

SF Commentary 104

November 2020

92 pages



Denny Marshall: 'Voyager'.

ENJOY LIFE WITH FRANZ KAFKA

It is not necessary that
you leave the house.
Remain at your table
and listen. Do not even
listen, only wait. Do
not even wait, be
wholly still and alone.
The world will present
itself to you for its
unmasking, it can do
no other, in ecstasy it
will writhe at your
feet.

The Zürau Aphorisms,
1931

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FRONT COVER: Denny Marshall: 'Voyager'. BACK COVER: Denny Marshall: 'Recharge'.

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I must be talking to my friends

Enjoy life with Franz Kafka

Franz Kafka said it best in 1931:

It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet (*The Zürau Aphorisms*, 1931).

You might hate me for saying it, but I seem to be one of the few people I know who has been enjoying lockdown. Two friends have told me that lockdown makes no difference to their way of living. Another friend, although 'isolated', has written 150 letters to friends and family since February. Many

other people seem to be dismayed by the concept of lockdown and isolation.

But surely the removal of ordinary-world distractions can be a gift? Now is the time, surely, to write that novel or short story, research and write that PhD thesis, write those letters, paint that picture, produce that podcast or video, or develop a musical project. Or, in my case, publish fanzines. 'The world will present itself to you for its unmasking.'

Or maybe not.

Because of a return of the covid-19 virus in June in the greater Melbourne area, we've had to stick to our houses, except for one hour's exercise per day. We've had to wear masks whenever leaving the house. Nobody has been allowed to visit another's house, except for that 'special other' person.

Phil Ware: A tribute from LynC

[Thanks very much, LynC, for allowing *SFC* to reprint this tribute to Phil Ware from *Ethel the Aardvark* 205, October 2020, edited by LynC for the Melbourne Science Fiction Club.]

Phillip Lindsay Ware: Born 19 March 1958, Died 6 September 2020 after a long battle with cancer. He is survived by his wife Mandy Herriot and their son Jonathan Herriot-Ware.

After a troubled and somewhat nomadic childhood, Phil made the decision to stay with his mother from whence he could receive stability and an education. Having the brilliant mind that he did, he then went on to Melbourne University where he honoured in Mathematics. It was at Melbourne University, through the Melbourne University Science Fiction Association (MUSFA) that I first met him in the mid '70s. These days what happened next would be called harassment; but confronted with someone so full of pain I had to reach out. In those days he had the most glorious mane of hair tied back in a ponytail (it was the '70s), and every time I went past I would reach out and gently tug it. It was some years before he told me that he had been torn between annoyance and

gratitude at the human touch, which was why he had never reacted. But by then we were friends. Not only were we friends but, at that stage he was rapidly allowing another to invade his heart, and he was soon to marry Mandy Herriot. Between them they were there when I really needed a friend to lean on.

Phil was also a friend who could discuss esoteric and intellectual things such as the book *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, or the concepts behind 'Discrete Mathematics'. Through me, he discovered he had a bent for computing and then went on to far outstrip anyone else I knew, going from learning on the job in the public service to lecturing in that most arcane of areas — Cyber Security.

He was still lecturing when he fell ill, and indeed up until the last couple of weeks of his life.

A true friend; a brilliant mind. I can't believe he is gone.



Phil Ware, 1991. (Photo: LynC.)



Almost all retail shops have been closed since July, apart from shops selling food. Hairdressers have been closed, whereas they were allowed to open during the first lockdown from March to May.

All these restrictions are nuisances, but they have brought the daily rate of covid-19 infection down from 793 on one memorable day a month ago to an average of about 10 a day. For Elaine and me, the restrictions have given us certain freedoms. We don't feel obliged to go out to dinner in restaurants that serve indifferent food at prices we can't afford. I don't feel obliged to drink the usual glass of beer with a restaurant meal. Beer is something I try to avoid these days, not only because most beers are uninteresting after the first glass but because beer puts on weight. We try not to buy food filled with fat and sugar, so I've managed to lose 10 kg (20 lb) during the first lockdown. (But have lost no more.)

I've been able to save money during lockdown. Gone are the trips to the city and Carlton, trips during which inevitably I spend money I don't have on goods I don't need. Since February, I've had only one financially ruinous day visiting Play Video in central Melbourne. (That's the shop with all the glittering imported Blu-rays.) Dave at Readings in

Carlton has been sending out parcels to Greensborough after I'm sent in my orders, but I've been saved from Browsing Splurge Syndrome. I've been offered only one freelance indexing job during the last 12 months, so my financial situation would have been disastrous without lockdown restrictions.

All this assumes, of course, that Elaine and I can avoid the virus itself. So we stay at home.

This sounds as if I have little sympathy for those who are suffering deprivation during various forms of lockdown throughout the world. Not so. I can visualise all the situations in which I would be very much worse off. Not having Elaine and the cats would be the worst.

Even in countries where restrictions on movement are much less severe than in Melbourne, Australia, most of you are sitting at home. You are venturing out in order to buy food and essentials, or waiting for deliveries. You're probably not sleeping very well, even if you're allowed an hour or two a day for exercise away from the house. You're probably not going for long walks if you live in inner suburbs or in tenement-style buildings. You're either living alone with little hope of visiting family or friends, or you are living in a house inhabited by far too many people: parents trying to work from home on their computer, kids using their devices to do home schooling, babies squawling, and the dogs, cats, and other pets hurtling around underfoot. In many parts of the world, you are probably most worried about the people you would most like to visit: elderly relatives who are locked up in age-care homes and are more likely to be afflicted by covid-19 than anybody else you know. You are either unemployed and wondering how to pay for food and the next utility bill, or still employed or on some pension but wondering how to fill in the rest of the day.

But I don't understand people who have enough physical resources, but seem bereft of internal resources, people who depend for their essential mental well-being on what other people do. Surely the world's greatest resource is the interior of one's mind? At least that's what I take Kafka to mean. This weird 2020 situation has given us the licence to spend time on all the activities we most enjoy. Unlike many people who write on Facebook, Elaine and I have been much too busy this year to worry about the effects of idleness.

No hurrahs for Hollywood

The least expected aspect of this year's lockdown conditions is that I've lost much of my interest in

watching movies and TV shows on DVD/Blu-ray. People complain on Facebook about having



watched ‘everything on Netflix’. For technical reasons, I can’t watch anything on any of the video services provided by the Internet, not even free services such as iView and YouTube. Also, I can only watch films and TV on disk after midnight. (Yes, I know Elaine says that I’m allowed to; but I know disapproval when I see it.) Often I prefer to read books instead.

Why don’t I like many popular films these days? Often I reach the middle of a film. I can imagine very well where it’s going, and I don’t feel like enduring the characters’ agonies that will take them to the end. So I stop the film halfway, never to watch the second half. Very occasionally I see a film that’s surprising from beginning to end, such as last year’s Oscar-winning film, **Bong Joon-ho’s** *Parasite*, from Korea.

Taiki Waititi’s *Jojo Rabbit* also falls into that category. When you reach the end of the film, you can see the arc of the story that carries its ten-years-old main character from absolute innocence to the beginnings of perception and self-knowledge. But you couldn’t have guessed the stops on the journey.

With episodes of British TV series I feel much more indulgent, much more inclined to sit back and relax and ride along with certain kinds of

nonsense. At the beginning of the year I looked at the entire *George Gently* boxed set, one episode per night. (Thanks to **Tony Thomas** for his recommendation.) Recently I’ve seen the latest series of *Vera* and *Endeavour*. Nothing like a good old-fashioned PC Plod mystery, preferably set in gorgeous English countryside. But many of the series that are name-checked in the *Age* are no longer appearing on DVD. No series first shown on Amazon TV or Netflix has appeared on DVD, or at least nothing that sounds interesting.

I’ve watched a few films that kind-hearted **John Davies** has sent me. He’s also sent various movies and TV boxed sets to other friends. I feel like saying, ‘Save your money, John!’ Still, I wouldn’t have known about the animated films of **Karel Zeman** if John hadn’t sent me the recent magnificent three-Bluray boxed set of his films from the 1950s. *Journey to the Beginning of Time* (1957) takes its child adventurers along a river backwards in time to the beginnings of life. *Invention for Destruction* (1958), a reworking of Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, is adventurous as a visual artefact. Every shot places live actors in animated sets that look like magazine etchings from the 1880s. Very steampunk, long before anybody coined the term. *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* (1961) is not supposed to look realistic. Zeman believed in *fantastic* fantasy. Live actors are placed in surrealistic animated paintings.

John also sent me a boxed set of pre-Hays Code **Bela Lugosi** movies from the 1930s. Some of the implied events are really kinky, even by today’s standards. The three films are also very funny. Bela Lugosi seems to be enjoying himself in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), *The Black Cat* (1934), and *The Raven* (1935). Boris Karloff also appears in the latter two films. Because of his success in *Frankenstein* at the beginning of the thirties, Karloff was paid twice Lugosi’s fee. Karloff also has great fun, especially in *The Black Cat*, which is visually and melodramatically the most interesting of the three films.

I have bought some of the current successful films (current at the end of 2019), but they sit in a large pile, daring me to look at them. Maybe I’ll stick to films from the 1930s and 1940s, or from countries like Czechoslovakia, Hong Kong and Korea ... and even Australia. (Exotic!)

Music (Lockdown Pleasure 1)

One of my two main lockdown pleasures has been recorded music. Before lockdown, Elaine used her

spare time to make a comprehensive computer catalogue of all the classical CDs in our collection,



both on the shelves and in boxed sets. This has proved very useful, as Elaine and I have each taken up different ambitious plans to listen to all the CDs that are on the shelf. Elaine is way ahead of me in her listening program, because for about 10 years she has been listening to a CD a day while cuddling Sampson while sitting with him on her lap in her workroom. In this way, she gradually calmed the troubled cat before he died in December last year.

My 'plan' is use an alpha system to listen to all

the CDs I've never heard. I'm dipping into the equivalent of four boxes of unplayed CDs, as well as playing many that have been on the shelf for years. Since January I've listened to 196 CDs I had never heard before, including 136 four-star CDs, as well as re-listening to many CDs.

I've bought far fewer CDs during 2020 than in other years. To buy a new CD or book, I need to know that it exists, but I haven't been able to browse for the last two months. I send a list to Dave at Readings, who fills a parcel and posts it to me.

I could fill the rest of this issue with a list of my four-star CDs, but perhaps only a few readers would be interested.

So far this year my favourite popular CD has been *The Family Songbook*, the new CD by the **Haden Triplets**, the three daughters of famed jazz performer Charlie Haden. **Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic's** 1959 recording of **Richard Strauss's *A Hero's Life*** (from the *Karajan 1960s* boxed set) is my favourite classical record heard for the first time.

Elaine has also been playing her way through a huge number of CDs, including many of my favourite classical boxed sets, such as **Daniel Barenboim's** first set of **Beethoven's piano sonatas**, recorded when he was 24, and **Antal Dorati's** complete set of the 104 Haydn symphonies, never improved upon although now nearly 50 years old.

Books (Lockdown Pleasure 2) or The Dennis Callegari Column

One of the long-lasting fan groups in Melbourne is the **Friday Night Group**, which has met for more than 40 years (until lockdown), most recently in the basement food hall of the David Jones store basement in central Melbourne. We used to go on to dinner at Ciao in Little Bourke Street, but we have been struggling to find a suitable restaurant since Ciao closed 'for renovations' about four years ago and reopened with a new format. The core members of the group are refugees from the **Melbourne University Science Fiction Association (MUSFA)** during the 1970s. Then they were students; now nearly all of them are retired. No longer able to natter over dinner on Friday nights, the members have taken to group emailing and Zooming.

The only member of the group to whom I can talk books is **Dennis Callegari**. He always carries a book with him, usually borrowed from a library. This year he has had to order his books ahead of

time and pick them up outside the library. We throw at each other the names of books we think the other person might enjoy.

AGENT RUNNING IN THE FIELD

by **John Le Carre** (2019; Viking/Penguin; 282 pp.)

I don't remember a lot about this novel six months after reading it, but I do remember that George Smiley contrives to make a brief appearance, even though he must be at least 100 years old by now. Le Carre, who was 79 when he wrote it, still writes spy fiction as well as anybody in the field. A crisp, satisfying adventure tale, which is more than most genre writers can manage these days.

A HISTORY OF THE BIBLE: THE BOOK AND ITS FAITHS

by John Barton (2019; Allen Lane; 613 pp.)

I started reading this book because it was recommended by **David Grigg** in ANZAPA last year. I expected lots of amazing revelations and penetrating insights, but gave up halfway through, somewhat exasperated. Much of this book is taken up with academic disputes between scholars about the origins of various parts of the Bible. Most of these disputes are made necessary because of the lack of evidence that many (or most) of the events ever took place. So then the battleground becomes: who wrote what, and what sources did they use? I was reminded most of the speculative subject called Solaristics I read about in Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris*. Still, the first third of the book is worth reading, and I did learn about some of the more poetic books of the Bible that were never mentioned at Sunday School.

GOOD OMENS

by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman (1990/2007; Gollancz; 345 pp.)

I read this book (a) because I've had the reprint edition sitting on the shelf since Gollancz sent me a review copy in 2007; and (b) the TV version had already been shown on TV and the DVD package had just been released. I found the novel version rather confusing, and I wasn't quite sure what had happened even at the end. I found it hard to distinguish one character from another, and was irritated by the tendency of the authors to point at their own jokes and tell you to laugh at them. The TV version is somewhat better. Good actors (David Tennant and Michael Sheen, among many others) give life to interesting characters. The direction of the main action is clear. It also helps to find yourself laughing at jokes that are not pushed at you.

THE RETURN OF THE INCREDIBLE EXPLODING MAN

by Dave Hutchinson (2019; Solaris; 298 pp.)

This a novel that is not quite as effective as the author thinks it is, but still rather diverting. **Dave Hutchinson** is very good at scene-setting, both of the physical scene and the relationship between characters and overall situation. He's not quite as good at resolving story points, as I remember clearly from the fourth novel in his 'Fractured Europe', which was supposed to end the series, but instead is filled with as many red herrings as it started with.

H. G. WELLS: A LITERARY LIFE

by Adam Roberts (2019; Palgrave Macmillan; 452 pp.)

Adam Roberts is best known as a wide-ranging SF author (although his books are so badly distributed in Australia that they are still hidden from me). He is also a top academic in Britain; *H. G. Wells: A Literary Life* will be one of the feathers in his literary cap. The only trouble with the book is that Wells himself was not very likable, as I had discovered when reading another biography. Also, his books and short stories went off the boil soon after the four great SF novels were published, but Roberts decides to examine them all: novels, short fiction, histories, and polemics. Wells's personality was made up of many conflicting elements: his appreciation of ordinary people during an era when most British novelists wouldn't have been able to distinguish an ordinary person from a cake of soap; and his belief that superior far-seeing people such as himself can and should prescribe methods for solving the world's problems. Seen that way, *The War of the Worlds* (for instance) can be seen as a battle between the best elements of Wells himself — the resourceful little guy who battles against the killer bullies, and the vast unsympathetic intelligence that Wells could be on a bad day.

IN CALABRIA

by Peter S. Beagle (2017; Tachyon; 174 pp.)

Peter Beagle has been my favourite fantasy author since 2010, when I read *Mirror Kingdoms: The Best of Peter S. Beagle* (ed. Jonathan Strahan; Subterranean Press). It's not just that Beagle is a deft, unflashy



writer or an ingenious one, but it's his ability to explore agonising human dilemmas through fantasy images. *In Calabria* is about unicorns (it's his thing; his 50-year-old ultra-best-selling novel is *The Last Unicorn*). A unicorn appears in a field beside the home of a man who lives in Calabria. At first this is his secret; the pain begins after other people discover his secret. The suspenseful climax to the story is heart-stopping. Everything works out for the best eventually, but his main characters have experienced the best and the worst aspects of human behaviour in sunny Calabria.

MORNING TIDE

by Neil M. Gunn (1930 reissued 1975; Souvenir Press 255 pp.)

Neil Gunn's specialty is writing about people surviving while scratching a living from the sea. They live off the coast of Scotland. The sea is always the main force in his novels. The main characters battle the sea, despite members of their families knowing that most of them will be killed by it. *Morning Tide* tells of three stages in the life of such a family. The situations, like the prose, are a bit overwrought, but that's probably because sudden death is the con-

stant companion of these people's lives.

CHANCES ARE

by Richard Russo (2019; Allen & Unwin; 302 pp.)

I've already recommended *Chances Are* to Dennis. I know he ordered it from his library. Three men meet at a beach resort many years after an idyllic postgraduate summer they spent there. The fourth person, the woman they all loved but who could never choose from among them, disappeared into the night at the end of the holiday, and nobody has heard from her since — until the opportunity arrives to find out her fate. Richard Russo's *The Risk Pool* is one of my favourite novels of the last 20 years, and *Chances Are* is even more memorable.

THE ALPACA CANTOS

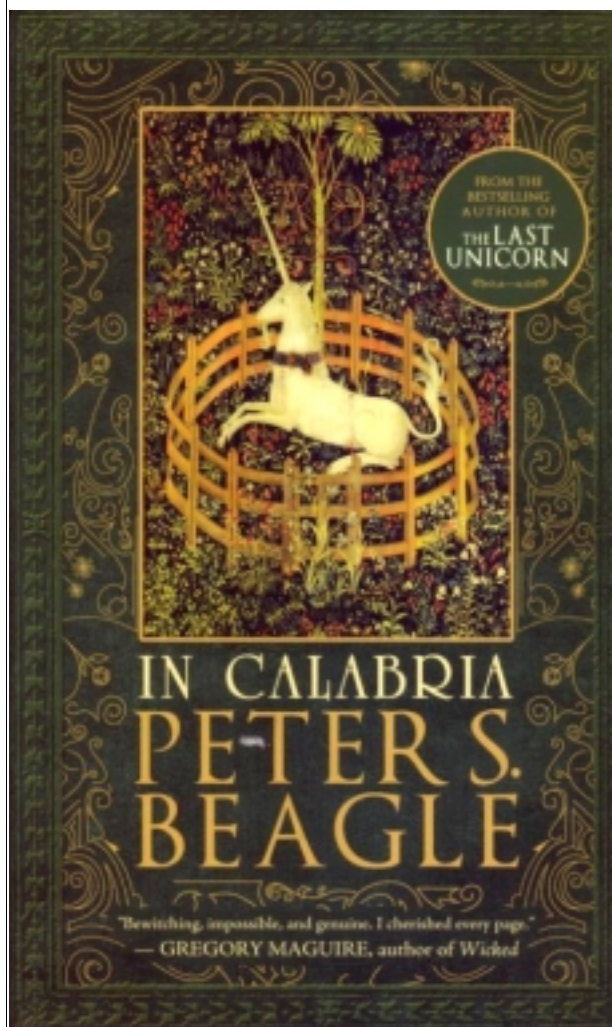
by Jenny Blackford (2020; Pitt Street Poetry; 76 pp.)

When Jenny and Russell Blackford lived in Melbourne, Russell was the bloke who produced occasionally brilliant essays and stories, and Jenny published some very fine reviews. They were both members of the ASFR Second Series Collective during the 1980s and early 1990s. After they moved back to Newcastle, each of them spread literary wings. Russell is now a sort of Philosopher at Large, and Jenny Blackford began to publish poems and stories. Suddenly she produced two books of wonderful poetry (*The Duties of a Cat*, 2013, and *The Loyalty of Chickens*, 2017). She had Arrived. Unlike the work of many Australian poets, Jenny's poems do not defy the mental capacities of ordinary readers like me. Yet they are deft, compressed, funny, and wise. If only Jenny Blackford could be reviewed by the heavies of the poetry world, her talent might be recognised more widely. Her latest volume, *The Alpaca Cantos*, is a bit slim compared to *Chickens*, so does not deliver quite the same impact. But 'Going Home' is one of the best poems I've ever read about losing a parent, and the book includes many other four-star poems.

THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR

by Jenny Blackford (2019; Eagle Books; 156 pp.)

Ten years after *The Priestess and the Slave* (2009), Jenny Blackford has published a second novel. Formally listed as either a children's or YA novel, *The Girl in the Mirror* has won the Children's Book section of the 2020 Davitt Awards, awarded by Sisters in Crime. *The Girl in the Mirror* is a deft amalgam of the time travel (or rather, time communica-



tion) and domestic crime genres. Two girls inhabit the same house, Clarissa in 1899, and Maddy more than 100 years later. They see each other in an old mirror, which has stood in the same place during all that time. As they begin to talk to each other, they realise that each faces a life crisis — it might in fact be the same one. Clarissa and the remaining members of her family are virtually held captive by their overbearing Aunt Lily. Clarissa's mother is very ill. Her little brother, dead at the age of eight, has taken to haunting the house in both eras. Maddy's baby brother seems to be dying of whooping cough, a disease thought to be eradicated in the twenty-first century. Each girl can help out the other. Each gains great self-confidence by solving what turns out to be a series of crimes or intended crimes.

As an adult reader, I found this book very satisfying. Jenny Blackford shows an attention to detail and pacing that is often missing in recent YA novels. I enjoyed meeting these girls and their families. The house itself comes to life. Highly recommended.

DREAMERS OF THE DAY

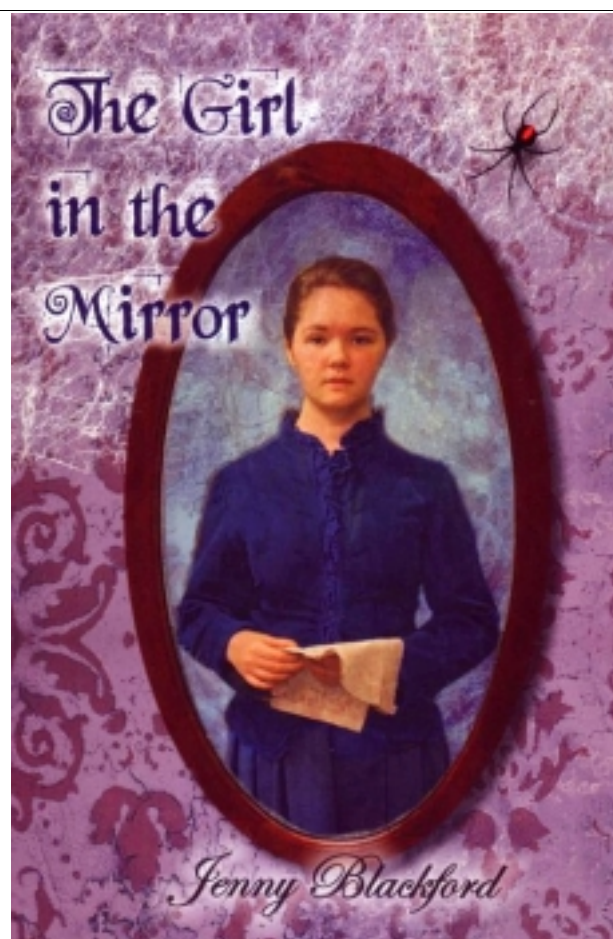
by Mary Doria Russell (2008; Black Swan; 179 pp.)

Mary Doria Russell wowed SF fans about 20 years ago with *The Sparrow*. She has not ventured back into science fiction territory, but *Dreamers of the Day* is just as much an exploration of foreign territory as was the priest's flight to a distant star. I read *Dreamers of the Day* a week or so after the full impact of the coronavirus was being felt throughout the world. Russell's main character is left bereft of her family a few days after they all attend a lecture in 1918 where somebody in the audience has the Spanish flu. Within a few days the main character falls very ill and all the other members of her family have died. She is left very rich and very grief stricken. She begins to travel the world, especially those areas then called the Middle East. With no qualifications other than her intelligence and willingness to learn, she becomes part of the circle of very powerful people who carve up the Arab countries after World War I. Many of the names in this novel are real historical figures; only the main character is fictitious, the perfect observer of the creation of the fractured Arab world whose struggles still dominate world politics.

THE SHINING GIRLS

by Lauren Beukes (2013; HarperCollins; 389 pp.)

The Shining Girls is a fairly gruesome combination

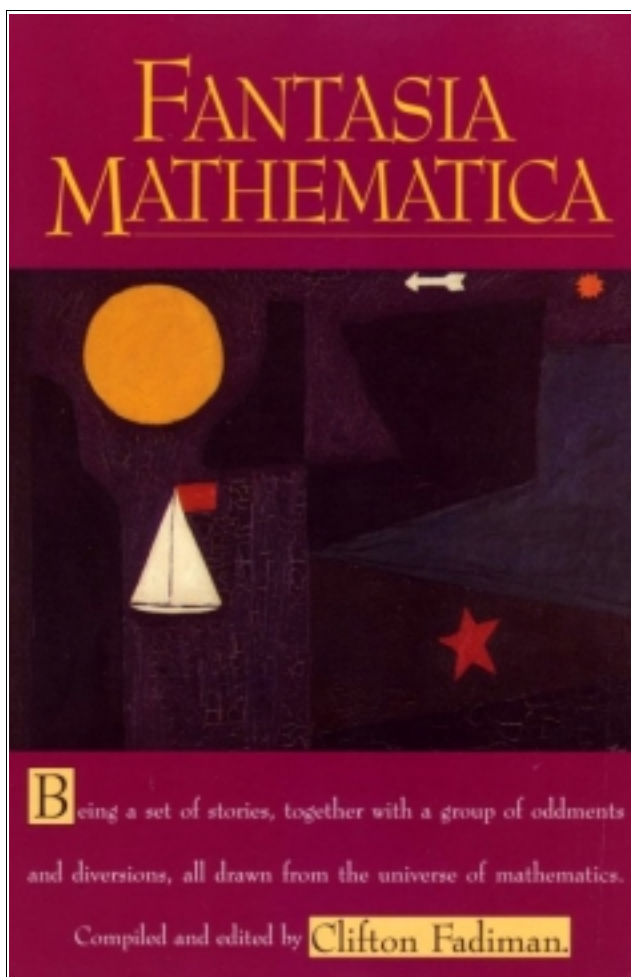


of serial killer horror and fantasy, and I'm not sure why I think it works. It will not suit many readers. It's enough to say that I keep meaning to seek out Lauren Beukes's most recent novel, but under lockdown conditions I haven't put a lot of effort into the search. I have many other books sitting on the Must Read list.

COLLECTED STORIES 1948–1986

by Wright Morris (1986; Harper & Row; 274 pp.)

I've given the book four stars, but a few months later I can't remember much of what I liked about the stories. They are the kind of solid stories about interesting characters and wide landscapes that American writers do so much better than anybody else, but they don't have the spine-tingling *flavour* of the fiction of a Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty. If he were still alive, Wright Morris might protest at being thought not worthy of comparison with them, but Welty's and O'Connor's stories explode with life and flavour. Perhaps I should re-read Wright Morris. I'd rather re-read Welty or O'Connor.



FANTASIA MATHEMATICA

edited by Clifton Fadiman (1958, reissued 1997; Copernicus/Springer Verlag; 300 pp.)

I found *Fantasia Mathematica* recently in a side bar of our collection and suddenly realised to my horror that Dick Jenssen had lent it to Elaine and me in the late 1990s, and we had not returned it! I've apologised to Dick, and hope he hasn't missed it too much. I'll be able to put it in his hands the moment we can all gather again at the Rosstown Hotel in Carnegie, but that could be months away.

I'm glad I finally read *Fantasia Mathematica*. I don't understand the maths that are at the centre of the science fiction and fantasy stories that Clifton Fadiman has included in the collection, but I did enjoy the sense of fun that ripples through its pages. The stories that work best for me include those I already knew, such as Robert Heinlein's great early story 'And He Built a Crooked House' and A. J. Deutsch's classic 'A Subway Named Mobius'; and a few stories that are new to me, such as Aldous Huxley's 'Young Archimedes', H. Near-ing Jr's 'Mathematical Voodoo', and Kurd Lasswitz's 'The Universal Library'. This book might still be in print; it's worth finding.

MOHAWK

by Richard Russo (1986; Vintage Contemporaries; 418 pp.)

Mohawk is set in the same small American town that features in *The Risk Pool*, but is not a prequel to it. It is also the story of two brothers at odds with each other, but *Mohawk* introduces too many extra characters and side stories for it to be wholly successful. Russo is one of those few authors who has steadily improved since his early books.

MUCH DEPENDS ON DINNER: THE EXTRAORDINARY HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY, ALLURE AND OBSESSIONS, PERILS AND TABOOS, OF AN ORDINARY MEAL

by Margaret Visser (1986; Penguin; 351 pp.)

This is a very famous book, which is why Elaine bought it many years ago. But I thought it was a book about cooking practices and recipes, the kind of delicious-sounding detail that chefs like to discuss on the radio. *Much Depends on Dinner* is much more ambitious than that. Margaret Visser travels through all the basic elements that can be found in a modern dinner meal, and tells their histories. Most food elements now taken for granted have been difficult to find and expensive to source until the last two centuries. However, modern methods designed to make cooking essentials cheap and easy to access for Western diners have gone a long way to destroying the natural resources of the Earth itself. This is hardly the first startling environmental scientific book, but it delivers a powerful message beneath a disarming surface.

NO OTHER LIFE

by Brian Moore (1993; Bloomsbury; 242 pp.)

I'm gradually reading through all the Brian Moore novels I've collected over the years, not only because of the wide variety of the subject matter he covers but because of his pitch-perfect styleless style. His novels are bloat-free. In *No Other Life* he tells of a priest on a fictitious Caribbean island who rescues and raises a wonderboy from among the locals and supports him in his ascent through the priesthood to political power, only to regret his own aims and choices.

CURIOUS TOYS

by Elizabeth Hand (2019; Mulholland Books/Little, Brown; 373 pp.)

I look forward to each **Elizabeth Hand** novel or book of short stories, but this and another recent book, *Wilding Hall*, are a bit disappointing. *Curious Toys* is a diverting mystery set in an amusement park in 1915, but it's all a bit business-like in its execution. It yields no real surprises. Dennis Callegari reads far more mysteries more than I do, so he might like this one more than I do.

THE UNICORN SONATA

by Peter S. Beagle (1996; Hodder & Stoughton; 154 pp.)

Peter Beagle has made unicorns his specialty, but *The Unicorn Sonata* is a very minor riff on themes he first brought to life in *The Last Unicorn*. I've kept the book only because it's by Peter Beagle, but will consider offers from other Beagle fans who might like a copy of the British hardback first edition.

THE OVERNEATH

by Peter S. Beagle (2017; Tachyon; 335 pp.)

This appears to be **Peter Beagle's** most recent collection of stories. Since the disappearance of Justin Ackroyd's *Slow Glass Catalogue*, it's become very difficult to track down every book published by many of my favourite authors. The most memorable historical fantasy in the collection is 'The Queen Who Could Not Walk' (first published in 2013), which has a wonderful surprising-yet-inevitable ending. Other special favourites from this collection are 'The Story of Kao Yu' (2016) and 'The Way It Works Out and All' (2011). There are other authors who can write a sentence as well as Beagle, but there are very few who keep inventing sparkling fantasy ideas for decade after decade.

THE MANY SELVES OF KATHERINE NORTH

by Emma Green (2016; Bloomsbury; 353 pp.)

Some publishing marketing executive has come up with this neat title. We bookshelf browsers are primed to buy this book; perhaps **Emma Green** is the next Claire North or David Mitchell. She isn't. She does not have their ability to spin smooth unputdownable narrative. Her style is more complex and tentative. The main idea of the book would have been tackled very differently by Claire North.

Emma Green's main character can enter the lives of other living creatures. However, hers is not

a rogue talent, such as those found in North's books, but a talent used by the scientists who employ her. My only reservation about the book is that I don't quite understand the ending; perhaps a second reading will reveal all.

ILLYRIA

by Elizabeth Hand (2007; PS Publishing; 123 pp.)

Illyria is a fine fantasy novella. The trajectory of its story is apparent from the beginning, so we are content to follow the experience of the main character who thinks she comes from the alternative world of Illyria. **Elizabeth Hand** at her best.

MAMMOTH

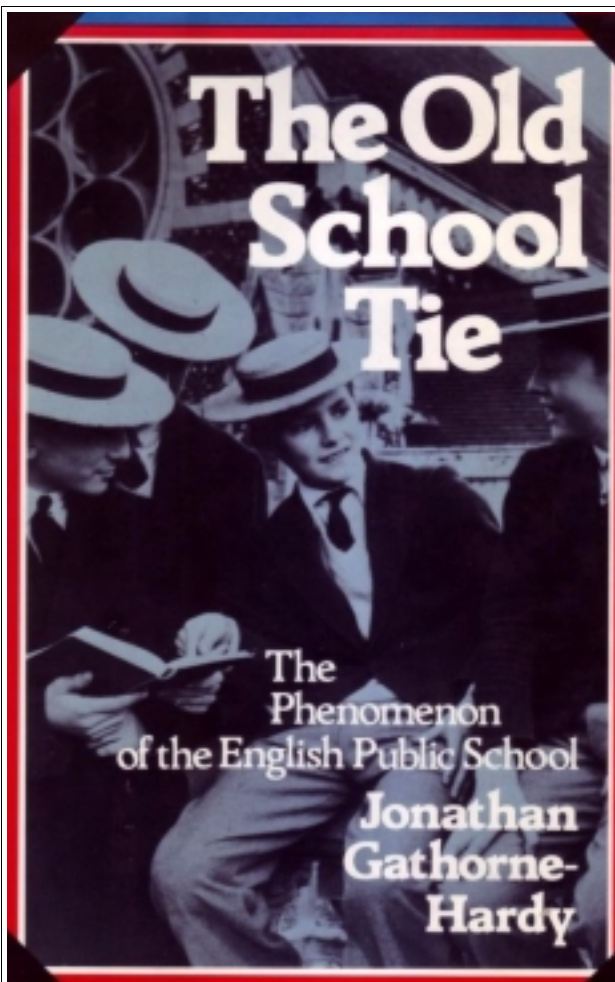
by Chris Flynn (2020; University of Queensland Press; 256 pp.)

