, dramatically reflect humanity's fragility when a simple unforeseen change threatens the collapse of civilisation, whether that change be caused by bioengineered Triffids and mass blindness, an alien incursion, or species evolution. The current coronavirus crisis is a supreme example of a Wyndham plot device. Wyndham is essentially Darwinian, and nearly always adopts the least-socially-acceptable option, as in *The Kraken Wakes*, which also reflects climate change concerns through rising sea levels.

In Wyndham's novel *The Chrysalids* (1955), religious fundamentalism holds sway in a small misogynistic agricultural community after a nuclear war. Women's modest clothes are decorated with embroidered crosses and they are held solely responsible for any child birth mutations. To be different is to be destroyed.

As Binns writes, 'The oppressive religious setting, the brutal punishment of transgressing women and the consequences of environmental damage prefigure Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.'

Wyndham always identified with the outsider child because of his troubled childhood. In *The Midwich Cuckoos*, filmed as *The Village of the Damned*, and *The Chrysalids*, readers empathise with the 'alien' children. The children must learn to hide their secret abilities even from their parents.

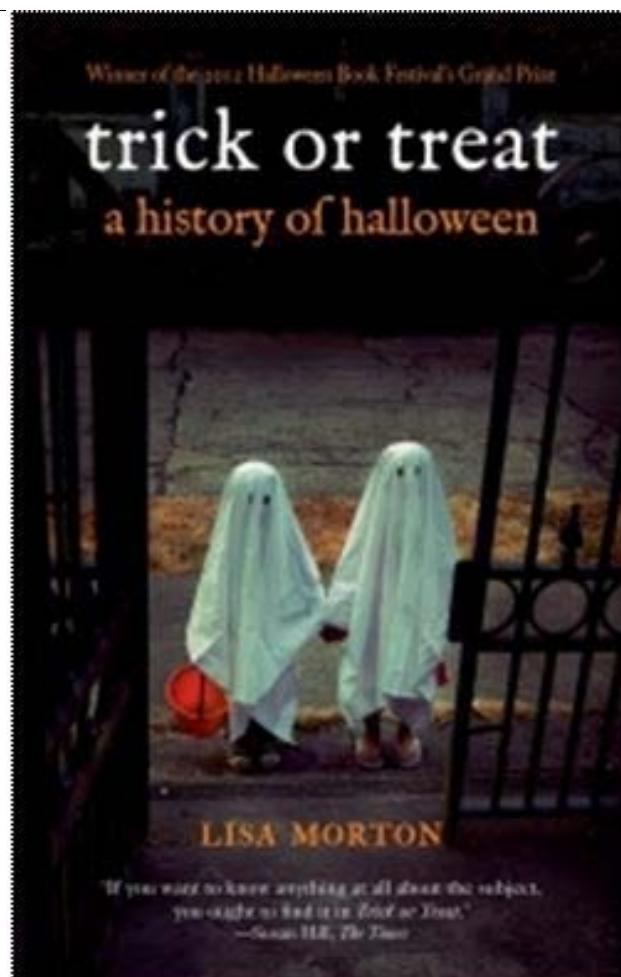
The man behind all the novels kept himself well hidden even as he became more popular and had to speak on radio and at conventions alongside figures such as Arthur C. Clarke. Amy Binns' perceptive biography *Hidden Wyndham* unveils the invisible man, highlighting an author whose writings resonate as much today as they did in the Cold War settings of the 1950s.

Books about society

TRICK OR TREAT: A HISTORY OF HALLOWEEN by Lisa Morton (Reaktion Books; \$24.99)

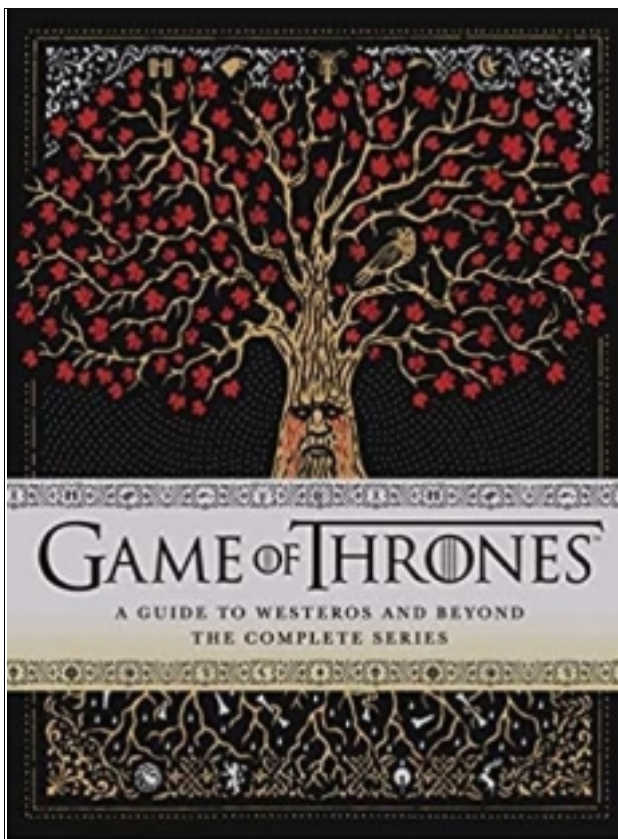
What are the origins of Halloween, surely one of the most unlikely global cultural events? American author **Lisa Morton**, who has written *The Halloween Encyclopedia*, the definitive reference book, has now produced a new edition of her 2012 publication *Trick or Treat: A History of Halloween*, winner of the Bram Stoker Award and the Halloween Book Festival Grand Prize.

Morton writes in her introduction that 'Halloween is a heavily commercialised product exported by the United States to the rest of the world. It also has the unenviable distinction of being the most demonised of days: Christian groups decry it as the devil's birthday,



authorities fear its effect on public safety and nationalist leaders around the world denounced its importation for conflicting with their own native traditions'.

Many people believe Halloween originated in America, but Morton documents its origins back to the Celtic Samhain, the ancient Gaelic harvest festival celebrated at the end of October. Samhain means 'summer's end', and Morton says, 'as the boundary between two years,



Samhain was a time for not only for paying off debts, but also for fortune-telling and visits by spirits, the *sidhe* of Celtic mythology’.

Eventually, with the rise of Christianity, Pope Gregory I sought to align pagan and Christian holidays in Ireland, through ‘souling’, asking for treats in exchange for prayers to dead loved ones. All Souls’ Day on 2 November was a time for the living to pray for the souls of the dead. All Saints’ Day, on 1 November, was also called All Hallows. That made 31 October All Hallows Eve, and later Halloween.

The huge Irish migration to America after the devastating mid-nineteenth-century potato famine took Halloween to America, where it was celebrated with parties and bonfires. Colonists from Britain had experience of Guy Fawkes Night on 5 November, including the knocking on doors for a penny for the guy. Halloween in America also incorporated the Catholic All Souls’ Day and to a lesser extent the influence of the Mexican *Día de los Muertos*.

Up to the early twentieth century, Halloween focused on a variety of activities, such as fortune-telling, when young women sought to identify their future husband, fun activities, including bobbing for apples, and harvest festival eating, especially Halloween cakes, which had small charms baked into them.

But then came trick-or-treat, a term Morton believes was first used in Canada in the 1920s. Morton says ‘trick-or-treat is descended from a number of different mumming practices, which involve begging food in exchange for a costumed performance ... trick-or-treat may derive from a combination of Guy Fawkes Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and All Souls’ Day tradition’.

Trick-or-treat roving for sweets or candies became a staple of Halloween: children now roaming the streets as

ghosts, zombies, witches, demons, and animals, and households. Houses were bedecked with jack-o’-lanterns in carved out turnips, potatoes, beets, and even cucumbers, but now, following American practice, pumpkins are the staple.

Sugar rationing during World War II put American trick-or-treating on hold, but after the end of rationing it boomed as American suburbs sprawled and Halloween became an opportunity to meet your neighbours. Candy companies began aggressively promoting candy as a Halloween must, and the animated Walt Disney short *Donald Duck: Trick or Treat* (1952), accentuated the popularity.

Morton is particularly good on Halloween’s impact on popular culture, such as books from Robert Burns, Washington Irving and Ray Bradbury, and TV shows featuring Halloween, such as *It’s the Great Pumpkin*, *Charlie Brown* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

A decline of trick-or-treating began in the mid-’60s as stories and movies highlighted the threats for children knocking in the dark on the doors of strangers. Newspaper stories of ‘Stranger danger’ proliferated, while John Carpenter’s famous movie *Halloween* (1979) didn’t help the Halloween image.

Now in America, adults have, according to Morton, reclaimed Halloween as a suburban party where parents can keep an eye on activities. Jennifer Vandekreeke, Vice President Australia, Carnival Cruise Line told *The Huffington Post* in 2016, ‘In the US, people love creating a costume from scratch. In Australia many people buy their costume and, most times, it’s only the kids who dress up. In the US, the adults take part as well and that’s what makes it special, that the whole family gets involved.’

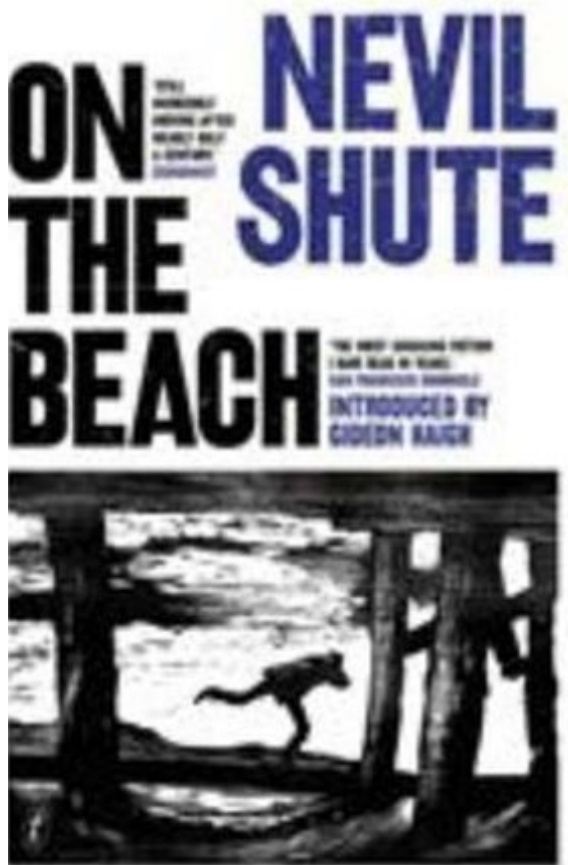
Commercialisation now massively underpins Halloween. It is now the American holiday that has the highest chocolate sales. Halloween has become increasingly popular in Australia in recent years, although we have a long way to go to catch up with the American fervour. Even so, Coles Australia estimated sales of over 270 tonnes of pumpkins in the lead up to 31 October.

Numerous black and white illustrations, references, bibliography, and an index supplement Lisa Morton’s engaging and solidly researched text. *A History of Halloween* documents lots of historical tricks, and is a wonderful treat for anyone looking beyond the commercial surface of Halloween.

Books about media

GAME OF THRONES: A GUIDE TO WESTEROS AND BEYOND: THE COMPLETE SERIES by Myles McNutt (Michael Joseph; \$49.95)

Game of Thrones: A Guide to Westeros and Beyond. The Complete Series by Myles McNutt is a sumptuous colour-illustrated coffee table book, organised into two geographical sections, North and South. It contains numerous short essays on the leading characters, their Houses and thematic backgrounds, supported by numerous photographs, maps, and timelines, and constitutes a great reference companion for fans of the *Game of Thrones* series.



Australian science fiction

ON THE BEACH

by Nevil Shute (Text; \$24.99)

Text Publishing has been particularly astute in reissuing, in a new hardback edition, *On the Beach*, Nevil Shute's famous 1957 book about the end of the world, which was filmed in 1959 by Stanley Kramer, starring Ava Gardner, Gregory Peck, Fred Astaire, and Anthony Perkins.

Ava Gardner has long been attributed to the comment, 'On the Beach is a story about the end of the world and Melbourne sure is the right place to film it', but it was a deletion by an Age newspaper subeditor that changed the setting of a journalist's words. Gardner, when questioned later, said that she did not remember saying it but 'would take credit for it anyway'.

On the Beach was perhaps the most influential example of all the 1950s fiction that reflected the Cold War fear of nuclear annihilation. In the first six weeks after the film appeared, the American edition of the book alone sold 100,000 copies, and it ultimately sold more than four million copies.

Gideon Haigh, who provides a perceptive 31-page introduction to Shute and the book, argues that *On the Beach* is 'arguably Australia's most important novel', in that it 'told the world, in language that everyone could understand, that nuclear war means death. And the world listened'.

Haigh follows the career path of British-born aeronautical engineer Nevil Shute Norway (1899–1960) and the influences on his life and work, both in Britain and Australia. Shute migrated in 1950 to Australia, a setting



Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck on set, *On the Beach*, Frankston Beach, 1957.

he used to great effect in best-sellers such as *A Town Like Alice* and *On the Beach*.

Shute, whose manuscript archive is held in the National Library of Australia, was never a great stylist, but his books captured the popular imagination of global middle-class readers.

The events of *On the Beach* cover the period from Christmas 1962 to the end of August 1963, after a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere, which originates in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. No nuclear bombs land in the Southern Hemisphere, but its inhabitants are doomed by the slowly descending radioactive cloud.

Haigh notes that Shute derived his cobalt bomb technical detail from the publications of Australian National University's pro-nuclear scientist Sir Ernest Titterton, the man who 'pushed the button' for the world's first nuclear weapon.

There are no scenes of mass rioting, looting, or anarchy as death looms. Shute focuses on a small number of characters, who, reflecting Shute's own conservative nature, are restrained in their emotions. In the novel, unlike the film, the two main characters, US Commander Dwight Towers and 24-year-old hard-drinking Moira Davidson, never consummate their love.

The members of the Pastoral Club, a thinly veiled Melbourne Club, also take to drink, given that there are 3000 bottles of vintage port to be drunk in six months.

Shute poignantly captures, through the Holmes family, the dilemma of whether you should kill your children first and then commit suicide. Shute's 1976 biographer Julian Smith termed *On the Beach* 'a novel about suicide'. The book ends with Moira: 'Then she put the tablets in her mouth and swallowed them down with a mouthful

of brandy, sitting behind the wheel of her big car’.

Shute reflects the courage and fortitude of the people he witnessed in the London Blitz of World War II. He depicts good people in dark times, as indeed we have seen with those confronting the Australian bushfires.

On the Beach was filmed on the Mornington Peninsula in a scorching 1959 Australian January. Now, in the devastating heat and apocalyptic bushfires of Australia’s summer of 2019–20, we have seen thousands of people literally on the beach awaiting evacuation.