I bought *Mammoth* because during 2020 its author, **Chris Flynn**, gave a fascinating video talk to the members of the Nova Mob from his home on Phillip Island in Western Port Bay. Chris's talk was a great deal more entertaining than the book, so I gave up after about 80 pages. Chris has been rightly praised for the originality of his idea. The fossils in a modern museum begin to talk to each other about their experiences, both from when they were killed in their own prehistoric period and from during the centuries or millennia since. However, Chris Flynn does not yet have the verbal skills to make anything urgent or interesting of his idea.

THE OLD SCHOOL TIE: THE PHENOMENON OF THE ENGLISH PUBLIC SCHOOL

by Jonathan Gathorne (1977; Viking; 480 pp.)

I've had this on the shelf since the 1970s. The subject matter sounded intriguing, but I had anticipated it would be one of those dry social histories that hit you over the head with umpteen facts and leave you none the wiser about the reality of the historical phenomenon that is being discussed. Gathorne is a very different kind of historian. He never worries about precise historical phenomena if he can hit you over the head with a pungent story. His subject area is English public schools ('private schools' in Australia) throughout their long and violent history. Not that Gathorne is a left-wing critic of English public schools. He readily admits that he was raised in one; and (in the early 1970s) still applauds many of their values. He really does believe there is a 'public school boy' (and perhaps the odd girl) who is fit to rule Britain. (The unfortunate results of this same belief can be found in



both houses of British parliament right now.). He presents an extraordinary pageant of eccentric headmasters and teachers and very rich kids tortured for their sense of privilege. The silly old sods have always sent off their progeny to the same schools for another round of torture. Physical punishment has been at the centre of these schools' 'learning method' until well into the twentieth century. Intellectual attainment has rarely been valued; instead, woe betide the child not good at 'games'. Germaine Greer once wrote something like 'All English gentlemen are basically homosexual'. Gathorne seems to agree with her. Much happens in beds after lights-out at English public schools. Stamping out sexual naughtiness in public schools has always been the obsession of the masters; achieving as much surreptitious sex as possible seems to have been the equally powerful obsession of the students. This is a very odd piece of work — a lascivious history book!

PROXIMA

by Stephen Baxter (2013; Gollancz; 457 pp.)

The **Stephen Baxter** of *Titan* and *Voyage* seemed to disappear many years ago. I gave up buying his books. But something **Claire Briailey** or **Mark Plum-**

mer wrote in *Quoz* made *Proxima* sound intriguing. I must said so in my ANZAPA mailing comment. Next thing, they sent their hardback copy to me from England by air mail! In 2020 a fan could go bankrupt sending books by airmail.

Proxima is a return to form for Baxter. Its main character is part of a team who discover a Mysterious Artefact on the surface of Mercury. Exploration of the artefact not only leads to a division between alternative realities for the main character but sends other characters hurtling off across the galaxy to explore Earthlike planets. This all works because nothing that happens is predictable, even at the end. That's when I discovered that *Proxima* is yet another satisfying novel with a bloody sequel! (There is no warning of sequelitis anywhere on the dustjacket.) And Mark and Claire have already found *Ultima* for me.

THE SANDPIT

by Nicholas Shakespeare (2020; Harvell Secker; 432 pp.)

Nicholas Shakespeare is one of those restless spirits whose works cannot be easily categorised. Some of his novels are on the fine-writing end of the current literary spectrum (*The High Flyer*). He has published an eccentric personal history of Tasmania. He also writes engrossing suspense novels, such as *Inheritance* and *The Sandpit*, his latest. In *The Sandpit*, a man returns to England with his son. He makes friends with the father of one of the boys at his son's new school. The father gives the man a packet that must be kept secret, then disappears. Enemies appear, fathers of other children at his son's school. All are intent on retrieving the packet. Mix a Hitchcockian McGuffin, a plot worthy of John Le Carre, and good writing that is not ornate, and you have a very satisfying thriller.

ROUGH IDEAS: REFLECTIONS ON MUSIC AND MORE

by Stephen Hough (2019; Faber; 443 pp.)

Stephen Hough is one of the best of today's concert pianists/classical recording artists. I love his set of the five Saint-Saëns piano concertos, and often hear his other recordings on radio. By the time I began noticing his name, he already had quite a long career. He has also had a long career of writing about music and many other preoccupations. *Rough Ideas* is made up of short essays written for newspapers or blogs that coalesce around music performance and appreciation, religion, and life in general. Without being too pushy, Hough is not afraid to be seen as slightly eccentric. Only a pianist could love Rachmaninov as much as Hough does

— or Liszt. But only a pianist could explain that there are eight ways in which any finger can strike a piano key. The professional pianist not only needs to know every technique but must find time to practise them all, often. Which leads him into an essay about trying to maintain piano practice while travelling constantly between engagements. Hough's views on religion seem a big daft to me, but his observations about the world as he finds it are both deeply humanitarian and take in the perception that humanitarian responses might have little place in our era. A book of treasures.

THE FRANCHISE AFFAIR

by Josephine Tey (1948; Penguin; 255 pp.)

TO LOVE AND BE WISE

by Josephine Tey (1950; Pan; 191 pp.)

THE SINGING SANDS

by Josephine Tey (1952; Penguin Crime; 202 pp.)

Recently I returned to **Josepine Tey's** Inspector Grant novels many years after reading them for the first time. I returned to them for light relief while reading some other books that required a bit more concentration.

Was I re-reading them or reading them for the first time? I felt that I had read *The Franchise Affair* some time in the 1980s, but could recall nothing of the story. I relish Josephine Tey's terse, descriptive prose and her concentration on characters and landscapes rather than surprises as the mainspring of the plot.

A local lawyer is asked to help two women who live in a house called the Franchise on the outskirts of a small English town. They have been accused of kidnapping a woman, holding her for several days, then releasing her. They know nothing of this, but the accuser's story hangs together. The villagers unite against the women who live at the Franchise;

and that is the real story underlying the detecting that takes place when Inspector Grant is called in. Alan Grant is a very subdued presence in each of these novels: the sort of intellectual inspector probably rarely can found at Scotland Yard but delightful to meet on the page.

I'm certain that I had not read *To Love and Be Wise*. Surely I would have remembered one of the most surprising surprise endings I've read in a long time, a solution that is revealed only in the last three pages of the book? An interesting set of friends invite Grant to a holiday gathering in the country. A weekend visitor disappears from the group, apparently fallen into the river, drowned, and another man is suspected of foul play. Inspector Grant does not believe that the 'victim' has indeed died, but he has a hard time finding evidence to the contrary. Again the interplay between the characters provides the real interest of the story — and the ending is a cracker.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, ABC Radio broadcast a radio serial in quarter-hour episodes after the 7 p.m. news. (Remember the quarter-hour 7 p.m. news?; now even the 7.45 a.m. news has been taken from us.) When I was living in Ararat for two years, I crouched over my little radio relishing every sentence of *The Singing Sands*. I forget who read from the book, but that experience made me a lifetime fan of Josephine Tey's. While re-reading it in the last few days, I remembered Tey's vivid description of Grant's visit to the Orkney Islands as he tries to find the 'singing sands'. I had failed to remember the subsequent chain of chases that occupies him while he searches for the singing sands, which turn out to have nothing to do with Scotland. (A man seems to have fallen in a railway carriage compartment and hits his head so violently that he has died there. Grant happens to pass the door of the compartment when the body is discovered. And he happens to pick up a stray newspaper from the compartment floor, on which someone has handwritten a little poem that includes the line 'the singing sands'. Stray information, but as with the other Tey novels, enough to solve a complex puzzle.)

Canon shots

THE WESTERN CANON: THE BOOKS AND SCHOOL OF THE AGES

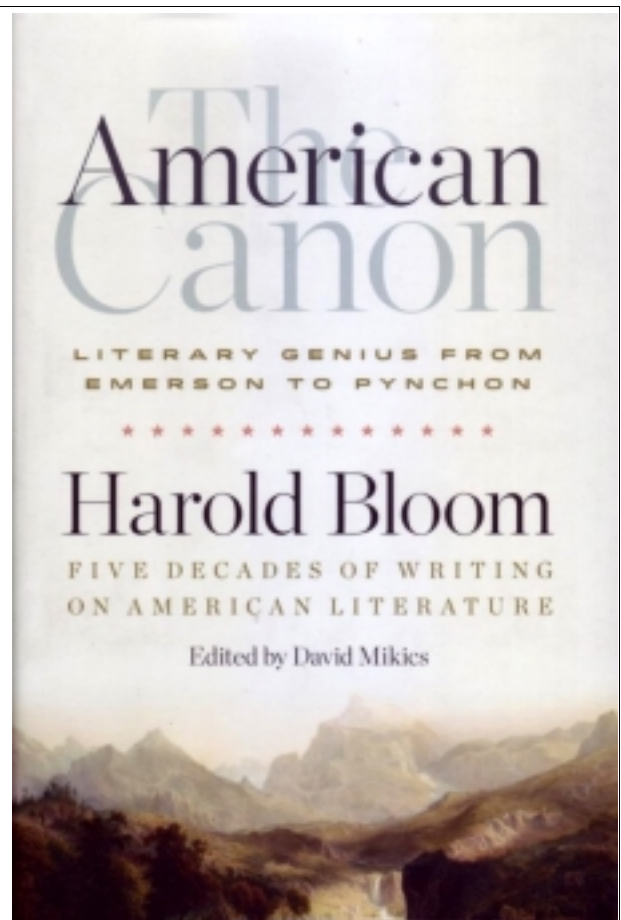
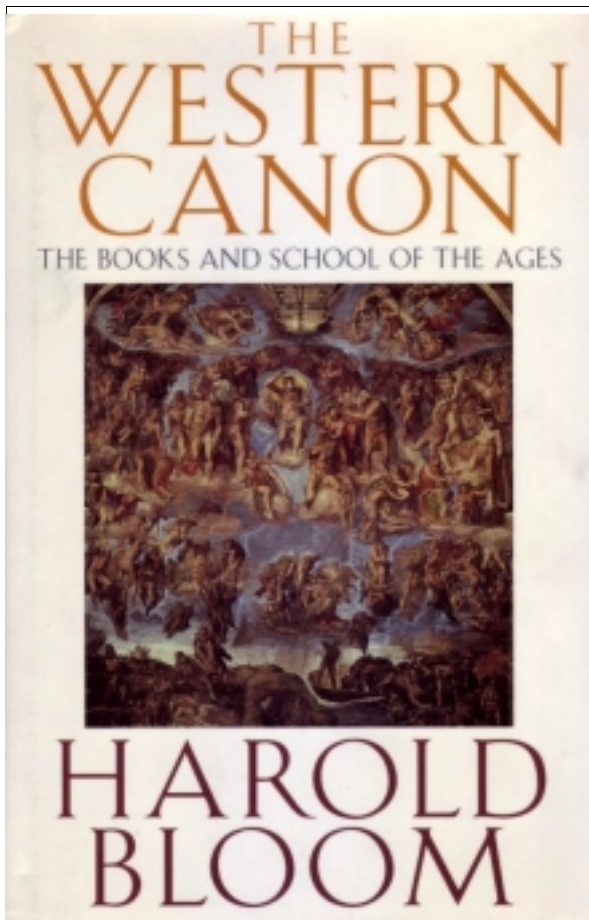
by Harold Bloom (1994; Harcourt Brace; 578 pp.)

THE AMERICAN CANON: LITERARY GENIUS FROM

EMERSON TO PYNCHON

by Harold Bloom, ed. David Mikics (2019; Library of America; 426 pp.)

I'm struggling to come to terms with the two most illuminating and frustrating books I've read so far this year, **Harold Bloom's** *The Western Canon* and



The American Canon.

Harold Bloom died very recently, at the age of 89. In his life, he seems to have read everything (including some science fiction), and written about much of what he's read. He became perhaps America's most famous literary critic even while placing himself in opposition to almost every trend in literary criticism during the last 40 or 50 years.

When Bloom died, Dinitia Smith, in the *New York Times*, wrote: 'Harold Bloom, the prodigious literary critic who championed and defended the Western canon in an outpouring of influential books that appeared not only on college syllabuses but also — unusual for an academic — on best-seller lists, died on Monday at a hospital in New Haven. He was 89. His death was confirmed by his wife, Jeanne Bloom, who said he taught his last class at Yale University on Thursday.'

'Professor Bloom was frequently called the most notorious literary critic in America. From a vaunted perch at Yale, he flew in the face of almost every trend in the literary criticism of his day. Chiefly he argued for the literary superiority of the Western giants like Shakespeare, Chaucer and Kafka — all of them white and male, his own critics pointed out — over writers favored by what he called "the School of Resentment", by which he meant multiculturalists, feminists, Marxists, neoconservatives and others whom he saw as betraying literature's essential purpose.'

My own immediate experience of Bloom has been listening to his wonderful, intimate talks with Phillip Adams on ABC Radio's *Late Night Live* and Ramona Koval on the late lamented *Books and Writing* program. Bloom's total love of poetry, especially Shakespeare's, was at the centre of his inner life. I bought *The Western Canon*, his major statement of those beliefs, in 1995. It has been on the shelf until now, daring me to open it. Instead, I began by reading a recent, only slightly less imposing, volume, *The American Canon*. In both titles, I could replace the word 'canon' with 'cannon'. The tone in both books is combative and interrogative. Both books have been quite different from my expectation.

I 'did English' at Melbourne University from 1965 to 1968 during the last great days of the Leavisites, although in fact the words of the great F. R. and Q. D. Leavis were rarely quoted during my three years at Melbourne. The emphasis of the courses was to impress on students the importance of reading for ourselves; exploring the texts as closely as possible; and reading a wide range of critics. The expectation was that if we read deeply, we would come to the same conclusions as the members of the English Department about the relative merits of various authors — 'the canon' of English literature, stretching from Shakespeare, Marvell, and Donne through Milton and Blake via Richardson and Austen to Forster and Eliot,

bypassing almost all British fiction and most British poets of the nineteenth century. It was made clear to us that we should not make conclusions about what we read based on what we knew about the authors themselves, but only upon our personal experience of the words in front of us. (The most extreme form of this argument is that we should read books without knowing the names of the authors, let alone anything about their lives and cultures. Gerald Murnane has advocated this approach in at least one of his fictions.) Since then I have tried to stick to the injunction *Aesthetics über alles*. Not that I stick exclusively to 'worthy' books, but at least I've invented for myself some criteria for distinguishing bad from good.

Bloom believed that students should read as deeply and widely as possible. It is the shallowness of the reading experiences of today's students that upset him, although he was equally willing to cast rocks at the shallowness of the reading and critical abilities of their teachers. To him, great poetry and prose are more important than any other aspect of our lives.

In practice, however, his application of his principles is very odd, especially to an Australian reader. For instance, he begins *The American Canon* with a rambling discussion of the work of **Ralph Waldo Emerson**. If Emerson's books are readily available in Australia or ever have been, I'd be surprised. The works of Emerson's follower **Henry David Thoreau** can still be bought easily enough. We have a copy of *Walden*, but I've never seen in a bookshop a collection of Emerson's major works. Bloom elevates Emerson into the position of a touchstone author, someone whose works can be used to judge the works of all later American writers. Later in *The American Canon*, **Walt Whitman** is elevated into the position of another touchstone writer, one whose influence can be found, according to Bloom, in all later important American poets.

Bloom's central thesis, in both *The American Canon* and *The Western Canon*, is that the 'canon' is created not merely by comparing authors but by working out the authors who have surpassed and supplanted the authors who most influenced them. Bloom's arguments about particular authors are therefore overcomplicated, sometimes even ruined, by his attempts to fit them into 'the canon'. Therefore I find a great discrepancy between the quality of individual chapters. His chapter on Walt Whitman is excellent in its own right, as are most of his chapters on the major American poets, such as **Robert Frost**, **Wallace Stevens**, and **William Carlos Williams**. However, he expresses quite often throughout the book a fundamental dislike of the work of **T. S. Eliot**, without explaining the foundations of his prejudice.

At its worst, Bloom's notion of the 'canon' re-

sembles **Sam Moskowitz's** canon of science fiction authors, as expressed in his two books about SF authors, *Explorers of the Infinite* (1963) and *Seekers of Tomorrow* (1966). In these books Moskowitz asserts that the main ideas in most of the major SF stories are either copies or extensions of the ideas in previous SF stories. He assumes that every SF author of the Golden Age had read every story in every previous magazine. This was possible in the 1950s, of course, because of the small number of magazines. Frequently his assertions could be challenged by later discoveries that such-and-such story by such-an-such an author could not possibly have been influenced by an earlier story because the influencing story had been written and accepted after the story it was supposed to have influenced. As I remember, Moskowitz did not explore the big stylistic issues of SF; for instance, he did not trace the ways in which pulp style metamorphosed into post-World War II 'slick' popular style. By contrast, Bloom concentrates on style as well as subject matter, but sometimes his accounts of particular authors gives the impression that the achievement of every great author is based only the ability to challenge the ferocious ghost of an earlier author.

I disagree with some of Bloom's canonical choices — or rather, lack of them. Why the set against **Eliot**, for instance? My greatest moment in poetry — the reason why I still read books of poems — was a day in 1964 when our fine English teacher Ken Ellis got sick of teaching the very boring compulsory English Expression course to our Form 6 (Year 12) at Bacchus Marsh High School, told us to sit down and listen, then read and acted out 'The Hollow Men' by T. S. Eliot. We were all thunderstruck. All at once I saw that poetry had something to do with the twentieth century; that it was not trapped in the era of 'thees' and 'thous'; that poems written early in the century could encapsulate many of the concerns that remained important in 1964.

The main qualities that Bloom seems to admire in great works are (a) 'abundance of language' and (b) the depiction of great characters, such as those found in Shakespeare. He admires many authors who write too profusely and at too great a length for my taste. The hero of *The Western Canon* is **Shakespeare**, whose greatest works include *Othello* and *King Lear*. Author after author is compared with Shakespeare, even if the casual reader might find few connections. Bloom's other hero author of *The Western Canon* is **Dante** in *The Divine Comedy*. I must admit I've never read Dante. My feeling is that Shakespeare, if he had thought of himself as anything other than a working writer and producer for the Globe Theatre, would have seen himself at the end of a line of literary giants, such as

Sophocles, Virgil, and Cervantes, rather than the progenitor of English literature.

Because of his prejudices, Bloom tends to leave out authors who exhibit a sharp, compressed style. Where are **Donne** and **Marvell**, for instance, whose poems fascinated me when I first encountered them at university? Shakespeare's plays provide widescreen baroque poetry, but Donne's condensed poetic meditations read like mini-novels these days. Where are the great nineteenth-century French writers in Bloom's canon? I find most Dickens and his fellow English writers unreadable, but **Balzac**, **Flaubert**, and **Zola** are not only still readable in the twenty-first century but tell us much more about their era than their fellow authors from across the Channel. Where is **D. H. Lawrence**? **Gerard Manley Hopkins**? Where is **Evelyn Waugh**, who to me is the finest British prose stylist of the twentieth century?

Why read Harold Bloom, since both *The American Canon* and *The Western Canon* can be very irritating? The short answer is that they inspire you to read more, not less; to include, not exclude. I began reading Bloom's books because my friend Dick Jenssen mentioned them. Bloom's great quality is his ability to point readers toward books they have never read. For instance, Bloom prompted me to take down from the shelf **Mark Twain's** *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. My copy has picked up dust on the shelf since 1973. It is a great book, but very different from what I was expecting. The last 100 pages are very odd, yet they complete the pattern of the whole: Huck can be seen as just as much a shyster and con man as the various villains he and Jim meet during their journey down the Mississippi River. The river is the real hero of this novel; most of Twain's best prose is devoted to descriptions of travelling upon it.

Should I now read **Milton's** *Paradise Lost*? I've owned a copy since 1966. It's one of Bloom's most admired texts. Well, maybe. I'm more likely to read **Ibsen's** *Peer Gynt*, which I've also had on the shelf for many years. All I know about *Peer Gynt* is Grieg's incidental music to the play; it had never occurred to me that it might be a major play in its own right.

The list goes on. How can I now not read my **Walt Whitman** collection? Bloom reserves much of his finest writing for praising Whitman, not only as a poet of his time, but as the major poetic influence on American poetry, along with **Hart Crane**. (But I've never seen a volume by Hart Crane in an Australian bookshop.) Why did I not have a volume of **Wallace Stevens'** poetry in the house? I have one now, thanks to Readings Books in Carlton, but I haven't started reading it yet.

I'm very grateful to Harold Bloom for pointing me towards my big book of **Robert Frost's** poetry

(**THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST**, ed. **Edward Connery Latham**; 1969; **Jonathan Cape**; 607 pp.). I've had that collection on the shelf for over 40 years, daring me to read it. The poems in the first four or five volumes are quite unlike others from the twentieth century. They are dramatic monologues, in the tradition of the poems of Robert Browning. They are mini dramas, or mini novels. They tell very twisted tales of back-country New England, but always in sinuous, inventive lines. Frost's later volumes of poetry are disappointing — one rarely sees a poet go off the boil in old age in quite so obvious a way.

Why talk about Bloom's criticism here? Because — surprise! — the best chapter in either *Canon* is the chapter in *The American Canon* devoted to the work of **Ursula Le Guin**, especially *The Left Hand of Darkness*. (Bloom also name-checks **Thomas Disch** and **John Crowley** in his list of canonical books at the end of *The Western Canon*.) Bloom's account of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of the finest I've read. 'When her precise, dialectical style — always evocative, sometimes sublime in its restrained pathos — is exquisitely fitted to her powers of invention ... Le Guin achieves a kind of sensibility very nearly unique in contemporary fiction. It is the pure storyteller's sensibility that induces in the reader a state of uncertainty, of not knowing what comes next.' Bloom also points out that essence of Le Guin's thought is Taoism; and that the best of her work can be found in her books of poetry. Unfortunately I have only ever been able to track down one of her books of poetry, her last.

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN by **Mark Twain** (1884; Penguin English Library, 394 pp.)

I was going to spend the year reading books from Bloom's American canon. I've read only four of them so far: by Robert Frost, Mark Twain, Thomas Pynchon, and Eudora Welty. My Penguin English Library edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been on the shelf for about 50 years, but I'm glad I've finally taken it off the shelf and read it. It's a pilgrimage novel. Huck and Jim, his African-American friend who is escaping from slavery, travel by boat down along the Missouri River and then the Mississippi. The book is a hymn of praise to the river itself. Its finest pages are about navigating its waters and shores. It is also a picaresque, a joke on the world itself, in which its main characters are thought to be dead to everybody but themselves for much of the novel. They meet crooks and conmen of various types, as well as some very kind people, but in the end they prove themselves (with

the late help of late-entry Tom Sawyer) to be as much rascallions as anybody they meet on the journey. The real hero is Jim, called a 'nigger' by many throughout the novel, but in fact the only person in the novel who exhibits all the virtues that the white folks claim for themselves. I must read more **Mark Twain**.

THE CRYING OF LOT 49

by **Thomas Pynchon** (1966; Bantam; 138 pp.)

Harold Bloom refers to **Thomas Pynchon** as one of his benchmark American writers throughout *The American Canon*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* as his major novel, but the book does not contain a chapter devoted to this book! I've had the American paperback on the shelf for nearly 50 years, so I thought I'd better read it. Bloom's admiration for Pynchon remains as inexplicable as ever. There are lots of overblown sentences, and some shaggy dog stories, and there is said to be a brilliant conspiracy theory

as the backbone of the plot, but I couldn't work it out. Pynchon is part of a collection of over-wordy American authors who have little to say to me, and whose work overshadows books by much more astute and verbally interesting writers.

ONE WRITER'S BEGINNINGS

by **Eudora Welty** (1983; Warner Books; 114 pp.)

Based on a series of lectures, **Eudora Welty's** autobiography of how she became a writer is much too short — but nobody could accuse her of wasting words. All her observations are terse and perceptive. So Harold Bloom does get right the importance of at least one really great twentieth-century writer.

That brings me to the end of July. Perhaps I'll be finished these book mumblings by December.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 29 September 2020

Train song

THE AUSTRALIAN BOOK OF TRAINS

J. H. and W. D. Martin (Angus & Robertson; 1947; 248 pp.)

After my mother died in 2007, my sisters Robin and Jeanette spent months down at Rosebud going through her house, throwing out stuff and retrieving much that remained important. My mother regarded herself as a declutterer, but she had kept the memorabilia we'd asked her to keep, especially the vast number of photographs and slides that Dad had taken during his lifetime. She had also kept some of the books that we had grown up with in Oakleigh and Syndal. 'But,' I wailed when I visited the house, 'Where is my *Australian Book of Trains*?' Nowhere in the house. My mother had been careful to send me many valuable documents that she knew I'd want to keep, but somewhere in the distant past she had given away or sold the favourite book of my childhood.

It's now 13 years later, but it's always rankled with me that my mother took decluttering a bit too far. After I mentioned this rankle on Facebook, my wonderful sister **Jeanette Gillespie** searched on eBay and found a copy of a book *The Railways of Australia* (**Stephen Brooke**; PR Books; 1984/1986). It's not the one I was looking for, but it is one of very few books ever published about the whole range of Australian railways. It is filled with more

photographs than information, but I was grateful that Jeanette arranged to send it to me. And then! A few weeks later Jeanette found the actual book I had been looking for. She bought it and arranged to send it to me as well. Receiving it gave a glow to a week otherwise filled with gloomy news about the renewed pandemic surge in Melbourne.

The first thing that surprised me about *The Australian Book of Trains* is that it was published much earlier than I had remembered, in 1947, not 1954. I remember my parents giving it to me for my birthday in 1954, the year of the Centennial of the opening of Australia's first steam train service from Melbourne to Sandridge (Port Melbourne). The Centennial was a huge event to me. I was a train nut because I had spent much time during my pre-school years sitting on the veranda at 50 Houghton Road, Oakleigh, looking at the trains as they travelled along the main Gippsland line on the other side of the road. Until I was about 10 years old, I wanted to be a train driver when I grew up. During the Centennial celebrations, Dad and I visited Spencer Street interstate railway station. I was allowed to step up into the cabin of one of the ultra-new diesel engines!

I had always remembered the book itself as having been published as part of the Centennial, but not so. It was published just after World War II. It contains rumours of the diesel-powered trains that

THE AUSTRALIAN BOOK OF TRAINS



J.H. and W.D. MARTIN

ANGUS & ROBERTSON
SYDNEY & LONDON
1947

in 1954 were about to replace all of Victoria's rural steam-powered trains. The authors also write about the coming age of atomic-powered trains!

The book itself comprises a host of photographs of the trains from all of Australia's state railway systems, plus a cheery, easy-to-read text. Many items remind me of life during my childhood. For instance, I value the book for its photographs of the electric-powered shunting trains. One of them could be seen every day from about 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. in the shunting yards over the road, 'playing train bangs'. The squat black locomotive would give a clunky push to one end of a line of goods wagons, just enough to start them trundling. It would then tootle to the other end of the line, back up to the carriages, and go 'bang' on the other end. The carriages would then trundle back to where they came from. It was like a huge toy train set playing just for my entertainment.

I've always remembered from *The Australian Book of Trains* an image of the Zigzag Railway that crossed the Blue Mountains: 'The now obsolete Zigzag Railway ... was Australia's first attempt to take trains across a mountain range, and is still spoken of as one of the most substantial and boldest engineering feats in the world ... Before it reached its terminal point at Lithgow, the Zigzag travelled over 8 viaducts, 8 bridges, 268 culverts, and through 4 tunnels ... By the time it had passed

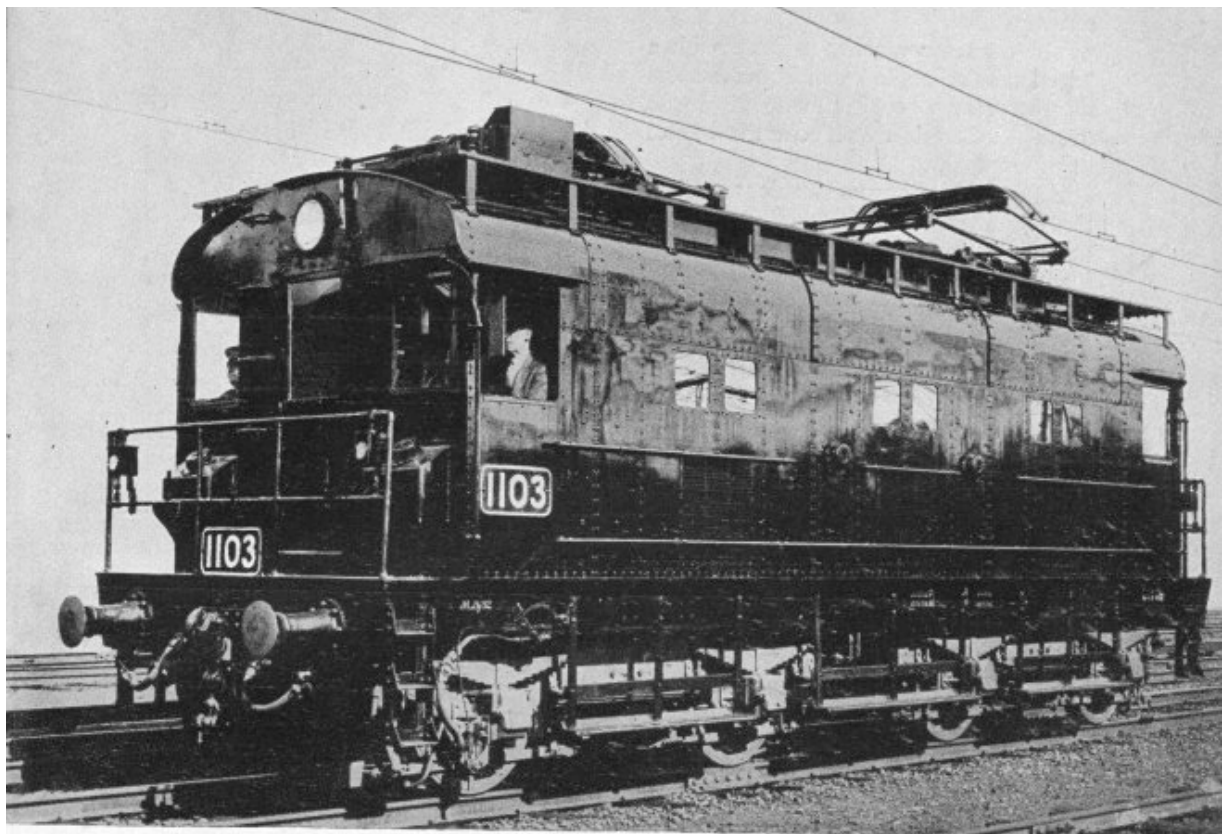
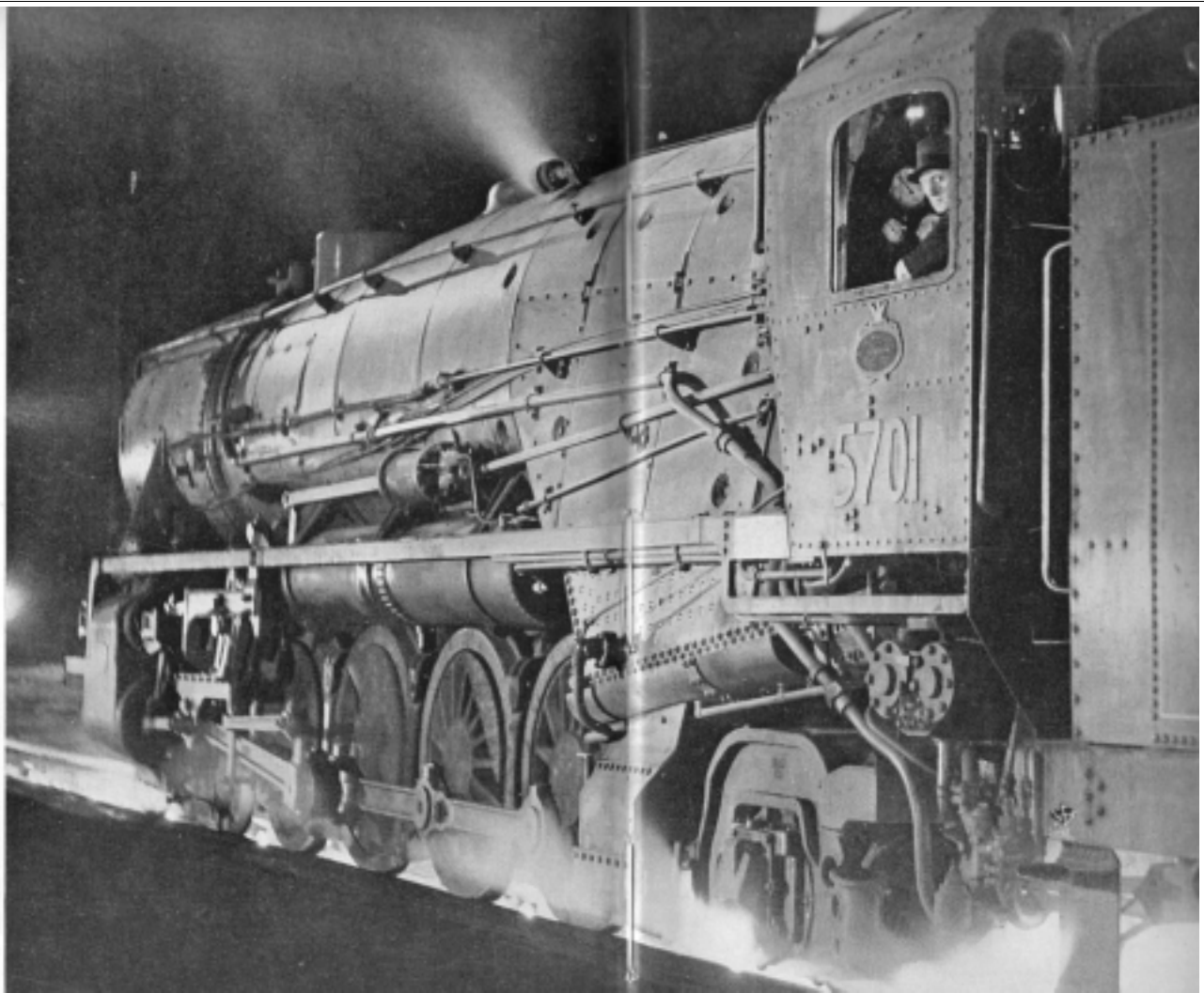
through Mount Clarence ... it had risen 3658 feet above sea level.'

I don't remember steam trains very clearly. (When our family visited Adelaide at the end of 1954, I was astonished to see its suburban trains still powered by steam engines.) *The Australian Book of Trains* has pictures of many of Australia's greatest locomotives, most of them built in Australia. 'Heavy Harry' was the most powerful locomotive in Australia for hauling goods trains. It used to take the goods-line through Glenroy, near where Elaine grew up. Her father would pick up pieces of coal that had been flung into Heavy Harry's boiler but had missed the fire and dropped onto the side of the line.

My main experience of trains is of Melbourne's suburban electric train network, built in the 1920s, which is still mainly intact. In the 1940s and 1950s all the carriages were dark red, powered by electricity from overhead wires using a pantograph. (Our trains were never powered by a 'third rail' system.) The seats were upholstered lounge-style chairs covered in leather. Passenger compartments were labelled First Class or Second Class, and Smoking or Non Smoking. The doors were not locked during the trip, so in summer I enjoyed opening the door beside my seat and watching the pattern of the sleepers as we whizzed over them.

The centre of the network was Flinders Street station and the vast spread of shunting yards that surrounded it. As the caption for the book's photograph of Flinders Street station says: 'Approximately 2270 electric and 122 steam trains, including goods, pass through or leave this station each day. Average daily number of passengers passing through its barriers is 310,761.' The concourse of the station included a magazine and newspaper display shop that must have been one of the largest in the world. Whenever I could coax some pocket money out of my mother, I could buy the week's supply of comics there. Our family travelled into town from Oakleigh to see movies at the Metro or the Regent or Plaza cinemas. Other holiday treats could be found in Melbourne rather than in the suburbs.

Somewhere lost in my computer files I have a small photo of the only carriage left of the Hornby toy railway setup that I played with when I was a boy. My parents did not have much money, but somehow Dad had built up quite a nice collection of toy carriages and railway lines when he was a boy in the 1920s. It had all been loaded into an old-fashioned tin trunk and kept for me until I was old enough to play with it without destroying it. With the benefit of birthday and Christmas presents, I accumulated the rolling stock from 1954 to 1956. Eventually I could lay out the tracks all around the back lawn during summer holidays. The lines and carriages



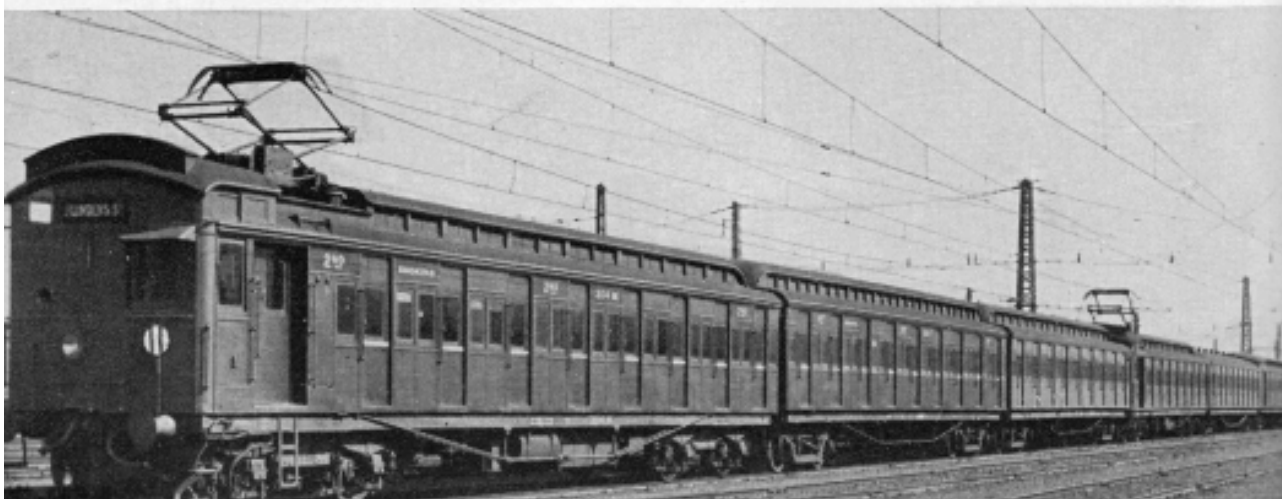
Electric locomotive type 1103, Victorian Government Railways.

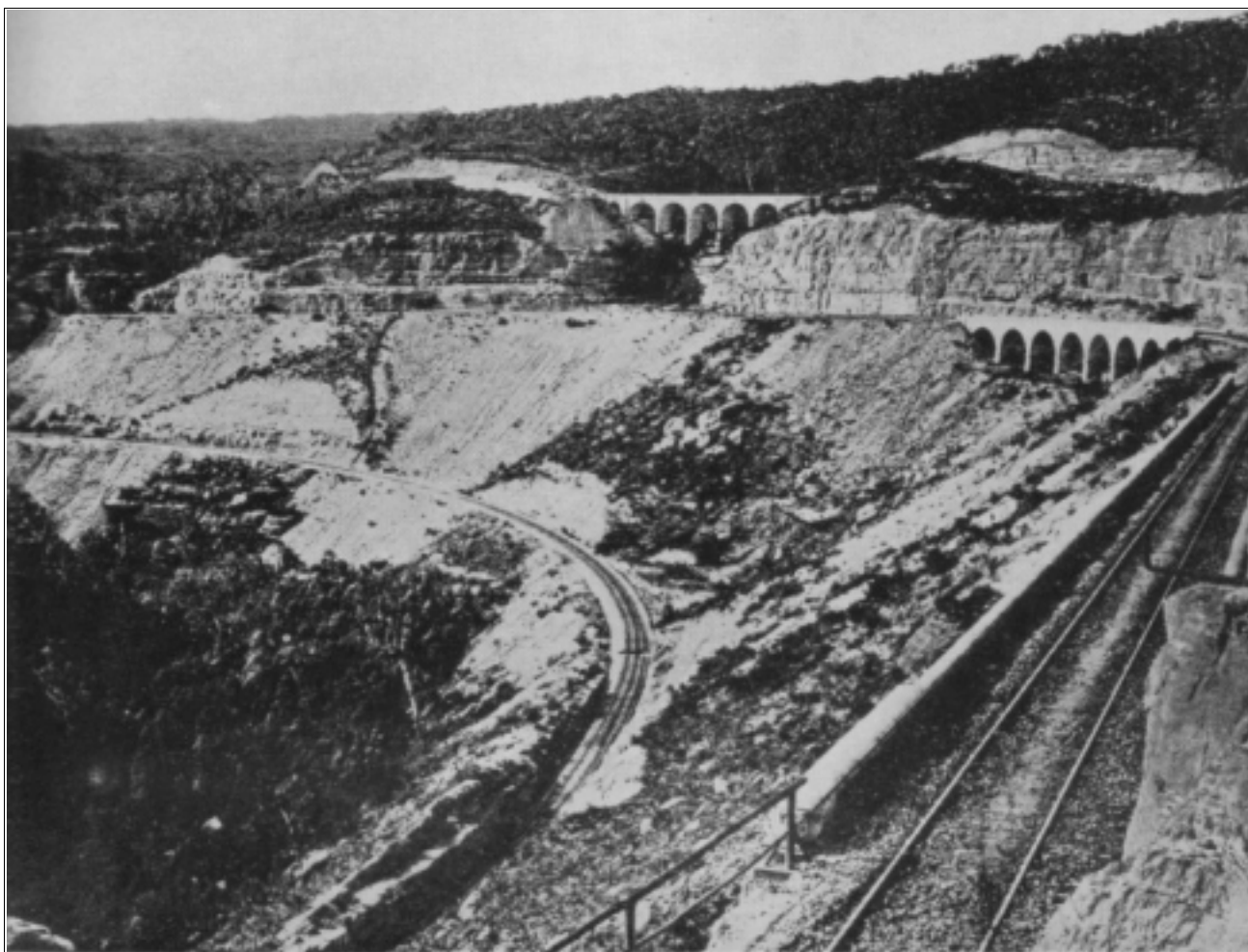


Flinders Street Railway Station, Melbourne, one of the busiest terminals in the world. Approximately 2270 electric and 122 steam trains (including goods) pass through or leave this station each day. Average daily number of passengers passing through its barriers is 310,761.

Flinders Street station hasn't changed much since 1947, has it? The only real change has been the replacement of Princes Bridge Station (far right, on this side of Swanston Street), first of all by the Gas and Fuel Corporation skyscrapers, which everybody hated, then by Federation Square, which many other people still hate, and now a major construction site for the Metro Tunnel project.

A Victorian Government Railways Electric Train.





The ZIGZAG Railway, N.S.W. One of the greatest engineering feats of all time.

were all put away forever after we moved to Syndal in early 1959 and I became a teenager. My mother did ask my permission before she gave the remains of the setup to a hobby group. I had nowhere to store it at Collingwood, but I wish now I had found a way to keep it.

Arrivederci, railways. The 'red rattlers' of the suburban system that lasted from the 1920s to the 1960s were replaced by blue-coloured Harris trains. They had by far the most comfortable seats ever fitted in suburban trains, but it was found that their structures contained asbestos. They were replaced by successive generations of silver-coloured trains. The country train service, whose 1930s-built carriages were not updated until after my stay in Ararat in 1969 and 1970, gradually improved, but the network itself was cut drastically by the Kennett Government in the 1990s. The suburban system survives, and the current Labor Government is improving various aspects of it. We moved to

Greensborough because of its regular frequent train service to Melbourne. Now we have been 'promised' that the replacement of the Greensborough station and the doubling of parts of the track to Eltham will put it out of action for six months or more.

When I was a kid I drew rough maps of ideal cities criss-crossed with networks of train lines, not freeways. Trains are the correct way to travel, especially as the Victorian network's electricity supply, based on Latrobe Valley coal for nearly two centuries, is scheduled to be replaced by renewable energy sources. Governments still kowtow to the car, destroying green valley after green valley by turning them into freeways. I won't live long enough to see any real improvement in Melbourne's public transport system, but then, neither will anybody else. The air will have cooked us all by then.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 21 August/15 October 2020

Two World Conventions: 2019 and 2020

Dublin 2019: Report 1

EDWINA HARVEY is the 2018 winner of the A. Bertram Chandler Award for Lifetime Achievement in Australian Science Fiction. Her many achievements in Australian fandom and professional publishing include long-time memberships of many media clubs and editorships of their magazines; from 2002 to 2010 co-editing with Ted Scribner *The Australian Science Fiction Bullshead*; various roles in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine (ASIM)* from 2002 to 2015; writing three books for Peggy Bright Books and co-editing two anthologies. For (many) more details see the Chandler citation in *SF Commentary* 97.

Edwina Harvey

Dublin and I didn't get off to the best of starts. The line-up to get through Customs (as a non-EU visitor) seemed to take as long to get through as my flight from



Edwina Harvey clutching a Hugo Award.
(Photo: Susan Batho.)

London to Dublin had taken. I wondered if the Convention committee had alerted Customs to expect an inflow of non-EU tourists, but maybe there's a limit to how much influence a convention can have on border control.

Dublin was of the opinion that I needed another baptism as I pulled my suitcase in the wrong direction (anti-navigation is my superpower, I reckon) until I finally found the 747 bus that would take me into Dublin.

The bus was full, but a woman in the back seat took pity on me, scrunched her partner into the corner and invited me to sit with them. We got talking, and in the space of a few minutes were all firm friends. That seems to be the way of it in Ireland: if they like you they accept you 100 per cent; there are no half-measures.

Lawrie Brown, my room-mate and 'guide dog' (I'm visually impaired and have poor night vision), was keen to get to the Dublin Convention Centre (DCC) early on the Thursday to register for the first day of the con. We didn't have to wait long to register, but that was the exception rather than the rule.

I'll get my major criticism out of the way first, as it was repeated by many at the Worldcon and most likely will be in their con reports: the Dublin Worldcon should be nicknamed 'Queuecon'. People were marshalled into queues to get into panels and events at both the DCC and the Odeon Theatre complex in the still-under-construction building at The Point, about 800 metres, or one LAUS tram stop away. If you were lucky, you got in to the panel you wanted to be at; if you weren't, the venue



From the opening ceremony of the Dublin Worldcon: Songs in the Key of D choir, Opening Ceremony, Dublin SF Worldcon 77, 15 August 2019. (Photo: Lawrie Brown.)

door would close and you had to find another panel with vacant seats, or find something else to do.

Like many other attendees, I found the queueing annoying. On Day 1 I witnessed the frustrated anger of quite a few fans who had been ejected from a panel by the DCC staff because the room was overcrowded. Staff clearly had instructions that rooms were not to be filled beyond capacity and policed this in a firm but polite manner. While I understand the need for crowd control and health and safety regulations, it saddened me on the evening of the second day of the Worldcon to overhear one attendee tell another that this was his first Worldcon and he still hadn't got into any panels he wanted to see. Are Worldcons victims of their own success?

Prior to heading for Dublin, I viewed the extensive con program online and found the amount of multi-streaming intimidating. There were often as many as five panels I was interested in attending at the same time. Studying the program after the con was over, I could see the pattern — if you missed one panel, there was often a variation on that theme later. But the process resembled navigating a labyrinth; I didn't see the pattern until it was too late.

The first panel I saw was on **'Fanzines Now!'** There was some debate over what constituted a fanzine and what constituted a blog post. I travelled to Point Square (the second venue) to enter my silk scarves and jewellery in the art show before heading to the **'So Long and Thanks for All the Fish'** panel on how animals communicate, chaired by Dr Claire McCague. As well as 'the usual suspects' — apes and cetaceans — intelligence and communication among octopus, cuttlefish, and bees was also discussed. I was fascinated to learn bees don't like the smell of bananas and the smell of sweaty humans makes them aggressive, while heavily floral scented soap excites them. This panel could have run twice as long as scheduled and I'd still have wanted to hear more.

The smell of fresh popcorn wafting from the Odeon candy bar was irresistible, so I had popcorn for lunch.

Thursday afternoon I attended a panel on **'Managing Finite Natural Resources'**. Various members of the audience had opinions to contribute to the panel, but because of strict time restraints there was little opportunity for robust audience participation.

Cead Mile Failte is Gaelic for one hundred thousand welcomes, and the **Worldcon Opening Ceremony** welcome by James Bacon felt warm and genuine, especially his references to how we're all Irish tonight, and part of the Fannish Family. An Irish folk band played a few songs that had fingers and toes tapping in the audience. It was a great start.

Friday morning I tried but failed to get to see a panel on self-publishing, ditto a panel on 'Bridging the Language Barrier: Translated SFF', but there was seating in the **'Great Heroes of Children's Literature'** panel. One of the panelists was author Peter Beagle, an unexpected bonus. That afternoon I was able to get into **'An Anniversary to Remember: the 1918 Flu Pandemic'**, which gave a nod to pro-vaccinators. I followed that up with **'Kick-ass Women on SF TV'** chaired by Donna Maree Hanson. Suffering what felt like a second wave of jet-lag, I retired to my hotel room. Friday night I went to the concert by the Dublin Worldcon Orchestra and absolutely loved it!

On Saturday I caught up with Susan and Graeme Batho, laughing at the fact that we live maybe 100 km away from each other in Australia, but had to travel thousands of kilometres to Dublin to spend some quality time together. I ended up hanging out with them for most of the day. The Irish *Star Trek* club, USS *Cuchulain*, had a mock-up of the original *Star Trek* bridge and invited people to try it out for some great photo opportunities, so Susan, Graeme, and I did this. It was only after I saw my photos that I realised I'd been wearing a red jacket, the symbol of a ST extra who'll get killed off in the next scene! We chatted with the members from the USS *Cuchulain* and I had pleasure in introducing Susan Batho as the first president of the first *Star Trek* Fan Club in Australia. I also had my photo taken holding my Hugo Award ... okay, so it was the con's 'demonstration model' we were allowed to handle; just leave me with my dream, OK?

The Traders Hall in the DCC was large, but underwhelming. I'd been expecting an Aladdin's Cave filled with tempting treasures to buy, as I'd seen in my first overseas Worldcon, Anaheim 2006. But while there were some wonderful local craft stalls among tables selling



Graeme Batho (l.), Edwina Harvey (middle) and Susan Batho (right) on board the USS Cuchalain. (Photo: Susan Batho's camera.)

T-shirts or promoting fan clubs, publishers, con bids etc., I had trouble finding anything I really wanted to buy (and I really did want to buy!).

Saturday afternoon, Graeme, Susan, and I managed to see the panel **'Preparing for Space'**, where guest astronauts Jeanette Epps (ESS) and Dr Norah Patten (NASA) chatted about training for their respective space programs. (I'd tried but failed to see them in an earlier panel.) Still in a *Star Trek* state of mind, at the end of this interesting talk, I turned to Susan with tears in my eyes and asked, 'When you were watching *Star Trek* all those years ago, [when Gene Rodenberry's original plan that the *Enterprise* be crewed 50 per cent men, 50 per cent women was reduced to 30 per cent women by TV executives] did you ever think we'd see the day when women could have a career as astronauts or scientists in a space program?' It really made a positive impact on me to realise that women finally seem to have equal footing when it comes to working in these fields.

I went with Susan and Graeme to the **Art Show** at The Point. I was delighted to see my two silk scarves and a piece of jewellery had already sold. We had dinner at the aptly named Eddie Rocket burger franchise (very good burgers, in my opinion) before heading back to the DCC to watch the **Costume Parade**, which provided a variety of high-class costumes and performances, though didn't include a skilfully crafted pterodactyl costume we'd seen earlier in the day. I parted company with the Bathos and



Three Australians in Dublin: (l. to r.): Alan Stewart, Lawrie Brown, Edwina Harvey. (Photo: Susan Batho.)

with Lawrie Brown caught the last of John Scalzi's 'Dance Across the Decades'. As you'd guess, this was dance participation. Lawrie — a keen dancer — joined in while I enjoyed the music and watched the dancers. Unfortunately Lawrie insisted we leave before they played a waltz — the one dance I can do!

Sunday I attended a short concert by **Sam Watts**, who has composed music for *Planet Earth*, *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, and *Wizards vs Aliens*, among others. He played highlights from his previous work and debuted a new piece. I followed that by queueing and getting into a panel on **'Orville v. Discovery'**. I've only seen about 10 minutes of *Orville*, but know many fans rave about it, so I was hoping to become aware of what I'd missed about the show. Instead I discovered Erykah Lacey sitting in the row in front of me. The talk wasn't what I thought it would be, and while the audience was keen to contribute, time didn't allow for audience participation.

After that, I mooched into Martin's Bar (named in memory of Martin Hoare) where I got into a conversation with Dave Luckett. We were soon joined by Erykah. It was nice to sit, talk, and have a drink for a while. I got to the **'What Has Art Ever Done for Science?'** panel, then, with flagging energy levels, headed down to Point Square where they were closing the Art Show. They also had a bronze and copper clay workshop that I would have loved to have attended if only I'd realised earlier it was on (i.e. before I left Australia.).

I took some time out from the con on Sunday afternoon and caught the tram to Connolly Street — the main shopping precinct — partly to be a tourist but primarily to find a currency exchange. Then it was back to the hotel to change for the Hugo Awards Ceremony. The tram stop closest to our hotel had been closed as the hurling (Irish football) finals were on that night, but we were at the DCC early enough to see the talk **'Is There Any Other Life in the Solar System?'** Presenters Dr Laura Goodney and Dr J. A. Grier were good friends who share the same opinions, but took 'for' and 'against' sides to give the discussion a rounded view.

Seating was at a premium for the **Hugo Awards**. We claimed seats up in the rafters, and as I hadn't had dinner, I went looking for food, but the DCC serveries that had been open on previous nights were closed. The Hugos were hosted by multi-talented Guests of Honour Afua Richardson and Michael Scott. Part way through the ceremony Afua sang 'Stand By Me' in honour of her recently passed grandfather and Nichelle Nichols (Lt. Uhura from *Star Trek*, who also encouraged women to join the NASA space program). Nichelle had been recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

After the Hugos were over, Lawrie made a bee-line for a concert by The Doubleclicks while I unsuccessfully searched the DCC to buy dinner. Returning to the concert venue, I was politely but firmly told the room was at capacity. I sent Lawrie a text and waited outside for about 10 minutes. With no response from him, and desperate for food (which I had in my hotel room) I found my way to the DCC tram stop in the dark with no problems. (We'd walked the path several times at night by this, so I had my bearings.) I felt safe enough in the company of

other fans, but was worried about what I'd encounter when I had to get off the tram. Would the stop be open? Would the area be swarming with loud, drunken revelers? (as I'd expect to see in Sydney after a major match). I was feeling apprehensive and vulnerable. Luckily, the stop had reopened and the area was quiet (the Irish seem much more civilised in their football fandom than the Australians!), and I made it back to the hotel without any problems, save for my very bad mood.

Monday morning, I collected my unsold artwork, thankful for the very tired but very patient volunteers who searched for my missing paperwork. I finally caught a performance (by Gary Ehrlich I think?) in Point Square Warehouse 2. The acoustics in the cavernous space didn't do justice to anyone performing there. Back at the DCC, you knew it was the last day of the con because the foyer space previously reserved for recharging mobility scooters was now crowded with suitcases! I got into the panel on 'Really Big Telescopes', which was both entertaining and informative. The concert by **Spider Robin-**

son was worth queuing for! He couldn't find the sheet music for what he wanted to play so we all ended up singing Beatles tunes. It was delightful! After that, I joined the throng sitting with their heads down looking at their screens. I was winding down fast!

The **Closing Ceremony** expressed the same worthy sentiments as the Opening Ceremony had — the reminder of Fandom Family, gratitude to all the volunteers for a job well done, and humour as guests arrived on stage with pints of Guinness. The Dublin Worldcon was officially brought to a close by James Bacon, who is a first-rate orator IMHO; the gavel and responsibility were handed on to CoNZealand, next year's Worldcon hosts. A recorded welcoming speech by NZ PM Jacinda Ardern (gee I like her!) was broadcast, followed by a couple of promotional scenic clips for New Zealand, though from what I could tell, there was already a lot of interest in CoNZealand by attendees at the Dublin con.

— **Edwina Harvey**, December 2019

Dublin 2019: Report 2

ROBERT DAY has been knocking around parts of British fandom, on and off, since discovering it as a student in mid-1970s Newcastle upon Tyne. Like many other fans of that generation, his excursions have become fewer of recent years; but sometimes the heavenly bodies line up just right. Here's Robert's account of the most recent Worldcon to have convened in physical space — Dublin in 2019.

Robert Day: Fantastic voyage

All photographs taken by Robert Day.

In my time in science fiction fandom, I've been to six World Conventions; but until 2019, I had never actually left the UK to go to any of them. It hardly takes a transcontinental voyage to reach Dublin, and existing arrangements between the UK and the Republic make the border currently as friction-free as it can be; but the Republic is a different country and has followed its own destiny for almost a century, so it's just sufficiently different to get that sense of otherness that comes with travel. Indeed, the area around the convention venue, Dublin's

Docklands, uses so much European street furniture and the buildings, so many European fittings and fittings, that getting off the tram by the back of the Conference Centre Dublin (CCD) almost felt like being in parts of Frankfurt or Munich.

(Having said that, and with the official line being that the Common Travel Area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland remains in force, I was a bit surprised to find that the Irish police were doing ID checks as you came off the ferry in Dublin. This wasn't a full-blown



Conference Centre, Dublin

immigration check — apparently, any photo ID would do — but if I hadn't been pre-warned by social media posts from early travellers to the convention, I might have been taken by surprise by this. Or perhaps not. These are strange times we live in.)

The other thing to note about Dublin is that it is a remarkably expensive city. My original plans for the convention — before a friend dropped out of the intended trip — involved a hotel bill that would be close to a four-figure sum. Travel was also potentially much more expensive than just buying a tank of petrol. (And we won't even mention an exchange rate so close to parity as not to make any difference.) But to cut a long story short, I eventually settled on travelling via train and ferry, and staying in university accommodation a couple of miles out of the city centre, commuting in by bus and tram each morning, and getting a taxi back at night. I reckoned that saving nearly £700 on the room entitled me to spend a bit more on personal transport.

I was staying on the Glasnevin campus of Dublin City University. Centred on the 1851 Albert College building, the bulk of the university dates from the 1970s and 1980s. DCU has a very diverse, international student body, and also runs a number of summer schools; so the campus was far from empty and some of the nightlife was quite vibrant. At the same time, some of those schools attracted older visitors and there were also a number of people staying on-campus as tourists like me (though as far as I could see, no other Worldcon attendees). My room was fairly spartan, though little worse than an Ibis hotel. (The bed was a little Klingon in terms of firmness, though.)

My morning commute became part of the fun. One thing I always enjoy doing in any new city I visit is being what the French call a *flâneur* — a gentleman stroller of the city streets, who observes the foibles of urban life with a certain cool detachment. I may have been indulging my *flâneurery* from atop a bus, but the ability to see a slice of the life of ordinary Dubliners became a pleasure to start my day. I would drop off the bus on O'Connell Street, Dublin's central thoroughfare, and then walk the length of it to where the LUAS tram ran from Abbey Street along to a stop at the back of CCD, and then on to the convention's second venue, The Point, a new (and unfinished) leisure development where the Art Show was



CCD foyer.

located together with a number of other program items.

It quickly became clear that the LUAS was becoming an informal convention venue itself. I bumped into friends old and new on the tram. We didn't quite get to the extent of holding tram parties, but in all other extents it was part of the convention. The Conference Centre Dublin itself was a modernist pile on the banks of the Liffey, notable for a series of escalators passing up through a glazed atrium that gave a number of attendees vertigo attacks. It also rapidly became clear that trying to squeeze more than 5000 warm bodies into one building was going to need some heavy-duty organisation; queue management became a rapidly evolving management art. The clever convention-goer began queueing for program items they wanted to see up to an hour beforehand. One American was unimpressed — 'It's like a totalitarian regime, being told where to stand!' he grumbled — though the absence of convention staff beating fans with rubber truncheons for not queueing properly rather defused that argument. The rest of us just used it as an opportunity to chat to people, as you do.

When not queueing, perhaps the main focus of the convention was Martin's, the bar area. Martin's was named for UK fan Martin Hoare, who had organised the bar at most British Eastercons and many other conventions across Europe for many years, as well as organising firework displays, but who unexpectedly died a couple of weeks before the Worldcon. His job on the Worldcon Committee was Bar Manager, and so the naming of the bar after him was a foregone conclusion and most likely



The entrance to Martin's bar, named after Martin Hoare, who died shortly before the convention.



Newcon Press launch party.

an instant tradition. Martin deserves nothing less.

The rest of the convention committee were kept very busy, though the CCD staff joined in and especially made queue management a definite joint effort. Certainly, none of the committee stood still long enough to talk to much until the Sunday afternoon when I bumped into committee member Dave Lally at the Newcon Press launch party, held in a particularly unfinished part of The Point. Even then, Dave was still fizzing with his accustomed energy, such that in my photograph with him see that his extremities are mere blurs even when he



Dave Lally, convention committee member.

himself was standing still.

It wasn't just the committee and CCD staff who were busy. On my first day, I went into the Dealers' Room and within minutes heard some publisher telling another, in incredulous terms, that 'John Jarrold has 35 meetings planned this weekend!' John, long-time fan, once a major publisher's science fiction editor and now a freelance agent, seemed quite relaxed about this when I saw him on Friday morning between meetings and was even unfocused enough to chat for a few minutes.

I went to a number of program items, of course. After all, the registration fee was so hefty I wasn't going to ignore the program altogether, even though I come from a generation of fans that considered going to program items as definitely Uncool. Most of the program items I went to centred on the *Apollo* program, seeing as the 50th anniversary of the first Moon landing had been



Panel: 'Alternative Apollo': l. to r.: Eric Choi, Gillian Clinton, Ian Sales (moderator), Geoffrey Landis.



Dr Jeanette Epps.

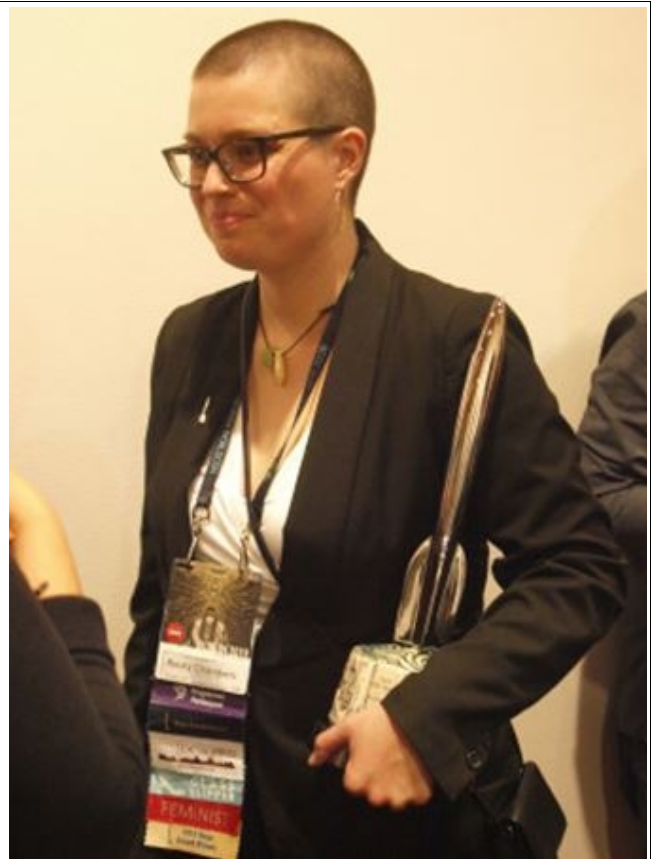


Mary Robinette Kowal, winner, Hugo Award, Best Novel: *The Calculating Stars*.

marked just a month or so before. *Apollo* retrospectives, 'Alternate Apollos' and future missions — especially NASA's ambitious plan to be back on the Moon by 2024 — all featured and featured heavily. This last strand really was 'Rocket Science', and we had the benefit of a number of rocket scientists on the panels, including Dr Jeanette Epps from the NASA astronaut corps.

One of the other panels I attended was a discussion between two astronomers. One was Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell, who was one of the convention's Guests of Honour. Born in Lurgan, Co. Antrim, she was the person who discovered the highly energetic astronomical objects called pulsars, for which her boss was awarded the Nobel Prize. (It should be noted that he never got invited to these sorts of gatherings for some reason.) She was in conversation with Brother Guy Consolmagno, SJ, whose Day Job is Director of the Vatican Observatory. They talked about science, their work, and the influence their individual faiths had on these things. Neither saw faith as any obstruction to their work. (Burnell was raised as a Quaker.)

My original plan for the weekend had included some sightseeing, perhaps a bookshop crawl around Dublin and possibly even an excursion out of town — after all, Irish Rail is as cheap as chips, and a day return to somewhere like Wexford would have cost me little more



Becky Chambers, winner, Hugo Award, Best Series: *Wayfarers*.

than my taxi back to DCU; but in the end, this was curtailed by the knowledge that I'd spent a lot on attending the convention and so really ought to get my money's worth. I'd reduced my plans to perhaps a trip out to Howth on the Sunday afternoon, only to find that the convention clashed with the All-Ireland Hurling Championships Final that day, meaning that the city centre was heaving with sports fans from early morning and most places would be deserted in the afternoon with those not actually at Croke Park glued to their televisions. My one excursion, then, was to take up an invitation to lunch from one of my online friends. Apart from my blogs and my Flickr account, my other major online activity is the book cataloguing website LibraryThing (www.LibraryThing.com), which also has quite active discussion groups about, oddly enough, science fiction. Library Thing (or 'LT' to its community) is pretty far-flung, but many of its users are based in North America and so don't get to meet up all that often. Peter (pgmcc) had organised a rolling program of meetups, recognising that many of us LTers at the convention would have fully packed programs. So at Friday lunchtime, I ventured out across the highly modernist Samuel Beckett Bridge to a pub called The Ferryman. Unlike a lot of the pubs in central Dublin, which had excessive amounts of Oirishness to appeal to tourists, this felt more like a proper city pub, frequented by office workers and ordinary Dubliners. Peter, who works in Dublin, was familiar with the place and had suggested the venue. It looked not unlike any one of the thousands of Irish theme pubs that sprang up all over the world in the 1990s, except that this one



Dublin was beginning to look a little out of true by now ...

really was Irish. Drink was taken, which may go some way towards explaining how heavily I was leaning on the bridge parapet on the way back to the convention.

The unprecedented numbers of attendees made a few changes to convention custom and practice necessary. For the first time — and perhaps as much to control the flows of people around the venue — access to some of the major events was managed by pre-booking wristbands. These wristbands were issued free of charge during the day for events such as the Friday evening orchestral concert or the awards ceremony on the Sunday night. The concert I went to, and enjoyed. Vincent Docherty had first organised this for Loncon in 2014, so when he found himself with his own Worldcon to arrange, he lost no time in scheduling another concert. I enjoyed both concerts, though in this one I felt there was an over-emphasis on music from film and TV (the inevitable *Game of Thrones* theme being the least worst instance of this) and a little more inventiveness would not go astray. (Where, for example, was a performance of Howard Hanson's Second Symphony, as heavily used in *Alien*?) Still, live music is always worth supporting.

As for the Hugo awards ceremony: not being 100 per cent up to date with my reading I didn't have too much interest in the blow-by-blow details of who won what, and so was happy with the live stream being shown in one of the secondary event halls and in Martin's. This did mean that I missed Jeanette Ng's iconoclastic speech accepting the (then) John W. Campbell Award for best new writer, and doing such a hatchet job on Campbell that the award was promptly renamed. Eventually, I met up with some old-time fan friends, and we nattered and drank, and

then flâneured to the post-ceremony con bar. I didn't get to see George R. R. Martin's Hugo Losers' Party, which was, apparently, excessively curmudgeonly, even for George.