Gemma Carey wrote from Canberra in *The Guardian* on 25 December, ‘Sitting, nauseous with morning sickness, on a park bench in the bright heat of an unusually hot spring day my partner and I watch children march past us, striking from school: “What’s the point of an education if we have no future”, their signs say ... I wonder if my child will ever have the innocence I had two months ago, of not having to think about whether the air will kill you.’ In Shute’s case, it was radioactivity in the atmosphere; now it’s dangerous toxic smoke within a climate-change framework.

Recent years have seen, as in the 1950s, a plethora of dystopian novels, TV series, and films, reflecting global fears about climate change. Could a powerful Nevil Shute-like novel and movie about global warming help change the political debate over climate issues?

Clinton administration climate adviser John Acheson has written, ‘Shute’s *On the Beach* made the consequences of nuclear war real, and therefore, unthinkable ... ‘In a scientifically illiterate culture such as ours, these kinds of myth-based meta-narratives may be the best way to communicate complex scientific issues

like climate change’. Let’s hope for an *On the Beach* of climate change.

BRUNY

by Heather Rose (Allen & Unwin; \$32.99)

Tasmanian author **Heather Rose**’s seventh novel *The Museum of Modern Love* won the 2017 Stella Prize, the 2017 Christina Stead Prize, and the 2017 Margaret Scott Prize.

Bruny, set in a near future Tasmania, is an abrupt fictional left turn from her previous novel, which is internally focused. Rose’s global setting is one in which the isolationist, neo-conservative US President, presumably Trump, has won a second term, there is now a King of England, and Brexit has occurred, leaving ‘the Brits a basket case’.

China and Australia are now much more strongly aligned. As part of the Belt and Road project, the Chinese are building a \$2 billion bridge in Tasmania between Hobart and Bruny Island. Many, however, wonder, why the Chinese would invest in a bridge that seems to have no immediate commercial viability. Can Bruny Island become ‘the new Cote d’Azur’, as the Tasmanian government’s marketeers believe?

Early in the novel, an underwater bomb brings down part of the nearly completed bridge. The Chinese, with the agreement of the Tasmanian government, fly in 289 Chinese workers, ‘who all put the Chinese Communist Party above their own interests’, aiming to complete the bridge by its original deadline.

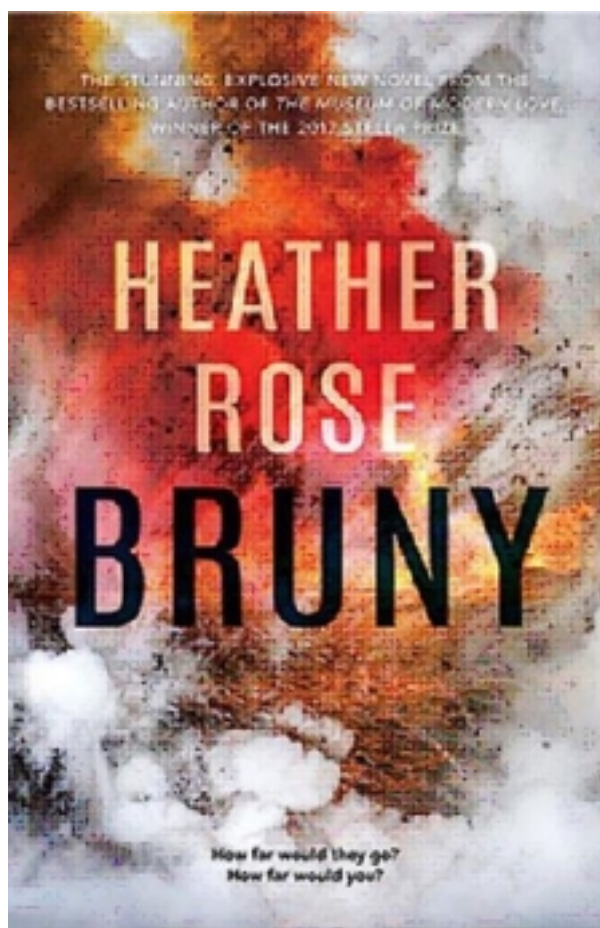
As Federal and Tasmanian investigations are launched into the explosion, Astrid Coleman, 56-years-old United Nations conflict resolution specialist, is hired to mediate the not inconsiderable tensions over the bridge. The Chinese entrepreneurs and the Tasmanian and Federal governments are on one side, while the BFG, the Bruny’s Friends Group, the Greens, and the unions are on the other.

Astrid, who left Tasmania when she was 18, is a member of the powerful Tasmanian Coleman family. Her twin brother, JC, is the Liberal Premier and her older half-sister Max is the leader of ALP. There is lingering family resentment that Astrid hasn’t returned from New York for years to see her father with dementia and her mother shrunken with cancer.

Family tensions will parallel the political tensions. Astrid is still bitter about her marriage breakup after her academic husband Ben left her for a younger woman. Ben had ‘watched a lot of women rise on the academic ladder while his own career stalled’ and clearly resents Astrid’s career success. Astrid reflects, ‘it’s men who created the violence and viciousness of the world’.

Astrid wonders if ‘we are all pawns’ in the politics behind the bridge building. After all, ‘Bruny was a very out of the way place for China to want to connect to’ and ‘The Chinese Communist Party espoused very different values and loyalties to those held by the everyday Australian’. Nonetheless, she is willing to take her brother’s word as to the ultimate benefits to Tasmania of the bridge construction.

When, however, a Chinese worker is killed during the rebuilding of the bridge, and his death is covered up by



the Chinese and the Tasmanian governments, Astrid determines to find out the truth behind the Chinese largesse. No easy task, given the politics and money involved, and in a Tasmania where the government has passed a law that 'anyone communicating an opinion harmful to the government or government activities received a \$5000 fine'.

The truth, when ultimately revealed, of the Tasmanian/Chinese relationship will be too far-fetched for most readers, but it does allow Astrid to unearth secret political deals and family skeletons, and the opportunity, perhaps too conveniently, to find a new love.

Astrid's investigative journey allows Rose to use her, and other main characters, as a mouthpiece to expound widely on numerous issues, including Australian politics, the rise of populism, climate change, religious extremism, social inequality, corporate power, and foreign investment in Australia, particularly Chinese 'chequebook colonialism'. These soapbox-like declarations don't help the narrative flow. Nor do they assist the plot, except perhaps, the nature of Chinese expansionism, unless it represents the overall global nature of fractured politics.

A few examples of the soapbox: John Howard is 'a little man, a mean-spirited tracksuit wearing Conservative Prime Minister, who ... persuaded an optimistic nation to become pessimistic'. Rupert Murdoch has left 'a toxic legacy ... dumbing down the national conversation in the US, UK and Australia to three-word headlines and shock jock commentary'. Journalism in Australia 'had all swung right and into personal opinion. And even the ABC ... had been forced to adapt. So many of the intelligent programmes had been cut'. One may agree or disagree with such statements, but the issue is the numerous placements in the novel's framework.

Canberra doesn't escape. Max states: 'Canberra operates in a bubble. No traffic jams or parking problems. Everyone can afford to send their kids to private school. It's a group of intelligent, affluent, middle-class people totally removed from life in the rest of Australia.'

Rose has said that *Bruny* is part political thriller, part satire, part love story, part family story. These diverse elements, supplemented by the overwhelming political messages, never coalesce successfully, but there's no doubt *Bruny* will arouse much passionate discussion, pro and con, not least in Tasmania.

THE CRUEL STARS

by John Birmingham (Head of Zeus; \$32.99)

Brisbane-based writer **John Birmingham** is always an entertaining author who provides his readers with fast paced narratives. *The Cruel Stars* begins a space opera trilogy in which, simply put, five very different characters unite to save civilisation from the 'Sturm'.

The Sturm are 'species purists', whose aim is to kill any humans with genetic or cybernetic enhancements. And that's a lot of humans! Two centuries previously, the Sturm were defeated and banished to the dark reaches of the galaxy, but now they have returned with a vengeance.

Birmingham has said that he was inspired to write *The Cruel Stars* 'by the novels of Peter F. Hamilton, and John Scalzi and C. J. Cherryh and Isaac Asimov and Iain M



Banks. In the end I had to remind myself this was a traditional military thriller, in a science-fiction setting'.

Birmingham delivers a black-and-white fight between good and evil. The Sturm are given few redeeming characteristics, and the background is not detailed in depth.

The best hope of defeating the Sturm lies with an unlikely group comprising an exiled young headstrong princess; an untried female Navy warship commander; the leader of an outlaw group; a soldier traitor on death row; and a retired admiral from the first war with the Sturm.

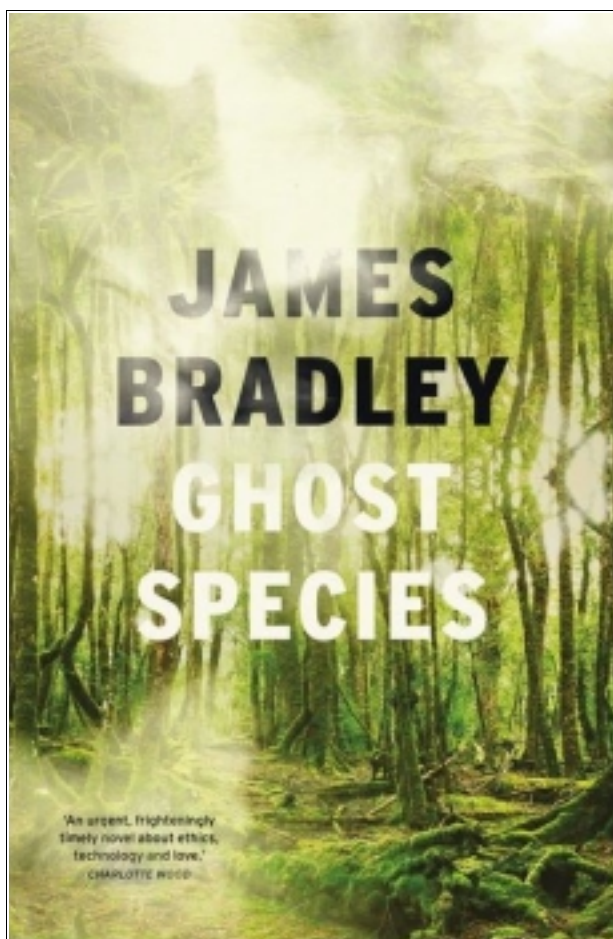
Birmingham says of the characters, whose stories alternate throughout the narrative, that the most 'fun' character to write about 'was the foulmouthed, irascible 700 year old Scotsman, McClelland ... His relationship with the advanced combat intellect, Hero, was like a marriage. Not so much a marriage gone bad, as one gone deeply, deeply strange'.

Birmingham is not strong on world building or deep characterisation, but his combination of frenetic action, bloody battles, inventive technologies, and dark humour ensures the readership will look forward eagerly to the rest of the trilogy.

GHOST SPECIES

by James Bradley (Hamish Hamilton; \$29.99)

James Bradley has established an impressive reputation as an author on climate fiction (cli-fi), notably with *Clade* (2015), and as a commentator on environmental issues.



In 2012 he won the Pascall Prize for Australia's Critic of the Year.

In *Ghost Species*, Bradley portrays a near-future world well down the path of climate change catastrophe, with the extinction of many species and a collapse of society. Earth is 'past the tipping point'.

Bradley has said that as he was writing the novel, 'real events were constantly outpacing what I could imagine and that the kind of catastrophe I'm exploring was already unfolding around me'.

Ghost Species sees two young geneticists, Jay and Kate, who are in an uneasy personal relationship, recruited by social network billionaire Davis Hucken to work in his secret research laboratory in Tasmania.

Bradley says Tasmania 'has powerful existing associations with extinction that I wanted to conjure up, plus I wanted to draw on its symbolism of colonial heedlessness'.

Hucken's research establishments have secretly resurrected thylacines, mammoths, and genetically engineered plants in a bid to restore the damaged environment. Now Hucken intends to recreate a Neanderthal baby, using a surrogate mother and DNA extracted from an ancient tooth found in a French cave. Hucken wants to prove that we are not 'distinct, separate, unique'.

The project is successful. The baby, appropriately named Eve, cries when born with 'a sound not heard for forty thousand years'. With the proof of concept achieved, Hucken rejects the need for more babies, leaving Kate disillusioned on ethical grounds with her 'billionaire puppet master boss'. The 'project is wrong,

not because it is an exercise in vanity, because it places humans at the centre of things or pretends to godhood'.

Kate, whose relationship with Jay deteriorates when she miscarries, absconds with Eve to a remote country town, where she keeps Eve hidden from prying locals. Kate, however, will not be able to escape Husken's surveillance.

The bulk of novel follows, creakily at times, Eve and Kate's story over 25 years. Eve, despite some physical differences, develops 'within the normal sapient range', and is able to comprehend her 'other' status entailing connection and disconnection with humanity.

Ghost Species is ultimately 'unconsoling', in Bradley's words, depicting a world brought down by human arrogance. Bradley's powerful narrative reflects that humanity collectively needs to change, a message even more relevant in the current coronavirus pandemic.

Australian fantasy

ANGEL MAGE

by Garth Nix (Allen & Unwin; \$24.99)

Many still regard **Garth Nix**, Australia's top-selling fantasy author, as Canberra's own, even though he has lived in Sydney for just over three decades. His formative years were spent in Canberra, where he attended Turner Primary School and Lyneham High School before graduating with a BA in Professional Writing from the University of Canberra in 1986.

This reviewer remembers Garth Nix working in the now long gone, but still fondly remembered, Dalton's



bookshop in Garema Place. Interestingly, Garth will have a new book out in 2020, titled *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London*, set in the 1980s, which will draw on his book-selling and publishing experience.

I also remember in 1991 reviewing for the Canberra Times Nix's first novel *The Ragwitch*, which spins off the finding of a rag doll in a midden heap, inspired by a midden near the Nix family beach house at Bawley Point.

Garth Nix has been a full-time writer since 2001 with over 6 million books sold, especially the 'Old Kingdom' fantasy series, comprising *Sabriel*, *Lirael*, *Abhorsen*, *Clarel*, and *Goldenhand*. His last book *Frogkisser!* is being developed as a film by Twentieth Century Fox/Blue Sky Animation.

Nix believes that 'Often the most successful and enduring fantasy books offer an element of escapism, while at the same time also offering an alternative means of looking at and perhaps understanding ourselves, our world and our problems'.

During October 2019, Nix was visiting 30 cities in 22 days in Britain and America to publicise his blockbuster new novel *Angel Mage*. Interestingly, it's being marketed by Gollancz, his publishers in Britain, as an adult novel, whereas in America it is being marketed as a young adult (YA) novel for readers from the age of 14 upwards.

Nix says these labels are essentially publisher marketing ploys, depending on who the publisher sees in their country as the 'core audience'. In this context, he says, readers should 'abandon their preconceptions', as his new novel *Angel Mage* will appeal to all ages.

The Three Musketeers, which Nix first read as a teenager, is the inspiration for *Angel Mage*, a novel that he says has 'been building up for decades'. Nix feels, however, that Dumas's novel, like other crossover novels, 'work on different levels', depending on the age at which they are read, so that readers have 'different experiences'. His 'preferred definition of YA books is that they are essentially adult novels that have particular appeal to teenagers and up'.