I nearly forgot the books. One of the reasons for my choosing not to fly was the understanding that I might well be acquiring a number of books. Having had a close encounter with excess baggage once on a trip to Vienna (by virtue of stuffing my coat pockets with some of the books I'd bought, I managed to get my hold baggage to within 250 grams of the overall allowance), I reckoned that the ferry would be my best solution, and so it proved. (My luggage for this trip consisted of my camera bag and a gigantic wheeled holdall that is of such a size that you could easily conceal a dismembered torso in it.) There actually wasn't much that I acquired that (in theory) I couldn't find at home in the UK, though as I hardly ever go into a city centre these days and visit a proper bookshop, any opportunity to buy science fiction is to be welcomed. I was able to find a couple of Peter Watts titles, and the new Ted Chiang collection *Exhalation*. I was pleased to be able to pick up a reprint of Michael G. Coney's *Hello Summer, Goodbye* in a new edition by PS Publishing; and I took special pleasure in finding a monograph on the classic British horror film *Theatre of Blood* (wherein Vincent Price plays a rather over-the-top Shakespearean thespian who returns from his apparent death to kill off his many critics in various gruesome Shakespearean ways). There was little that was obviously Irish about my purchases, save for Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (Irish surrealism) and something fairly

unique to fandom: *Warhoon* 28, Walt Willis's legendary fanzine detailing the history of Irish fandom in the 1950s and 1960s, a sort of fannish equivalent to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, so special that it ended up existing only in a hardback edition (!) and copies of which change hands online for exorbitant prices (£60 and more! For a fanzine!). The convention had unearthed the last stocks of this fannish icon and were offering them for 20 Euro, which was a bargain. At least, I thought so until I saw them offering copies on the last day for 10 Euro. So it goes.

I managed one little side trip, just so that I got some railway interest into the trip; on my way back to DCU on the last day, I stopped off and spent half an hour looking at one of Dublin's two major railway stations, Connolly. I had seen the Dublin commuter trains, the DART service (Dublin Area Rapid Transit), passing over various bridges in the city; DART had purchased Japanese units for these services, and it was very odd seeing trains which I instinctively identified as Japanese running around Dublin.

For a lot of Irish fans, this was not only their first Worldcon but their first convention of any sort. Many seemed highly delighted to have the convention in Dublin, and their enthusiasm was extremely infectious;

certainly, I enjoyed this convention more than I've enjoyed any Worldcon since my first (Seacon '79 in Brighton; but in those days I was pretty new to fandom as a whole and so a Worldcon had novelty value for me). Sadly, funds wouldn't stretch to my staying on and then travelling to the European Convention the following weekend in Belfast, but I enjoyed myself so much that a return visit must be inevitable. I may look at attending an Octocon, the Irish national convention (in October, strangely enough), or find some other excuse based around my other interests to make a return visit. As for Worldcons, next year is Wellington, New Zealand; 2021 is Washington DC; neither of which I am likely to attend. After 2021, the site has not yet been decided, but there are bids for Chicago in 2022, and for Memphis (USA), Nice (France) or Chengdu (China) in 2023. Whilst Nice is possible, the most likely Worldcon I'd be going to in future, assuming they win the bid, would be Glasgow in 2024.

But I enjoyed Dublin and want to see more, both of the city and the country. I was last in Ireland in 2010, and that was a flying visit helping drive a team of hill walkers around the highest mountains in these islands of ours; another trip ought not to wait so long.

— Robert Day, September 2019

CoNZealand 2020: a virtual worldcon

Edwina Harvey: Chalk and cheese: The first virtual Worldcon

I'd planned to attend two Worldcons in two years: Dublin in 2019, then CoNZealand in Wellington in 2020. Well, I got to both, after a fashion.

Last year at Dublincon I noticed people occupying public seating and floor space in the Dublin Convention Centre, staring at their screens: phones or tablets. Eventually I joined them, sending messages and checking Facebook when I couldn't get into live events. I wondered if this would be the way of it; we'd all be 'attending' virtual Worldcons via our devices instead of 'in real life'. I just didn't expect to be at the first virtual Worldcon within 12 months!

In case you're reading this in the farflung future, the Covid-19 global pandemic changed much of what we'd taken for granted — such as easy affordable international air travel. New Zealand was one of the first countries to go into lockdown and close its borders. (As a result the country has had an enviably low rate of Covid-19 infections.) Overseas travel to holiday destinations came to an abrupt halt, taking the dreams and funds of those planning on travelling to NZ for CoNZealand, the 2020 World SF Convention, and some sightseeing with

them. New Zealanders aren't restricted from travelling within NZ, and it's important to remember that they could still attend the non-virtual CoNZealand in Wellington while the rest of us went to our first 'virtual' Worldcon via our screens.

Considering how rapidly global events have been unfolding this year, we should all be bloody grateful that there was a Worldcon in any form. CoNZealand seemed to languish for a while, then the committee announced it would go ahead as a virtual event. They had approximately four months from announcement to start date, but to their credit, and against incredible odds, they did it! Congratulations to all of those volunteers who worked on the con and made it happen.

I was curious to find out how it would work, and assumed — as I consider myself a computer/technology luddite — I'd lack the resources and ability to join in (though I'd also felt overwhelmed by aspects of Dublincon the previous year for other reasons). Lawrie Brown, who helped me get my physical bearings in Dublin last year, decided he'd be my technology 'guide dog' for CoNZealand. We had a Zoom session (my first) in the

week before the con. He encouraged me to have a play-around on the mock-up con site (a very good idea of the con organisers IMHO), but the next day I was invited to be the ‘crash test dummy’ for the dealers’ room platform. I figured if they could teach me, they could teach *anybody*! The way I imagined it might work wasn’t the way the Dealers Team had decided it was going to work. I’ve had 40 years experience selling at SF cons, markets, book fairs, and pop expos as well as on platforms such as eBay and Etsy, so I felt I could comment on ways the set-up could have been improved (i.e. direct sales via a shopping cart and checkout set up, as used by many sites.) But with less than a week before CoNZealand started, it was pretty obvious it was too late to change things.

Time I thought I had to play in the mock-up con site got diverted to uploading images of items I hoped to sell: my hand-painted silk scarves, jewellery, and titles for Peggy Bright Books (Australia) and Dragonwell Publishing (US), so I was expecting to be confounded and lost when I tried to enter the ‘proper’ CoNZealand site. Nope! No problem getting in at all. (Lawrie had walked me through registering with Discord and Grenadine, sorting my ‘name badge’ etc. a couple of days before, which certainly helped.)

One high point of a virtual convention is *finally* we’ve perfected a way to be in three places at once. I could be at my virtual dealers table, see/participate in panels at the same time and still be sitting in my living room. Unlike Dublincon the year before, no standing in queues in the hope of getting into a panel. I had access to all the panels I wanted to see at CoNZealand. The problem I thought I detected at Dublincon — the audience often couldn’t participate as much as they wanted to because of time restraints — seemed to be obliterated by Zoom’s Q&A and chat options, shared by the panelists and audience. Panelists would often shift the direction of their presentations in response to audience comments, and channels were made available so discussions could continue after a panel (the virtual equivalent to chatting in a foyer or at the bar after a panel finishes).

Other advantages of going virtual are that everyone gets a front row seat at the big events, handy if you’re visually impaired; and some panels provided captions — a help to those with restricted hearing.

Despite allowing you to be in different places at the same time, even virtual Worldcons manage to program multiple panels you’d really like to go to all at the same time. Some things never change.

Maybe it was a Pavlovian dog response, but despite all the trials and tribulations in the world, and despite being in my living room instead of in Wellington, I had a frisson of excitement as the **CoNZealand Opening Ceremony** started. It embraced friendliness, humour, and a warm welcome from the NZ Prime Minister.

Panels I attended on the first day of the con, Wednesday 29/7/2020, included **‘Who, What, When and/or Where Inspired You?’** I wonder if Australian horror writer Kaaron Warren has ever run a talk on the strange things she’s come across while sorting through deceased estates donated to charities she works at? I’d love to hear more about some of her discoveries. I pitied one of the other panelists, Snezana Kanacki, speaking at her first

Worldcon panel at 3 a.m. (her local time). Ouch!

I also attended **‘Epidemics and Plagues in the Real World and in Fiction’**. Yes, I know, as if ‘real life’ wasn’t enough. But it was an interesting panel, and the first time I’d heard of dogs being trained to detect Covid-19 in people. I’d rather be sniffed by a dog than get a nasal swab!

‘Can Living in a Small Space on Earth Prepare You for Living in Space?’ was another interesting panel. You can’t get out of a spaceship half-way through the flight if you’re feeling claustrophobic or you’ve had a row with another member of the mission the way you can exit from a simulation on Earth if things all get too much.

‘Traditional Publishing: Working with Publishers’ saw US editors interviewing Ion Newcombe about *Antipodean SF*. After this panel, I went to **‘How Podcasts Are Transforming the Speculative Fiction Landscape’** featuring the same speakers as well as some others.

I also saw **‘The Art of Kathleen Jennings’**. It was fascinating to see how Kathleen creates her intricate silhouette-style paper cuttings, turning them into enchanting works of art.

‘The Real Dirt on Exoplanets’ was an interesting scientific panel on — you guessed it — exoplanets. While we continue to detect them, we’re also now able to identify chemical elements in their atmospheres.

I found I could listen to some panels while doing other things or I could get up and walk around. Viewing the panel full-screen again was just a click away. However, ‘escaping’ from the con to walk my dog provided a much needed break later in the day.

Like a non-virtual Worldcon, I got a bit lost and muddled about getting back into the con the next day as sleep deprivation and time lag took their toll.

On Thursday, 30 July, I attended the book launch for Cindy Lynn Speer’s new fantasy novel, *The Key to All Things*. I’d read an early draft of this work and also edited Cindy’s book *The Chocolatier’s Ghost*, but this was the first time I’d ‘met’ Cindy, who hadn’t planned to attend CoNZealand until it evolved into a virtual con. Perhaps virtual conventions make themselves more accessible to more participants?

I also hung out at Alan Stewart’s Kaffeeklatsch. While these events usually have restricted numbers and fill up quickly at ‘live’ conventions, a virtual con seems to make them accessible to more people. On the down side, I lacked good coffee and the choice of cakes that I might have had at a ‘live’ event. (Though I think Alan’s was more a ‘catch up at the bar’ arrangement.)

While I missed dining and socialising with friends like Graeme and Susan Batho, or Ion Newcombe, overall, I felt I had a lot more opportunities to have conversations with other attendees at CoNZealand than I had at Dublincon, though I felt very disconnected from everyone when I was concentrating solely on my virtual dealers’ table. I missed watching the passing parade or getting into random chats with other dealers or people who dropped by. The Dealers Team sought to correct this by giving the dealers a Discord channel open to the public, but it was all new to many of us and the attendees, and like any other big event, there was an awful lot to take in.

Friday 31 July, I attended an interesting panel on **'Getting Your Book Edited and Ready for Self Publishing'** with panelists Jane Routley, William C. Tracy, and Yen Ooi.

I only caught the last part of the Masquerade, but particularly liked the skit involving pirates and a variety of (stuffed toy) New Zealand birds.

Having missed a (very, for me) early morning dealers' coffee and donut session on the first day of the con, I made sure I was at the **Dealers Hall Mid-Con Reception**. It was sort of a 'show and tell' — a chance for each dealer or independent author to briefly explain what they were selling and wave a sample in front of their computer camera. It was also a chance for us to see the other people we shared the space with in the virtual dealers' hall.

Later I caught the **'How to Work with Editors'** panel with Aidan Doyle, and Katrina Archer.

Changing tack, I went to the **'Access to Space'** panel featuring Stephen Dedman (heard but not seen).

Interestingly, I was averaging the same number of panels daily as I had at Dublincon while also minding a dealers table.

Saturday, I saw the **'Hugo Awards'**, which had a few technical problems. I thought I was listening to a pre-award creative performance with lots of audio looping before realising that wasn't incidental entertainment. I pinged Lawrie, who sent me an alternate link that worked better. In a reflection of our times, a lot of the award recipients used the platform to speak out about world issues such as racism, sexism, bullying and social injustice, with varying degrees of success.

A **Brisbane in 2025 Worldcon bid** was announced. From the little I can find, the organisers are resourceful, talented individuals who will bring a lot of energy to the bid. I wish them the best of luck!

Later I saw/participated in the panel **'Birds of a Feather: Librarians'**. In my case you can take the fan out of the library, but you can't take the library out of the fan! I'm drawn to panels about libraries at SF cons. Maree Pavletitch was the coordinator, and anyone could add to the discussion (as during many panels of old). I very much enjoyed participating with other attendees in this one.

Sunday 2 August, 2020: The **Closing Ceremony** at 9 a.m. (Sydney time) felt a bit weird. But there was that same post-con wind-down. I attended a few more panels, Robin Johnson was at one of them (yes, 'brain fog' works at virtual cons too!). I held out for the **Catatonic Cat Party** (a different take on the Dead Dog party). It offered four options. I found myself in conversation with two of the room coordinators asking me which stream I'd like to go to. I asked if I needed a password, then said they were probably too young to know about the Marx Bros.



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A third room host quickly 'materialised' on my screen, saying 'Swordfish!' If you're not a Marx Brothers fan this will make no sense at all. But as a Marx Brothers fan it gave me great comfort to know their humour has been passed on to the next generation. The future is in safe hands!

I opted to join the filking party, as you don't see a lot of them at Australian cons. The attendees seemed to be evenly mixed between singers and listeners. I didn't stay to the last — even virtual Worldcons make you tired. But I hear parties were still going on well after midnight NZ time.

On the last day of the con, I got chatting to Liz from Unusual Frequency. (She creates beautiful machine embroidery items.) Virtual cons have become the new normal in the US. With no end in sight to the Covid-19 pandemic, I wonder if I'm one of a few who've attended the last non-virtual Worldcon *and the first virtual Worldcon?*

— **Edwina Harvey**, 10 August 2020

Incidents and accidents: Life stories

William Breiding

The skeletons of winter

The past is not dead. It's not even past.

— William Faulkner

Conway remarked with a smile: 'I suppose you're certain, then, that no human affection can outlive a five-year absence?'

'It can, undoubtedly,' replied the Chinese, 'but only as a fragrance whose melancholy we may enjoy.'

— James Hilton

Late October 1992:

Months before I left for this road trip, I had convinced myself that one of the two people I'd invited to come would scrape the money together, get time off work, and venture forth with me onto the high plains of south-eastern Oregon.

Something that amused, yet also disturbed me: I couldn't think of one man that I wanted to consider the invitation. Perhaps as recently as two years ago I would have immediately chosen one out of several men to ask. I thought about what Bill Bowers had said in an *Outworlds*: that his really deep friendships were with women ... through no fault of any of the men he knew (though, I'd perhaps begun to differ with him on that...!), it's just the way it was. This was not something that I agonised over; it was noted in passing, a thought for curious moments.

By the first of October it became apparent I would be heading out alone. People began asking, aren't you excited about taking this trip? My hesitancy gathered frowns, as I hemmed and then hawed, saying: yeah, I guess so, I mean, it should be ... interesting.

The truth of the matter was that I had no desire to make this trip by myself, and that I was frightened. I wasn't frightened by anything but me. Although I had been making some real progress in my interior over the last few years, I was still a major malcontent romantic, and a cynical bastard, to boot, with a broken heart. There were some knives from the past that were still stuck in me and being twisted. Ones that I liked to handle and give a few twists myself, every now and then. Beyond that, taking a solitary road trip reflected back to me broad implications that I did not like the person that I was seeing inside myself. Without a partner to share with, be distracted by and have fun with, I was left to myself and what it meant being me.

This is all hopelessly cliché, the Zen and art of etcetera, etcetera, I know. But real life is often nothing but a series of hapless incidents that can be reduced down to a few movie-like clichés.

I wrote two journal entries while I was gone. The first follows:

18 October 1992:

Lava Beds National Monument

... late morning

Yesterday was no better than the day before. On the road by 6.30 a.m. and still had no idea where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do. I drifted all the way to Quincy, CA in an irritable, lost, anxious mood. I was within spitting distance of Cromberg, CA, home of Apa-50 member Bob Marshall, but turned about, instead, heading north. I could have gone south — through Cromberg — into Reno then up to Pyramid Lake, but somehow I had been able to make a decision to head



towards Tule Lake. I figured I needed to test this jazzy little rental, a red Geo Storm, for a day, and see where its limits lay. I found them this morning.

A plan of action had formulated. I would camp on the south side of Lava Beds National Monument — if the site really existed. Turning around in Quincy, heading north towards Susanville, I had an impulse to take a small county road northeast, cutting the distance by half over to Highway 395. It was a wonderful road, beautifully maintained until it hit Plumas National Forest when it took on a decidedly cute, homemade feel. Highway 395 up to Alturas, CA was a long slog, with lots of memories of Danielle, particularly in Likely, CA, where we once had stopped for gas.

Two cowboys had hitched their horses to the high porch railing, there, in picturesque Likely. They were pitched back in some old wooden chairs, feet to the railing, dressed in boots, chaps, and cowboy hats, drinking bottled Coke, seriously checking out Danielle.

I was going out along state route 299 to 139, when an unexpected entrance to the National Monument appeared. I turned at the junction, following my instincts, heading towards Medicine Lake. I had no idea what I was doing. Neither road nor lake were on the map. I drove by several roads that led to Glass Mountain, described on the map as 'a mass of jet black obsidian glass'. I wanted to go see it, but it was late, and I had to see if this campsite really existed before it got dark. Although not on the map, Medicine Lake is a good-sized, several-miles-long lake, now half dried up because of the drought. It is a major campground. There were probably 20 other people there spread out in three large camping areas.

I spent a deliciously frightful, uncomfortably cold and windy night under the stars. Somewhere after the half-moon rose (late) a wind started, and blew the rest of the night, piercing through my down bag. It had been sunny and hot all the way from San Francisco to Medicine Lake. When I rose before sunup the wind was still carrying on a racket, and had blown a cloud cover over the landscape for hundreds of miles.

I was in a ridiculously good mood when I finally dragged myself out of the sleeping bag to make coffee. It was absurdly windy and cold. It was crazy-funny to me. I was laughing all over, going bonzo. If Theresa had been there I would have had her in stitches, all while the coffee water was desperately trying to come to a boil in the high winds. Alas. I was alone.

I decided my mode for the day would be 'take it easy, what's your hurry?' After coffee I took a hike to Little Medicine Lake. It was gorgeous, and everything that the big Medicine Lake and its 'recreational' uses was not.

I decided to drive back to Glass Mountain. I came to a sign at a dirt road that indicated it was five miles out. Three miles along I came to a T-intersection, with signs pointing in all directions but no mention of Glass Mountain. I chose the rougher road to the left, driving for several miles across a land sink. The road got to a point where I felt the Geo Storm would bottom out if I went any further. There was no 'mass of jet black obsidian glass' in sight. Perhaps on another trip, with a better car.

I whizzed back past Medicine Lake and on towards the Lava Beds. The paved road ended again and I bumped on to gravel. Just as this happened a light came on that said 'check engine'. I stopped and opened the hood, staring blankly at the tiny hi-tech engine. My



theory was that the little red Storm just didn't like dust, being a city car, and sure enough, at my first stop inside the Lava Beds, at Monument Crater, I turned off the engine. When I returned, about an hour later, the 'check engine' light didn't come back on. (I was used to 'vintage' cars without such notifications as 'check engine' lights. Decades later I have learned these sensors are frequently faulty, lighting up the dash for no good reason.)

Here I am now — with no idea of destination — at the Monument Crater campgrounds, with a 160-mile view to a set of mountains to the northeast (Oregon?). I will go to Tule Lake, my original destination, but from there I haven't the foggiest . . . (*end journal entry*)

Travelling is used for many reasons. Some run from their problems. They fail to understand that wherever they go, they follow themselves. Others use it as a sort of Zen way of moving into their interior. The further you go, the deeper you get. Some like to look at things, do things. Others thrill at the experience of moving white lines. Some travellers are genuine explorers, regardless of whether others have been there before them. Then there are those who are looking for something. They don't know what it is. They move around, looking for it. This small town. That big city. Burrowed in a hillside among quivering aspens in early autumn. Chasing armadillos through a spring rain in Georgia while looking for alligators. Kissing her, hugging him. Leaving. Arriving. Movement. The sense of being alive, aware, in love.

In ideal moments, I would say that I have been all of these people. But, as usual, it would be a lie. I'm not a habitual liar. I'm a romantic. It would have been easier just to write: I have been all of these people, and it would have saved me from writing a bunch more words. But it wouldn't be the complicated truth.

When I was 13 I started travelling. Extensively in the southwest, northwest, and many of the small by-ways of California. When I was 14 I read Hermann Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund* while my family drove a modern-

day covered wagon (an International Harvester three-quarter-ton pickup truck with a canvas top, stretched over a wooden frame) from San Francisco, across what used to be old Route 66, to West Virginia. Tell me that my fate wasn't sealed by this very deliberate act.

I spent my teens and early twenties hitchhiking extensively, crossing and re-crossing the country. In 1977, when I was 20, I hitchhiked 10,000 miles, on a suicidal binge (i.e. I was contemplating suicide all that summer). At the end of this trip, which set me down in Detroit, I met Patty Peters, fell in love,

turned 21, took a train trip from West Virginia to San Francisco with her, and set up housekeeping. (Movement equals change.)

Travelling is a spirited business. It takes moxie and a smile. You have to lean forward without hesitation and ask, what's next? You have to have the courage to be stuck wherever you are, with whoever you are, with palms up, and receive good naturedly all the kicks in the butt that fate has to dole out. Because tomorrow you'll drive through Leadville, Colorado and stand in the tallest town in the contiguous United States of America, and there the wind will blow cold in August, and a Coke will warm your gizzard.

The dread I felt while pondering Oregon's outback was caused by a broken spirit. Through those years since 1977, I had been punched, pulled, split apart, and never put back together properly. I felt like the China Doll joker in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, who was laced with seams and cracks. Inevitably, he was dropped and shattered. Glued back together, he would have those fissures forever.

Through the years I'd become cynical and numb. It was impossible to be otherwise, through my failed romances and shattered friendships, and through the useless jobs I do to survive. I became dead lost with no sense of the future, my past, or even the very moment I was living. My life was not even a beautiful skeleton; it was rotting meat, it was the stench of piled corpses; I was shot and never buried. This was the killing fields of the heart. My dreams were dreary things that pointed nowhere. My soul was in a long, riveted darkness. I was embraced by pale forms, and I clutched back, helplessly looking to fade into these rare and golden moments.

There was the slow process of remembrance. A painful and humiliating experience. But with the act of remembering came a sense of self. The pain was no less, and perhaps far greater, because in remembering and becoming myself, I became functional, rational, and able. Being automatically functional while feeling useless is an unconquerable road; hating yourself while doing

your job is the dead-end alley in the City of Misery. The traps were everywhere. By circuitous routes, unnamable, unmentionable, unknown, and unforeseen, I began to rise. The zombie of love was out, walking in the autumnal day's end.

There is never any way, like in books and movies, where you can look back on your life and say, if I had just done this, everything would be okay now. It's never that easy, though over and over again I have bullied and bruised myself with that very idea. Had I only turned around and said this. Well, I didn't. I did something else. And my spirit was broken. I was functioning, alive, making it through the day, a coyote in the sights of a cattleman's rifle.

And now I was out again, experimenting and experiencing, resolute in my decision to make new memories.

I found myself outside of Lakeview, Oregon in the moments before dawn, looking at the biggest unknown in my heart: a simple dirt road. The challenge of freedom, the symbol of my youth, and everything I had believed in.

Fifteen miles out of Lakeview I was on a small county road that led to Plush, Oregon. At Plush the pavement stopped. That's what the map said. Nothing but dirt roads for almost 100 miles. My game plan was such: I would stop in Plush and ask about the roads over to French Glen, the projected area for a camp site in the Steens Mountains. All up the county road to Plush I practised what I would say, what questions I would ask.

The curious thing about the travelling I've done is that it's been solitary. I don't meet people. It comes from being shy and constantly feeling out of place, no matter what environment I find myself in, and self-conscious. I practised over and over again the questions I would pose. If I was given a negative I would turn around and go back. I was looking for someone to tell me what to do.

I drifted into Plush. A small cluster of buildings; a general store with a gas pump. I coasted on by. I drove some more. You coward, I thought. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I thought back, fuck you too.

A sign; a brown sign with white lettering: HART MOUNTAIN REFUGE, 34; FRENCH GLEN, 73.

The road to Hart Mountain turns out into a wide, open valley. The tarmac continues. The land is incredible, flowing north and south in endless ripples of autumn-browned prairie grass. The road heads straight east into the mountain, which looms huge, at least 4000 feet high, sharply silhouetted by the rising sun, so dark on the western side it looks like it's made of coal. Hart Mountain is not a regular mountain. When you think of mountain ranges you think of these big round things protruding up out of the ground, shaped like teepees, and snowcapped. This mountain is a vertical wall, a structure of jagged rocks jutting up from the flat plain. A sheer cliff face, forming a blockade into the sky.

Half way through the valley the tarmac ends. Okay, this is where everything starts. Let's do it.

The road was good and I maintained a fair clip. At the foot of the mountain it veered north and ran along the bottom of the cliff for about five miles. A woman was filling her pickup with gas from a 200-gallon tank, propped on stilts, in the middle of the field. She was off

a ways but she looked up. We both smiled and waved. There were five cowboys in the distance, sitting on their horses talking and smoking, while casually corralling a small group of heifers. About a half mile later a larger herd of cattle is moving swiftly along the fence line; a small stampede.

The road enters the boundaries of the Hart Mountain Refuge. A refuge for mountain goats. All of the native mountain goats are extinct; these were brought down from British Columbia in a herd of about 20. They bred, did well, and now have rights.

At a cattle guard there is another small brown and white sign, the first of its type that I'd seen anywhere. It sketched a dwindling road disappearing into the sunset, proclaiming America's Back Roads.

Without further ado the road climbs the vertical mountain face. The road is rough, rocky, steep, a series of switchbacks full of potholes. I climbed thousands of feet within a half mile. Tough going for the little red Geo Storm.

At the tip of the rim, there is no descent. High plains run for 50 miles, smack into the Steens Mountains, which rise from the chaparral. It's as if the ridge I'm on has captured the plains. Gone, I could visualise a massive slippage of earth rearranging itself, filling the lower plains.

While I am driving on this perfectly good dirt road there is an interior dialogue going on. It ranges far afield, from an imaginary conversation with my Dad, who is a naturalist/conservationist/ornithologist, and has spent a good deal of his life in the outback, and him saying: Well, Bill, if the road is rough, you just take it easy, you just take it easy, while another part of me is remembering a time when I would have revelled in this isolation, in being in the middle of nowhere with the whole world waiting to be explored. If the car breaks down, you take a jug of water and start walking. What's your fear?

Facts of the matter: it's a beautifully maintained dirt road. I made it to the Hart Mountain Refuge headquarters in an easy 45 minutes.

At the headquarters I parked and walked into the visitor's centre (a sign on the door read: *Always Open.*) As I did so a large man in a hunting cap skittered from behind a building and crossed to another. He peered at me impassively. Inside the visitor's centre, from behind a closed door, I heard a man carrying on a conversation with a woman over a ham radio. There was a topographical map of the area on one wall. As I was studying this, a John Goodman lookalike walked through another closed door at the opposite end of the room. He nodded and started going for the door I'd just come through, without a word.

As he's passing, I say, 'Hey, got a question.'

He stops and looks at me, saying nothing. His demeanour is open, just not forthcoming. I point at the map.

'I'm heading over towards French Glen and then down into Denio, Nevada.' I pronounce 'Denio' like Denny-o.

He stuffs his hands into his pockets and takes a few steps towards me and peers at the map.

'Well. Let's see. The roads down to Dee-NIGH-o are all pretty good,' he says, correcting my pronunciation.

'Dee-NIGH-o,' I repeat, looking into his eyes. 'I have that little red car out there' — I point out the window — 'I was wondering if you thought it would make it. Looks like it's nothing but dirt all the way into Nevada.'

He takes a hand out of a pocket, and pushes his red and black plaid hunting cap back to the crown of his head. A lock of thick strawberry hair falls over his forehead. He traces a forefinger along the road to French Glen and then down to Denio.

'The only rough road we got is right here, outside the station. Everything else is real good on over to French Glen. Hell. We have people coming through here in Caddies, if you can believe that.'

'Caddies!' I murmur.

He nods and smiles slightly, raising his eyebrows.

'What about down through here and into Denio — I'm thinking of going to Pyramid Lake.' I trace a finger south to the Nevada border.

He squints at the map, tracing a finger down Route 205, from Burns to Denio. The map indicates that it's unpaved after Roaring Springs Ranch.

'You know, I believe this is paved all the way down now.'

I frown and we exchange glances. He looks at the map more closely.

'Well, that's not what the map says, is it?' He looks at me, pauses. 'Hell, it's been so long since I've been down in that country I can't really remember any more. But the roads are good. Like I said, the only rough road is right outside the station over there.' He points east.

There is a note of dismissal in his tone. He takes a step back. We look at one another again.

'Thanks,' I say.

'Sure thing,' he replies.

He walks through the front door, and it's as if he'd never been there, nothing but a ghost, and I begin to wonder if he really had been. John Goodman has been known to pop up in stranger places.

I spent a few moments looking around the visitors' centre. The man behind the closed door was silent, had been all the while John Goodman and I had been chatting. I wondered what it was that he was thinking right then. Was he drinking a cup of coffee? Was he married? Did he give a shit who I was?

Some things you decide to do later. The Hart Mountain hot springs was one of them. I had seen it on the map, and noted it as a possible stopping point. But the day was young, hardly a couple hours since sun up. And the Steens Mountains and the Donner und Blitzen River called to me.

What John Goodman referred to as 'rough' was a deeply corrugated area that ran for about a mile. I may have jarred a few fillings from my teeth, but after that it was smooth sailing.

I finally got to see a jackalope on the road to French Glen. A jackalope is a rare hybrid of jack rabbit and antelope, oft seen on postcards, never in actuality. I was tooling through this vast expanse of plains at 50 miles an hour, doing the corrugated road foxtrot, drinking water and wondering about my complex life situation, when wham! Twenty yards ahead a weird critter darted across the road. I slowed considerably, the car shuttering and lurching, rubbernecking the chaparral, hoping for

another peek at this shy creature.

'A god damned jackalope!' I said aloud to the throbbing sun. About 20 minutes later another jack loped across the open road right in front of me.

'Fuck!' I ejaculated in wonder. 'There's jackalopes in them thar hills!'

Unlike those featured on the postcards, the real jackalope is not merely a rabbit with a set of antlers. The two I saw were about an eighth the size of an antelope. They were long and sleek, their upper chest, head, and snout the countenance of the antelope, with huge rabbit ears, but no antlers. Their hind-end was that of a jack rabbit, with long, sinewy, attenuated legs that enabled the beast to run rather than hop.

I laughed, thinking of all the desert rats living up here. It was easy to imagine how these things got started. I envisioned some grizzled old coot wandering in to some settlement or another, sitting down and saying, 'You know boys, I saw the damndest thing t'other day!' A bunch of whiskey and guffaws later a legend is born. Much like the fur-bearing trout of central Colorado.

French Glen, Oregon. If I were to ever move anywhere away from civilisation, I would move to French Glen. It has a Bed & Breakfast with a small, grassy wayside park just next to it. There is a Post Office/General Store with a gas pump, and maybe five houses. The village's actual population couldn't be more than 15. It is set back in the crook of a valley. The road comes straight down from the north at a steep incline, passes through town, then winds its way southwest up a mountain. The village faces east, the road lined with old trees.

As you leave town, heading south, a dirt road forks off in a westerly direction. This is the Steens Mountains Loop; it meanders over 50 miles into the sticks, finding its way back to the hardtop about 15 miles beyond French Glen. The loop has three camping spots, and one 'RV resort'.

Page Springs Campgrounds is situated up in a hollow surrounded by a small, sheer cliff of red rock. The campground is nestled between Page Springs and the Donner und Blitzen River.

It is extremely verdant because of all this water, while the landscape, in all directions, is brown, or various shades of yellow and burnt red. I stopped here, ate lunch, and wrote in my journal:

19 October 1992: Page Springs, Steens Mountains, Oregon

I have to force myself to slow down. Not an easy task. Yesterday was a particularly uneventful day. By noon I was dead from lack of sleep and too much driving. I left the Lava Beds and toolled around Tule Lake, not stopping to explore, something I told myself I would do on this trip. Instead I drove on to Klamath Falls, Oregon, a town I detest.

I was spaced out and needed food, even though I'd just eaten a few hours ago. Every place was crowded with bus tours. I waited a hopeless 15 minutes in a Denny's (at the counter) where another patron tired of waiting hailed the waitress ... 'When you have a moment...' and she retorted... 'When I have a moment I'm going home.'



We never were waited upon, so I left, got gas, went to Safeway for food and other supplies and moved towards Lakeview, Oregon, another two-hour drive.

When I got to Lakeview I was driving strictly out of reflex. Some young girls gawked at me and I smiled weakly as I drove by. I somehow managed to manoeuvre my way through a motel transaction (a very cool little motel, I might add). I took a shower, long and hot, and shaved. When I stepped back into the room I felt like an entirely new human being. Prompted by this, I set up the Coleman one-burner and cooked a meal in the motel room. And wrote Jeffrey a letter.

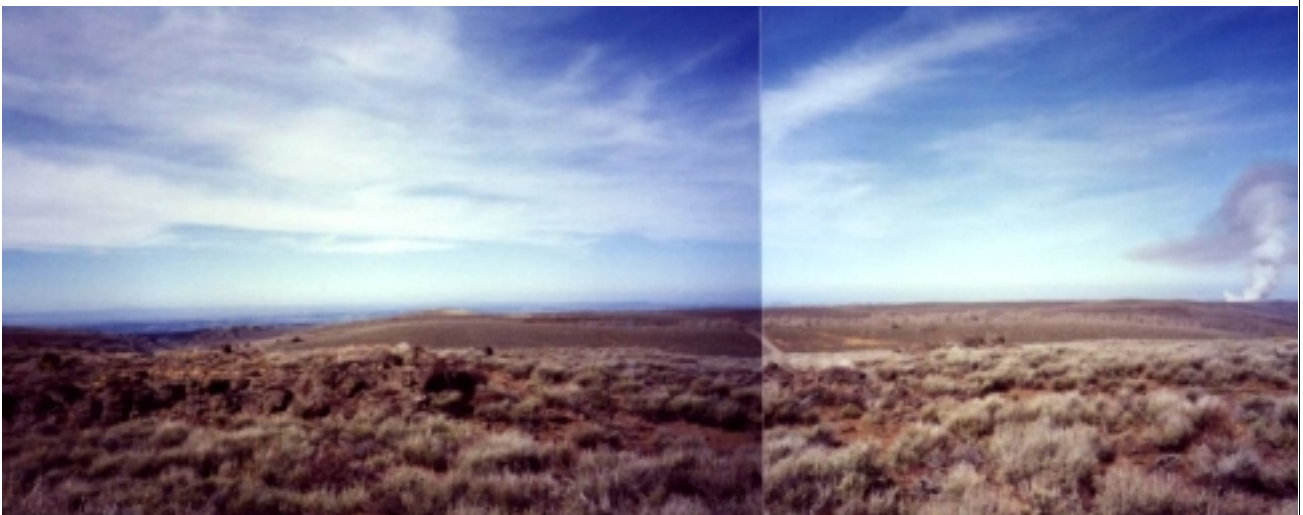
On Friday I had received a letter from Jeffrey saying 'fine that you go alone, the constant cravings for companionship may be one of the things that gets in your

way...'

I'm in a very cute, very civilised campground, right now. I had some difficulty taking it seriously because it was so hospitable, so friendly.

Then I sat cross-legged next to the meandering Page Springs with a cup of coffee and a sandwich and thought of my friend John Fugazzi. I knew he would like it here. It's so pretty and nice. I sat in the warm sun silently, as John might have done. Birds came flocking around me, and quail bobbed on the flaxen hillside. The coffee was strong, black, and hot. The mustard was tangy and whole on the salami sandwich. The sheer face of the vermillion rocks was drenched in sun. The clouds were high and thin, and beyond, the sky palest blue.

I looked at the springs and the plants surrounding it,



yellowed by the turn of season. A baby chestnut tree, with its leaves half dropped, shimmered in the breeze.

I thought about Jeffrey's letter. I travel badly by myself now. It's others that slow me down, that make me less worried, that keep my demons at bay. I'm kindest to myself then, open, able to love, myself, my surroundings, my eyes open as the heart surrenders to beauty.

Perhaps this is the bedrock of my self-hatred. Face to face with the utterly stony, ridged, deepest part of me that wants desperately to see, feel and hear nothing. It is through people that I transcend myself. (*end journal entry*)

The problem I've developed by not wanting to travel alone is a gruesome one; its root goes to my very depth. When you travel alone there is only you. Either you enjoy yourself or you don't. This shades how you react to everything else. In my teens I embraced the image of the solitary traveller and lived it, until it became part of the core of my personality.

Then from the early to late eighties I never travelled alone. I covered extensive territory all over California with Danielle. And this, too, became a part of my romantic core. Danielle had become integral to who I was and formed, informed, and reformed, a lot of who I was, and what I would become, first in a positive sense, and then in a negative one.

Facing the open road is facing my past, and the memory of a million things I've done anywhere I could point at a map of California. For the last five years I'd avoided travelling because no matter where I went, I could see nothing but pain. Even to get somewhere I'd never been before, I had to go through a memory-haunted landscape.

Through the course of time I'd come to loathe myself and what I had become. I was as far away from loving myself that a person could get without being entirely closed off. I often felt on the brink of a blank desolation. All because of a sustained immaturity, and a sense of living moment by moment.

I had made a huge mistake back in 1987. A compass error. I'd been in a five-year relationship with Danielle, the woman of my dreams. But because of who I am, I was restless, and took the relationship for granted.

That year I decided to go on a solo camping trip. I was gone for three months.

Early on, I was camped out in Arkansas, making supper. It was at that moment, while I was stirring the chili, that I came to the realisation she was the woman of my dreams, and that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I should have turned around right then and hightailed it back to San Francisco and asked Danielle to marry me.

Being the stubborn prick I am, I didn't. I didn't even tell her about my revelation. I just continued to take her, and the relationship, for granted.

When I returned, after three months of roughing it, Danielle was involved with another man. They eventually married and had a daughter.

I was utterly devastated, plunged into a dark well of hell and self-hatred. It took me five years, the entire length of the relationship, to even begin to surface from the filthy wallow into which I'd descended, the begin-

ning of which was this Oregon trip, when a faint lightening of the blackness finally commenced. It took me yet another five years to begin to live a life that wasn't always tinged with sheer regret, from moment to moment, day to day, year to year.

The repercussions of these kinds of grave mistakes never really go away. You must pay the penalty, and enact the penance they incur. Eventually you learn to live with it — in whatever way you can.

I was constantly at war with myself during the trip. I would catch myself off in the distance, out of touch with everything, my eyes seeing only the small stretch of road ahead. I was figuratively slapping myself silly throughout the days, saying: Wake up, look around, slow down, pull over, what are you feeling?

I knew this whole trip was about coming to terms with myself. About slowing down and really looking. About waking up the zombie I had become. About allowing myself to feel something again that wasn't filtered through the pain of what life and my missteps had led me to — the clichéd uncertainty of middle age and the devastation of the one that got away. I could no longer live with my unexpressed rage, the haunting feeling I was less advanced now than at fifteen.

After I ate lunch at Page Springs I packed up and promised myself to return if the other campsites were a bust. Even as I promised myself this, I was feeling some strange pressure to move on, to keep travelling, to exhaust myself and go empty and whimpering into the bad night.

There was a plume of white smoke eastward, probably the Sheep Mountains, the next range across the plains from the Steens. White smoke denotes a hot, raging, uncontrolled flame. The west had been littered with fires all summer and fall. I shook my head worriedly, wondering, and moved on.

I spent five hours rambling the Steens. Both of the other campsites were weird. One was on a half-dried lake, with two fisherman who glared at me.

The other campsite was even odder. It was entirely barren, a myriad variation on the colours brown and yellow. Everything that could lay or fall down had done so.

Of course I wandered down into it and parked. I spent a good hour here taking photos and wandering around. While there, two women, public land rangers of some sort, arrived. One got out of the pick up and went into the outhouse. The other drove off and stopped at the message board.

Neither would make eye contact, nor look in my direction. This seemed very strange. I thought about John Goodman at Hart Mountain, who would have done the same thing, had I not stopped him. Are these people merely being polite, or do they themselves wish no contact with others? It's my tendency to believe that they were up here in the middle of nowhere for a good reason. They wanted to be left alone. That led to the thought: I wonder if I could get a job here, taking care of public lands?

After the two women left I wandered over to the board and saw the announcement they'd hung. 'Because the water has been turned off for the season, there will be

no charge for camping at this site.' A fine and private place, indeed.

There was another 25 miles of the loop to go. Because the two women had come from that direction I knew there were probably other undesignated camping areas further along. But psychologically, I knew continuing the loop would put me back in the frame of mind of moving on, especially if I were to end up back at the blacktop. Fighting that urge, I turned around and took a slow ride back to Page Springs.

The fire over in the Sheep Mountains was starting to send up billows of sooty black smoke mixed in with the white. I knew smokejumpers had reached the flame and were trying to control it.

My late afternoon, evening, and night at Page Springs was the best of the trip. I did entirely William things. I followed deer trails down by the spring. I threw rocks into a pool and watched the trout scatter. I followed the Donner und Blitzen River. I took photographs of it all. I wrote postcards and reread Theresa's letter and wrote her a response. I cooked and had a glass of wine and built a roaring fire.

At dusk I saw a porcupine and an American eagle. A herd of about 10 mule deer came in, foraging in the middle of Page Springs, just a few feet from my campfire. They remained for a good two hours. All night, a warm breeze blew, and it was clear as a bell. I saw a million more stars than I ever knew existed. I drifted in and out of sleep. The three-quarter moon rose and illuminated the campgrounds.

The deer returned in the darkness just before dawn. When I rose to make coffee they shifted their heads in unison to look at me and remained frozen in that position. Finally one of them lowered its head to forage, making a snuffling sound as it did so. The rest of the herd relaxed, ignoring me until they moved on.

I broke camp in the morning twilight and stopped off at the French Glen post office. A rancher couple were hitching a horse trailer with a horse in it to their pickup. They smiled indulgently at each other, but not at me.

I drove too far and I drove too long and when I reached my destination I got depressed. Something familiar, eh?

John Goodman back at Hart Mountain had been correct about the road. It was paved all the way to Denio and beyond. I made a mental note to write Mobil and update them. (I had compared Mobil's atlas to the Rand McNally. Mobil's atlas was superior, far more detailed than Rand McNally's. Mobil's is harder to read because it's cluttered, but once you have it figured, the wealth of information is astounding. As a matter of fact, in most cases, I found the map to be more accurate than the actual signs along the road ways.)

The long haul from French Glen, Oregon to Denio, Nevada, then west over into California, and southeast again into Nevada, hence down to Pyramid Lake, was beautiful. High plains, and in the distance the sharp rising teeth of mountains. I played one of my two Ry Cooder tapes and sang along to most of the songs. Along this dirt road I experimented with a smaller road that would have cut me slack on about 50 miles. It started out bad, and remained so. After about a quarter of a mile I gave it up and turned around, remembering what had

happened with the 'check engine' light on that rough road over by Glass Mountain.

Right before I left I had talked with my friend Steven. As we were preparing to hang up he told me to be careful and not to pick up Rutger Hauer. (Re: *The Hitcher*.) While I was driving this lonesome, beautiful road towards Roaring Springs Ranch I began thinking about such things. What if there was a guy alongside the road who needed a lift? I couldn't just pass him by. And what if he was a psycho?

Since the time that I went through all of those muggings (six muggings in a twelve-month period) I've prepared a sort of philosophy about being endangered by violence. Surrender yourself, not to the aggressor, but to yourself. Refuse to be intimidated, refuse to be afraid. Defend yourself by being fearless. The attitude is either do it, or get the fuck out of my face. Right now. Do or die. I chuckled as I thought about this. Putting plan to action was another matter entirely, but it's what I was facing in all aspects of my life.

There was an alluring, even startling, descent from the rugged, high plains of Nevada, into the jagged, lonesome landscape of northeast California. I came down off the heights, into a small town, hoping to find gas for the Geo Storm. Just before town, along the right-hand side of the road was an old ranch. Stuck on many of the wooden fence posts were the severed heads of coyotes. There must have been a dozen. I was so startled by this sight that I failed to stop and photograph it, which I now regret. The town was completely dead, with no gas station, and not a person in sight. I continued southeast, heading back into Nevada, and into the high desert (as opposed to the high plains).

This area of Nevada, bounded by State Highway 140 to the northeast, Interstate 80 to the south, and the California border to the west, is now well known: The Black Rock Desert, home of Burning Man, which had just moved from the beaches of San Francisco to the deserts of Nevada. When I went through this region it was not yet a landmark for a countercultural event of nearly 70,000 people, but a fine and desolate place of severe beauty.

About 10 miles north of Pyramid Lake a 50-mile-long dirt road cuts west out into the desert, then swings south along the western shores of the lake. At the end of the dirt road (where asphalt once again begins) is a camping spot at lakeshore. I was excited. Pyramid Lake is a gigantic body of low-salt water dotted with tufa, and enclosed by a mountainous desert terrain, approximately thirty miles long, and at its widest about nine. It is within the boundaries of the Paiute Indian Reservation.

I was a little nervous about the road at first. It was rough in spots, but nothing the Geo Storm couldn't handle. There were large patches of loose sand pits stretched across the road that couldn't be avoided. The only way to deal with it is to go fast. Go slow and you get stuck in a tire spin. It actually made for some fun driving, because it really wasn't a worry, but a challenge.

First sight of the lake coming in off the desert is glamorous. The road follows the landscape in a slow curve then faces the lake in a direct downhill run. You roll towards the lake for about a half-mile, with a straight shot for a running jump over to the mountains on the



other side. Then the road veers suddenly to the right and bumps along the edge of the lake.

The campground was a huge, miserable place. I got this far in my journal before getting too depressed to write further. Here I am surrounded by one of nature's true wonders — a beautiful, gargantuan lake enclosed by desert — and I'm sitting in one of the world's trashiest campgrounds ...

It was once a very beautiful, well-thought-out campground, probably built in the late 1950s. Lakeside it had streamlined buildings with toilets and showers, beautiful and interestingly designed picnic tables and sun shelters that ran along the coast of the lake. The actual camping grounds are on a high point overlooking the lake to the south. I went up.

I parked and got out, wandering from site to site. There were half burnt sanitary napkins and tennis shoes sitting in fire pits. At one site someone had tried to build their own pyramid to the moon — with Coors Lite cans. I went back to the car and sat down, heaving a big sigh. As I sat there a Park Ranger drove by, obviously an Indian, who gave me a mean look.

I started the car and returned back to the shore, and the picnic tables. Two cows strolled along the beach, munching their cud. I got out and sat on a picnic table looking at all the junk strewn about haphazardly on the beach and wondered how either the Indians or the Park Service could let this place get so trashy and ramshackle. The shower houses were boarded up; where they were not, the opaque windows had been smashed and glass was everywhere. Fuck, I thought, I might as well be back at the projects, across from my apartment house.

Behind the picnic table sat an old car engine. By the shore of the lake was a huge concrete slab. God knows what it was originally intended for, but now it was just another piece of litter. The only thing that was pristinely beautiful, aside from the lake water, was a brand-new-looking red telephone booth. It sat at the corner of one of the gutted shower houses. I took a picture of it.

I resigned myself to staying the night and sleeping in the car. I had driven about 300 miles, quite a bit of it on dirt roads. I was dead beat and spaced out. It was beyond my comprehension how this post-apocalyptic devastation had been allowed to unfurl over the years.

During my first encounter with the lake, miles north

of the camping and picnic site, I had parked and walked on the beach, dipping my hands, splashing the warmish water into my face.

A flock of migrating geese rose and honked angrily at my presence. In the sand near where I knelt there were coyote tracks, bobcat tracks, horse tracks, cow tracks, antelope tracks, and several more I had been unable to identify. When I left there were cowboy boot tracks. I thought, this is really the only thing we should be leaving behind: our tracks, not heaps of trash, decaying engines and dying architecture. Could Mad Max be far behind, or were the Indians already there, embracing the breakdown of it all?

I prepared dinner with the lifelessness of the automaton I'd become, eating in a deep and awful silence. I wrote in my journal then threw everything back into the car. I could not remain in such desolation. If I had to spend the night in the Sparks-Reno area, that's what had to be. There was no way I could stay in one of the world's most beautiful habitats, but down among one of man's most oppressive party sites. (*twenty-first-century update*: The entire area has been cleaned up, of course.)

So I hunkered down in a sleazy motel on a back street in Sparks, Nevada, deeply depressed. Even after a shit, shower, and shave I felt bad. I had two or three more days left to my trip. I was in the Reno area, only about four hours from home by super-freeway. Was this how my trip was to end? I looked desperately at the map trying to find a sane way to go on, but could see none. In every direction there was nothing but the pain of memory. I was frightened and lonely. I considered calling Leslie to talk it through.

Instead, I went to the Nuggets Casino and looked at the zombies, not even vaguely tempted to gamble. I came back to the motel and drank some water, turned on the TV, and watched three hours of politics on C-SPAN, getting updated on a week's worth of the '92 Presidential Campaign.

During the course of all of this political TV, somewhere inside I calmed down. I realised that tomorrow would be a better day.

I went to bed early and slept well. I woke at 4 o'clock to the sound of rain. I thought I was dreaming. Rain in Nevada in October was an unlikely prospect. I looked out the window and a hard steady stream was pouring down.

I was on the road by 7 o'clock. Mount Rose, which rears its tall head between Reno and Carson City, was covered in an astounding four inches of snow (according to the local news). It was haloed by thick white clouds, and down in the valley, I was driving through intermittent rain.

At breakfast I had consulted the map and decided to drive south to Minden, then head west into California, to Markleeville and Grover Hot Springs; not that the weather would be conducive to camping and hanging at a hot spring, but what the hell. Through the years many of my friends had made pilgrimages over and over to Grover Hot Springs but I had never been. Maybe it had been a California fad in the nineteen-eighties, like jacuzzis in Marin County in the nineteen-seventies.

Traffic was intense down Highway 395. I was glad to jump off of it, and on to State Route 88, heading into California the back way.

Markleeville is in what they call 'California Alpine Country'. It's mountainous and woodsy with various ski spots throughout. This semi-rural area of California is comfortably progressive. By this I mean a tattooed-pierced-faggot-Goth-rocker-in-leather could stop anywhere in the Markleeville area and people might look on in an amused, indulgent fashion, but they would be pleasant and he/she would get polite service, and maybe even some conversation. In some ways that's better than parts of San Francisco.

When I parked at Grover Hot Springs, hiking across the beautiful flaxen fields through a light rain, and looked up at the newly snowcapped peaks that surrounded the park, I understood the attraction my friends had for this place. Bring some champagne, chill it in the creek camp side, and hang in the hot springs. However, when I reached the actual pools I asked the single most asked question on this whole trip: Why?

The park service had institutionalised the hot springs, surrounding it with a view-blocking wooden fence line. They had built two typically azure-colored rectangular swimming pools, piping in the springs. I found the whole idea disturbing but amusing. I was used to travelling to obscure, sylvan hot springs, left unimproved, surrounded by nature.

Again, the voice of my subconscious, John Fugazzi, came to me, and I looked around at the beautiful fields and the array of wildflowers someone had planted by the pools, and the high snowcapped peaks. John's viewpoint opened me up to the beauty of what was there, not what I thought should've been there. I smiled to myself, strolling back to the car in the light rain. Next year I would go back to the hot springs at Hart Mountain. (Never did do that, but the goal remains.)

On the other side of Markleeville, a fork in the road, a very important one. State Route 88/4 continues due west, through some of the most beautiful terrain in California. The road, though paved, is so bad that even on the map it warns the dubious traveller: Bad Road. I know this road and it is truly amazing. State Route 89 forks south from 88/4, curling up to Monitor Pass, eventually meeting Highway 395 on the other side, down in the valley. In Reno that morning I discovered a road I had never been on in this area, State Route 108. It runs off 395 from the middle of nowhere and comes to a dead

stop in Modesto.

This road travels through the literary country of Bret Harte ('The Outcasts of Poker Flat' was placed on Sonora Pass), and to a lesser extent, Mark Twain ('The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County'). In the foothills, at the edge of the Sierras, on the verge of the San Joaquin Valley, is the village of Twain Harte.

Did I have a choice? Was this not destiny calling? From the moment I started to traverse State Route 89, I became lucid and transcendent.

In this area of California you don't rise to a mountain pass. You wind and climb. Maybe you descend 1000 feet, then start climbing again. This might happen several times on the way to the top of a mountain.

There was snow mixed with bare trees, and trees with golden leaves, climbing in brilliant angles across the steep granite mountainside, causing bright, slashing patterns to the summit.

Patches of clouds threw rain down. I plunged into a narrow canyon and was surrounded by barren white trees, either aspen or birch, stripped of leaves. The sun pierced the clouds and highlighted the trees, the landscape a darkened mass.

The skeletons of winter/are standing/with no rotting flesh/in a perfect land ...

I was trying to compose a poem in my head as I drove out of the canyon and ever upward, but stopped. I knew this trip wasn't about trying to find my voice as a poet (as if I had one!). But I had figured out this trip was about writing, about the healing process. That, too, had come to me in Reno, before I left to eat breakfast. It had all become clear. I no longer felt ashamed of returning to San Francisco on Wednesday, when I'd only started on Saturday. I knew upon my return I would write. I looked forward to reaching my messy apartment, and sitting down to the keyboard, with no one knowing I was home.

Monitor Pass was an expansive, snow-fringed alpine meadow, with few trees. I got out of the car, taking the brisk air deep into my lungs, invigorating my dulled senses. At the far end of the pass the road begins a quick 8 per cent drop, switch-backing quickly through open mountainside, giving breathtaking vistas of typical but incredibly beautiful western terrain, something you might see in any John Wayne or John Ford western.

I needed gas when I arrived and turned south on 395. Every town was closed until I got to Walker, California. A pleasant middle-aged woman came and cleaned my windshield as I pumped my own gas. Her face was kind and open.

'Any rain down here?' I asked.

'Oh, heavens no!' She said. 'Sometimes I don't think we're ever going to get rain here ever again!'

I laughed. 'I was just up in Reno, out at Pyramid Lake. It was raining cats and dogs up there early this morning.'

She shook her head. 'We sure didn't get any of it. Sometimes I think this area is going to be called Death Valley North. It's never going to rain here again.'

I chuckled. 'Now wait a minute,' I replied, 'you know about California and its drought cycles don't you?'

She looked at me.

'About every fifty years there's a drought ...'

'Fifty years!!' She interrupted.

'No, no, no,' I returned. 'Serious droughts come once

about every fifty years. They last maybe ten years; we're about six into ours. We have a few more years to go.'

She pursed up her lips. 'Well, I sure hope it rains one of these years! That'll be \$6.50, please.' I handed her the dough and she smiled at me. 'You have a good trip, you hear?'

'I will. Thanks. See you soon!'

A tall, lanky man with grey hair came out from the garage, pushing cap to back of head. He looked at me, then looked at the woman. He smiled, shaking his head. They walked back to the office together as he pulled a cigarette from his pocket. I got into the car smiling.

State Route 108 takes off at a sharp angle from 395. It meanders through a progressively narrowing valley, until it can go no further, forcing the road to climb. In the valley a military operation was going on, 'mountain warfare practice'. About ten guys in uniform were out on an airstrip passing a football. As I passed I beeped and waved. They all looked up startled and hesitantly some of them waved back. I laughed out loud. I suppose football is as peaceable a way as any for military intervention.

At the end of the valley, before the climb towards Sonora Pass, there was a small ranch. A cowboy was at the fence line near the road fixing wire, a cigarette dangling from lips, cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes. For some reason I wanted him to look up at me, to make eye contact, but he ignored me, as if there were no road at all, and he was out in the middle of nowhere, a hundred years ago. Just him and his horse.

There is no way to describe the beauty of State Route 108. Words fail me. Climbing to Sonora Pass was sublime, an experience that happens only a few times in a life.

The beauty of the landscape collided with the turmoil of my emotions. Somewhere halfway up the mountain I started crying, just bawling my eyes out.

Then I started screaming, as well as crying, and then I started laughing. Somehow I was able to let go of everything for a moment, and there I was, naked and exposed, deeply experiencing my own raw, opened past. In those moments I loved myself, and my life. An acceptance came. The complete failure of my life was okay. I was able to look forward, not back.

Such times of brilliant transcendence last but moments, but the epiphany, hopefully, lasts a lifetime.

Reality intruded quickly. I nearly collided into the backend of little purple car as I was pulling around a blind bend, my eyes full of tears. They had slowed down to a near stop to look at a particularly magnificent view. I slammed on the brakes and we drove bumper to bumper for a few moments, then they pulled out of the way. I moved on with a peck of the horn in thanks.

Everything was beyond description. The natural beauty, my own altered perceptions. I stopped often to take photos.

I would like to return there, perhaps take a backward trip to the Steens Mountains, starting with State Route 108. Maybe next time I will go with a pal, or maybe even a lover.

The worst part about taking a road trip is coming home.

There is no gentle way to reenter San Francisco, except maybe through Marin County. All approaches are

gruelling super-freeways. It can nearly ruin your experience. Particularly the beautiful, ephemeral things that welled up as I climbed Sonora Pass and down again, into the city of Sonora itself.

Along the six-lane commuter freeway back to San Francisco I took a break from driving. At the side of the road was an old abandoned structure, burnt out, windows missing. I pulled over and explored, smoking a cigarette (finally quit in 1997), and taking photos. There was beauty, even on the interstate.

I survived the drive in, and was happy to be home, and inside my body, once again.

It was still early in the day. I couldn't wait to start writing. I threw everything down on the wooden floor and put on the coffee. I warmed up the old MacPlus and settled down.

A page and a half into it (not the first pages you've read), the phone rang.

I stopped, startled. Then automatically began to reach for it. No, I thought, no one knows I'm home. I'll never get any writing done if I answer the phone. I let the phone machine take the message.

I heard my friend Christina on the other side of the line, crying. Right before I left I had tried to call her. Her line had been disconnected. She's just about my best friend, and now lives in Iowa. She had recently married and was experiencing turbulent times. I picked up the phone. And we talked for hours.

Another good reason I was meant to come home a few days early. Christina, without phone or address, would have left a message while crying, and I would have not been able to get a hold of her.

The following day, Thursday, I checked the rest of my phone messages. There were four from Theresa. I felt awfully shy and nervous and glad about that.

In between writing, which I've been doing in long stretches, I went to dinner with Leslie, did some grocery shopping, returned the car, and went to Berkeley, spending \$40.00 on CDs at Amoeba Records (Mike Oldfield has a new album out!).

When I returned the car, and the transaction complete, the clerk said, 'Have a good weekend.' I know it was by rote, but realising I still had two more days before returning to work was dizzying. I felt dazzled as I strolled down to BART on my way to Berkeley. For the moment life was sweet.

— William Breiding, October, 1992

Postscript, January 1999

As mentioned in the text, in 1987, at age 31, I purchased my first car, quit my job, and immediately embarked upon a three-month camping trip through the central and southern areas of the United States. That jaunt was partially inspired by William Least Heat Moon's wonderful bestseller, *Blue Highways*.

This trip to the southeast corner of Oregon was inspired by my friend Phil Paine, a well-travelled Canadian who, nearly 10 years earlier, had explored the Steens Mountains. I was briefly self-conscious when I submitted this piece to *The Metaphysical Review*, an Aus-

tralian fanzine. If there is any one thing Australia is known for it's that incredible Outback. In America, 'outback' is a relative term, and its isolation could be easily questioned. Be that as it may, southeast Oregon is a fine unsettling desolation.

I recently came across the August 1997 issue of *National Geographic*, which contained William Least Heat Moon's 'A Special Place: Oregon's Outback'. Moon is a fine writer who often zips back and forth between dreamy flights of fantasy and chatty fact-based prose. He is a fool for research; I am not. According to Moon, whom I trust on this matter (as well as the *Geographic* fact-checkers), what I thought was the awesome Hart Mountain was instead the awesome Poker Jim Ridge. I seem to have never made it to the 8018-foot Hart Mountain. The high chaparral that I climbed to at the other side of Poker Jim Ridge lies at 7601 feet; apparently Hart Mountain rises so subtly from these plains for another 417 feet that I missed it. Or the entire section I traversed is considered Hart Mountain. I have no doubt that Moon uses topographical maps and all of this is made clear there.

I've often suspected that many of the vivid characters Moon quotes in his travel writing to be fabrications, vessels through which he may more entertainingly dispense his exposition. A good example crops up in this *National Geo* piece.

Apparently Moon was also corrected when pronouncing the town named Denio, Nevada. He asserts that a waitress offered to correct him: 'Duh-NYE-oh,' she said, 'but if you live here, it's Denial.' I wonder at the authenticity of that witty quote.

I was given a slightly different 'correct' pronunciation of Denio by the man on Hart Mountain, Dee-NYE-oh, rather than Duh-NYE-oh.

Moon and I do agree about the area, however. 'I love this cursed and sere beauty, this excellent forsakenness,' Moon writes, 'and now I fear somebody disrupting it.'

I recommend the August 1997 issue of *National Geographic* for Sarah Leen's photographs if your sense of

wonder has been tweaked. Though Moon is better equipped to write than I, his piece on Oregon's outback is deferential to Sarah Leen's photographs, with few descriptive passages. Leen makes as much visual sense as she can from the mammoth, desolate beauty. Perhaps they will inspire you to plan your own trip. I know that I will be returning.

Postscript, October 2017

I write this particular postscript upon the twenty-fifth anniversary of my trip to Oregon's outback. When Bruce rediscovered this submission to *The Metaphysical Review* and made noises about still wanting to publish it, I returned to it. It was difficult reading.

First, because of its emotional content. I was only just then resurfacing from the darkest of times. To quote Dave Edmunds, I was determined to 'start living again if it kills me'. I did so, and survived. Second, I was abhorred by the writing. I am not a purist. Rewriting older pieces makes sense to me. I have taken the liberty to do so. It started by giving context and nuance. Still not satisfied, I realised it needed to be completely rewritten. The only way to fix it was a sentence-by-sentence revision. Not wanting to lose the feel of my 1992-self, I compromised by restructuring many sentences, but not a complete rewrite.

When I wrote the first postscript, in January 1999, the internet was not as pervasive as it is now. While Sarah Leen's photographs for National Geographic remain extraordinary, you can just as easily do a search on the Steens Mountains and tour this amazing landscape via computer.

I never did get back to the Steens, or Hart Mountain. But a trip is in the planning stages before the advent of 2020.

— William Breiding, October 2017

Jennifer Bryce

Teaching in a boys' technical school 1968–1970

At university I studied Arts, majoring in Music History and Indian Studies. As I reached the end of the three-year course I realised I would need to get a job. I tried for a couple of unrealistic positions (writing concert programs for the ABC, which involved a terrifying interview, and research assistant for an anthropological study in Central Australia). When I was unsuccessful with these applications, I realised that my scholarship would extend for another year if I studied DipEd. That's why I took up teaching. At the end of DipEd., I was sent to a boys'

technical school, 'Heidi Tech', where I was assigned English and Social Studies classes. What a challenge!

I had been to an all-girls independent school in Balwyn. Four years at university hadn't prepared me for the rough and tumble, the swearing and sexual innuendos, or the complete aversion to anything that required reading a book (or a few words). The Humanities weren't important at a technical school, so Social Studies was taught in double classes. I had 2EF for Social Studies (about 55 14-year-old boys). And one afternoon (prob-



‘HeiTech’ — a typical government technical school in the 1960s and 1970s.

ably Friday) I had them for a double period (80 minutes). It was during one of these classes that a hefty boy jumped up, threatening me with a knife: ‘I’m not reading that, Miss!’ (It was the first or second week of term and I hadn’t yet realised that most of them couldn’t read.) Instinctively I snatched the knife out of his hand — a stupid thing to do. I don’t remember what happened after that, but when the class had finished the head of department took me aside: ‘You seem to have a bit of a discipline problem, Miss Bryce.’

I don’t remember the detail of the other Social Studies classes, but I floundered hopelessly. I do, however, have some better memories of teaching English. I think English must have been taught in single rather than double classes. I was assigned 4A1 (the best class) and 4PW (the Plumbers and Woodworkers). To my astonishment, Ken, in 4A1, had read *War and Peace* (I hadn’t). I geared the class to Ken’s needs and dragged the others along somehow. There didn’t seem to be a curriculum. Zeffirelli’s film of *Romeo and Juliet* had just been released in Melbourne. I decided that 4A1 would read the play in class (although quite a few of them could hardly read) and we would go to the film as ‘an excursion’. This was all for Ken’s benefit — I probably gave him the part of Romeo. Did I read Juliet? There were enough boys who could read a bit to take the other parts, and the romantic interest and fighting between Montagues and Capulets seemed to sustain the rest of the boys. Of course, there was the bribe of an afternoon in the city going to the cinema. It was such a relief to teach these boys, compared to 2EF Social Studies!

I had 4A1 for English, last period Friday afternoon. How to fill in the time? We produced a class newspaper. Ken was the only one who could write well enough to put together the articles. The boys who couldn’t write at all turned the handle of the spirit duplicator and the boys who were well behaved were allowed to deliver the newspaper to other classes. I wish I still had a copy of the paper. I don’t remember the content at all. I suppose it was mainly sports results.

The only thing I remember about the 4PW English classes (no one could read well enough to attempt Shakespeare) was that someone wrote a poem and showed it

to me. It was amazing that someone had spontaneously written something. It described a hole, but was almost unintelligible — possibly the boy’s idea of sexual imagery to shock me, or maybe it was a genuine effort. I was so keen to encourage creative writing that I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

I had to teach English to a night class of plumbing apprentices. Most of the boys in the class were only a year younger than me. We were all rather self-conscious. Once again there was no set curriculum. *My Brother Jack* was being read on ABC radio for 15 minutes during the class time. A gift! We studied *My Brother Jack*. Someone who could read, read ahead and discovered the section where Jack has sex with his girlfriend in the back of a car — all of a sudden, reading was okay! There was supposed to be some oral English. I suggested that each boy should give a talk on a hobby. A boy called Peter selected Spotlight Shooting. I’d never heard of it — this must have been apparent and he elaborated with ghoulish details, perhaps waiting for me to throw up or faint.

The eccentric Miss Burke, whose Year 7 classroom was opposite mine, liked to listen to the radio serial *Blue Hills*, which was on at 1 p.m. Being an old hand on the staff, she arranged to have Year 7 English at 1 p.m. every day and so, at 1 p.m., those of us teaching in the vicinity of her room, would hear the familiar French horn theme wafting down the corridor. She set a big assignment so that the boys had to listen carefully for the whole 15 minutes of the program. The resulting projects, on butcher’s paper, were pegged on string across the classroom like washing on a clothesline.

I seem to have mainly remembered the good bits of my two years of teaching in the technical system. Women were not highly valued — the government had only just brought in equal pay. Women were thought too vulnerable to do yard duty, so we had to wash the dishes in the staff room. The ‘Tradies’ — male staff who taught plumbing, woodwork, and sheetmetal — were highly respected and seemed to have the run of the school. On one of the rare occasions when a class of mine was working quietly, a Tradie came into the room and, supposedly sotto voce, but at a volume that the students could definitely hear, he started to single out various

class members: 'his brother's doing time in Pentridge'; 'he'll be in the clink before he's 21'; 'his old man's done a runner'. With difficulty I steered this authority figure to the corridor, out of the boys' earshot. The class was completely disrupted.

Two years of this was enough. I gratefully accepted a

job in educational research. It took me some time to adjust to a working life that wasn't organised by bells ringing every 40 minutes.