Nix has commented that 'Fantasy brings together a lot of my passions, like history and mythology', and 'readers like the mixture of fact and fantasy'. That is certainly true on both counts of *Angel Mage*, set in an alternative seventeenth-century Western Europe, with the main narrative taking place in Sarance (France) and to a lesser extent Ystara (Spain) with characters from Alba (England).

Nix acknowledges he is 'a great reader of history of all kinds, from fairly heavy academic tomes to popular histories and biographies, and historical fiction. I tend to mentally collect small details that will come in handy in my own fiction'. He is currently reading a new biography of Thomas Cromwell and looking forward to the upcoming final volume of Hilary Mantel's fictional Cromwell trilogy.

Nix has dedicated *Angel Mage* to Alexandre Dumas and Richard Lester and George MacDonald Fraser, director and writer respectively, for *The Three Musketeers* (1973) and *The Four Musketeers* (1974). Nix's British publicist has said that *Angel Mage* infuses *The Three Musketeers* with 'magic and kick ass female characters', which is perhaps as good a short summary as one could get of a book of nearly 500-pages.

Spin-off Dumas details abound within the text. Nix says, he 'wanted to create a similar feel of adventure and derring-do, while not actually being a retelling or version of the same story'.

That is certainly true, particularly as most of the main characters in *Angel Mage* are female, with different skin colours. Nix says that he wanted his 'world to have gender equality' in contrast to the largely white male world of Dumas. He says, 'I'm trying to break an age-old mindset and expectation in fiction that it will be all male, to reflect the modern realisation that gender and skin colour should be irrelevant to employment, position and power'.

Angel Mage takes place in a world in which icons are physical symbols of heavenly powers and can be used by humans to connect with angels for a variety of requests, although that contact can come with dangers, depending on the level of angel summoned and the mage involved.

Each country has a Cardinal who liaises with an Archangel. In the case of Ystara, Cardinal Alsyrheron summons Archangel Palleniel to avert the disaster of the Ash Blood plague, but Palleniel refuses as 'another commanded him now'.

This turns out to be Liliath, 'the Maid of Ellanda', a 19-year-old powerful icon maker, 'obsessed beyond the point of madness'. As a result of the 'grey ash' plague unleashed by Liliath and with the country unprotected by Palleniel, two-thirds of the population of Ystara die, while nearly another third are transformed into zombie-like 'beastlings'.

Neighbouring Archangels, acting as a sort of angelic border force, quarantine Ystara, although Liliath manages to escape across the border to Sarance and falls into a magic sleep. 137 years later, she wakes up, still 19, and renews her single-minded quest to be united with her now fragmented love, Palleniel.

Sarance is notionally ruled by Queen Sofia XIII, with an ineffective King by her side, but her female Chief Minister, Cardinal Duplessis, 'was in most cases the actual Governor of the realm'. As with Dumas, different armed groups serve the Queen and Cardinal. So, Captain-General Dartagnan and her Musketeers side with the Queen, while Captain Rochefort and her Pursuivants protect the Cardinal.

His female characters, Nix says, 'are well-developed individuals with their own plans and desires, leading countries or actively working to destroy them. I loved that the women are the heroes, the villains and everything in between'.

Liliath realises she will need the help of four 18-year-olds living in the Star Fortress of Lutace, who are unaware of Liliath's intent and unknown to each other. The four comprise Agnez Descaray, an ambitious and headstrong cadet in the Queen's Musketeers; student doctor Simeon MacNeel; Cardinal's clerk and fortune hunter Henri Dupallidin; and Dorotea Imself, a student icon maker with magical skills.

The four will find themselves beginning a dangerous journey against their will to seek a resolution they cannot understand. Will they be able to bond, given their different personalities, and come together to resist Liliath in her desire to use their combined skills to reconnect with

Palleniel? Liliath has already destroyed one world. Can they prevent her destroying another?

Once readers have digested the complex background of human and angelic power structures, Nix delivers a fast-moving narrative, bringing it to a dramatic conclusion, pivoting around love and power, obsession and passion.

Nix has said, 'I like to tell a really good story.' That is certainly borne out in *Angel Mage*, which although billed as a stand-alone novel, has considerable potential to become a series. The last line indeed states, 'their past adventures done, their new ones just begun'.

Australian horror

MONSTROUS HEART

by Claire McKenna (Harper Collins; \$29.95)

The publicity for *Monstrous Heart*, Melbourne author Claire McKenna's fantasy debut, references the successful novels and TV series *Outlander*, which decidedly overhypes the textual reality.

Arden Beacon arrives in the windswept 'coarse coastal



Kaaron Warren.

town' of Vigil with the task of following in the tradition of her late uncle and using blood magic to keep a lighthouse operating off the coast. Arden and her friend Chalice have to challenge traditional mores in a society with hidden secrets.

The tumultuous seas are filled with krakens and leviathans, hunted by individuals such as Arden's neighbour, Jonah Riven, whom rumour asserts has killed his wife to placate the monsters of the deep. Everyone tells Arden to avoid Raven but naturally the opposite occurs.

McKenna mixes real and fantasy settings within a complex plot line, elements which never really fuse successfully, while the slow-burning relationship between Arden and Jason clearly indicates a sequel.

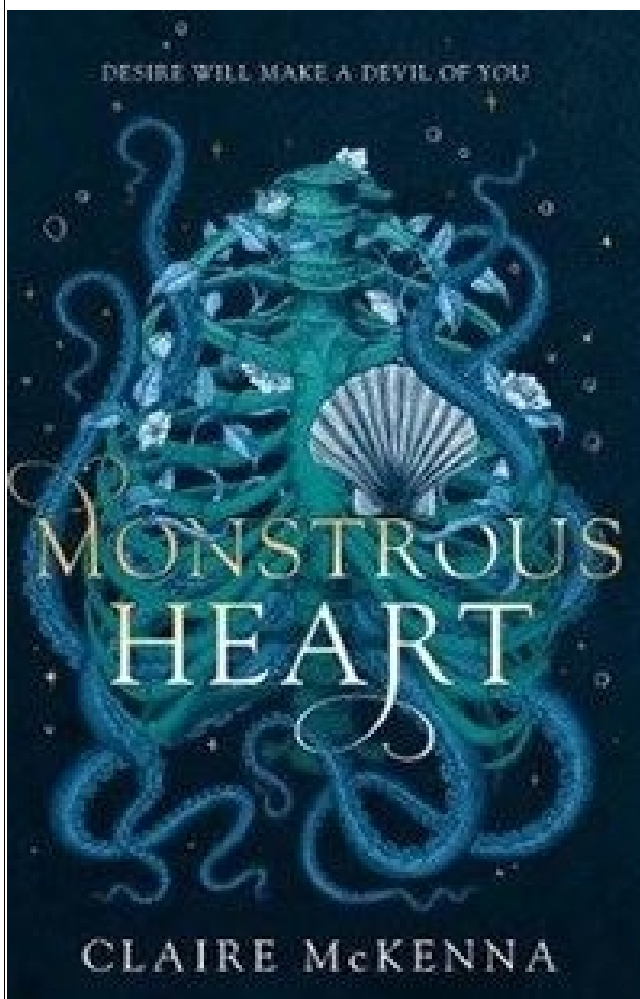
INTO BONES LIKE OIL

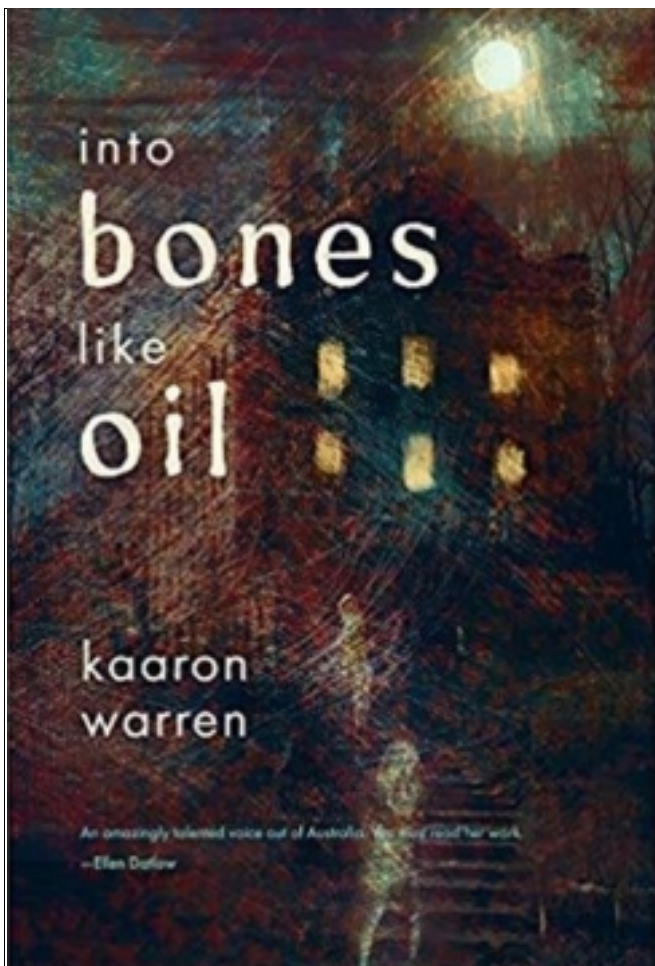
by Kaaron Warren (Meerkat Press; \$22 95)

Kaaron Warren has won the ACT Writers and Publishers Award four times and twice been awarded the Canberra Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Her short stories, comprising over 200 published since 1993, have won the Australian Shadows, Ditmar, and Aurealis Awards; this is in addition to five award-winning novels *Slights*, *Walking the Tree*, *Mistification*, *The Grief Hole*, and *Tide of Stone*.

In 2018, *A Primer to Kaaron Warren* was published by Dark Moon Books in Los Angeles. Yet, because a significant proportion of Warren's dark fiction has been published overseas, or is only available in small press publications with limited distribution, her reputation as one of Australia's best imaginative writers is not as widespread as it should be.

Her new novella *Into Bones Like Oil*, is set in Anglesea, a rooming house, possibly near the sea in Victoria. The residents, known as 'wrecks', are fleeing personal traumas. Warren says the rooming house provides a focus for 'how transient many people are in life, how we are who we say we are in new places where others don't know us'. Dora, the main character, is fleeing a terrible family tragedy, 'She is driven by grief and guilt; these things





direct everything she does.'

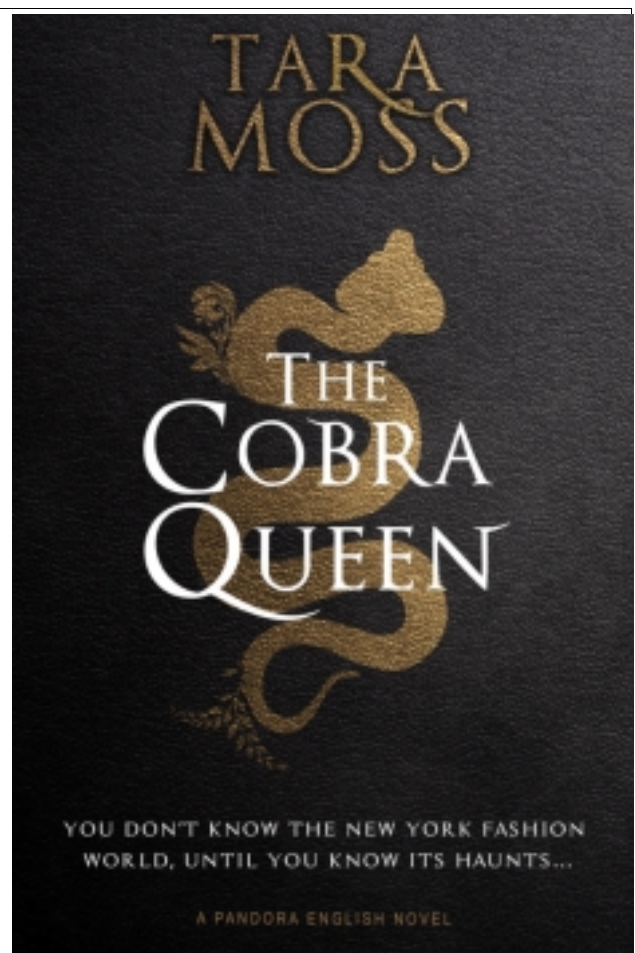
The rooming house adjoins a beach, the site of a long-ago shipwreck, and is haunted by the people who drowned at sea. Warren's sharply delineated characters have their own ghosts to confront as well as the ghosts of the long-dead crew and passengers.

The residents can pay off their debts to the landlord by being put into an induced sleep to facilitate communication with the ship's ghosts. Critics have observed in Warren's writing elements of hauntology, where, even if archetypal ghosts are not present, characters are haunted by their shadow selves.

The landlord comments to Dora, 'You know it's more than a rooming house. You wouldn't have come, otherwise. You need help to sleep. Everyone does who comes to me. You will sleep well here at The Angelsea. No doubt about that at all. It's my little contribution.'

Dora initially resists the induced sleep, terrified that this gateway will enable her to be in contact with her dead daughters, who will surely tell her 'it's all you're fault we're dead'.

Warren has said of *Into Bones Like Oil*, 'I wanted to explore guilt and how it affects our lives going forward.' Dora finds a sort of resolution at the end of an impressive dark novella, which explores love, grief, death, and guilt and the ability to survive when all hope seems lost.



THE COBRA QUEEN

by Tara Moss (Echo Publishing; \$29.99)

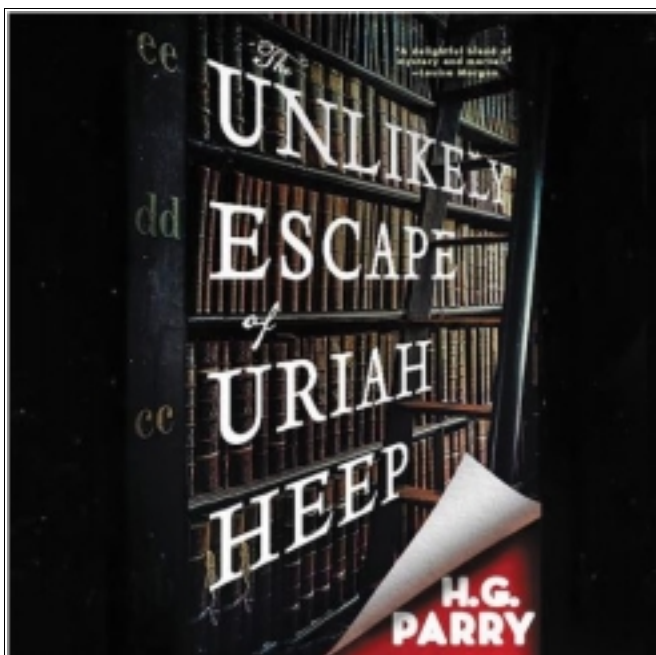
The Cobra Queen by Canadian–Australian author **Tara Moss** is the fourth in her Pandora English series, which combines urban supernatural fantasy and gothic horror.