— Jennifer Bryce, 2019

BRUCE GILLESPIE writes:

My experience mirrors Jenny's, but not at the same school. I also taught during 1969 and 1970. I majored in English and History during my Arts degree at Melbourne University, and finished my DipEd. in 1968 (which was also my first year in fandom). Like Jenny, I was sent to a boys' technical school within the Victorian system. Unlike Jenny, I was sent to a country school, which should have been much easier to work in than 'Heidi Tech.' Also unlike Jenny, I did not make a late decision to become a teacher. It was my ambition during my years at high school. Teaching was going to be my lifelong career. Therefore my failure felt all the more crushing.

Tech. schools did not teach History. They taught Social Studies, an odd mixture of History and Geography. I had no idea what to do with Social Studies, even though I was given most of the classes in the new school. The syllabus was very vague. Social Studies was not popular among tech. school kids, for the reasons Jenny gives. English rated a bit more highly, because it was compul-

sory. But I was offered few English classes in 1969, and only one in 1970. I might have stayed in the profession if I had been given the English classes.

My only triumph mirrors Jenny's. I had bought an old ink duplicator in order to publish *SF Commentary*. I asked the boys in Form 5 (Year 11) to contribute stories and articles to a class magazine. I was astonished at the results. Most of the kids were capable of writing something interesting for a class magazine. One boy, who otherwise appeared rather gormless, turned in a superb story. And the cleverest kid in the school enjoyed a couple of Philip K. Dick novels that I lent him.

I was alone and lonely; not the sort of person who fits into a country community. I didn't even drive a car, a fact inconceivable to my students. I was in desperation at the end of 1970. I came back to my parents' place, and decided never to return to Ararat. And I never have. 1971 then became my *annus mirabilis*, but that's another story.

— Bruce Gillespie, August 2020

ROBERT LICHTMAN has been a major force in American fandom since the 1960s, best known for editing *Trap Door*, which has had two Hugo nominations. Robert has won a total of 17 FAAN Awards in various categories. I know him best as a brilliant fanzine editor, dedicated fanzine collector, a valued correspondent, Secretary-Treasurer of FAPA since 1986, and organiser of the Bring Bruce Bayside fan fund after I arrived in America in 2005. His many publications other than *Trap Door* include a collection of Francis Towner Laney's fan writing titled *Ah! Sweet Laney!*, a fanthology of writing from *Quandry* titled *Some of the Best from Quandry*, and a collection of Walt Willis's *Fanorama* columns. He has also been writing autobiographical articles in recent years, including the following piece from his FAPazine.

Robert Lichtman

Coming of age in the sixties

[First publication: *King Biscuit Time* 70, February 2020
for the 330th FAPA mailing, February 2020.]

Every now and then, on one of the e-mail 'lists' in which I participate, the subjects will turn to reminiscences of

various aspects of times past. On one recent such occasion, rather than respond individually to each memory thread, I wrote this omnibus recollection:

We didn't eat out in restaurants very much when I was a kid, so when we did it was for me a very memorable occasion. I have recollections of two from when I was very young and still living in Cleveland on the other side of town from Harlan Ellison. Both restaurants were downtown, which involved a street car ride because my father didn't buy his first car until we moved to Los Angeles near the end of 1950 and he needed one to get to work. Cleveland had a good public transportation system, Los Angeles a bad one, although at that time the Pacific Electric trains — the 'red cars' (see the *Roger Rabbit* movie) — were still running and I remember one of them being part of a trip out to see my great-aunt and uncle in far off exotic El Monte. One of the restaurants was Italian, the other Chinese, and both were in basement premises that seemed cavernously large to my young self. My memory of each meal is of a huge rounded heap of, variously, spaghetti and chop suey, and my parents' incredulity that I ate all of each of them unaided.

My parents bought their first house in 1943, just months after I was born and their one-bedroom apartment near my mother's parents would no longer be sufficient. That house was at 3827 W. 128th Street in Cleveland, and you can see it on Zillow. It was white when we lived there, but otherwise looks exactly the same as in this photo. When we first moved to Los Angeles at the end of 1950, we rented an apartment at 4175 S. Buckingham Road (rear ground floor in the building on the right in a Google view) while our house was being custom built at 6137 S. Croft Avenue, into which we moved early in 1951. That house, as shown on Zillow and Google, is not what it looked like when we lived there. It was a classic single-storey 'mid-century modern' (pale green stucco with matching gravel roof, and some redwood panels below the windows). After both of my parents had died, my brother and I sold it off and eventually it was almost completely torn down and replaced with this much larger Spanish-style two-storey.

There was no TV in our house until around 1954, the official story from my parents being that they were afraid it was Just A Fad and they'd get stuck with an expensive useless appliance. Fortunately, I had friends both in Cleveland and in Los Angeles who would invite me over to see the kiddie shows of the time (*Howdy Doody*, *Kuhla Fran & Ollie*, *Time For Beany*, etc.). In its absence I was very fond of what remained on the radio — more adult shows of various ilks, everything from *The Great Gildersleeve* and *Our Miss Brooks* to *The Shadow* and *The FBI in Peace and War* (and much more, especially including the radio *Gunsmoke*, which I always liked better than the TV version).

My longest job was the eighteen years I spent working for the City of Santa Rosa Public Works Department, which was also my last job. Good thing, that, because it came at a time when I was anxious about having money to retire on — and there was a pension built in, so I was able to relax on that score by simply sticking around and doing the work. My supervisors were also pretty loose

regarding my use of time, so long as I kept on top of ongoing tasks and always turned in bigger projects on time or even (my preference) before the last minute. I remember there being anniversary gifts at the five, ten, and fifteen year points, at least some of them presented as part of a big group meeting in the City Council chambers. I only remember what one of them was: a nice pocket knife in a sheath. In addition, the supervisor of the division within the department I worked in gave me gift certificates every holiday season, good for one pound of See's Candy. I still have some of those, and they still work (at least they did the last time I used one, a couple of years ago).

My next longest job would be the near-decade I spent living on the Farm, where I had a variety of positions — and within that the longest would be the nearly five years spent with the Book Publishing Company, which was the only place in the community where there was air conditioning (for the presses, we rationalised when called on it). There was also a small colour television where for a couple of years groups would gather to watch *Saturday Night Live* and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*.

Most likely due to my coming of age in The Sixties, I never had aspirations of having A Career — and one could say most of my work life has flowed out of the nine weeks of typing class I took when I was fourteen, followed by becoming a fan the following year and having use of that skill and picking up my speed exponentially so I always aced the typing tests that came as part of job applications.

I don't recall the name of whoever counts as my first love. She was someone I had a crush in when I was six or seven years old and still living in Cleveland. I don't remember any names from my early years of school in Los Angeles, either, until we moved into our new house sometime in 1951. Before that I'd been going to a school that was near the apartment we lived in while the house was being built. It was an easy walk from the apartment to that school. But when we moved to that new house, we were on the extreme far end of the district's borders for that school. I would have had to take a bus or catch a ride with a schoolmate's parent. We had only one car — my mother didn't drive (never did) — and my father used it to get to work where his shift began well before when school started. My memory is hazy, but I seem to remember that I did take a bus back and forth until school let out for the summer. It was a big adventure for an eight-year-old, but also time-consuming — and worrying for my parents.

Our new house was just across the street from the border of Los Angeles with Inglewood, one of the many smaller towns surrounding giant Los Angeles, and there was an elementary school on the other side of the street. My parents got some sort of dispensation from the Inglewood school district so that I was able to start fourth grade at that school. Apparently other parents had done the same thing, and a petition drive to annex our neighborhood into their school system was launched and was successful.

So with a stable school situation I began to start knowing the names of my classmates. One girl I had a huge crush on was Nancy, who was the tallest girl in the

class, slender and cute. (I was the tallest boy.) At that age I was very shy around girls, so she never knew. On the other side of the coin, one of the parents who led the charge to annex us to the Inglewood schools had twin girls, Maybelle and Chardelle. They were a somewhat overweight pair, not all that attractive or intelligent, and I didn't talk to them in fourth grade, either. But by the time we all got to sixth grade, their mother was apparently desperate to get them boyfriends. They were originally from somewhere in the South, where — as we know from the example of Jerry Lee Lewis's wife — girls begin getting married off when they reach the age of thirteen and apparently she was of the view that even though now living in Los Angeles her girls should not — *must not* — be allowed to become old maids.

One of the things we had to do as part of school was learn to dance — fox trot, waltz, polka, square, etc. I didn't care for any of it, but it was required. The twins' mother hit upon the idea of having afternoon dances in the large garage of their house — driven, sure, by her views as stated above. She let all the parents know about

it, and my parents insisted that I go. It was a strange affair with cookies and punch and music on a cheap record player. Their mother manoeuvred things so that all the boys got/had to have a turn with each of the twins. I remember holding their sweaty hands at arm's length while shuffling through a fox trot, and that both of them were heavily perfumed. I also got to dance with Nancy — of course carefully revealing no emotion — who was the opposite of the twins in every way. But overall they were really awful affairs.

I didn't date in high school. By that time I had discovered and immersed myself in fandom and had enough money to cover publishing fanzines but not for dating expenses, plus I had no access to a car. I didn't have girlfriends, but overcoming my awkwardness around women I did have friend girls — the difference pretty obvious. It wasn't until I went on to the university that I did, finally, have girlfriends now and then, plus a car — which facilitated matters.

— Robert Lichtman, 2020

GUY SALVIDGE's intermittently award-winning fiction has squirrelled its way into such esteemed publications as *The Great Unknown*, *Westerly*, *Award Winning Australian Writing*, and *Stories of Perth*. When he's not writing, Guy moonlights as an English teacher in rustic, rural Western Australia.

Guy Salvidge

Supernova memories

I walked into Supernova Books in downtown Perth with the intention of getting a job there on the third of August, 2001. I know this because it was my twentieth birthday. I had been to Supernova before, of course, to that stuffy room on William Street packed with science fiction, fantasy and horror titles. It was like being on the inside of a Rubik's cube. A month or so previously, I had purchased a big, blue brick of a book called *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* there. It turned out that a guy who served me, Richo, was a fellow student and friend of mine at Curtin University. Little did I know that, sooner rather than later, it'd be me sitting on an office chair behind that aged till and Richo scampering off into the direction of the pub.

Supernova's owner was a rather forbidding person-age named Alwyn. He would have been in his sixties then, and as it turned out with little more than two and a half years to live. I got the job, although it was noted that I was too shy to make eye contact with him (his cavernous face, his pitiless eyes). I would work for two and a half

hours on a Thursday afternoon so that Alwyn could play tennis, and alternate the days of the weekend with the other weekend guy. It was, as I told my Romanian employer at the fish and chips shops where I would no longer work, my dream job. It paid \$11 an hour.

The shelves were poorly made, frequently damaging the stock; the till was so ancient that it surely predated me; and the 'Nova' in the neon sign had long since stopped working. 'Super Books', old men and women read out as they tottered past. They then tottered inside and asked me if me had anything by Danielle Steele. Sales were recorded in an exercise book, the takings calculated on an old calculator. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on me — a science fiction bookstore with a primitive till and no computer.

On the evening of September 11, before the infamous attacks, I was putting the finishing touches on a story that the American SF writer Barry Malzberg was helping me with. I had become friendly with Malzberg after posting on the one and only fansite dedicated to his work (run

by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, later to become a SF writer and critic himself) and he had sent me signed copies of several of his books. Malzberg seemed to think that my story 'Manitee' was good enough to be published in *Interzone*. He would write to its editor, David Pringle, and recommend my story to him. I had been redrafting 'Manitee' for days, adding new scenes and deleting troublesome ones, and my final task was to produce a new ending. Sitting in front of the computer, literally minutes before the attacks, a scene jumped into my head:

I am wheeling through space — I am the *Manitee*. The boosters are firing — calamity looms as booster 3 torches its casing and — alas — ignites the others. But my heart is glad. Inside the ship, the part of me which is me smiles in her sleep. Her mouth opens as if to frame a final question but I soothe her, telling her to rest.

We are afire.

Having written these words, I emailed the story to Malzberg and sat down to watch a classic SF film, *Westworld*. Yul Brynner's murderous rampage had barely begun when I was interrupted by a friend informing me that a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center, the existence of which I had been, until that moment, blissfully unaware. *Westworld* forgotten, we watched in excitement as a second plane hit the other tower. When the Pentagon was hit, we were aware that life as we knew it was ending. 'More planes!' we cried. We envisaged a hundred, a thousand planes hitting buildings all over the world, bringing the machinery of capitalism to a halt. My delirium for the apocalypse far outweighed any sense of the hideous human toll being extracted.

But there were no more planes. The next morning there was an email from Malzberg, which said, 'As far as I can deduce, this story is now saleable. If life as we are about to know it resumes its stately course (it probably will) I'll write Pringle and you'll send it on.' I had known that Malzberg lived in New Jersey, but I hadn't realised that his house was just three kilometres from Ground Zero. One of his friends, the writer Carter Scholz, had missed the fatal Newark–San Francisco flight by an hour. He later said he had been 'sentenced to life'. But like Scholz's plane, which ended up never leaving the tarmac, so my SF writing career failed to take flight. I never received a reply from *Interzone*, not even a rejection letter, and the whole incident eventually faded to a painful memory.

Immediately after 9/11, all the talk in the Old Bailey, the pub I frequented on a Wednesday night for its \$4 pints, was of war. Surely America would go to war, and thus Australia. But against who? Malzberg was a steadying influence on me. He had more reason to fret in New Jersey than I did in Perth, but that didn't stop me from imagining the Bankwest building, just a handful of blocks up William Street from Supernova, collapsing in a hail of concrete and glass. I wondered whether I would survive, cocooned between a layer of *Babylon 5* novels and the latest volume in David Weber's absurdly popular *Honor Harrington* series.

Working at Supernova was 99 per cent tedium and

1 per cent plain crazy. It took me a few weeks to realise this. In the initial weeks, I spent much of my time dusting the shelves and cleaning the grubby windows, as per Alwyn's direction. The books never stayed dust free for long, as there was a constant stream of cars flowing over the Horseshoe Bridge onto William Street, their exhaust fumes settling on the bookshelves and in my lungs. It didn't take long for inertia to win out.

The 99 per cent tedium is barely worth recalling. A decade on, my memory of those long hours can be boiled down to a single, generalised anecdote. A customer walks in. It's late afternoon in winter, perhaps four-thirty. The shop assistant smiles inanely, rubbing his bleary eyes, and does not put down his Graham Greene novel or show any sign of intending to. There's no one else in the shop. The customer browses without harassment for 10 minutes before selecting three popular titles, one of which is a new release hardcover. Our customer will get fifteen cents change from a hundred dollars. During this time, one other customer has been and gone without making a purchase, and the shop assistant has read another chapter of *The End of the Affair*, which is rather conspicuously not science fiction, fantasy or horror. Our paying customer makes his offering at the font of commerce, and for this he gets his books taped up in a large paper bag. Despite the minor irritation of having to stop reading for thirty seconds or thereabouts, the shop assistant is making strong progress on the Greene novel and will probably finish it on the train after his shift.

That was my Supernova experience times infinity. I worked there two years, and by the end I wasn't only reading in the shop (which Alwyn had expressly forbidden, although we were encouraged to take books home to read so that we would become more knowledgeable about the stock), I was listening to AFL football on the radio, much to the annoyance of the customers who thought they had entered a nerdish enclave opposed to mainstream Australian culture, playing X-COM: UFO Defense on my laptop, and generally not being a model employee. It didn't seem to matter how many times I was caught reading by Alwyn (he had a tendency to pop in when you were otherwise engaged), the job was mine as long as I wanted it and so long as I didn't ask for a pay rise. Alwyn also had a habit of coming in at odd times to collect the previous day's take, which we were instructed to put, rather predictably, in a paper bag underneath the plastic tray in the till.

The 1 per cent craziness was what made the job interesting. Part of the trouble stemmed from the laundrette on the far side of William Street. Staring out Supernova's window through the long hours, I came to realise that the kind of people that seemed to cause the most trouble in society were *precisely* the kind of people who also did not own or did not have ready access to a washing machine. Plenty of washing machine owners cause trouble of their own, of course. I recall a rough Outback character punching walls and harassing people for cigarettes. The tension mounted as the rejections piled up. Finally, to my relief, someone gave him a pack or what was left of one. Going back to my tasks, I was shelving books when he came in and asked, quite politely, whether he could leave his suitcase in the shop overnight. He had nowhere to stay, you see. Terrified, I

demurred as gently as I could manage, and the man lugged his suitcase back across the street to the competing Magic Circle bookshop, where I imagined he tried a similar stratagem. More often the crazies weren't aggressive, simply deranged, like the time a drunken Aboriginal crossdresser wanted a plastic bag — two in fact — for his cask of wine, as it was too cumbersome for him to carry. He grinned at me, lipstick smeared all over his face and chin, and asked if I would transfer the wine into the plastic bags, seeing as he was altogether too drunk to perform such a task. Usually people just want change for the parking meter.

For the most part, the customers themselves were far saner. In my mind's eye a regular customer named Terry claps his hands and parades before me, perusing the new releases. He was a forty-year-old kid who wore a baseball cap and a rucksack. Terry was also something of a social Darwinist, proclaiming survival of the fittest as evidenced by characters in the commercial fantasy genre. This went down okay with me, as a less threatening character I could not and still cannot imagine. I encouraged him to talk but he tended to repeat himself in stock phrases like 'I'll see you later my good man' and 'it's all very quiet'. Terry liked something 'with a bit of ultra-violence in it' and abhorred the 'soppy stuff'.

I remember a rather charming older woman engaging me in conversation regarding Ursula Le Guin and *The Dispossessed*. 'Wouldn't you like to live there?' she asked, meaning the desert planet Anarres, which was a sort of scarcity utopia. I had to admit that I would like to live 'there', in a word without money, bureaucrats or weapons of mass destruction. She told me that she couldn't afford to buy new books because she didn't have a job, and I could sympathise. I rarely bought new books myself, prowling around remainder piles and second-hand bookstores instead. Immediately after she left, a man dumped a tower of *Babylon 5* novels in front of me. \$341 dollars worth.

Another regular customer, Raylene, was a tall, heavy woman sporting short, curly hair and a snappy demeanour. Gruff, brusque, and sometimes annoying, Raylene was nevertheless one of my favourite customers. She seemed to have a fascination with the lay-by system. When the customer made the appropriate noises, myself or someone like me wrapped the desired books in a paper bag and affixed a piece of paper to the front, upon which the customer's details were written, along with the amount that had been paid and the amount owing. It was Raylene's policy not to buy books outright but to add them to a burgeoning lay-by pile, from which she would select one like a gourmand, leaving the rest to simmer for a few more weeks.

Alwyn himself was simpler, or so he seemed to me. As far as I could discern, he had no interest in the books he sold. Still, he knew what the punters wanted and he supplied it to them. His business model relied largely on American imports. Thus, when the exchange rate between the US and Aussie dollars reached a 2:1 ratio, the prices went up. Way up. A new release American hard-

cover was normally priced at \$60 or even \$65, and yet they sold. *Honor Harrington*, *Anita Blake*, and *Harry Potter* sold like the proverbial hotcakes at these prices. Had Alwyn lived long enough, the internet and the strengthening Aussie dollar would have decimated his business. Amazon would have beaten Supernova to within an inch of its life, and Book Depository would have danced on its grave. But it never came to that. Six months or so before I quit Supernova, Alwyn went on holiday to New Zealand. When I asked him why New Zealand specifically, he said that he wanted to see it before he died.

It was virtually impossible to get fired from Supernova. Probably theft would have done it, but I never sank that low. I found out just how far Alwyn could be pushed late one Friday night. It was winter, and I was in the habit of leaving my suede jacket and other possessions in the shop and returning for them when I was ready to catch the train home. The only problem was that, after six pints of Beck's on an empty stomach, I was in no condition to go anywhere when I returned for my jacket at around 11 p.m. I thought I'd lie down on the carpet in the dark for a while. I had half an hour until the 11.30 train anyway. But 11.30 came and went without me being able to raise my head, and I would have missed the midnight train as well had fate not intervened.

To my everlasting horror, the door opened and in stepped Alwyn to collect the day's take. I had no idea he would leave it so late in the evening. He stood over me, surprised but not angry. 'Are you on drugs?' he said. I looked up at him from the floor, and replied, 'I'm just pissed, that's all.' This was the impetus I needed to get to my feet. I was barely able to navigate the traffic on Wellington Street without becoming a statistic. Like *Frogger*, my chances were slim. I collapsed in a heap at the foot of the Horseshoe Bridge, where I vomited on my expensive suede jacket. Somehow I made the midnight train. To his credit, Alwyn never reminded me of this shameful incident. For all I know, he might have taken it to his grave. Had I not been in the habit of retelling this anecdote to anyone who would listen, no one might have ever known.

The last time I saw Alwyn I was paying off a lay-by of my own, a deluxe edition of Jeff Vandermeer's *City of Saints and Madmen* I had asked him to order in specially. He seemed untroubled by my decision to quit. I walked out with the Vandermeer and my thoughts, leaving him to his tiny shop and the layers of dust. A few months later, Alwyn was dead.

Supernova outlived its founder, but not by much. My replacement was a guy named Tim. He ran the store for a while after Alwyn's death before setting up his own SF bookstore, White Dwarf Books, in the adjacent shop. I saw Tim at Swancon recently but I don't think he remembers me. For a while, Supernova lay empty. Last I saw it, the shop had been converted into a Crazy Teez outlet, the memory of the business that had thrived there for so many years all but erased.

— Guy Salvidge, 2013

Poems personal

Michael Bishop

Michael Bishop introduces 'Jamie's Hair':

In 2009, my late colleague and friend Steven Utley and I published an anthology of stories, *Passing for Human*, that we had edited for Peter Crowther's PS Publishing in England. If you were to open a copy of this volume (an unlikely event because only 700 copies were ever printed) to its copyright page, you'd find not only an acknowledgment of Steven's and my involvement, but also, under the words COVER ART, the attribution 'Copyright (c) 2009 by Jamie Bishop'.

By the time of the anthology's publication, Jamie had been dead for twenty-eight months. He'd already done covers for at least three of my books: the poetry volume *Time Pieces*, an ElectricStory ebook version of *No Enemy But Time*, and a big nonfiction compilation for PS Publications of my pieces about science fiction and fantasy, *A Reverie for Mister Ray*. At the time of his death, Jamie worked for a major university as a language instructor and utility IT guy, but planned to enrol that fall at another nearby university to get a degree in art and essay a career as an artist, even if he had to start on the ground floor, so to speak, to achieve his goal. He never got the chance.

Here is what I wrote about about Jamie in the introduction to *Passing for Human*:

[A] word about the cover on [this volume]. My son Jamie, who was shot to death on the morning of April 16, 2007, teaching a German class in Norris Hall at Virginia Tech, created this digital collage. (Thirty-one other innocent persons also died on campus that morning.) He used, I feel certain, a photograph of his own torso and the elegant power of his own personality, his own design sense, to hint at a blaze of alien anger or alien heat behind a cyborg-like human exterior. This is the last cover that he undertook for a book project [of mine], and it saddens me unspeakably to know that he will never do another, unless we find among his finished, unattached art a work or two suitable for adaptation ... Jamie was fully human, with all the quirks and virtues that the phrase 'fully human' implies, but he was definitely passing for human, as we all must do, and I regret with all my heart that he passed, with no chance to do otherwise, long before he should have.

Christopher James 'Jamie' Bishop (Nov 9, 1971–Apr 16, 2007)

Jamie's hair

i.

He scooped it with deft, long-fingered hands and tamed it with an elastic band, or let it hang loose on the flat bony cliff of his back. His hair declared him his own bohemian, a middle-class free spirit with a mortgage to pay down, a racing bike, a sub to Netflix, and a frau as deceptively frail as Hans Memling's palest Madonna.

ii

Married, he cut it but twice and only to give away.
He then looked like a soldier or a monk — though neither calling
set his mind afire as did the table saw or the digital collage.
Long again, his hair gave him a faint resemblance to a rock star
he aped at a party — ‘Famous Dead People’ — two months before
falling into his own celebrity, if only for fourteen minutes.

iii.

Riding shotgun in a dry-ice mental fog, I carried his hair
back from the mortuary in a Ziploc freezer bag.
Later, we Googled the guidelines of the organization
to which we sent this salvaged relic of his immolated body.

iv.

Sometimes I try to picture its recipient thinking on her world —
a purple zinnia, a swim in the bell-shaped pool, a milkshake
after chemo — but see only his shorn head at the crematory door,
serene as a bodhisattva’s, soon to kindle in a fire that will never consume
our love, a fire his hair escaped to adorn the skull of someone younger —
dying, but not yet dead.

— First published in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 2008

Jenny Blackford

Jenny’s poems and stories have appeared in august Australian and international literary journals and anthologies as well as *Asimov’s*, *Strange Horizons*, *Cosmos* magazine, and multiple Rhysling anthologies. Pitt Street Poetry published an illustrated chapbook of her cat poems, *The Duties of a Cat*, in 2013, followed in 2017 by her first full-length book of poetry, *The Loyalty of Chickens*, and *The Alpaca Cantos* in 2020.

Meeps

My sister wondered where each passionfruit
disappeared to, just as it ripened. Tiny black holes?
Or local possums’ black-hole guts?

But what about her dingo and spaniel/poodle mix — surely
good dogs would defend the bounty of their backyard
against marauders. Surely.

Could it be kids hopping the back fence
despite sharp-spiked bougainvillea
and dogs’ shining teeth? Unlikely.

Birds? A glorious dark plague
of black cockatoos descended from the heavens



before every almond would-be harvest. All too likely.

Surely not rats, too small
to carry near-ripe globes of passion
in their tiny paws. It was a mystery.

The finches — ‘meeps’ — in their small aviary
were the only witnesses to the nightly theft
until one morning — horror — my sister smelled a rat.

The tiny terror must have squeezed through birdproof bars
and rampaged through the meeps. Body parts
and bloody feathers strewn the sandy floor.

The rat was too fat, now, too full of finches,
to squeeze back through the bars. Poor little meeps.
The well-fed dogs had slept

right through the massacre. Rat? What rat?
My sister, squeamish about murdering the murderer
gave the beast a sporting chance. The cage door opened

while the dogs watched. Fattened rat sprinted
for the fence, ducked through a tiny gap
between the palings. Five seconds more

and the dingo might have snagged its tail
but no. The rat had got home free.
The spoodle looked on, baffled.

Rats one, dogs nil, no finches left on the field.
The cockatiels and galah squawked consolation
doing their best to comfort the bereaved.

— First published in *The Enchanting Verses*, xxix, 2019: <http://theenchantingverses.org/issue-xxix-july-2019.html>

Monster-mollusc

More than half my snow pea seedlings
had disappeared, no trace left.
Marauding birds at dawn, or snails.
So much for plans of sweet peapods
crunched raw and cool each afternoon.

Frankly cranky, I walked the deck
and almost accidentally squished
the biggest slug I've ever seen —
long as my hand, thicker than my thumb.
So, the culprit!

Seeing me, or feeling my steps
on the deck, it halted
trying to make itself invisible.
I stared.
This was a monster-mollusc,
stranger than any garden predator
I'd ever seen. And what
was that weird red mark
almost a triangle
high on its back, right between
where its shoulders would have been
if slugs had arms?

Something stopped me
from finding a stick or rock
to crush the garden enemy
destroyer of seedlings.

Inside the house, I looked it up.
Like a blue whale sifting plankton,
this gentle giant slug eats only algae.
Plenty of that on the rocks at the edge
of the damp garden bed.

I don't know why the small monster
had slithered noiseless
out of whatever shady trove of algae
that it grazed. Perhaps our house
smelled of mould, delicious
after the weeks of rain. I turned my back
and in a minute, maybe two,
it disappeared back to its secret
algal feeding grounds.

— First published in *The Enchanting Verses*, xxix, 2019:[http://theenchantingverses.org/issue-xxix-july 2019.html](http://theenchantingverses.org/issue-xxix-july-2019.html)

Quantum string

The cat who's finally learnt
at ten years old

to sleep in a cardboard box
perches now, lemur-precarious,

at the edge of an over-full chair
softly snoring.

Even an old cat
can learn new tricks

from the Great Felinity
who tangles quantum string

round softly-hissing black hole balls
deep in the centre of the multiverse.

— First published in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, May/June 2019,
<https://www.asimovs.com/>

Our Lady of the Winter Squash

On every stair and fence and wall
icons and idols remind us of the fleshy
seed-stuffed bounty of our Goddess
during this her yearly festival
and sacred celebration.

Even in the chrome and marble foyer
see the altar loaded

with black and orange offerings
to Our Lady of the Winter Squash.

Our golden goddess feeds the world.

Give Her bones and blood
the best foods for the soil.

Please Her with images
of her sacred animals: crawly spiders

in massed grey webs
scattered with dry-sucked corpses,
flapping bats that feed on flowers, fruit
and blood,

and arch-backed cats
as fecund as the night.

— First published in *Polu Texni: A Magazine of Many Arts*, October 2018: <http://www/polutexni/?p=1847>

Sweet intertidal flesh

Imagine a modern midden
of mussel shells, mounding
higher with every pot
full of the fruit of the sea



that we humans have feasted on
time out of time.

Simmered in a saucepan
they're creamy, tangy with herbs
and Neolithic wine, cider, bread.
Thrown on a campfire
they steam in their own juice,
delivering sweet intertidal flesh
to the hungry hunter-gatherer.

Back before metal was melted,
blue-black shells were sharp scrapers,
clever little blades, hollow spoons

all silver-shiny inside, no need
to carve wood or polish stone —
a Swiss Army Knife free
from the sea.

Honour the sandy salty strings
of their beards, that cling them
to rope and post and stone. Know
the useful shell held in your cupped hand.
Celebrate the tender flesh today,
remembering that first campfire
by an estuary, that first
warm sweetmouthful of sea.

— Won first prize in the Connemara Mussel Festival Poetry Competition; published on its website, May 2016

The matrix

Our atmosphere
with all its clouds birds insects
rooftops treetops sky
lies barely fingernail-deep
over its solid matrix

Mother Earth

We tiny soft-shelled things
crawl our small lives
through one so-slender slice
between our Gaia's
molten metal core

and high cold dark.

— Shortlisted in the Quantum Words 2018 Science Poetry Competition, first published on the Writing NSW website, October 2018

Down in Windy Hollow

Down in Windy Hollow
where the graves are cold and deep,
down in Windy Hollow
where the slimy crawlers creep,
down in Windy Hollow
where the spiny spiders leap,
down in Windy Hollow
are you sure you're just asleep?

Down in Windy Hollow
where the brackish plankton thrive,
down in Windy Hollow
where the Morlocks jump and jive,
down in Windy Hollow
where the ghosts and ghoulies strive,
down in Windy Hollow
are you sure you're still alive?

Down in Windy Hollow
where the vampires stroke your head,
down in Windy Hollow
where the zombies are well fed,
down in Windy Hollow
where your legs feel full of lead,
down in Windy Hollow
are you sure that you're not dead?

— *The School Magazine*, Touchdown edition, June 2018

Tim Train

Tim Train is a human entity existing in the northern region of Melbourne between two cats, a worm farm, an in-house yeast colony, and two boxes of carbohydrate-gathering insects, who regard his comings and goings with frank suspicion. He is one of a team of MCs at Poetry at the Dan O'Connell Hotel in Carlton, has published a book of poems with Ginninderra Press entitled *Hangover Music*, and has recently had a story and a poem published at *Antipodean SF* (antisf.com).

Superman

Superman is stupid
Flying through the air
Great über-boober-goobermensch
In outer-underwear.
As if a brick could think
As if a brick could fly
Blooperman is stupid,
Lunkhead of the skies.
Superman much angry!
Superman pow-smash!
Cranky Super! Cranky Super!
Brada-clatter-CRASH!
Superman is stupid
Flying through the air
Great über-boober-goobermensch
In his outer-underwear.

Yt ys an epystle

From ye HOUSBOUNDE, away from the house on business, to hys GUDEWIFE, containing sundry matters of various sortes (c. 1550)

Gudewife! Fine greetings from thy housbounde deare,
Thogh I been far, I wyshe thatte I were neare.
I heare that in thy clymes the dayes growe colde —
High tyme yt ys to press cheese in a moulde.
I praye our cattles are healthy, & oure birdes;
Please to make sure they do notte nicke the curdes.
Hast thou a wynter cough, mayhap, or sneeze?
I praye thee not to do yt on the cheese.
I heare telle thatte thy hand is wounded sore —
GREAT GRIEFE! Who'll turne the cheeses over more?
But art thou tired, gudewife? Rest welle yn bedde —
Lest whenne thou turnst the pattes, they weigh like unto leade.
And praye do not thyself hurt spynnyng flaxe,
For yn a daye, or two, deare, we must waxe.
~~& so, in Holye Cheese's name I pray ...~~
~~Gude Jesu, in thy whole Edam to day ...~~
Gude Lord, I praye for holye cheese thys yeare —
& thou as well, Gudewife. Gudenight, my deare!

Criticanto

PAUL DI FILIPPO has been writing professionally for over thirty years, and has published almost that number of books. He lives in Providence RI, with his mate of an even greater number of years, Deborah Newton.

The following reviews appeared first on *Locus Online*, and are reprinted by kind permission of the author.

Paul di Filippo

Sensual adventures with old heresies

SHADOWS IN THE STONE

by Jack Dann (2019; IFWG Publishing; 362 pp.)

The Christian ‘heresy’ of Gnosticism offers a fascinating mythos, a disturbing philosophy, and a ready-made set of fantasy props and beings that could be adapted for fictional narratives. Put very simply, Gnosticism holds that all of material creation, rather than standing as the shining example of a benign creator’s will, is a diseased prison brought into being by a malevolent demiurge, operating in defiance of the actual offstage supreme deity. Humans who have twigged to this reality have a duty to disobey all the institutions and rules that enforce our captivity. And there’s a whole hierarchy of colourful, extra-natural entities on both sides of the battle. It’s a large, heroic, rebellious, and consequential belief system that should lend itself to myriad plots and storylines.

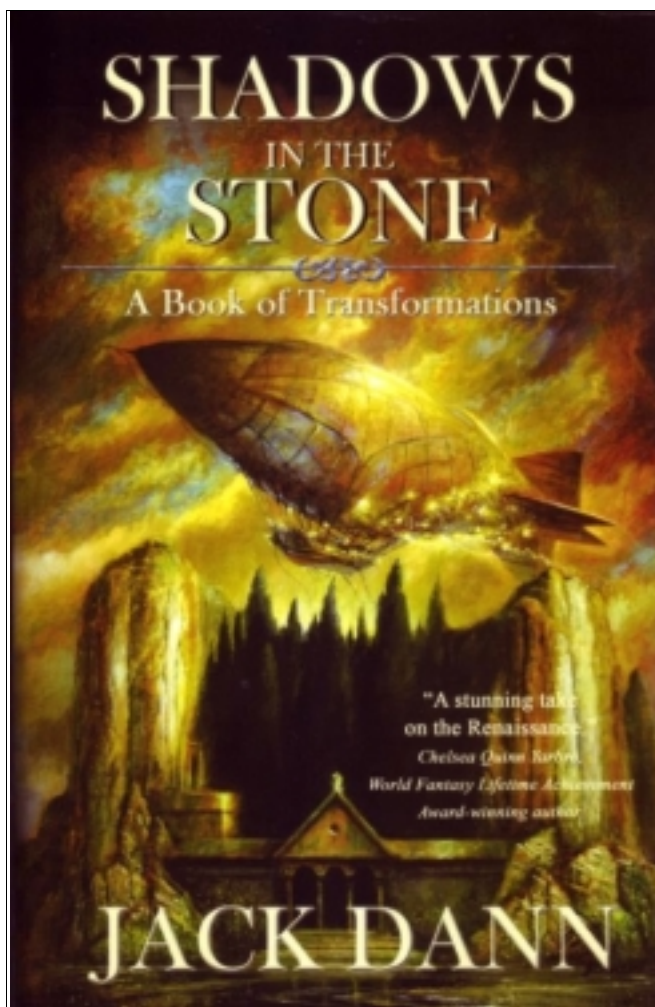
However, very few writers have plundered this belief system for novels. David Lindsay’s *Voyage to Arcturus* is seen as embodying gnostic principles, although not explicitly. The *Illuminatus!* trilogy by Shea and Wilson used some gnostic riffs among many other conspiratorial tokens. Inspired by Lindsay, literary critic Harold Bloom dipped his toe into fiction with *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fan-*

tasy. Dick’s *VALIS* trilogy depicts our mundane reality famously as a ‘Black Iron Prison,’ a very gnostic concept. *The Da Vinci Code* notoriously deployed Gnosticism in its revisionist stew. And a small novel titled *Ciphers* by some guy named Di Filippo very ambitiously tried to limn a secret Gnostic underpinning to all history.

But that’s about the whole catalogue. Until now, with the publication of **Jack Dann’s** *Shadows in the Stone*, which instantly raises the bar for this type of book. Exciting, intriguing, visceral, and vivid, Dann’s fantasy-rich historical adventure makes this old heresy into a living experience for characters and readers alike. Far from being abstruse and academic, a dead theme, his take on Gnosticism is living, vibrant, sensual, and satisfyingly occult all at once.

We open with a chapter that has a Campbellian heft to it. That’s Joseph Campbell, he of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. As in the original *Star Wars*, where Luke’s family was wiped out, launching him on his quest, our protagonist Lucian ben-Hananiah will be orphaned by cruel forces and set adrift to pursue his fate.

Lucian is a member of a community of Essenes in the Middle East of the 1400s. This clan guards the Gnostic secrets that the rest of Christianity denies. Just turned 13 and heir to the tribe’s



leadership, Lucian undergoes an initiation ritual that finds him meeting the ‘upper aeon and archangel’ Gabriel, who endows him with certain sensitivities to the underlying true state of the universe. (Gabriel becomes an important player for the rest of the book, always charmingly tutelary.) But before Lucian can use these new talents for his people, the whole tribe is slaughtered by the Knights of Cain, who demand the secrets held by the Essenes. Lucian alone escapes, thanks to help from secret sympathisers.

We next jump to Italy, some years later. Lucian is 21, and a lowly servant — hiding his abilities, unsure of himself — in the house of Pico Della Mirandola, sage, kabbalist, and general all-round wizard. The household also includes Pietro Neroni, Mirandola’s apprentice; Isabella Sabatina, young cousin under Mirandola’s care; and Agnolo Baldassare, who is acting as the medium, or scryer, for his boss, allowing Mirandola to peer into his magical stone for cosmic visions.

When Lucian finally exhibits his own unsuspected powers, superior to Baldassare’s, new vistas open for Mirandola’s researches. But before any coherent program can get underway, adversaries both temporal and supernatural stage their attacks. On the mortal front, Mirandola and

company are being sought by civic and religious authorities right up to the level of the Pope (who, we must recall, is the Bad Guy). This causes them to flee. But they are also being harassed in other dimensions, by the Dark Aeons led by Belias.

To complicate matters even further, we are introduced to Louisa Mary Morgan, a young girl from the era of America’s Civil War. She is yanked through time back to 1400s Florence, to assume her new duties as an avatar of Sophia, the supreme Gnostic mother.

The rest of the book — whose action encompasses only a few objective days — is a long pursuit through Florence, to other cities, finally culminating in a showdown on all planes of existence. Dann employs easy shifts of viewpoint amongst Lucian, Mirandola, and the two girls, Isabella and Louisa, giving a multivalent perspective on events. And what events they are! A ride on a Renaissance airship powered by spirits; escape through secret tunnels; precarious refuge in castles and other venues. All of the cultural apparatus and the physicality of the era is rendered in minute and convincing details that never become burdensome, doled out by Dann, via his obviously extensive researches, in just the right measure. (The book is cousin to Dann’s other Renaissance novel, *The Memory Cathedral*.)

Dann’s prose is never over-archaic or fusty, but neither is it modern. He achieves a very readable otherness, allowing us to enter the spirit of his chosen time and place. Here’s a good example. Pietro, who comes to have the magical scrying stone literally embedded in his flesh, finds he can control a pride of lions living as ‘watchdogs’ in the city.

[The lion] ran across the piazza, gnashing and tearing at anyone unfortunate enough to be in its way. Its sensorium overwhelmed, it ran through the screams and smells, slipping on wet stones, swiping its claws at a porphyry statue of a crouching lion as it crossed a bridge. It paused behind the church of San Zaccaria, sniffing at its moon-white facade, then circled the convent. There was something inside the squat brick building, a sapphire lodestone that the lion perceived as comfort and satiation; but against its will the lion moved on, moved away from the discordant clamor of nuns and daughters of patricians who were entertaining eligible guests. Although it yearned for raw flesh and warm blood, the lion skirted around the crowded piazzas and campos and made its way north through ramo side streets and dead-silent alleys.

In this one masterful paragraph we get cultural details, emotions, a sensual onslaught, and action. It’s typical of the whole book, whether describing

earthly or celestial events.

A wealth of very lively and unforgettable ancillary characters fleshes out the cast as well, and Dann always makes sure to grant each individual a full measure of moral complexity.

With flavours of the work of Gene Wolfe and John Crowley, James Morrow and K. J. Parker,

Dann's new book is guaranteed to take the reader on a whirlwind journey of danger and enlightenment behind the cardboard reality we mistake for the universe's true substance.

— **Paul Di Filippo**, 2019

Wells v. the Martians, continued

THE MASSACRE OF MANKIND

by **Stephen Baxter** (2017) (US: Crown; 496 pp., hardcover) (UK: Orion/Gollancz; 464 pp., hardcover)

In 1995, **Stephen Baxter** crafted an authorised sequel to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, titled *The Time Ships*. I recall enjoying it immensely, and thinking that Baxter was a fine choice for such a project, and should do more such, in between his original work. Little did I know that it would be two decades and more before I got my wish.

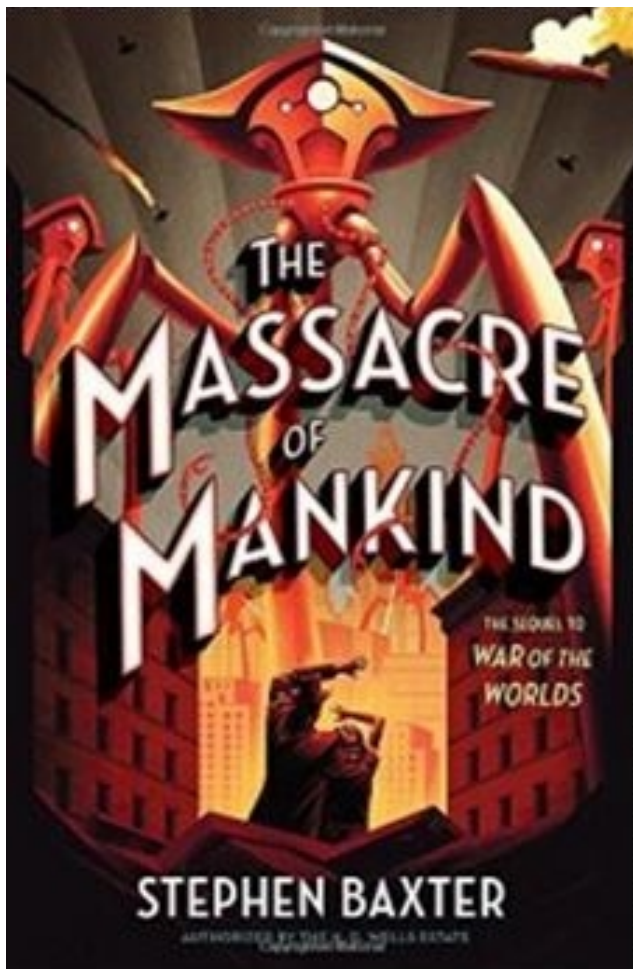
Of course, one motivating factor for the new book — just as it was for the commemorative

appearance of *The Time Ships* on the hundredth anniversary of its predecessor — is that 2017 was an anniversary year for the serialisation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which appeared in *Pearson's* in 1897. (Its book publication occurred the following year, so that Baxter can really extend the anniversary across two years.)

In any case, Baxter's offering now joins a select assortment of Wellsian spinoffs, from Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* on down, proving once again just how fertile and seminal and influential old Herbert George was and remains.

In *The Massacre of Mankind*, Baxter has gone to great lengths to establish believable continuity between his text and Wells's, across many parameters, all this groundwork serving as foundation for extending the tale. So rather than dive headfirst into a recitation of the plot — not all of which can be revealed, for fear of creating spoilers — perhaps the initial thing to do is examine how he has cleverly built his bridges.

Baxter has chosen as his primary protagonist Julie Elphinstone, who played a pretty relevant part in the original. She was the wife of the brother of the original narrator, whose escape from the Martians constituted some vital passages. That last-cited figure, the narrator, forever unnamed by Wells, is now revealed as one Walter Jenkins, suffering from shellshock to the current day, and obsessed with the quiescent quandary presented by the Martians. His brother, Frank, is currently divorced from Julie, and a medico. These three souls serve as a vital link to the preceding War, having experienced it firsthand and bringing their perspectives to the new encounter. To this cast Baxter adds imagined folks, among them Harry Kane, a brash American journalist, whose later career is conflated with that of Orson Welles (hence, I believe, justifying the clue of the Kane surname); and Bert Cook, a typical Brit prole of the sort beloved by Wells, who eventually comes off as a kind of Ballardian 'in love with entropy' outlaw. Add some famous historical figures such as Winston Churchill, Thomas Edison, and General Patton. And oh yes, a certain 'speculative writer, the



‘Year Million Man’ essayist’.

The next thing Baxter does to promote continuity is to stick to Victorian physics and astronomy and cosmology. His solar system is rigorously that of an 1890s understanding, and akin to the consensus venue beloved by the later writers from *Planet Stories*: swampy Venus, dying Mars, etc. He also treats the various Martian inventions — heat ray, tripods — with logic and consistency.

Third, Baxter carries forward the themes of the original — Darwinian struggle of lifeforms, advanced cultures versus primitive; the logic and ethics of imperialism; the way that social structures fail under pressure; etc.

Last, Baxter uses the conditions prevalent at the end of the Wells book as his inviolable points of extrapolation for the subsequent 14 years that separate his plot from Wells’s. Thus we learn that the UK has become a somewhat Orwellian police state under the dictatorship of one General Marvin, who addresses the populace through special radio sets known as ‘Marvin’s Megaphones’. The rest of the globe, while cognisant of the earlier Martian invasion, is less affected, although a kind of modified Great War has occurred in Europe.

So, with this sturdy framework of character, theme, technology, and extrapolation in place, Baxter kicks off his new invasion, a decade and a half after the original. A huge fleet of capsules is seen to be launched from Mars, and their impact points on Earth are plotted. The military has strategies in place to re-fight the last war better, but the Martians have learned to improvise. Their first new tactic is to employ the advance-wave empty capsules as kinetic bombs. Thus they immediately wipe out half the English forces like so many meteor impacts. Then the second wave arrives. From here, it’s death, destruction, distraction, and desperation for all.

The events are filtered through Julie’s scrupulous reportage, which is presented as an after-the-fact record or reconstruction, with much foreshadowing that eventually humanity will emerge intact. This strategy, I felt, removed some of the suspense from the tale, but the immediacy and drama of the plot could still be relished, if one put aside the guarantees of some kind of victory. And the surprise nature of that victory remains intact right up to the big reveals. Additionally, Julie will present some of her story from the POV of Frank Jenkins and his companion Verity Bliss. This move was essential to shoehorn in some important events, but taking Julie offstage seemed a bit awkward at first.

But with these quibbles aside, the book is stuffed

with potent action scenes, tangible human relationships, epic incidents of devastation and despair, and surreal moments such as the feeding chamber in the Great Redoubt of the Martians. Those aliens come off as less cipherish than they do in Wells, with rational reasons for all their actions. The book never ventures into the more van Vogtian realms that I seem to recall *The Time Ships* did, but that is totally in keeping with the mimetic fidelity of Wells’s original.

Part of the ‘charm’, if you will, of such apocalyptic books as this one is the alluring overturn of mankind and the vaunted civilised works of our species. We all secretly revel in imagery of our boring civilised lives tossed into the trash heap where they belong, and Baxter satisfies that perverse urge perfectly.

But if you looked closer, things were far from ordinary.

There was no other traffic to be seen on the road along which we sped, for a start. Here and there one would see wreckage — cars driven off the road and abandoned to rust. The most startling sight of that sort, which we saw from a level crossing, was a crashed train. It lay along the line that had carried it; passenger coaches were smashed to matchwood, and freight coaches lay on their backs, with their rusting wheels in the air, like tremendous cockroaches, upended. It was not the train’s destruction that affected me so much as the fact that it had never been cleared away.

A little later we passed at speed through an area that looked, from afar, as if it had been burned out, for a black dust, like soot, lay over everything: the road itself, the houses, the fields. I would learn from a grim-faced Frank that this was the aftermath of a Black Smoke attack.

Now perhaps the most intriguing accomplishment of this book involves something that it is not. It is definitely not steampunk. Steampunk is a post-modern style of knowingness and hindsight and revisionism, sometimes devolving to sheer farce, camp, and snark. One could write a steampunk sequel to *TWotW*, but that is not what Baxter has done. He has written a ‘cutting-edge’ Victorian SF novel as authentically as a person can compose such a thing in the year 2017. And for this, he is to be honoured, as he valiantly fills in large part the vacant shoes of his literary grandfather.

— Paul Di Filippo, 2017

Delany, Robinson: memoirs of distinctive lives

There are never enough memoirs and autobiographies available from genre writers. Historically scarce for various reasons — perhaps the most significant being a lack of uncontracted-for free time on the part of the writers themselves — first-person accounts of the creative and commercial lives of pulpsters and popular-fiction authors are generally entertaining, informative, and illuminating of how fiction for the masses is created and sold, as well as being colorfully descriptive of historical characters from these genre milieus and the mundane events of a working writer's life.

Fans of crime fiction and SF would have devoured full-length autobiographies from such figures as Theodore Sturgeon, Donald Westlake, Elmore Leonard, Leigh Brackett, Patricia Highsmith, or James Tiptree, Jr. But that opportunity has been lost with their deaths, even if the occasional personally slanted essay survives. The books that have appeared along these lines, from such folks as Frederik Pohl, Jack Vance, Jack Williamson, Isaac Asimov, Damon Knight, Frank Gruber, Jim Thompson, H. Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Shirley Jackson, and others, are cherished and kept in print.

NOT SO GOOD A GAY MAN: A MEMOIR

by Frank M. Robinson (2017; Tor; 319 pp.)

Luckily for those of us who relish such intimate and informative narratives, two SF writers have recently gifted us with their accounts. One, **Frank Robinson**, is recently departed, having died in 2014. Born in 1926, he belonged to the generation of writers who

came to prominence in the 1950s. The second man, **Samuel Delany**, is happily still with us. Born almost 20 years after Robinson, and a prodigy, Delany flared into prominence not two decades later, as one might expect, but in the early 1960s.

The fact that Delany is and Robinson was gay makes their accounts of their lives all the more compelling, since the full record of contributions by LGBT authors in the field has been obscured by past prejudices and once-dominant social and publishing practices. For instance, even today the sexuality of Arthur C. Clarke is little commented on — arguably, a condition he seemed to prefer — and his name is hardly the first byline that most people would think of when compiling an honour roll of gay SF writers.

While Robinson's *Not So Good a Gay Man* is a semi-formal autobiography, Delany's *In Search of Silence: The Journals of Samuel R. Delany, Volume I, 1957–1969* is the reproduction of a necessarily more scattershot diary or daybook that addresses the events and course of his life in a more haphazard way. Along with their generational and career-path differences, these contrasting formats offer intriguing points of discussion.

Robinson's book first comes off as a breezy raconteur's banquet, offering up the highlights of a packed, productive life. And yet the bones beneath the skin harbour a deep sadness, melancholy, and sense of regret, tied to the rigours of being gay in mid-century America. The title, of



NOT SO GOOD A GAY MAN

A MEMOIR

FRANK M. ROBINSON

course, puts this self-doubt and lingering malaise front and centre.

Robinson's Illinois childhood echoed those of his generational peers, such as Will Eisner, Harlan Ellison, and Isaac Asimov: he recalls his pre-WWII life as a *mélange* of movies, comics, and sleepover camps, filled with rough-and-tumble free-range juvenile dynamics. A father's abandonment precipitated family chaos, which settled down into a blended household when his mother married, strictly out of practicality, the man who became his stepfather. Early sexual tensions with a stepbrother offered some rudimentary self-awareness that Robinson's sexual impulses were not aimed at females. Some early college years were interrupted by wartime service. The postwar resumption of college life was mixed up with nascent fiction writing, the sale of a first novel ('Lippincott wanted some minor changes, but they offered an advance of \$500'), and eventual employment at a variety of magazines. Science fiction fandom filled in any gaps of time. And throughout, Robinson wrestled with his libido and the nature of his desires, finding little help from any community or font of sane authority.

By 1959 he was employed as an editor at *Rogue* magazine, a rival to *Playboy*. As the 1960s accelerated into their quintessential wildness, Robinson ramped up his own quest for personal freedom, eventually ending up in San Francisco for the Summer of Love and beyond. Finally burning out there, he ended up back in Chicago, working at last for *Playboy*, where, irony of ironies, he, a stifled gay man, dispensed the hip heterosexual hedonism of the 'Advisor' column. His literary career really took off when he and fellow gay author Thomas Scortia wrote a series of bestselling disaster novels, starting with *The Glass Inferno* (filmed as *The Towering Inferno*). The profits allowed him to live as he wished — and to accumulate one of the standout collections of pulp magazines, later valued at over a million dollars.

Robinson's fascinating life did not, however, stall out there. Returned to San Francisco, he became speechwriter to politician Harvey Milk, martyred in the midst of their relationship, and participated, willy-nilly yet heroically, in the early years of the AIDS crisis. This brings us up roughly to the mid 1980s. Robinson's last three decades are, unfortunately, scanted in a mere final 30 pages. And alas, a hoped-for index is nowhere to be found.

But the novelist's eye for details and sharp characterisations are both in evidence throughout. He conjures people into solidity with an easy hand.

One day Bill [Hamling] asked me to fill in as bartender for a party he was throwing in his rec room the next week. The party was a rousing

success, but I noticed a man standing quietly in a corner who didn't talk much to the people there. It turned out that he'd worked with Bill when they had both been employed by a publishing company in a North Side suburb. He was a would-be cartoonist Bill said, and had self-published a book of his own cartoons titled *Chicago, That Toddling Town*. As a favor Bill had bought several of his cartoons for *Imagination*, though he never planned to publish them. I think I poured a beer for the man and promptly forgot him.

That was the first time I met Hugh Hefner, though it wouldn't be the last.

That portrait of Hefner as nerdy wallflower goes on to underpin as subtext all the subsequent encounters that Robinson chronicles.

Of course, Robinson's own sharp perceptions and portraiture talents are trained on no figure more intently than on himself. His dissection of his neuroses and fumbling attempts to break through the constraints of psyche and society are unsparing.

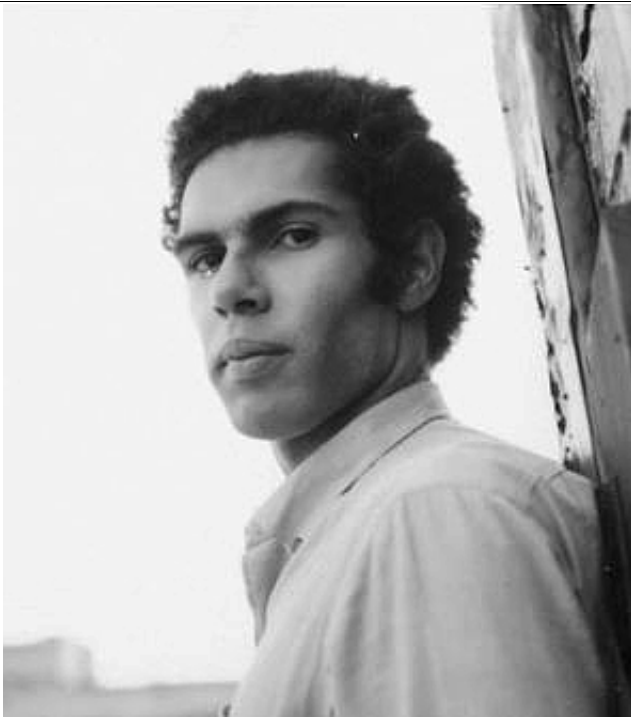
My self-esteem was rapidly sinking, and there was nobody in whom I could confide, nobody who could offer real-life advice. I was on my own, and if I didn't do something I would go off a bridge, as Tyler Clementi was to do generations later.

I had to bite the bullet and do what I knew had to be done. I didn't succeed, but in the process I managed to fuck up the lives of two other people.

This fraught, dangerous, frustrating, yet ultimately triumphant journey — 'My life changed in an instant; it was like slamming a door ... I had been leading two lives for years and now one of them was abruptly dead' — is the prickly armature on which Robinson hangs all the other marvellous, colourful incidents of his rich life. It's a brave display whose antithetical components merge into one organic vision of a life deeply fulfilled.

IN SEARCH OF SILENCE: THE JOURNALS OF SAMUEL R. DELANY, VOLUME I, 1957–1969
by Samuel R. Delany, edited by Kenneth R. James (2017; Wesleyan U

The most apt comparison I believe I can make after finishing Samuel Delany's *In Search of Silence* is to reading Philip K. Dick's equally massive omnium-gatherum, *Exegesis*, his graphomaniacal attempt to derive sense from a mystical experience he underwent. Both reading experiences are tantamount to undergoing telepathic overload from tapping into the stream of consciousness — never meant to be



Samuel Delany on Avenue B, summer 1966.
(Photo: Ed McCabe.)

overheard — of a unique genius whose mind is roiled by a million different concerns, topics, themes, emotions, accomplishments, insights, and dreams.

But conversely, there is a major difference between the two men and the two books that is best encapsulated in a famous quote from Salvador Dalí: ‘The only difference between me and a madman is that I am not mad.’ (Alternatively: ‘The difference between me and a madman is the madman thinks that he is sane. I know that I am mad.’) The ‘madman’ of course would be helpless, hapless Dick, while his ‘sane’ counterpart is competent, composed Delany. In Dick’s case, his copious text is an almost involuntary response to the incomprehensible world, an attempt to master chaos and distance himself from it, while Delany’s journals are a very deliberate and willed attempt to chronicle and internalise the beckoning world and to write himself into a higher resolution of being.

Whether my comparison holds up or not, the reader of Delany’s project is certainly in for a wild ride through a torrential landscape of autobiography, drafts of fiction, essays, correspondence, travelogues, pornographic fantasies, word portraits of friends and strangers, intellectual experiments such as the creation of an artificial language, and literary criticism.

Much of the book’s success has to be credited to the masterful work by editor **Kenneth R. James**. His general introduction is a concise history of the author, his materials, and Delany’s place in the canon. Then, with each section of the book, James

provides more guidance, setting the historical context for what we are about to read, highlighting the most interesting bits, and explaining his curatorial decisions.

Delany began annotating his own existence at the age of 15 and continued for decades, though this present volume culls from only roughly 12 years of notebooks. But it’s enough to chart the development of a nonpareil mind and talent in greater depth than even Delany’s previously published autobiographical works.

From 1957, the very first notebook — presented only in an appendix, due to some slight doubt as to its chronological provenance — opens with 15-year-old Delany’s ‘Outline for “Great American Novel”.’ This far-from-standard-adolescent presumption and preoccupation is typical of the whole project. That Delany would see his first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor*, published when he was only 20 is foreshadowed by the wealth of literary experiments and the developing aesthetic sensibilities on display here. Whether he is cultivating his novelist’s ear by recording public conversations, scribbling story fragments and titles, or tossing off doggerel — ‘Lateday sadness/melting madness/to recapture/morning rapture’ — Delany is ever awash in a welter of language.

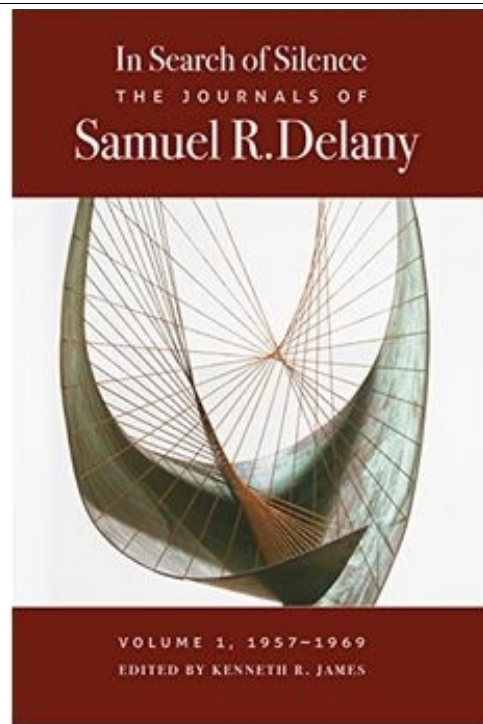
But of course all of these attempts to grapple with the constraints and delights of formal prose are interspersed with heartfelt chronicles of love affairs, familial dramas, comradely excursions, scholastic assignments, and other quotidian matters. Throughout, Delany is striving to fathom and embrace his own sexuality. His path seems to have been easier than Robinson’s, due no doubt in part to sheer temperamental differences between the two men. But Delany also operated from a platform of wider reading, of deeper urban acceptance, and of the shifting mores of the relaxed 1960s as opposed to the more straitjacketed 1940s. But of course, life is not a bowl of cherries. His never-diminished love for — and abortive marriage with — the poet Marilyn Hacker is a turbulent journey, from one end of this volume to the other. And in 1964 Delany suffered a kind of nervous breakdown from the strain of overwork and other causes, requiring hospitalisation. Although this was the most significant roadblock to his growing harmony of mind and body, the book recounts many other such pitfalls common to sensitive gay artists. Even three years later, he is still undergoing panic attacks:

This morning a bit after six, I woke up in a total panic that my heart would stop. I must’ve catapulted from the deepest sleep because I was exhausted. After I was awake a moment my heart began to pound and I began to sweat. I tried to

return to sleep, but this obsession rode my mind like a bronco rider. I lay there holding my pulse, trying to discover other places where I could feel it. Each natural change would terrify me. I knew it was all ridiculous anxiety, yet I was completely convinced. Half a dozen times I began to fall into tingly, nervous sleep, and pulled myself awake. I knew this anxiety must be generating from the confusion around me. Ron is leaving in June, and we treat the business as though it is the end of the relationship. My mother just left for her vacation in Greece, and her worries were all about leaving me alone. As I write this, I feel my anxiety rising, and yet I can't follow the connections. I was obsessed with the idea of speaking to Marilyn. But there is no money in the house to call. I think the whole business was sparked last night when Linda Sampson came over to see Ron, quietly hysterical. I had put in my first good day of work in weeks. Ron & Linda talked in the other room. She was having one of those negative female adolescent epiphanies: she was alone and terrified and wanted Ron to go away with her. She verged over into tears a couple of times. I felt sympathetic. I also hated her for being weak — there was perhaps just the faintest bit of jealousy that Ron paid so much attention to her, but even more I was terribly envious of her for being able to feel like that. A few more years have passed and I have not cried. I hate everybody who can: I suppose that especially means women who do it so easily. It sits like a ball in the back of my throat, wanting to get out.

But the overall tenor of this book — of course, never composed as a coherent narrative, and yet somehow taking the shape of one in retrospect — is one of joy, brio, excitement, and ambition. The reader will experience not only the passions of youth but also the dizzying atmosphere of the era. Often these pleasures combine, such as in Delany's travelogues of his separate excursions to the Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals. When, as an award-winning writer, Delany sets off for Europe, the reader experiences the same broadening of horizons that the author did.

While these accessible threads will appeal to general readers, two aspects of the book will delight SF specialists above all. The first concerns Delany's attempt to create a critical vocabulary and approach for dealing with science fiction. Drafts of essays point toward the voluminous and groundbreaking work that would appear in such later books of his as *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*. The second aspect deals with his fiction. We get to see not only the often contorted trail that brought him to the finished books but also the many, many ideas and



conceits that died a-borning. (Not all of it is genius; *The Flames of the Warthog* has to be one of the dumbest ostensibly serious titles ever.) The evolution of such masterpieces as *Nova* and *The Einstein Intersection* is vividly on display, providing for the first time ever a look at the many discarded iterations that resulted in the finished books. But even more alluring, to my tastes at least, are the ambitious projects that never bore fruit, such as this one:

Mirror and Lens: A series of five novels following the life and times of Ian Scorda during the Solar Revolution. Each volume will be between 70 & 80 [thousand] words.

As a fiction writer myself, having grown up on Delany's work and continuing to be enamoured of it, I am tempted by almost every page to pick up these cast-off concepts and write the books I wish Delany had found the time and energy and circumstances to provide! Many other readers will feel the same, daydreaming about lost worlds where these books did emerge.

The decision to print these revelatory notebooks, which hold nothing back and which exemplify Delany's devotion to his craft and to a wide-armed embrace of all types of people and all the muck and mire and celestial effulgence of the world, is typical of the generous way in which the man has lived his life and delivered us his books. They are just one more gift from a boy named Chip.

— Paul Di Filippo, 2017

When the world is running down,
you make the best of what's still around

THE WATER KNIFE

by Paolo Bacigalupi (2015) (US edn.: Knopf;
371 pp.) (UK edn.: Penguin Random House)

In his piercing 2011 review of *Welcome to the Greenhouse*, an anthology of climate change fiction edited by Gordon van Gelder, **Paolo Bacigalupi** concluded his meditations on how much such science fiction could help remediate the world's troubles by wondering whether SF itself had reached the end of the road: 'My biggest fear as I turn the pages of this book is one left unspoken — that fiction itself is extinct. That in the future there will simply be no tale to tell.'

This mind-at-the-end-of-its-tether tone did not seem to condone defeatism or any throwing in of the towel, at least for Bacigalupi himself. Since that review he has produced three books, one of which, *The Drowned Cities*, deals explicitly with issues congruent with those in van Gelder's tome. But all three of those books were aimed at young adults; *The Water Knife* is Bacigalupi's first novel for more

mature audiences, covering his core theme of how our heirs might deal with a ruined environment.

Any reader following this insightful author's career — which even before his award-winning debut novel, *The Windup Girl*, has focused on climate change, corporate malfeasance, public inattention, and sustainable technology — will approach this new book with high hopes to see if Bacigalupi has envisioned some new route through our global dilemma, some new reason for SF to go on existing.

What the reader will discover is no utopia. But it is not precisely a dystopia, either. It is simply a noirish portrait of a tough and exacting era, in which people maintain as best they can, with little energy or will left over for civilised niceties or do-gooding. Bacigalupi is not chronicling a descent into barbarism like the *Mad Max* scenario but rather a Water Wars Depression, a harrowing of the flesh, engineered by nature with the assistance of human cupidity and stupidity.

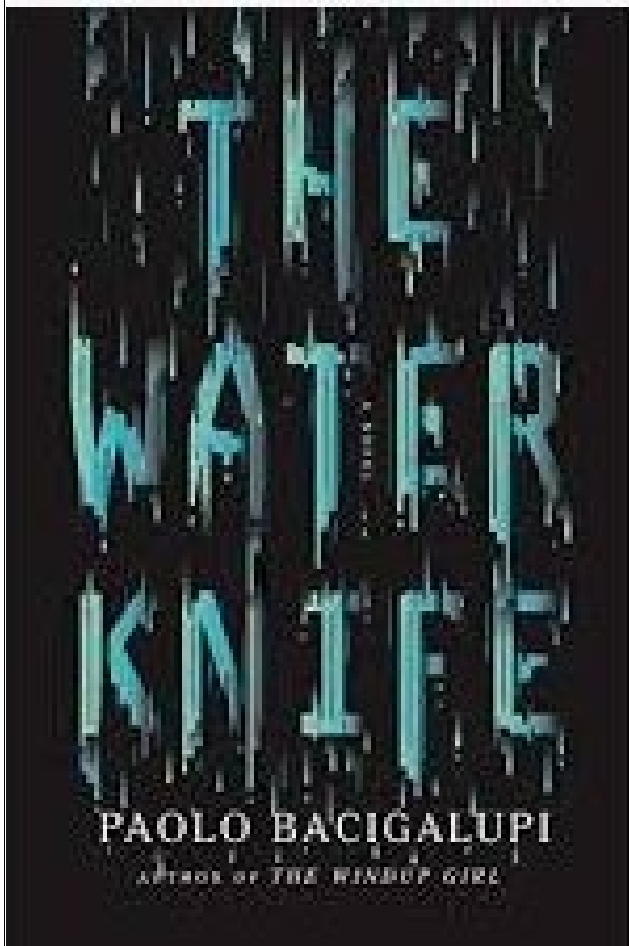
The time frame is the indeterminate near future, as the American West and Southwest, along with an offstage Mexico, struggle to survive the drastic diminishment of all water resources. Rivers run shallow, rain does not come, aquifers go dry. Cities are hollowed out, refugees hit the road, and the rich end up in sustainable arcologies, vast hermetic structures whose luxurious interiors rely on recycling, conservation — and the ruthless, quasi-legal arrogation of any and all water rights.