Pandora, who lives in Great Aunt Celia's Victorian mansion in Manhattan, is the 'chosen one', the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. Moss has said she preferred to follow 'a matriarchal line rather than patriarchal line that we have seen in older tales'.

Pandora is a fashion journalist covering an upcoming Egyptian exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, which will awake a wronged female pharaoh and threaten the apocalyptic 'Revolution of the Dead'. Without Pandora, 'the living world will fall and the balance will be undone'.

The ensuing battle will test all of Pandora's supernatural gifts and those of her allies, including her beloved 'spirit guide', Civil War soldier Lieutenant Luke Thomas.

Moss says she pays homage to 'classic mythology, old school horror tales and popular stories of the paranormal but with a twist'. The twist is 'the powerful and complex, and not always good' Pandora, who carries the story through to a rousing conclusion.



New Zealand fantasy

THE UNLIKELY ESCAPE OF URIAH HEEP by H. G. Parry (Orbit; \$22.99)

The Unlikely Escape of Uriah Heep by New Zealand author H. G. Parry is the ultimate book-lover's fantasy. Parry's debut novel has echoes of the Jasper Fforde novels and Cornelia Funke's Inkheart trilogy, as she delivers 'a love letter to reading'.

Young Wellington University academic Charley Sutherland is a 'summoner' with the power to bring literary characters into the real world. A problem is that they often escape his control. As the novel opens, Charley calls his lawyer brother Rob in the middle of the night with the news, 'Uriah Heep's loose on the ninth floor ... and I can't catch him'.

Fictional mayhem ensues, as another 'summoner' unleashes characters who threaten the fabric of the world, with Wellington the literary fault line. 'Stories bring things into the world, and they can't be put away again.'

Reading is an act of interpretation, allowing the emergence of famous characters such as Dorian Gray, Heathcliff, multiple Mr Darcys, Victor Frankenstein, Ebenezer Scrooge, and even the hound from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, as they step onto centre stage.

Dr Parry skilfully mixes reflections on the power of literature on our lives in a clever, engaging fantasy mystery that will appeal to all age ranges.

British science fiction

WIDOWS WELCOME by D. K. Fields (Head of Zeus; \$32.99)

D. K. Fields' *Widows Welcome*, is the pseudonym of Welsh authors David Towsey and Katherine Stansfield. It is the first book in their 'Tales of Fenest' trilogy, which through

an inflected Victorian setting, reflects our contemporary world of fake news or tall tales.

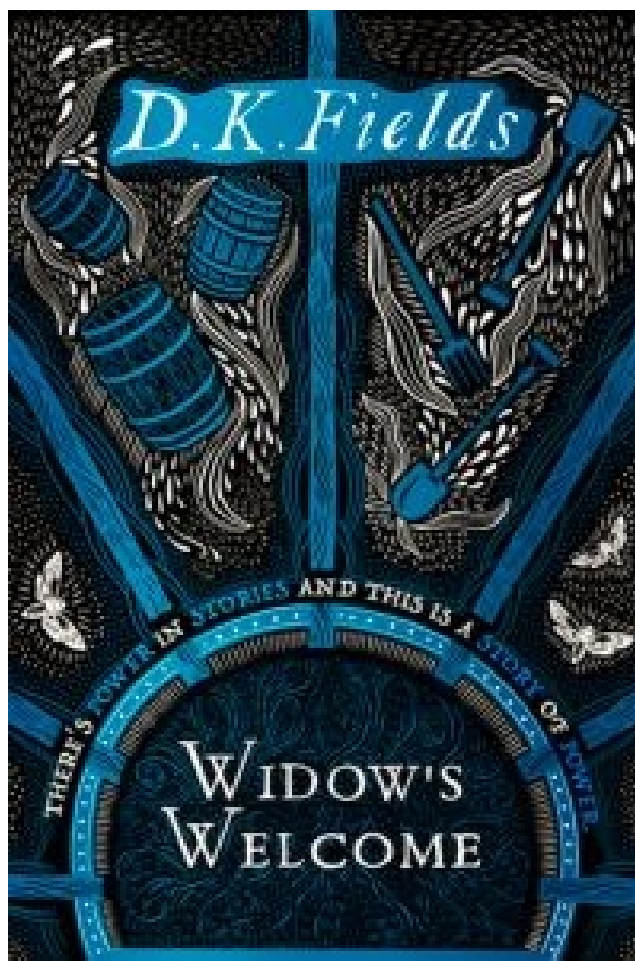
It is set in the Union of Realms, where the outcomes of elections turn on stories told by storytellers. When one of the storytellers is found murdered with his lips sewn shut, young Detective Cora Gorderheim is assigned to find out the murderer and why this message has been silenced. An unusual form of election rigging needs to be solved before political anarchy results.

EPISODES by Christopher Priest (Gollancz; \$29.99)

Christopher Priest is one of Britain's most talented writers, but sadly neglected in the general literary pantheon. *Episodes*, his latest short story collection, received scant coverage in the British literary press on publication.

In *Episodes*, Priest has provided commentary for each of the 11 stories, covering four decades of his writing. Each story has a Before and After section, which tell the origins of and reaction to the stories. They thus comprise key notes as to developments in his writing career. He also tells us that he has engaged in 'a little polishing here and there of the stories'. Priest notes in his preface that the stories could be termed 'fantastic', a term which is 'indefinable and free of boundaries, with no restrictions on time or place'.

'An Infinite Summer' was originally published in 1976 within the 'Dream Archipelago' sequence. The story originally fell into the notorious publishing black hole of Harlan Ellison's *The Last Dangerous Visions* collec-





tion, before Priest rescued it for publication. It tells how time travellers 'freeze' people as time vignettes. In 1903, Thomas Lloyd and his girlfriend Sarah are frozen in time. Thomas is unfrozen in 1935 and waits patiently over the years for the split second when Sarah is unfrozen in order to save her. Priest beautifully recreates contemporary mores in a love story that becomes infinite.

Similar nuances can be found in 'Palely Loitering', published in 1979. Priest writes that 'Palely Loitering' 'was written soon after I returned from a long and very happy stay in Melbourne, Australia. It was an attempt to think myself back into a European sensibility; visiting Australia is like seeing the past and future simultaneously, and the familiar and unfamiliar at once.'

In the distant future, Mykle is the 10-year-old son of a family that echoes, in an affectation, Victorian traditions. Flux Channel Park was the site of a starship launch 70 years ago, leaving behind a flux whose two bridges distort both space and time within a 24-hour framework. Mykle, by crossing at an angle, is able to advance more extensively into the future. The story recounts his various encounters at various ages with a girl called Estyll. News of the starship's return means that the flux field will end, but hopefully not the relationship between Mykle and Estyll. Priest again explores what is the nature of reality and 'dreamlike convolutions'.

Priest indicates that three of his stories were influenced by H. P. Lovecraft. 'I, Haruspex' is set in a wooded England where the reclusive James Owsley ingests entrails in order to fight underworld forces, the 'Old Ones'. The freezing of time again comes into play when Owsley

encounters in 1937 a German fighter plane from the Second World War whose occupant will determine his fate.

In 'The Head and the Hand', Priest documents the physical and marital dismantling of a performance artist who amputates bits of his body to please his audience. A dark story that outdoes Roald Dahl. The Afterword covers Priest's relationship with Michael Moorcock and the story of the film, possibly with Mick Jagger, that never eventuated.

Stage magic was a major part of Priest's novel *The Prestige*. In 'The Stooge', Priest takes the reader back to the British music hall circuit of the 1950s and 1960s, in which 'magicians' plied their nightly trade with glamorous assistants. A paid volunteer from the audience soon finds out that after being part of Splendido's act that being alone is far more than an illusion.

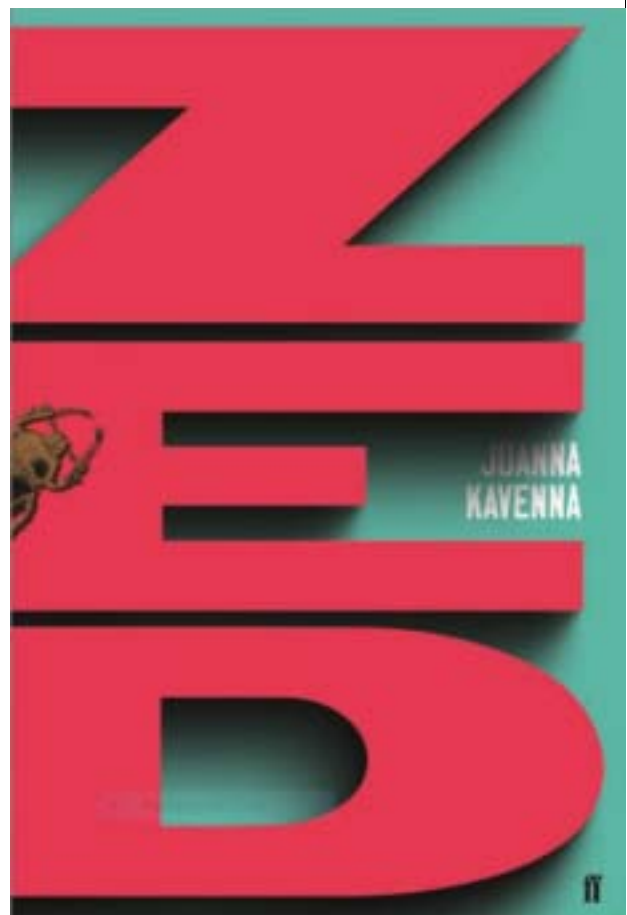
Episodes is a valuable addition to the Priest oeuvre.

ZED

By Joanna Kavenna (Faber; \$32.99)

British author **Joanna Kavenna**, one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists in 2013, won the Orange Prize for New Writing with her second novel *Inglorious*. Her sixth novel, *Zed*, set in the near future, imaginatively extrapolates from contemporary AI trends to a world where algorithms rule and the line between the real and the virtual is blurred.

Zed is a particularly relevant novel at a time when a global action plan has been launched by Sir Tim Berners-Lee and others to save the World Wide Web from politi-



cal manipulation, fake news, privacy violations, and other trends, which they believe will result in a digital dystopia.

In *Zed*, multinational tech firm Beetle, a combination of Google, Facebook, and national security agencies, dominates the world. People wear BeetleBands, which record all thoughts and acts, spend a crypto-currency BeetleBits, consult Wiki-Beetle for information, are monitored by BeetleInsight, and are encouraged to use a simplified language, Bespoke.

The United Kingdom is now 'the most advanced benign regulatory environment in the world', as viewed from the Beetle perspective. Given their systems run the infrastructure of Great Britain, they have immense power over the government as well as the press. The *London Times*, staffed by 'robohacks', has been allowed to keep publishing as a Beetle-controlled 'curiosity'.

Human life is monitored by algorithms, with anything unpredictable being deemed dangerous. People can be arrested by security forces and police for predicted future crimes and acts of terrorism. Those who resist conformity are called 'unverified'. Echoes of Philip K. Dick's 'Minority Report' here.

The novel begins when a man murders his family without any algorithmic prediction. Beetle panic ensues. It is deemed a 'Zed' event, one thought impossible within the Beetle framework of prediction.

Beetle, run by egotistical CEO Guy Matthias, assigns 'lifechain' predictive expert Douglas Varley to sort out the crisis. High-level national security agent Eloise Jayne is also given the task of uncovering the reason for the murder. It is more pressing for them to find out what went wrong than finding the murderer.

As it happens, anti-terror droid officers (ANTs) kill a man whom they wrongly identify as the murderer, another inexplicable Zed event, which foreshadows a plethora of unpredictable catastrophic events and a chain of events questioning Beetle's global dominance.

Kavenna peppers her text with literary allusions, which include Kafka and Orwell, and there is even an electronic personal assistant called Little Dorrit. The myriad of characters, however, and occasional info dumps, detract from a powerful cogent satire about the growing influence of multinational corporation technology on our life and thoughts.

SALVATION LOST

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

British author **Peter F. Hamilton** is renowned for his multivolume hard SF/space opera novels with a large cast of characters and peppered with inventive technological extrapolations.

Salvation Lost is the second book in the 'Salvation' trilogy, which is set in the twenty-third century. Earth's people have portal access to the stars, where they encounter the alien Olyix, who are seen as benign because they freely share their advanced technology. Unfortunately, the Olyix are now revealed as intending to harvest humanity for transportation to the 'Omega Point' as a tribute to their God. Their agents emerge and plot on earth to close down networks and access portals, with the alien attack beginning in Perth, 'a clean urban jewel

sitting on Australia's coast. It was protected by eight interlocking oval shields that stretched for seventy kilometres end to end, and forty deep'.

Hamilton tells the story of resistance and human survival through the perspective of a variety of not always fully developed, characters, a survival that is complicated by the revelation of another alien species, the Neána, who warned of the Olyix's intentions.

Because of the defined invasion framework of the narrative of the second book, *Salvation Lost* is much tighter than is usual for the middle books of trilogies, although the final resolution, as usual, has to wait for the final volume, *The Saints of Salvation*.

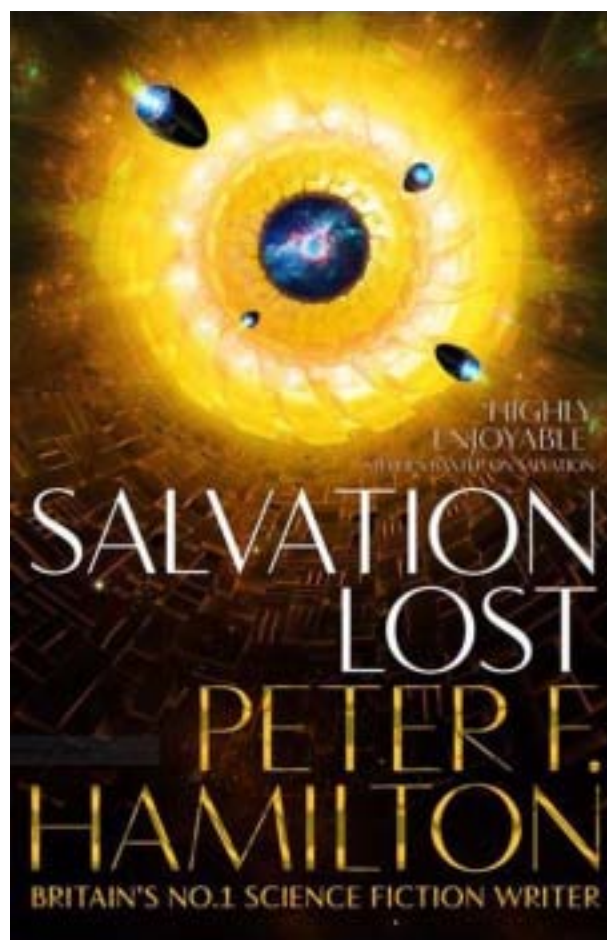
British fantasy

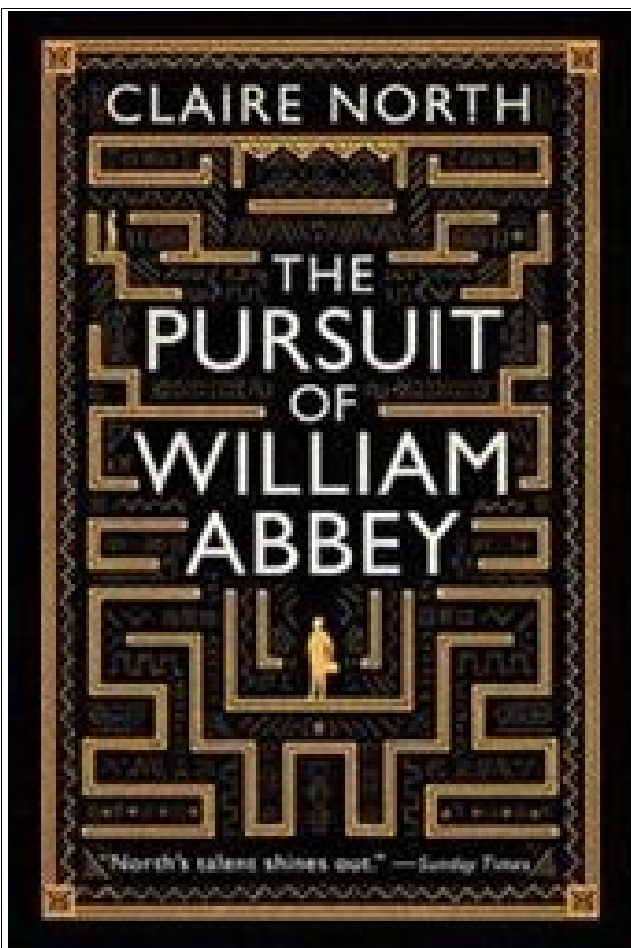
THE PURSUIT OF WILLIAM ABBEY

by Claire North (Orbit; \$32.99)

Claire North's *The Pursuit of William Abbey* opens in a 'pestilential backwater' in Natal in South Africa in 1884 with the words of a young English doctor William Abbey, 'I was cursed in Natal, in 1884. I stood by as a teenage boy [Langa] was beaten to death by a mob. His mother cursed us all by truth and by blood, but the shadow took to me, and we have been together since.'

The novel is told retrospectively from France in the First World War. William Abbey tells his story in a make-shift hospital to a nurse, Sister Ellis. Langa's mother's curse turned Abbey into 'a truth speaker', with the power





to see the truth in people, but he will always be pursued across continents by the shadow spirit of Langa. Chapter 59 covers his journey from Darwin to Perth and meeting Jarli, an Aboriginal truth speaker.

Abbey is employed by the British government to seek out other truth speakers but is principally used as a global spy by the government, a process that enables North to expose the ruthlessness of imperial Britain. Abbey's shadow curse could be interpreted as a personal metaphor for the ruthlessness of colonisation.

Ultimately, Abbey decides to fight back against his employers while trying to stay ahead of the spectral spirit, which will destroy those Abbey loves if contact is made.

In a bleak conclusion, of a powerful novel that transcends several genres, Abbey realises, 'truth is a terrible thing. Because the truth, when confronted, is always the same. That the world is run by petty, small, terrified men. That every violence is done just to prove that they are not so small, not so weak. That the universe cares for none of us in the end.'

FALSE VALUE

by Ben Aaronovitch (Gollancz; \$29.99)

At the time of writing this review, Ben Aaronovitch's *False Value* was the number one bestseller on the *Sunday Times* fiction list. It is the eighth in the 'Rivers of London' series, which mixes police procedural crime stories with an urban fantasy framework in the style of Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams.

Indeed, Adams' 'Hitchhiker' novels are cross refer-

enced on a number of occasions in *False Value*, which sees suspended detective Peter Grant going undercover from his job in the Metropolitan Police.

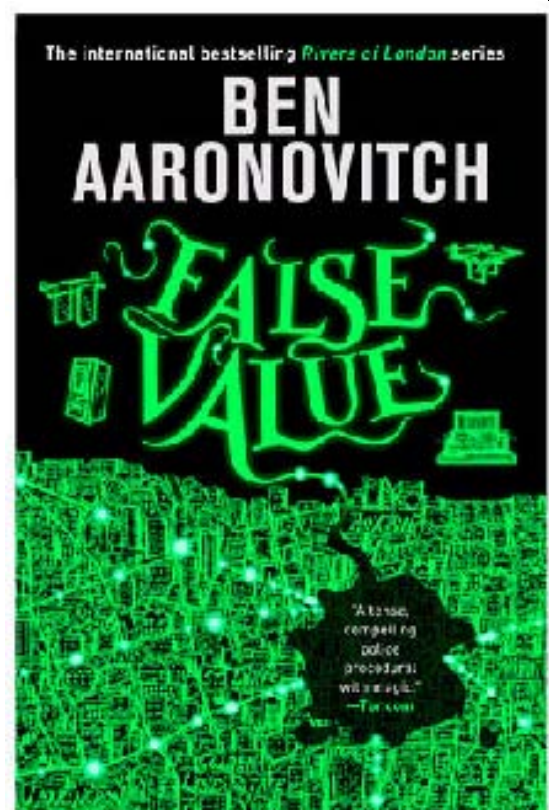
Grant is hired as a senior security consultant at the London-based Serious Cybernetics Corporation (SCC), run by rogue Australian tech-entrepreneur Terrence Skinner, who allegedly made his millions in Silicon Valley and is now funded by the Russians to uncover algorithmic secrets.

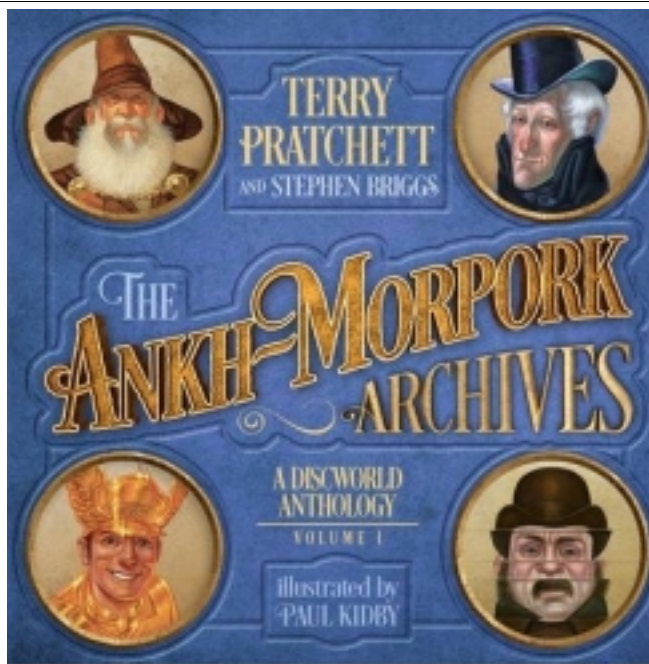
Grant is given the task of finding out who is trying to kill Skinner and steal the secrets of SCC, which involve AI magical devices linked to Ada Lovelace, Charles Babbage, and the 'Mary Engine', as well as mysterious rose jars, used for trapping ghosts, as key resources.

Grant encounters many hurdles, not least 'a demon trap', a magical land mine that has to be defused by even more powerful magic, and problems posed by some competitive librarians from the New York Public Library, who are after the same secret device. Grant will need all his skills to thwart Skinner, uncover the truth, and prevent the opening of a Lovecraftian portal into darkness in the SCC server warehouse.

Help is provided by his multicultural colleagues at the supernatural police headquarters, 'the Folly', headed by 'Detective Inspector Thomas Nightingale, a man who is looking considerably — indeed, suspiciously — spry considering he was born in 1900' and 'DC Sahra Guleed, who wears a hijab with more stylish flair than anyone else on a Murder Team, who is still coming to terms with the fact that magic is real — and far from always benign. Let's not forget Molly (no last name, at least none I'm going to tell you), London's most retro — and scariest — traditional house maid. She looks after the Folly, our heroes' home base in darkest Bloomsbury'.

Aaronovitch's narrative pace stutters at times as he





combines historical computing, contemporary hi-tech, police procedural, and the supernatural, but a vigorous last third of the book brings it all to a rousing conclusion. A bonus is 'A Dedicated Follower of Fashion', a new Aaronovitch short story at the end of the novel.

THE ANKH-MORPORK ARCHIVES: VOLUME 1
by Stephen Briggs, Terry Pratchett and Paul Kidby
(Gollancz; \$59.99)

Terry Pratchett lives on in *The Ankh-Morpork Archives: Volume 1*, a comprehensive hardback guide to Pratchett's Discworld capital of Ankh-Morpork. Pratchett once joked at an ANU/ *Canberra Times* Meet the Author panel that the name derived from the citizens demanding more pork. If Pratchett were alive now he would surely be referencing pork barrelling.

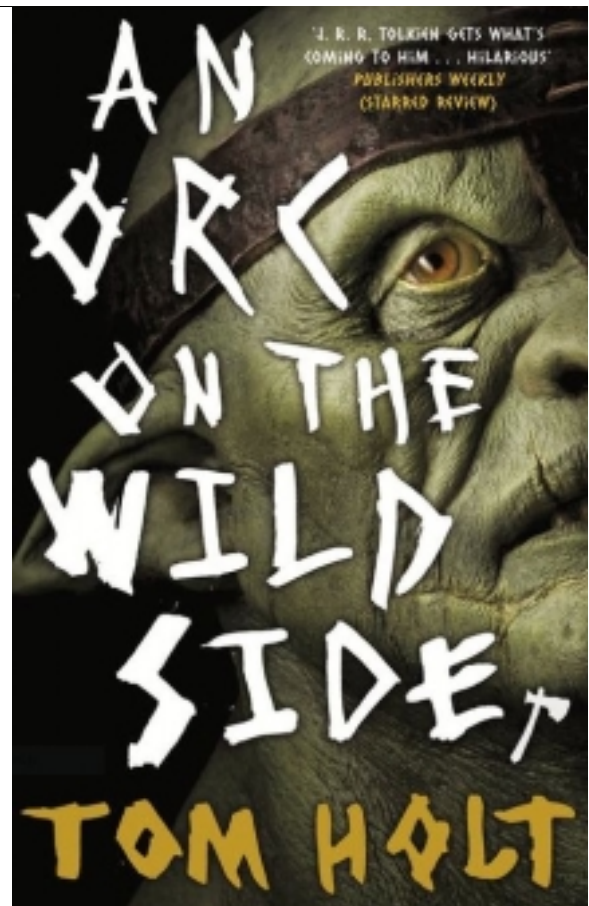
The Ankh-Morpork Archives usefully gathers together the separate texts written by Pratchett and Stephen Briggs for the annual diaries of the *Unseen University*, *Assassins Guild*, *Post Office* and *Thieves Guild*. In this new lavish publication, with numerous full-page illustrations by Paul Kidby, the diary elements have been removed and the texts have been redesigned.

The 2020 BBC America TV series, *The Watch*, based on Ankh-Morpork's police force, the City Watch, has already stirred up a lot of critical comment by Pratchett fans even before release, thus making *The Ankh-Morpork Archives* a necessary Pratchett reference *vade mecum*.

AN ORC ON THE WILD SIDE
by Tom Holt (Orbit \$22.99)

British author **Tom Holt** is a comic writer definitely in the Pratchett mould. *An Orc on the Wild Side* (Orbit \$22.99) is a witty fantasy satire set in a world known as the Realm, not too distant from Tolkien's Middle Earth.

King Mordak, the goblin leader, had wanted to make goblin life better by creating female goblins, but the first female goblin turns out to be stronger than her male



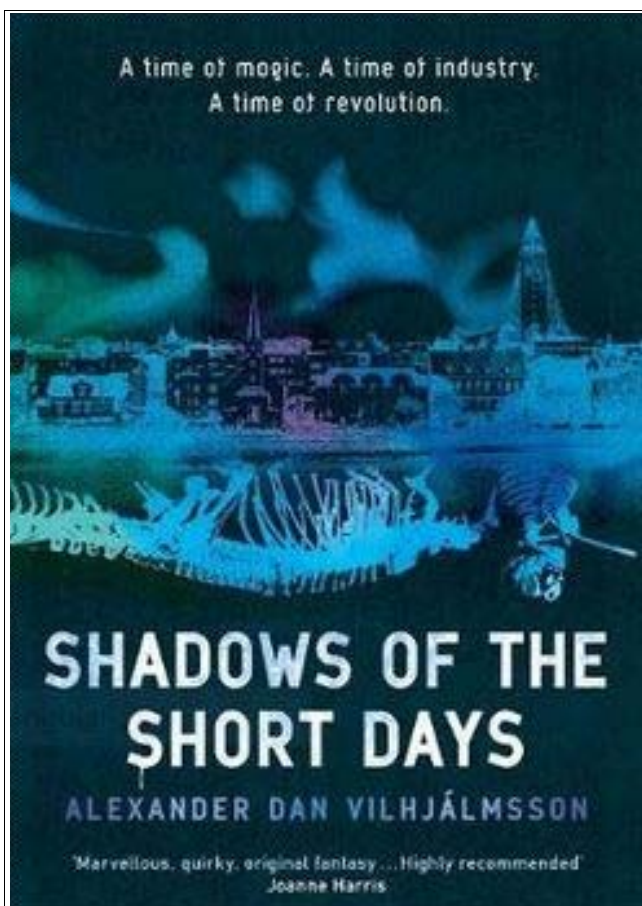
counterparts and ructions begin — let alone having to deal with cynical dwarves and bureaucratic elves.

Mordak's life changes when the Realm is invaded by multiverse-manipulating humans from Fulham and Ealing seeking cheaper real estate, although they complain about the fact that they can't get Tunisian olives or Parmesan. Side stories, such as that of John the Lawyer, allow Holt into a critique of lawyers and billable hours, credit cards and real estate conveyancing. In a wider context, Holt's comic invention and punning provides an effective framework to satirise contemporary events and classic fantasy.

SHADOWS OF THE SHORT DAYS
by Alexander Dan Viljalmsson (Gollancz; \$32.99)

Shadows of the Short Days by **Alexander Dan Viljalmsson** is a dark genre-mixing debut novel, whose setting has echoes of Pratchett's *Unseen University* but located in an alternative Reykjavik. One of the two main characters, Sæmundur, a sorcerer expelled from Svartiskóli University for trying to access the forbidden magic source Galdur, has now descended into drug and alcohol abuse and wishes to wreak revenge on society.

Garún, the other main character, another societal outsider but more likeable, is a half-breed graffiti artist who infuses her artwork with a political agenda that she hopes will lead to revolution against the oppressive government. The line between magic and drugs is blurred as the stories' two characters come together in a dense narrative, which mixes tragedy and fantasy with a definitive Icelandic flavour.



ESCAPE ROUTES

by Naomi Ishiguro (Tinder Press; \$32.99)

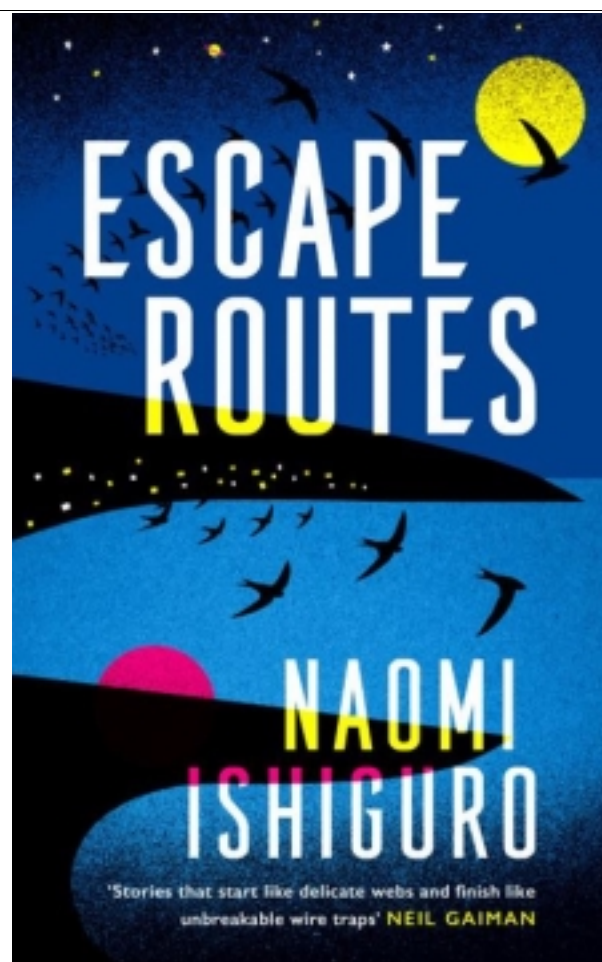
As the daughter of Kazuo Ishiguro, Nobel Prize winner for Literature, **Naomi Ishiguro** has a lot to live up to with her first book, *Escape Routes*, comprising a novella and eight short stories. While she acknowledges her debt to her father, she also cites Angela Carter and Neil Gaiman as major influences, with their 'possibility of magic in the everyday'.

Ishiguro deliberately shuffled the stories during the *Escape Routes* editing process. As a result, 'The Rat Catcher', a novella, is split into three sections within the collection. 'The Rat Catcher', a dark fairy story, begun during Ishiguro's Masters in Creative Writing course at the University of East Anglia, is set in a Gormenghast-type world of castles and abandoned factories.

A rat catcher, summoned to eradicate oversize rats in a rundown palace, is caught up in regal chaos between an eccentric king, who wants to be a simple woodsman, and his enigmatic elder half-sister. The Angela Carter influence is strongest here in a story that expresses a sense of uncertainty and the desire to escape, sentiments that pervade the whole collection.

In 'Wizards', set on Brighton beach, downtrodden 10-year-old Alfie hopes his life will improve when he becomes a wizard at 11, but reaching the Hogwarts age may depend on a 28-year-old seaside fortune-teller.

'Shearing Season', set on a remote sheep farm in the English Lake District, follows another young boy, Jamie, who wants to be an astronaut but finds 'the unknown' is closer than he ever thought.



'Heart Problems' tracks the London angst of a young man, 'labouring under some kind of unidentified yet all-consuming sickness' and desperately homesick for his small Irish county town. His partner's busy life simply emphasises his alienation in a London of the survival of the fittest.

'Bear' exemplifies Ishiguro's juxtaposition of the absurd and reality, when a wife seeks solace, and surprises her husband, by buying a huge teddy bear at auction, which gradually takes over their lives but restores their relationship.

In 'The Flat Roof', Annie, broken hearted after the loss of her partner and child, finds a form of relief by communicating with birds from the roof of her apartment block. The interaction will lead to a Ballardian escape of sorts.

In *Escape Routes*, except for 'The Rat Catcher', everything is familiar, and yet nothing is quite what it seems, as Ishiguro's fantastic lurks in the margins of the mind.

THE UNSPOKEN NAME

by A. K. Larkwood (Tor; \$29.99)

A. K. Larkwood, Cambridge University English graduate, makes an impressive fantasy novel debut with *The Unspoken Name*, the first in 'The Serpents Gates' trilogy.

Csorwe, brought up in the strict religious House of Silence, is to be sacrificed to a god when she reaches 14. With her death hours away, Csorwe is saved by Sethennai, a powerful sorcerer — but what is his reason? Larkwood

has said, 'What do you owe to someone who saves your life, and what do they owe to you?'

Sethennai makes Csorwe his aide and an apprentice sword-hand as he seeks a mysterious reliquary, the key to unlock portals to other worlds. Csorwe is now bound to Sethennai, who may or may not have her best interests at heart. And the gods never forget.

The Unspoken Name is an original fantasy debut encompassing themes of sacrifice and loss, abandonment and vengeance, loyalty and ultimately love.

British horror

STARVE ACRE

by Andrew Michael Hurley (John Murray; \$29.99)

Lancastrian author **Andrew Hurley** received considerable critical acclaim for his debut 2014 novel *The Loney*, which won the Costa Best First Novel Award and the Book of the Year at the British Book Industry Awards. *Devil's Day*, his second novel, was picked as a Book of the Year and won the Encore Award.

The novels demonstrated Hurley's evocative sense of place underpinning unusual or unnatural events. *Starve Acre*, his third novel, set in the 1970s, is less original within the framework of English folk-horror, which Hurley has defined as 'what lies under the surface of a particular (often rural) place and how the "ghosts" of the past manifest themselves.'

Richard and Juliette Willoughby are relative newcomers to a remote village in the Yorkshire Dales. They had been shunned by the local villagers after the violent behaviour of their young son Ewan, who dies unexpectedly at the age of five. The marriage then falls apart, with Juliette becoming a recluse in the house, seeking help from local spiritualists to contact Ewan.

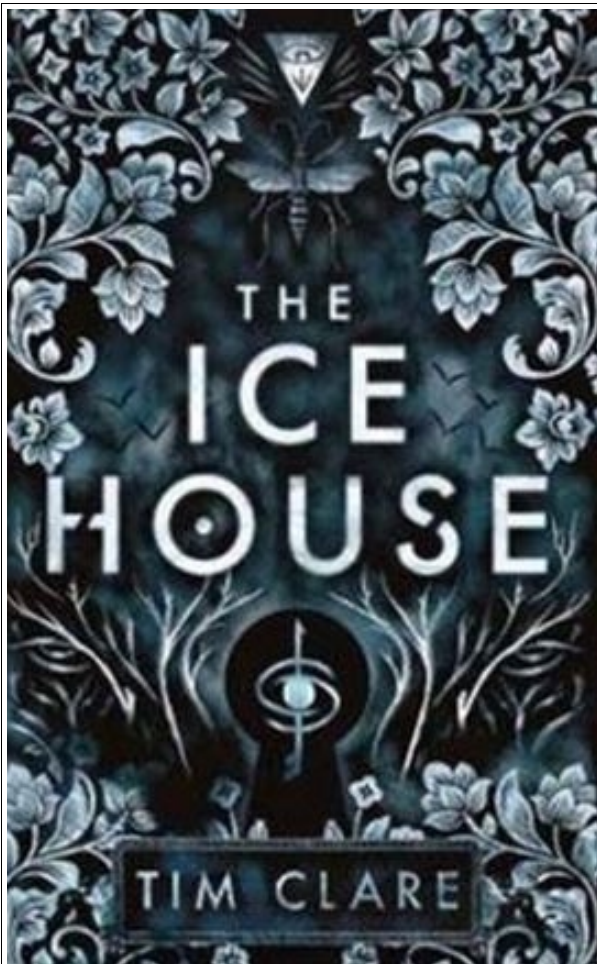
Richard resorts to excavating the adjacent Starve Acre field, in which an old gallows tree evokes memories of a malevolent 'fickle entity' 'Jack Grey', a local version of the Green Man. Richard wonders if Jack Grey had been in touch with Ewan and influenced his violent behaviour to other children. The past increasingly intrudes on Richard and Juliet, culminating in a literally hare-raising conclusion.

WAKENHYRST

by Michelle Paver (Head of Zeus; \$32.99)

British author **Michelle Paver**, known for her best-selling 'Chronicles of Ancient Darkness' children's series and her acclaimed ghost stories *Dark Matter* and *Thin Air*, has said of her latest novel *Wakenhyrst* that it is a 'quintessential Gothic novel where unnatural and irrational elements of the past surface into an isolated and enclosed setting ... an isolated manor house in the Fens ... There's an element of the past in that we're in Edwardian England, my heroine ... is a girl and she's just growing up and then there's an element of 'well, it could be madness or it could be a true haunting'. She's got this repressive father and he's got a long-buried secret which, when he finds this medieval Last Judgement in the graveyard,





starts to surface. And then the question for her as her life becomes a battle of wills with her father is ‘is he going mad or is there really something out there in the Fens?’ I don’t think you can get more Gothic than that really!’

That sums up the story of this carefully constructed gothic mystery with a strong central female character. Readers quickly learn that in 1913, at Wakenhyrst Manor in Suffolk, historian Edmund Stearne used an ice pick and a geological hammer to ‘slaughter ... the first person he came across in the most bizarre and horrible way’.

Stearne is subsequently incarcerated in an asylum until his death. Stearne’s 16-year-old daughter, Maud, is traumatised by the event, and becomes a recluse. Fast forward to 1966, when Maud, now 69, works with a researcher to find the truth after a tabloid reporter writes that Maud could be ‘a madwoman and a murderess’.

The narrative is largely set in the first decade of the twentieth century as Maud uses Stearne’s previously hidden notebooks to unravel the past and her father’s demonic investigations, to seek resolution.

THE ICE HOUSE

by Tim Clare (Canongate; \$29.99)

Tim Clare’s second novel follows on from his acclaimed 2015 novel, *The Honours*, which was set in the 1930s in the country house environment of Alderberen Hall, a location based on the famous Holkham Hall. The main character is precocious 13-year-old Delphine Venner, who battles strange creatures released from a portal to

another world.

It would certainly help for new readers to go back to *The Honours* for the background to the events in *The Ice House*, which takes place 73 years later. Delphine is now a woman in her 80s and her friend Alice is in an aged-care home with dementia. When Delphine finally, after decades of searching, refinds the portal, she passes through to find her father. In the process, she and Alice de-age back to their early 20s. Age is no longer a form of exile.

Clare cleverly juxtaposes the experiences of age and youth in an engrossing narrative that largely takes in the alternative world of Avalonia and the port city, built on stilts, of Fat Maw. This world, with its echoes of Borneo and Vietnam, sees Delphine and Alice quickly entwined in the local politics and religions, particularly involving the immortal and vengeful Hagar.

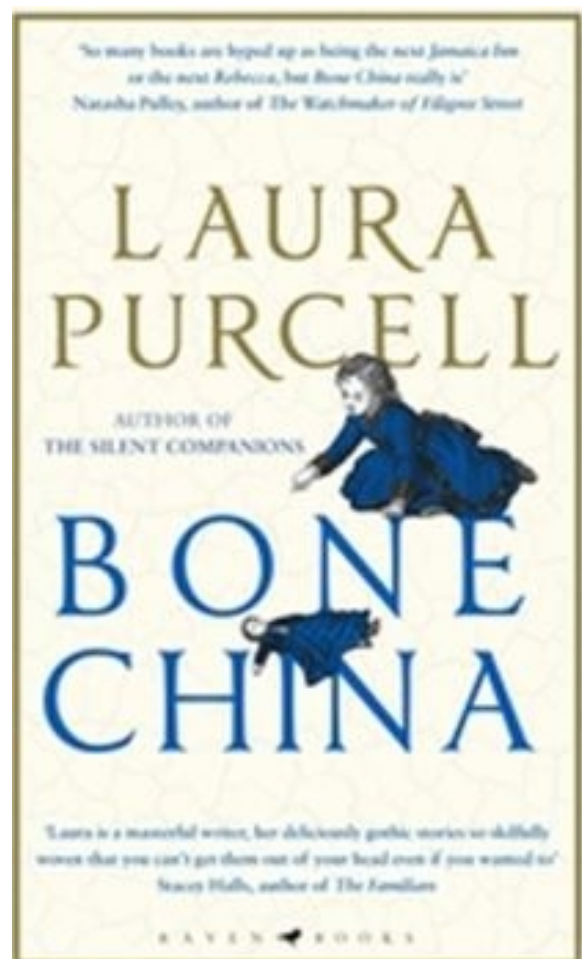
Claire has said that he looks at the events in the book ‘through the lens of loss. There’s this pervasive grief we see once love’s floodwaters have receded. And maybe that grief is an inextricable part of love, perhaps what we’re seeing in that devastation is in fact a testament to love’.

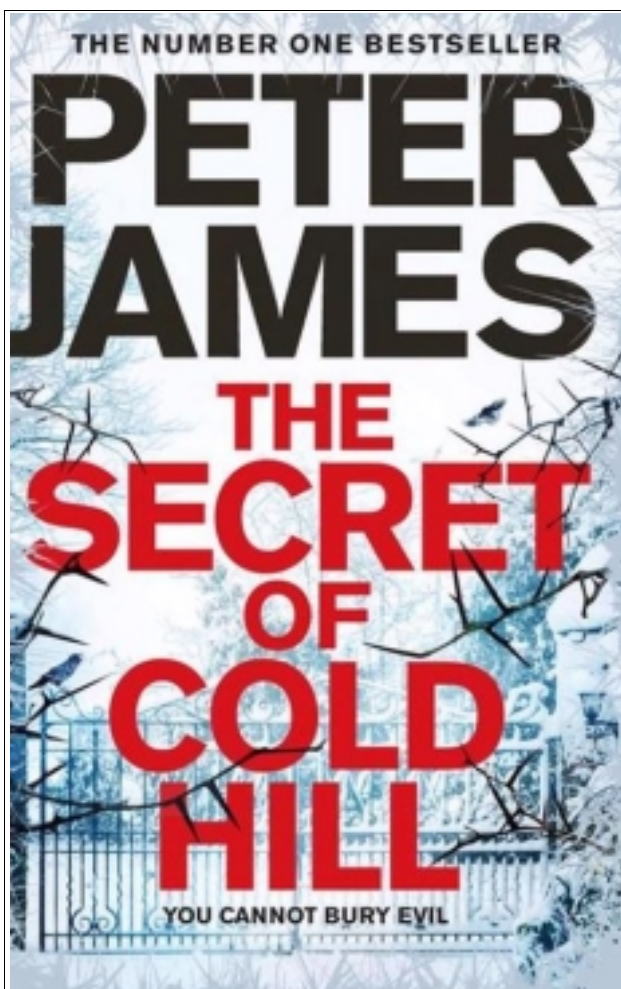
The Ice House is an original fantasy and, at times, poetic creation, but Clare’s two books really need to be read together so that the reader feels their full impact.

BONE CHINA

by Laura Purcell (Raven Books; \$29.99)

Bone China by **Laura Purcell** falls squarely within Daphne





du Maurier territory. In the early nineteenth century, 32-year-old Hester Why flees her dark past, taking up a position as a lady's maid at Morvoren Mansion, 'a gloomy castle straight from the pages of Mrs Radcliffe's novels', set above the cliffs on the Cornish coast.

Hester's role is to care for the partially paralysed Ms Louise Pinecroft, who rarely speaks, and who spends her days and nights in a freezing room surrounded by a large bone China dinner service. Hester, who has an addiction to gin and laudanum, is wary of the other servants, especially Creeda, who believes spirits haunt the house, and holds an strange influence over Louise's ward Rosewyn.

Hester can only guess as to the background of the troubled household, which stems back decades to when Louise's doctor father tried to find a cure for tuberculosis by experimenting on a group of consumptive prisoners in the caves under the cliffs. Louise was his assistant in the experiments. Purcell's draws on research into Cornish faerie folklore to explore the concept of changelings, as Creeda was and is convinced that the patients were changelings.

Bone China has three narrative strands: Hester's past in London, Dr Pinecroft's ultimately failed medical project, and Hester's attempts to unlock the secrets of the past in the present. Purcell juggles supernatural and the psychological themes, but these never quite coalesce. The suitably dramatic conclusion comes too quickly as Purcell tries to tick off all the gothic tropes.

THE SECRET OF COLD HILL

by Peter James (Macmillan; \$29.99)

Peter James is best known for his best-selling Detective Superintendent Roy Grace novels, set in Brighton, but after success with his supernatural thriller *The House on Cold Hill* (2015), he has written a largely stand-alone sequel, *The Secret of Cold Hill*.

Cold Hill House, destroyed by fire, is now being redeveloped as a small estate of upmarket homes. Successful artist Jason Danes and his chef wife Emily and Claudette and Maurice Penze-Weedell believe they are the first occupants on the estate, but they soon find otherwise. The Danes are essentially likeable, if not fully characterised, while the Penze-Weedells are caricatures of middle-class snobs.

As a result, readers never get really involved as to the ultimate fate of both couples, who are haunted by the past and troubled that nobody on the new estate has lived past the age of 40. *The Secret of Cold Hill* is a slick and occasionally humorous read, but greater frissons emanate from Purcell's bone china.

MISTLETOE

by Alison Littlewood (Jo Fletcher Books; \$32.99)

Alison Littlewood has said of *Mistletoe*, 'I wanted to write a winter ghost story, with the elements of Christmas being an integral part of the plot ... I discovered more about the folklore around mistletoe ... [which] was also believed in some cultures to enable contacting the dead, so that was a gift in terms of writing a ghost story'.



The main character, Leah Hamilton, mourning after the separate tragic deaths of her husband Josh and son Finn, buys a rundown isolated farm in Yorkshire, which also allows her to escape family sympathies and Christmas, with its 'gaudy shop windows, the ever-repeating chirp of carols'.

No one told Leah, however, about the dark history of the farm and a Victorian tragedy whose secrets will manifest themselves in the present day. Leah may be getting a new family from the past but not one she will want. *Mistletoe* effectively juxtaposes dark Victorian history, folkloric traditions, bleak winter landscapes, and a sensitive characterisation of Leah.

British young adult fiction

THE BEAST OF BUCKINGHAM PALACE

by David Walliams (HarperCollins; \$22.99).

A British National Literacy Trust survey of more than 56,000 children in December 2019 revealed that the 22 per cent of children who own books read above the expected level, compared to just 3.6 per cent who do not own a book.

David Walliams, like J. K. Rowling, presumably bolstered those ownership figures. Walliams published his first book, *The Boy in the Dress*, in October 2008, followed by *Mr Stink*, *Billionaire Boy*, and *Gangsta Granny*, which were all turned into BBC films. Other books, such as the 'World's Worst Children' series have followed at a prodigious rate, with Walliams earning over £100 million, making him one of the Britain's highest-earning authors.

Walliams said that he likes reading with his six-year-old son Alfred, including sharing the stories he loved as a child, especially Roald Dahl and the Dr Seuss books. Walliams has said, 'I'd urge all parents to make time to read with their children, as it is a joy for both of you. What could be better than firing their imagination just before they drift off to sleep?'

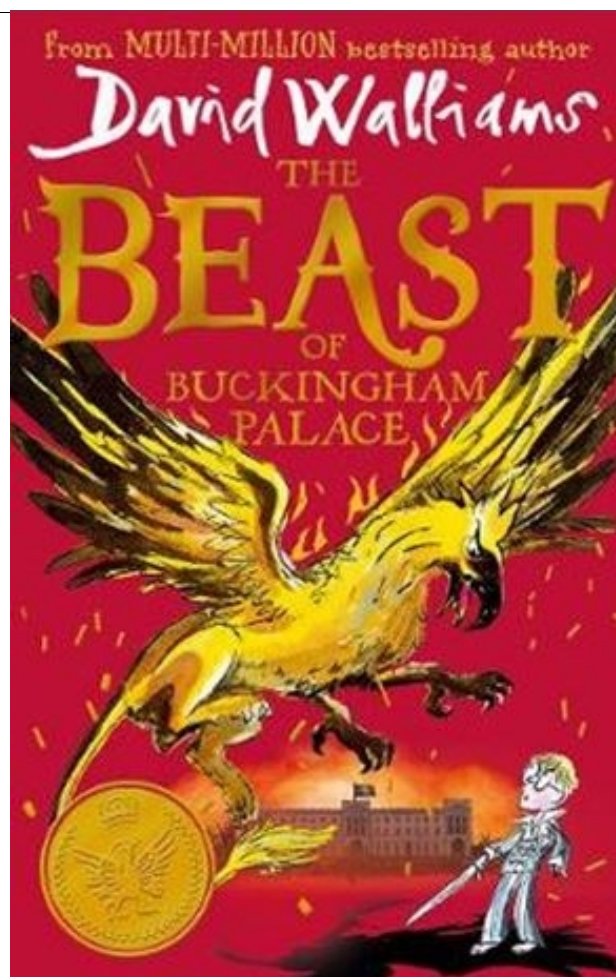
One can see why his books are so popular, with their imaginative and humorous texts, black-and-white quirky characterisation, large textual exclamations, numerous illustrations, in this case by Tony Ross, and what might be termed naughty bits.

Walliams has said, 'Everyone loves the word "fart" — kids and adults. Kids of a certain age love talking about anything to do with going to the toilet. I know my son does. I always like to make my books a little bit naughty, forbidden.'

The Beast Of Buckingham Palace, his latest and thirteenth book, racked up sales of over 130,000 copies in the first week after publication. Walliams initially also had to contend with the media speculating whether or not his book is about Prince Andrew!

It is set in 2120, its main character being 12-year-old Prince Alfred, a book-loving recluse in Buckingham Palace. He has never known life outside Buckingham Palace in a world devastated by climate change. 'The Kingdom is dark. Britain has not seen sunlight for fifty years.'

While the King rules, he is 'as lost as his Kingdom', being controlled by the scheming Lord Protector, who imprisons the Queen in the Tower of London. The



Protector, who controls the Palace with the aid of an all-seeing flying robot eye, summons Edward III's griffin and other mythical beasts to control the kingdom.

Alfred must battle against the odds to save his family and the impoverished downtrodden populace with the aid of Little Mite, who is 'very small, very poor and very hungry — but also very brave'. Read on!

U.S. science fiction

THE CITY WE BECAME

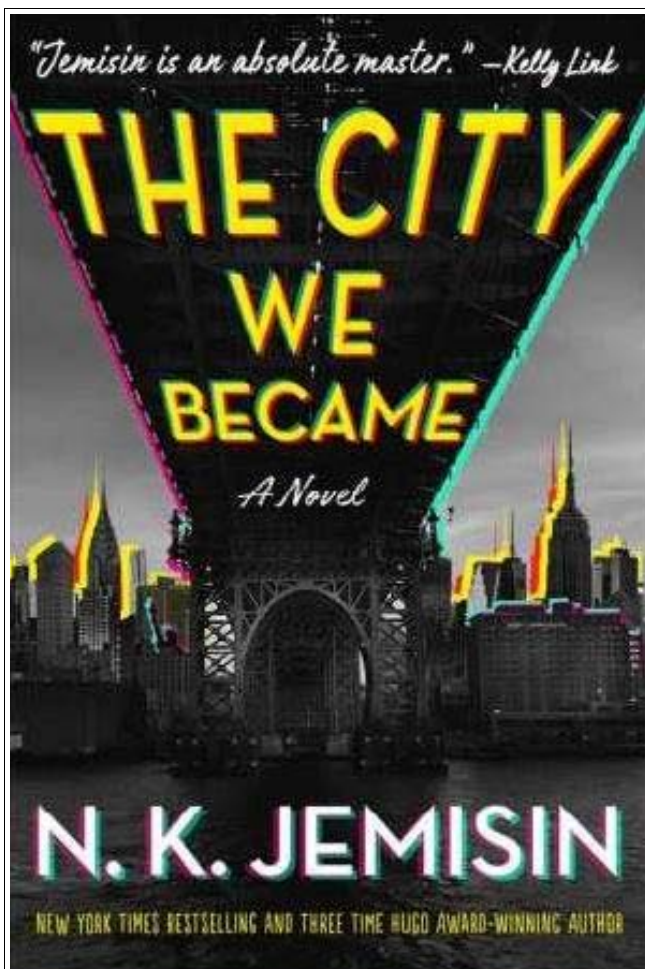
by N. K. Jemisin (Orbit; \$32.99)

N. K. Jemisin has quickly become one of the major names in science fiction and fantasy. Each of the books in her 'Broken Earth' trilogy, *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017), has won the Hugo Award for Best Novel, the first time this has occurred.

The City We Became, the first of a trilogy, has been described by Jemisin as, 'my chance to have a little monstrous fun after the weight of the Broken Earth saga'.

Jemisin's fun spins off the idea that a major city might have its own particular 'soul', an idea that goes back to Ancient Greece. Jemisin notes, 'Great cities are like any other living things ... born and maturing and wearying and dying in their turn.'

When cities are being 'born', however, as in Jemisin's



New York, they are vulnerable to attack from ‘the Enemy’, a multiverse force.

Human avatars emerge to defend cities. In the case of New York, its defender, a homeless black teenage graffiti artist, is injured and left *hors de combat*. So, the multi-ethnic, multi-gendered avatars from New York’s five boroughs, Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island come together to fight the ‘Woman in White’, who represents H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘nightmare corpse-city’ of R’lyeh — a prescient foreshadowing of Covid-19 New York.

The initial threats to New York ‘have a kind of viral flavor to them’, with the Woman in White infecting and thus influencing susceptible members of the population.

Although Jemisin finished the manuscript in 2018, she says the book ‘ended up dropping right in the middle of a global pandemic’.

Jemisin provides a searing indictment of contemporary America, commenting on corporate greed, homophobia, social inequality, gentrification at the expense of the poor, racism, and police violence towards black communities. In New York, the Covid-19 pandemic, has had a disproportionate impact on people of colour.

The one criticism of a powerful and imaginative novel is that the plot plays out, at least in the first book of the trilogy, like a superhero film, as each avatar, whose personality reflects their borough, is introduced to the reader. They must combine, despite their differences, to try to save New York.

Jemisin’s message, that a city and its people must

stand up to darkness by standing up for each other, resonates strongly in today’s fact as well as in fiction.

AFTER THE FLOOD

by **Kassandra Montag** (Harper Collins; \$32.99)

After the Flood, award-winning poet **Kassandra Montag**’s debut novel, portrays a climate change future set in 2031 in America. This is a world in which only the mountaintops are habitable because of rising seas.

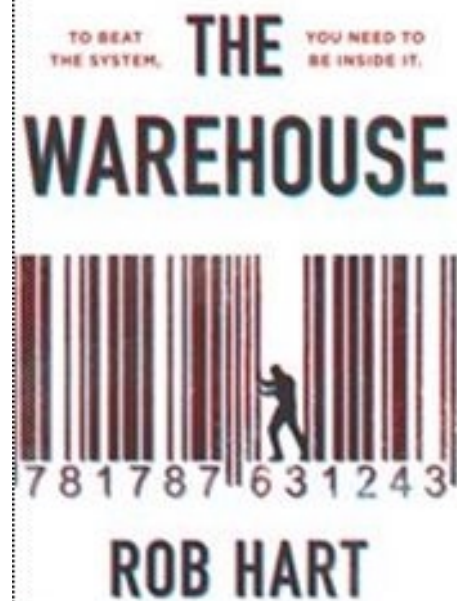
Myra and her daughter Pearl fish from their boat, bartering fish for supplies in order to survive. Their life changes dramatically when Myra decides to embark with Pearl, across decidedly troubled waters, to find Row, her other daughter, who has been taken from Nebraska by Myra’s estranged husband Jacob.

Montag has said in an interview, ‘The imagery of a global flood and changed landscape was a transparent metaphor for my anxieties about becoming a mother. Specifically, my anxieties about what world I was bringing my child into and how I could navigate the increasingly disparate responsibilities I felt.’

‘Raiders’ — pirates — dominate the seas both for plunder and female breeding stock. Myra’s eventual journey to a raider encampment near Greenland will prove to be both precarious and dangerous. Myra has to balance her responsibilities to her daughter and her new crew friends against the dangers she encounters because of her total obsession to find Row.

Montag admits, ‘After the Flood is partly about the role selfishness and selflessness play in the fight for survival. I was interested in how the survival instinct can





be inherently selfish in a dangerous world without enough resources and if there are ways to transcend that. I was also curious about the way that survival can be seen as selfless — an act of love through carrying on.'

Montag has not added significantly to the corpus of climate-fiction, but she does deliver a strong narrative of a driven main character who ultimately finds out the truth about her missing daughter and thus ultimately about herself.

THE WAREHOUSE

by Rob Hart (Bantam; \$32.99)

The Warehouse is Amazon on steroids. Rob Hart dedicates his novel to Maria Fernandes, a New Jersey resident, who accidentally died in 2014 from suffocation from gas fumes while sleeping in her car between her shifts at three different franchises of Dunkin' Donuts. In his 'Letter from the Author' at the end of the novel, Hart notes that she was receiving the minimum wage of then US \$8.25 an hour, while the Chief Executive of Dunkin' Brands earned US \$10.2 million that year.

The Warehouse is set in a near-future America, impacted by a severe global economic downturn and dramatic climate change. The American economy is dominated by a ruthless company, Cloud, that even operates its own national Cloud New Network (CNN!). Run by multimillionaire Gibson Wells, it operates under the slogan that we provide 'the solution to every need'. The firm's ruthless efficiency across all sectors of society means unemployment is down 3 per cent but at significant cost to personal liberties and wage conditions.

Gibson reflects, 'Making Cloud was like making an omelet, just like any business. Some eggs had to be broken along the way. Not that I ever felt good about breaking eggs. It's never something I took pleasure in. But the end result is the thing that matters.' Current populist leaders may well agree with that maxim.

Cloud essentially owns its 30 million employees, who

live in 'MotherClouds' centres, comprising sleeping areas, health-care facilities, schools, and entertainment centres arranged around a core massive warehouse whose contents are distributed by drones. Workers are paid only in Cloud credits, which can be docked for many reasons, including arriving to work late more than twice and not meeting monthly quotas. Cloud workers are monitored 24/7 through a smartwatch, CloudBand. Here, Orwell's Big Brother meets the big business techniques of Amazon, Google, and Facebook.

The story is told from three perspectives. New Cloud security guard Paxton, who wants to escape his past, is eventually drawn into questioning the totalitarian environment. The other main character Zinnia, is given the task by a business rival to spy on Cloud from the inside. Her world and Paxton's gradually interlock. The third element of the story is through Gibson, who, dying of cancer, reflects on his life and the growth of Cloud. Here, Hart reflects on the increasing privatisation of essential community services by multinationals through government encouragement or inaction.

Hart brilliantly builds up the oppression behind the seemingly bland settings of the compound and Cloud's seemingly benevolent patronage. He highlights contemporary issues such as corporate control through AI algorithms, societal inequality, corporate espionage, and drug addiction. One of Paxton's tasks is to investigate drug smuggling within the compound.

The Warehouse is a clever dystopian thriller, solidly extrapolating on contemporary trends. It's not hard to see why Ron Howard has acquired film rights. Hart concludes his 'Letter from the Author', saying that he wanted to write 'an issues book wrapped in the language of thriller'. In this he has undoubtedly succeeded.

US fantasy

HOUSE OF EARTH AND BLOOD

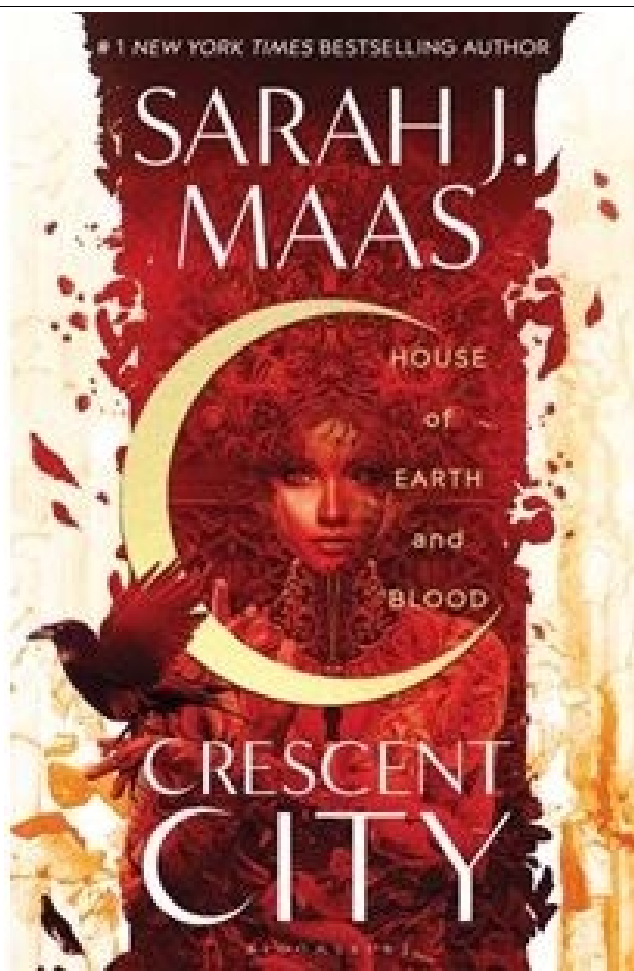
by Sarah Maas (Bloomsbury; \$29.99)

Sarah Maas' two young adult books *Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* have sold more than nine million copies globally.

House of Earth and Blood, which also mixes the paranormal with urban fantasy, is her first adult fantasy, containing liberal doses of strong language and violence.

The storyline follows half-Fae and half-human Bryce Quinlan, who sells magical antiquities by day and parties at night in the clubs of Crescent City. She is devastated when her best friends are murdered.

Ultimately, to find their killer, Bryce partners with a fallen angel, Hunt Athalar. Hunt is promised his freedom if he can help Bryce capture the murderer, even if this means exposing their pasts and forging a relationship to find the truth in Crescent City's dark underbelly.



US horror

FULL THROTTLE

by Joe Hill (Gollancz; \$32.99)

Joe Hill's *Full Throttle* contains 13 short stories, two of which, the title story and 'In the Tall Grass', were written with his father Stephen King. The stories are prefaced by a lengthy biographical essay on his growing up in the household of Stephen and Tabitha King and their impact on his life in writing. Hill also provides an afterword on the gestation and content of the stories.

'In the Tall Grass', originally published in *Esquire* magazine in 2012 and now a Netflix movie, takes place in another isolated rural setting, a large field of tall grass by the side of a Kansas highway. After hearing a young child's cry for help, a sister and brother leave their car and venture into the six-foot-high long grass to help, but they soon become separated and disoriented and realise there may be no way out. An ancient evil stalks, and all flesh is grass.

Full Throttle acknowledges its inspiration from Richard Matheson's classic short story 'Duel', which was the basis of the famous Steven Spielberg film. A biker gang finds itself pursued on an interstate highway and sequentially rundown by the anonymous driver of a huge semitrailer seeking revenge for his daughter's death. Hill and King combine in a novella of sorrow and retribution.

Hill uses his travels on British Rail to good effect in 'Wolverton Station', in which a ruthless American coffee



chain executive finds himself surrounded on a train by men who turn out to be wolves. His chance to escape the train at what he thinks is Wolverhampton turns out, however, to be Wolverton, with wolves exacting revenge for the dog-eat-dog corporate world.

In a library, readers communicate with dead authors through reading their books. In 'Late Returns', which has echoes of the work of Ray Bradbury, Hill provides an intriguing twist. An out-of-work truck driver volunteers to drive an ancient 1960s bookmobile, only to find that most of his patrons are using the bookmobile's time slip powers to 'return overdue books in spite of the inconvenience of being dead'. Hill juxtaposes the love of reading in the context of renewals between the living and the dead, although horror returns when we get previews of books that haven't even been written yet, notably *The Art of the Presidency: How I Won My Third Term* by Donald J. Trump.

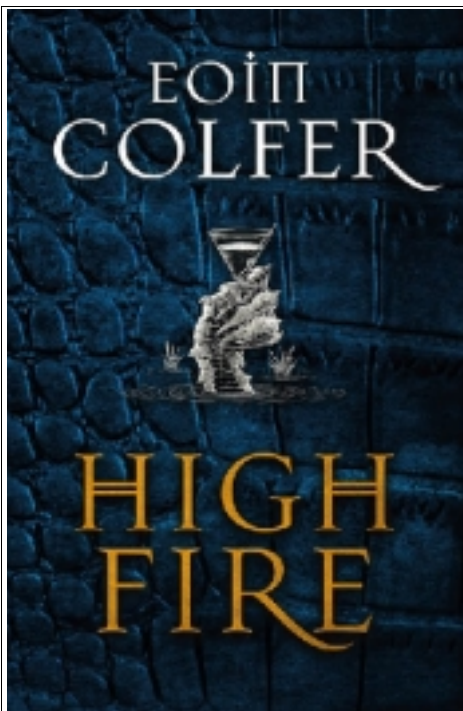
Irish fantasy

HIGHFIRE

by Eoin Colfer (Jo Fletcher Books; \$32.99)

Irish author Eoin Colfer has sold over 25 million copies of his Artemis Fowl series. The release of the Artemis Fowl film, directed by Kenneth Branagh and starring Judi Dench, will lead to many more copies being sold.

Colfer has said in an interview, 'As a teacher I always found that telling stories was the best way to teach because you could sneak the information inside an adventure story. So, a lot of the Artemis books, for example,



would have a very ecological message. My books tend to be, of late, a mixture of escapism and trying to tackle issues head on. And then the flip side of that is I like to do books like *Highfire* and *Fowl Twins* just so people can have a laugh and kids can go to bed smiling.'

Highfire, his first adult fantasy novel, featuring Vern, a curmudgeonly, vodka-drinking, Flashdance-loving dragon hiding on a small island in a Louisiana bayou, will certainly entertain. As Colfer says, 'Every day on the TV [kids] are looking at people getting blown up, people drowning, the world war coming ... When you've had that all day or maybe you are one of those kids and you just would like a little grin before bedtime. That's the book for you.'

Squib, a teenage boy, is running off the rails at school, while trying to help his single mother Elodie evade the attentions of the corrupt, sadistic local policeman Regence Hooke, who is trying to take over the local drug-running business.

Colfer says Squib is based on one of his sons, while he sees himself as the grumpy Vern. Vern, 'bipedal, seven feet tall, with grey hair and yellow eyes', may be grumpy because he is the last dragon left on earth or because he is on the Keto diet. Many days Vern falls asleep, drunk in front of the cable TV output, which includes his disdain for 'Game of fucking Thrones! — those dragons are like servants'.

Vern, originally Wyvern, Lord Highfire of Highfire Eyrie, despises the human race for killing off his fellow dragons centuries ago, but when Squib inadvertently gains evidence that will destroy Regence, Vern must intervene to save him from Regence's murderous intent.

From this point the action revs up, in an adult fantasy with lots of narrative witticism, violent action, and scatological dialogue, which often echoes Carl Hiaassen's Florida novels.



Polish fantasy

THE WITCHER: THE LAST WISH

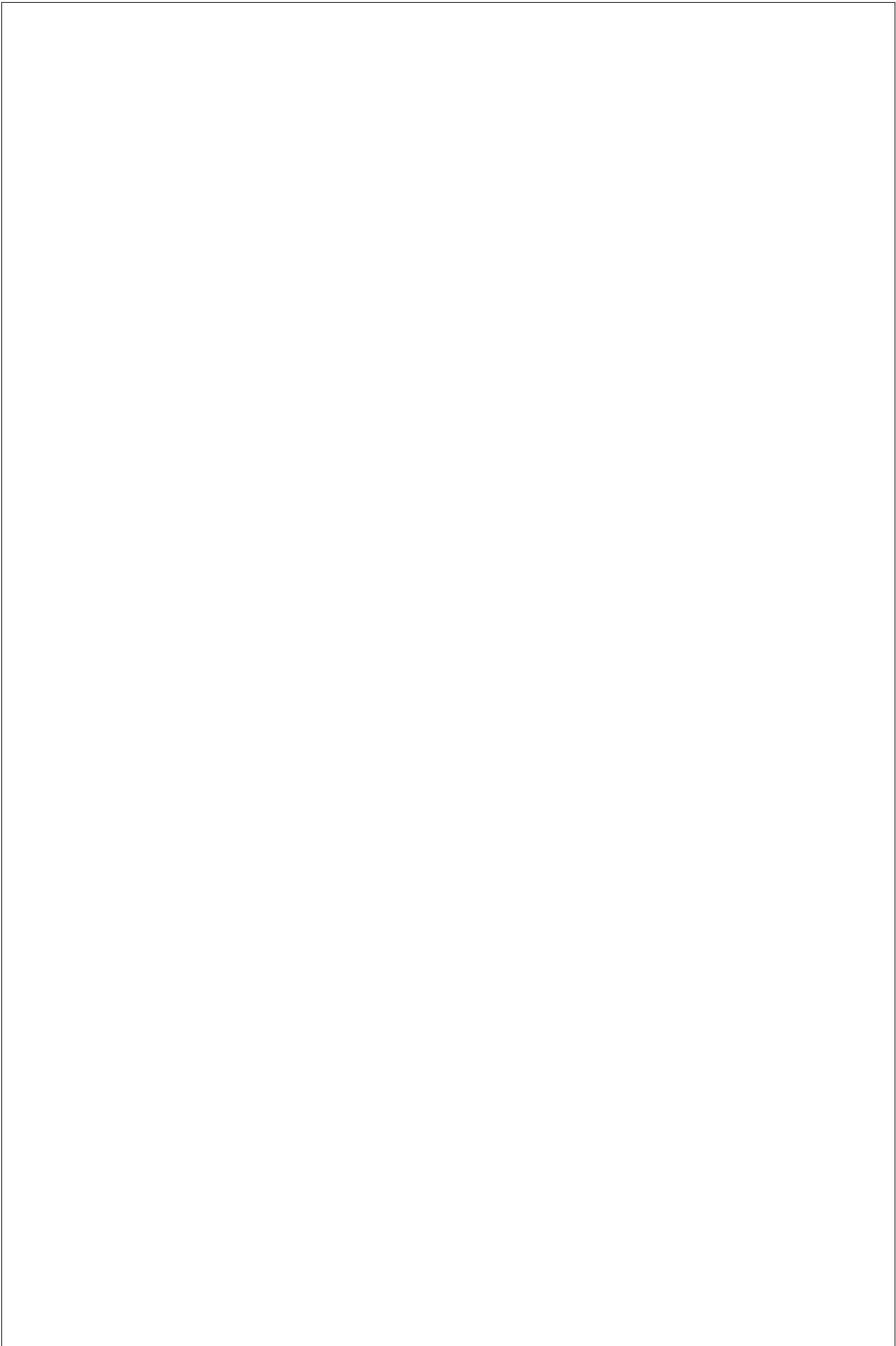
by Andrzej Sapkowski (Gollancz; \$16.95)

TV networks have been frantically looking to emulate the success of *Game of Thrones*. Netflix thinks it has found one in the TV series being made from the fantasy novels and games of Polish writer **Andrzej Sapkowski** featuring Geralt de Rivia, the Witcher. Only released in December, the first series quickly became one of the most popular Netflix productions of 2019.

The Witcher: The Last Wish is not Sapkowski's first published book, but has been reissued to coincide with the TV series, as its short stories provide the best introduction to the main characters, Yennefer of Vengerberg and Princess Ciri, and especially Geralt, sorcerer, swordsman, and mutant, who fights injustice and monsters plaguing humanity, although we quickly learn that humanity can just be as monstrous.

Given some of the complexity and timeshifting of the first TV series, *The Witcher: The Last Wish* is an ideal source to begin following the series. Influenced by East European folklore, it makes many old fantasy tropes seem new.

— Colin Steele, October 2019–May 2020



SF Commentary 102

July 2020 80 pages



2019 — THE YEAR BEFORE THE DELUGE

BRUCE GILLESPIE *
JENNIFER BRYCE *
DAVID GRIGG *
PERRY MIDDLEMISS

and

**DITMAR (DICK
JENSSEN) ***
HENRY GASKO *
LEIGH EDMONDS *
COLIN STEELE *
DENNY MARSHALL

Denny Marshall: 'Zazzled'.