Three viewpoint characters allow us to witness the various social strata and desperate machinations of this future.

Angel Velasquez is the 'water knife' of the title, a canny, deadly catspaw for Catherine Case, the queen of Nevada water dealings. Next is Lucy Monroe, a freelance Internet journalist chronicling the slow demise of Phoenix, Arizona. Last, we come upon Maria Villarosa, one of the proles struggling to make it from day to day.

The book opens with a thrilling, slam-bang set piece: Angel's military takedown of one of Case's rivals, the municipality of Carver City that has water Case needs for her own Vegas projects. This chapter drags the reader headlong into the dusty, dog-eat-dog future. Chapter 2 digs into Lucy's somewhat dicey life, which is going to go even further off the rails. Chapter 3 shows us Maria, hustling to make a buck by cleverly parlaying a few dollars on the amateur water futures market.

All three milieus are conveyed in slangy, taut



language, full of sensory cues that deeply embed the reader in the altered realities of this scrabbling, hard-luck, at times almost Ballardian environment. 'In the end it was always the same: traffic lights swinging blind on tumbleweed streets; shadowy echoing shopping malls with shattered window displays; golf courses drifted with sand and spiked with dead stick trees.'

Bacigalupi is in cyberpunk mode here, in a novel whose very title conjures up assonance with *Blade Runner*. When he's not taking us up to the sterile boardrooms where the deals are made, he's stalking the blood-puddled streets where the nasty stuff goes down and technology finds its unanticipated niches. The viability of the cyberpunk attitude and suite of speculative tools, fashioned by William Gibson and his peers, proves itself all over again in Bacigalupi's able grip. (And please note the surname Case as a possible tribute to *Neuromancer's* seminal cyber-cowboy.)

Bacigalupi keeps his three protagonists on separate tracks until circumstances cause them to converge. Angel is in Phoenix, investigating the death of someone for his employer, and meets Lucy at the morgue. He immediately senses her entanglement in the affairs that interest him and wrangles a tense meeting with her. This gives Bacigalupi a chance to emulate Hammett or Chandler with clever accuracy, *mutatis mutandis*. Although Angel is certainly no tarnished knight like Spade or Marlowe, his dialogue with Lucy here evokes the barbed *Black Mask* banter of those two writers and their literary school.

Lucy and Angel will form a reluctant alliance built on a quicksand compounded of love and hate,

mutual respect and suspicion, in order to solve the central, *Chinatown*-esque MacGuffin of the novel — the whereabouts of some up-for-grabs 'water rights older than God' — and in order to stop people from trying to kill them.

Bacigalupi of course does not stint in his world-building. His reinvigoration of that great trope the arcology, or city-within-a-building, is vigorously pursued. And who else could imagine 'Johnny-trucks' that circulate with tinkling chimes to allow citizens without toilets to get some relief?

There's a big streak of the cosmopolitan world-weariness and underdog perspective of the late, lamented Lucius Shepard here. But Bacigalupi has in mind another classic author who plumbed a similar vein, at least for a while. That would be John Brunner, whose quartet of monitory, info-dense, jacked-in novels — *Stand on Zanzibar*, *The Sheep Look Up*, *The Jagged Orbit*, and *The Shockwave Rider* — remain unparalleled examples of engaged and cautionary novels meant to forestall the very dangers they limn.

Bacigalupi's return to this type of tale in an adult setting — and reader beware, there are some shocking scenes of violence here — is no Kim Stanley Robinson foray into 'We Shall Overcome' territory. If the book evokes any anthem, it's the Police's 'When the World Is Running Down, You Make the Best of What's Still Around'.

Yet if this is as 'cheerful' as Bacigalupi can get about our future, then we should all be very glad he still stands tall, willing to declaim his vision so artfully, and with such force.

— Paul Di Filippo, 2015

Budrys's distinctive voice, thanks to David Langford

BEYOND THE OUTPOSTS: ESSAYS ON SF AND FANTASY 1955-1996

by Algis Budrys, edited by David Langford
(2020; Ansible Editions/Lulu.com, 378 pp.)

The field of fantastika could never have reached its current flourishing condition, nor hope to continue forcefully, without the efforts of the small presses. These firms throughout the history of the genre and into the present have preserved many older works from oblivion and also offered homes to worthy living writers whom the Big Five do not care to publish.

In the realm of preservation, David Langford's one-man operation **Ansible Editions** has done yeoman work, saving from the voracious trash heap of

history many worthwhile fannish and professional texts. One of Langford's major accomplishments was to produce a three-volume set of Algis Budrys's critical columns from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. (See links at <https://ae.ansible.uk/?id=printbks>.) And now he has followed that up with a compendium of Budrys's miscellaneous essays from various sources.

The half-life of literary critics is perhaps even shorter than that of the fiction writers upon whom they comment. In the year 2020, once potent names such as James Agee, Cyril Connolly, and Clifton Fadiman are faded remnants of what they once were. Even giants like Edmund Wilson ring few bells.

In the SF field, perhaps because we have had fewer critics (and those have been homegrown and

intimate with the readers and writers), each one has been more consequential and significant and perhaps better remembered. But even so, the name of Algis Budrys — slightly tarnished in some eyes due to his problematical dealings with Scientology in the waning years of his career — is hardly a household word. Yet he was too smart and vital and perceptive a storyteller and reviewer and critic to be allowed to vanish. So Langford's efforts are crucial and appreciated.

This meaty volume assembles nearly four dozen essays that range from personal memoirs to instructive how-to lessons; from insightful reviews of individual books to cogent analyses of the entire yearly output of the field; from Pauline-Kael-level observations on films to editorial and printerly considerations of the practical side of manufacturing a book. Throughout all of these pieces, there is one constant: Budrys's distinctive voice, which is affable, inviting, non-haughty, erudite yet down-to-earth, companionable and yet insistent on the maintenance of high standards and unlimited aspirations for SF. As he says in 'Bridges to Verity', 'The whole secret of my orientation as an essayist on books is that I speak as if I had just been asked about the book by a friend. As part of my contract with my friend, what I say about the book is nothing more than I would say if I had read it only on my own account. And absolutely nothing less.'

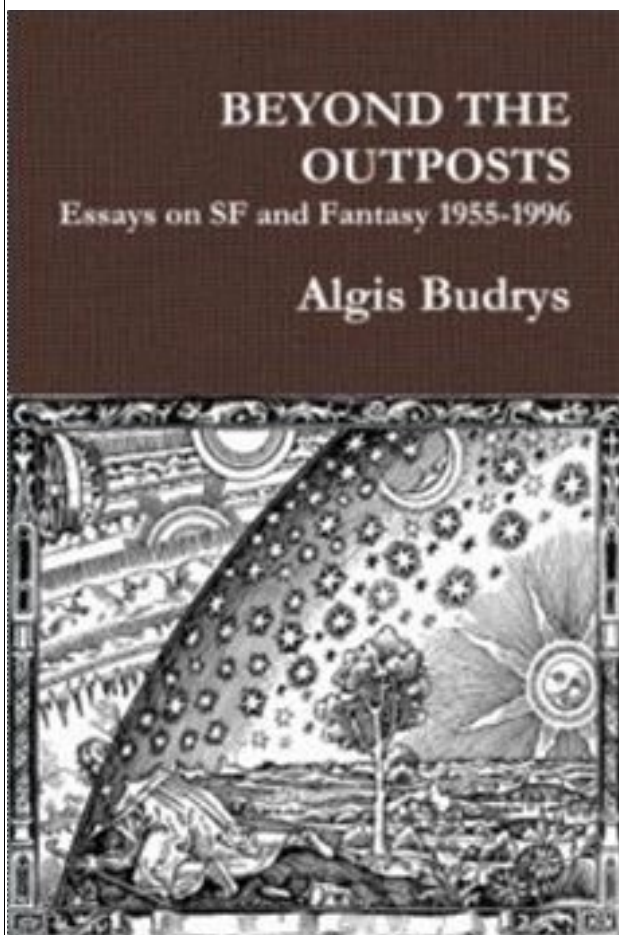
As the subtitle indicates, the oldest essay here (they come at us in chronological order) dates from 65 years ago, while the newest hails from a mere 25 years in the past. Thus they form a portrait of a vanished era. But one should not make the mistake of thinking these pieces irrelevant. Sure, there are some bits concerned with extinct practices and folks no longer prominent. But the genre matters that Budrys is concerned with are eternal and even topical.

Consider the very first essay, titled 'Or Thwim':

The attitude which I am here to speak against is that which contends that fiction should educate, and that writers of fiction are obligated to expose the injustices and inequities of our society. Stories and writers engaged in doing so are labelled 'sensitive', 'perceptive', 'significant', and, in critical terms, 'great'. Stories and writers not devoted to these things are labelled 'entertainment', 'hack', and, in criticism, 'good stories, but they don't say anything'. In recent years, this feeling has assumed major importance within the science fiction field, and a good many people now require of a story that it 'say something' before it can even be considered to be qualified for 'greatness'. This attitude has become so entrenched at times that what the story 'says' assumes paramount importance, and the actions, motivations, and statements of the characters, as well as the construction of the plot, no matter how clumsy, are all disregarded in critical analysis. One recent reputation, in particular, has been built on little more than the author's willingness to 'shatter taboos', with little regard for the fact that the future societies he constructs are flatly impossible, the future languages his characters use violate the laws of linguistic evolution, and the biology he quotes is monstrously inaccurate, to say nothing of the fact that these 'taboos' are taboos only in our current society and not in the ones the writer postulates.

What has happened, in short, is that an increasing number of nominal 'stories' in the field have become fictionalized essays, the construction of which justifiably (for its purposes) neglects the rigorous structural demands of the kind of science fiction story which, until recently, was held to be the highest refinement of the field.

My god, could anything be more pertinent to SF in the year 2020? Elsewhere, we find Budrys praising the influx of women writers into the field, and considering the ways big tent-pole movies such as *Star Wars* reconfigure the old landscape of prose science fiction. All still topical items today.



But perhaps the most timeless part of this book is when Budrys performs a dissection on the innards of science fiction as a mode of writing, when he examines the toolkit of our genre and strives to limn how one can master the task of writing superlative SF. He does this at frequent intervals even in simple reviews. But there are essays where this is his central theme, and the most illuminating are those he wrote specifically for *Locus*, here assembled under the rubric 'On Writing: The *Locus* Columns'. Very few critics, even those who were also professional fiction writers, have devoted so much analytical thought to the secrets of composing SF — and then been willing to share their cogitations and deductions.

Here we encounter Budrys's semi-famous formula for a story:

There is a thing which readers will recognize as a story every time. It has seven parts: (1) A protagonist with a (2) problem in a (3) context in which his (4) efforts to solve the problem are a succession of revelatory increasing failures which lead up to a (5) precipitating event which makes inevitable a (6) solution followed by a (7) reward. Stories with villainous protagonists go as follows: (1) A protagonist with a (2) problem in a (3) context in which his (4) efforts to solve the problem are a series of revelatory increasing successes which lead up to a (5) precipitating event which makes inevitable a (6) failure followed by (7) punishment. Clearly, these are the same thing.

And also in these *Locus* columns is where he lays down a manifesto of sorts.

SF is the hardest kind of writing there is. There's plenty of easy SF — witless adventure, facile notion, pop science montage, social primer. You can make a career out of that. If the western were still the predominant pop lit form, you could make the same career of that. If you make that choice, make it coolly, the same way a good carpenter does, and be the best carpenter you can. There's money in it now, and there may be money in it as long as you need.

If popular demand swings toward sports or

sea stories, perhaps you'll be able to detect the change and swing with it. If you never felt you were truly an SF writer, it won't even bother you.

But SF in its essentials is something else. It has the unique capability of exploring the chaotic universe realistically, because in its essence it is divorced from the constraints of transient myth which did not operate on your parents, will not operate on your children, but operates so overwhelmingly on you. SF in its essence demands that you know that, that you struggle against it as effectively — which means as knowingly — as possible, and that you come to understand what is important to people forever, as distinguished from all those conceptions which insidiously disguise what is important to you forever. That's doing art. Art is uncomfortable. Art is dog work.

Like many people, Budrys was a master of cognitive dissonance, a composite personality. He could advocate for a utilitarian nuts-and-bolts approach to writing SF, and then demand the presence of numinous inspiration. He labelled himself just another worker in the trenches, but insisted his novel *Rogue Moon* was the apex of SF. Resident at the beating heart of a much smaller field than exists today, he was on first-name comradely terms with giants like Asimov and Heinlein, and yet did not hesitate to call out their failings.

Let's take a look at 'Hardcover', the short story by Harlan Ellison in the May *Inside*. I'm going to be deliberately unfair in one facet of my criticism, and I therefore chose this story because it is not only readily available and perfectly exemplary of the dialectic approach, but also was written by a friend of mine who will understand that this in no way reflects my opinion of his basic ability.

This volume, while perhaps not quite so essential as the other collections of his essays, provides the most fun and wisdom pertaining to science fiction that you can buy this year, and Langford and Ansible deserve to sell thousands of copies.

— Paul Di Filippo, 2020

Cy Chauvin

Is science fiction alternate history?:
Benford's *Berlin Project*

CY CHAUVIN writes: 'My first issue of *SFC* was received in 1970 or 1971. It was only stapled in the upper left hand corner, and had an angular cover that may have been drawn directly on to stencil. The contents were interesting, but it's the letter that Bruce Gillespie wrote back that made me realize I had to subscribe. But I only made my first contribution (other than letters) in 2015. Nowadays, I write regularly for Stipple-Apa, including selections from my book log and bits of childhood autobiography.'

Cy published his own serious fanzine *Seldon's Plan* in the early 1970s, and edited *A Multitude of Visions* (T-K Graphics, 1975), a fine book of critical essays about the SF field.

THE BERLIN PROJECT

by Gregory Benford (Saga Press; 2017; 466 pp.)

The first notable alternate history story published in a genre market might be H. Beam Piper's 'He Walked Around the Horses' (1948). In 1976, in *Foundation*, David I. Masson calls it 'one of the finest sf short stories ever written' (p. 70). But the novelty of alternate history has been greatly debased since, and would a modern reader find it so fine? In 1975 Poul Anderson wrote, 'The study of prehistory is a science, and "caveman" stories have always been admissible a science fiction, even when they had no additional speculative elements' (*Homeward and Beyond*, p. 159). Again, do we perceive these stories the same way today, as we have more scientific facts about the past? Is the way forward for science fiction through the past?

Gregory Benford had been thinking about *The Berlin Project* for a long time. A hint of it is given in his *Eater* (1999): 'The Manhattan Project had been historically honored example of [the] approach of dividing each element of the A-bomb project from the other, with transmission only on Need To Know basis. Historians of science now believe that bomb production had been delayed about a year by this method. Under a more open strategy, the United States could have used bombs against Berlin, perhaps destroying the German regime from the air rather than on the ground' (p. 144).

This novel is written from a much more personal perspective than most alternative history (Benford

was the son-in-law of the main character, a scientist, Karl Cohen), and also from the viewpoint of the scientist. The novel poses the question: what if the Allies had developed a workable atomic bomb a year earlier? In some detail Benford speculates on how that might have come about, and especially on an alternative approach using centrifuges to purifying the uranium 235 from the more common U238. There is a lot of interaction between the scientists (my favourite part), although obviously not any mind-stretching physics.

The plot follows Karl Cohen after he returns to New York from Paris with his wife, and is hired by Harold Urey to work on a secret project. Niels Bohr arrives from Denmark to give them news about splitting atoms. The scientists try to interest the government in their work, and this is when Einstein is persuaded to write (or sign, actually), that famous letter to President Roosevelt about the necessity of developing a nuclear bomb before the Germans do.* The timeline begins to diverge from ours when a Rabbi Kornbluth is persuaded to interest some Jewish investors in developing their centrifuges, a divergence I ignored despite the Kornbluth name. Cohen eventually goes to England to help set up the first bomb for its mission to Berlin, and is even involved in a cloak-and-dagger adventure in Switzerland afterwards.

One line in particular in *The Berlin Project* made me pause: 'Most were nonentities swallowed whole by their petty affairs' (p. 57). This is Karl Cohen's observation of people he has 'known well' but after his involvement in the atomic bomb project they

now seem like strangers, since his concerns have so changed. But it made me pause too, because in the particular kind of novels I like in the mainstream, it is precisely the petty affairs — the jealousy of a married woman for a free man, people made rivals for prestige — of nonentities (a spinster, a child, a refugee) that interest me most. It made me realise all the more what a divide there can be between the concern and focus of science fiction and other fiction. And if no one could focus outside petty concerns, there could be no science.

The novel is advertised as a thriller, and while it has a number of thriller elements in its later chapters, it is a pretty thoughtful book. Most of the novel's details are historically accurate; many documents are quoted (with dates, Benford explains, changed to fit the novel's timeline). Indeed, you may wish, as I did, that the book had included an index so you could refer back and find the bit quoted! In the afterword, Benford explains that all the major characters (with one exception) are real people, and the book is illustrated with copious photographs, scattered at appropriate moments in the text.

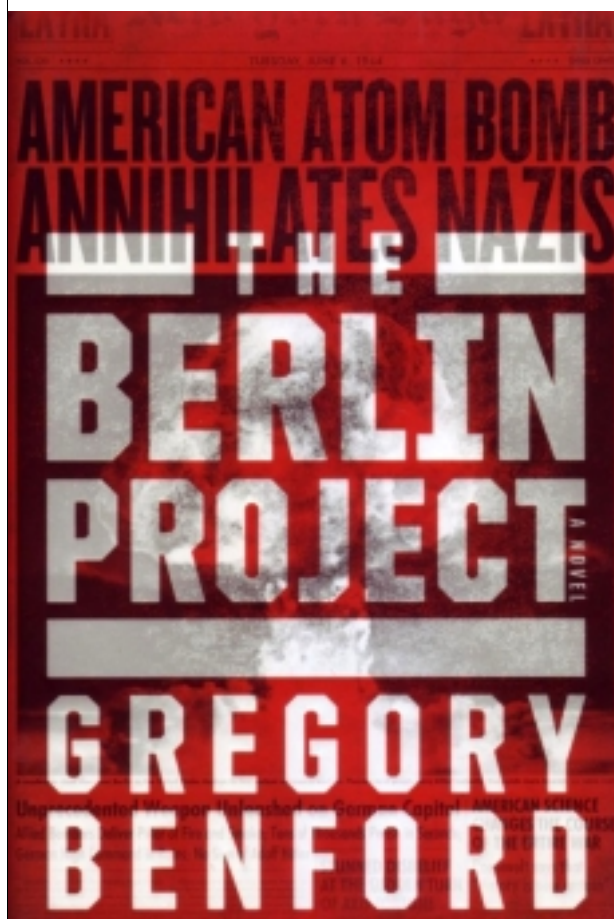
The significance of the novel? Benford does present a really convincing case that if the bomb had been developed a year earlier and dropped on Berlin, not only would millions of lives have been saved in the concentration camps and combat, but

it likely would have prevented much of Eastern Europe from coming under the domination of the Soviet Union. He also suggests that this thought experiment would have implications for any future mixed nuclear and tactical war. If the money had been found, could the science have been advanced any faster? (Interestingly, the second highest priority scientific project in World War II was the development of penicillin. It had a similar problem; finding a suitable process for mass refinement, not of an isotope but of a drug!)

The book also has the theme: who controls science and technology, or rather, to what purpose should it be put? Benford argues in his afterword that it is properly the sphere of politicians. Novelists are usually more effective when they are ambivalent, anyway. The decisions made during World War II still affect us today, but can an alternate-history novel affect how we think about them, or how we act in response today? We suppose that science fiction can do this, since it is apparently about the future, to which we are always still arriving.

I also re-read Gregory Benford's *Timescape* before reading *The Berlin Project*. I first read it 40 years ago. While being surprised again by how good it is, I don't know how dated the physics are or even if tachyons are still even considered possible agents of time communication. But the book is quite a comment on alternate history, too. In it, towards the end, are Benford's first attempts at alternate history, where he deviates from history by having John F. Kennedy survive his assassination attempt. And this branch of the story is apparently our past up until that point, the one being bombarded by tachyon messages. The future in *Timescape* (the origin of the messages) is one wracked by environmental degradation, starvation, and political upheaval, with the given future date of 1998 (now today's past, of course, but not in 1980, the date of the novel's publication). It has been suggested before that all science fiction not set sufficiently far in the future after its 'best-by date' becomes alternate history or fantasy, and in fact some writers offer this to explain that thus all science fiction is really fantasy in disguise. This is supposed to be an indication of SF's true nature, but it also seems an attempt to undermine SF, and especially hard SF, that tries to keep to some of the parameters/discipline of science.

But I think that the deliberate attempts at alternate history in *Timescape* and the post-dated future now (some might say) alternate history, feel essentially different. The 1998 future, with Dr Renfrew's desperate attempts to get funding for his tachyon experiments in Cambridge in order to contact the past and warn it about the effects of environmental degradation in the future, seem



every bit as urgent today as when the novel was first published. It's the writer's skill in part, certainly, but it's also the warning of environmental science too — it has not become outdated or less urgent. The survival or not of John F. Kennedy is just a novelty. Some of his ideas survived.

Or perhaps the still present urgency of the 1998 future is that Benford simply got the date for the environmental and political collapse of civilisation wrong.

In any case, *The Berlin Project* is probably the best alternate history novel anyone could hope to write, about a dramatic, important possibility that could have significantly changed history. It is 'hard'

alternate history — not just in its science, but in its history; only the details necessary to achieve its aims have been changed.

— Cy Chauvin, 2019

* Leonard Bickel, in his book *The Deadly Element: The Story of Uranium* (1979), writes about Albert Einstein's letter to Roosevelt, but contradicts the idea that it had any effect on the development of the atomic bomb — those aides who received the letter had no idea a 'uranium bomb' was even being considered.

Happy (belated) 50th anniversary, 2001: A Space Odyssey!

SPACE ODYSSEY: STANLEY KUBRICK, ARTHUR C. CLARKE, AND THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE
by Michael Benson (Simon & Schuster; 2018; 497 pp.)

The Redford Theatre in Detroit was showing Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in a 70-millimetre print in August 2018 in honour of the 50th anniversary of its release. I don't usually keep up with these things, but Michael Kurcharski had mentioned it in his email newsletter, and *2001* would start showing just the day before the annual Wayne Third Foundation (Detroit) reunion picnic, so it seemed an appropriate appetiser event.

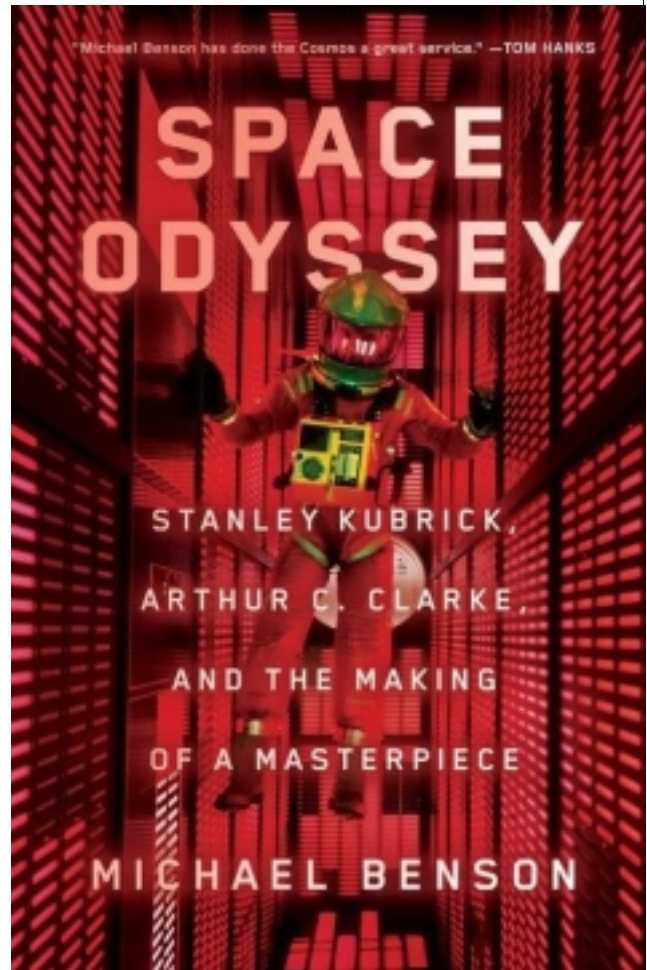
I'd seen *2001* only twice before. The first was at its original release, when I went with my mother, grandmother, brother, and sister to one of the old original grand movie palaces downtown. I don't remember now how my family reacted to the film; I had read the book, so I knew what was going on. I even saved my original program book. I saw it again in about 1977.

I really wasn't expecting it to be awestruck this third time, but I was. It is striking how *2001* differs from the sf films that have gone before and after. It seems essentially almost the only real 'hard' science fiction film, where not only is science respected, but science and the glory of the universe are the stars of the film. It appeals to our desire to explore the world, and the universe. Since the Earth is pretty nearly fully explored, what can fulfil humanity's innate instinct to explore like outer space?

I also thought that the most appealing parts of *2001* were those without dialogue, but with music. On this third viewing, it seems a better idea than

ever that Kubrick decided to do without a specially composed score and use existing classical work instead. In a sense, this turns *2001* into the most unusual 'musical' ever!

I have always been attracted to landscapes, and inspired by the natural world. *2001* is in some ways



the ultimate travelogue, too. That is what science fiction does best: create a drama between a changed future or interplanetary landscape and humanity. Humanity can fight among itself, or unite for a cosmic struggle. It seems so petty to do the former.

After watching the film, I decided to reread **Arthur C. Clarke's** novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for the first time since 1968. I had not been impressed when I read the novel previously, but I hoped to gain some insight on the movie. Instead, I found the book enthralling, despite reading it on the plane to San Jose. Like Jules Verne's *40,000 Leagues under the Sea*, it is a sort of travelogue, and my recent viewing of the movie helped intensify my mental images of what Clarke wrote about. The conventional space voyage in the book ends at Saturn rather than Jupiter (so Clarke can write about the gravity assist loop around the latter planet), but the more detailed explanations come near the end of the novel. There he describes how the Monolith acts as a star gate, and Bowman's space pod is transported beyond the solar system, first to a sort of Grand Central Station for spaceships voyaging elsewhere, and then elsewhere, to creatures only composed of energy, not matter. They transform Bowman into something or someone like themselves, the 'Star Child' in the images. The ending of the novel can also be read in a slightly sinister way: 'He waited, marshalling his thoughts and brooding over his still untested powers. For though he was master of the world, he was not quite sure what to do next. But he would think of something.' Perhaps I should read the sequel to find out what.

After finishing the novel, I wanted to read more about *2001*, and I discovered that **Michael Bensen** had written a book — *Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke and the Making of A Masterpiece*, released in 2018. The book is most interesting in its description the film's genesis. To begin at the beginning: I had not realised that *2001: A Space Odyssey* was supposed to be a homage to Homer's *Odyssey*. While Clarke's short story 'The Sentinel' is often cited as the origin of the movie, that connection is almost accidental. Kubrick was searching for a new film subject, and wanted to do a 'really good' science fiction film, but wasn't sure who to turn to for a collaborator and to write a screenplay. A friend, Arnie Shaw, told him to read *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke. Kubrick did so, while taking care of a sick child, with his wife. He was so excited, he tore out chapters as he read them and gave them to his wife, saying, 'You have to read this!' While Kubrick was doing further research, someone else confirmed his view that Clarke was the best sf writer to pick, but Kubrick believed he was a recluse because he lived in Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

Clarke eventually received a letter from Kubrick,

and flew to New York; at their first meeting, they talked for almost eight hours. Clarke began a novel with Kubrick's input because a novel is easier to create than a shooting script, in Kubrick's opinion, and it allows for more depth.

'The old idea that man invented tools is misleading, it's a half truth. It's more accurate to say that tools invented man.' Clarke wrote this in 1962. Benson also quotes from a conversation that Kubrick has with Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch 22*, during this time period. 'E. M. Forster talked about how regrettable it is that you have to have a plot, but how necessary. If the storyteller didn't hold their interest, they went to sleep. But you pay a terrific price for a good plot, because the minute everybody's sitting there wondering what's going to happen next, there isn't much room for them to care about how it's going to happen or why it happened. One of the neatest things is not to have a good plot and yet sustain interest either by dealing with something incredible and making it realistic ... or getting so close to the heart of a fact or character that they're held quietly' (p. 50). This whole discussion seems to be at the heart of why *2001* was created in the manner in which it was: as an object to view more than as a story.

Benson also writes that Stanley Kubrick said there are three factors to consider in every film: 'Was it interesting? Was it believable? And, was it beautiful or aesthetically superior? At least two of the three had to be in every shot of the film' (p. 92). The monolith in the film was at first constructed of clear Plexiglas, the largest ever made, nearly two feet thick. 'It looked magnificent, but it looked like a piece of Plexiglas.' It was not what Kubrick imagined it to be, an almost invisible alien artifact, and he ordered them to 'file it', take it away. It cost about \$50,000, or a bit under \$400,000 today.

It is hard to realise today, with computers everywhere, that all the computer readout graphics in the movie were drawn by hand (animation), with Bell & Howell 16-millimetre film projectors behind opaque ground glass for rear projection.

Gary Lockwood, one of the actors who played the two astronauts aboard the *Discovery* spacecraft to Jupiter, jogged so much around the centrifuge curved set of the spacecraft that he got blisters. 'Returning downtown, he started to notice that no matter which direction he turned, London's streets seemed to curve upward in front of him, causing him to lean forward. The set's circular logic had warped his visual perception' (p. 183).

How the music came to be selected for *2001* has always been a big question. Kubrick originally signed Alex North to score the film. But Kubrick was very secretive, and wouldn't let him see the film (still in production in 1966). Kubrick only said he

wanted something like Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony. Kubrick then contacted other composers (Carl Orff and Bernard Herrmann), who turned him down. Early in 1966, he sent one of his assistants to a record store in London to buy a very large assortment of classical music to play as temporary music. They played the music during the dailies, and one day while screening a shooting of the space station scene 'The Blue Danube Waltz' came on by accident. Afterwards, Kubrick asked, 'Do you think it would be an act of genius or an act of folly to have that?' (p. 358). Gyorgy Ligeti's work was heard by Kubrick's wife on the radio, and recommended to him that way. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss was found first, in 1965. This use of what was called 'drop needle music' — prerecorded tracks — was unusual for major films.

There is a general theme running through this book, that Kubrick drove people to do their best, or beyond their best, but also he paid an extreme attention to detail that went beyond any need or reason. One person appears to have had a nervous breakdown. The one point where I had to put the book down because these obsessions made me upset (and this certainly reveals my own obsessions) is in regards to the relocations of the Kokerboom trees in South West Africa. One of Kubrick's assistants and a photographer were there taking stills to use in the 'Dawn of Man' sequence in the film, and Kubrick saw some of these trees in the preliminary stills sent back to London — but they 'weren't in the right place'. He was told that these

trees were protected (some were 300 years old), but Kubrick really loved them, and told his assistant to sneak in there anyway and steal them. So they did, but got caught in a flash flood, and the cargo area of one of the trucks carrying the trees caught on fire and they had to be dumped in the river, and later rescued. None of the actual Kokerboom trees made it into the film except in the very distant background; an artificial variety made of rubber was manufactured in England and put on the 'Dawn of Man' set in the studio.

Amusingly, written into the boilerplate of the MGM film distribution contract is the following: 'Distributor's Territory shall include any and all space vehicles, lunar shuttles, space stations, service and orbital life support systems pertaining but not limited to the planets, planetoids, and moons in all of the galaxies of the Universe' (p. 90).

I think it will be a while before *2001* returns (if ever) to the Redford Theatre in Detroit, or elsewhere. I hesitate to see it on the small screen, since surely it of all films would lose the most there. Crazy of crazy, I did find packed away a perfectly sealed VHS tape of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, never opened, retro ready to go back to a future that never happened, yet still seems to inspire. There were more young people than old at that anniversary showing at the Redford Theatre, so perhaps there is hope.

— Cy Chauvin, 2019

Guy Salvidge

In magic hands

THE GIRL WITH NO HANDS AND OTHER TALES
by Angela Slatter (Ticonderoga; 2010;
210 pp; \$A25.00)

Angela Slatter has written and published many stories in the 'reloaded fairytale' genre in recent years, many of which are collected in this volume from Ticonderoga, and also in *Sourdough* from Tartarus Press. *The Girl With No Hands and Other Tales* won the Aurealis Award in 2010 for Best Collection, and it's not hard to see why. Slatter reworks a host of traditional fairytales, many of which will be familiar to all, but some which are more obscure, putting a fresh, feminist slant on

these already macabre offerings.

'Bluebeard' is told from the perspective of Lily, the daughter of the girlfriend of a wealthy banker, Davide. Lily isn't impressed with her mother's subordination to Davide, and as it turns out they're all in more danger than they first realise. There's a locked room hiding a nasty secret, a devilish mother, and no Prince Charming required to save the day. 'Bluebeard' cleverly inverts the premise of this familiar fairytale, leaving the reader scrambling to discover the source of the murders.

'The Jacaranda Wife' is an Australian version of the Selkie myths, in which James Willoughby finds a white-skinned, violet-eyed woman asleep under

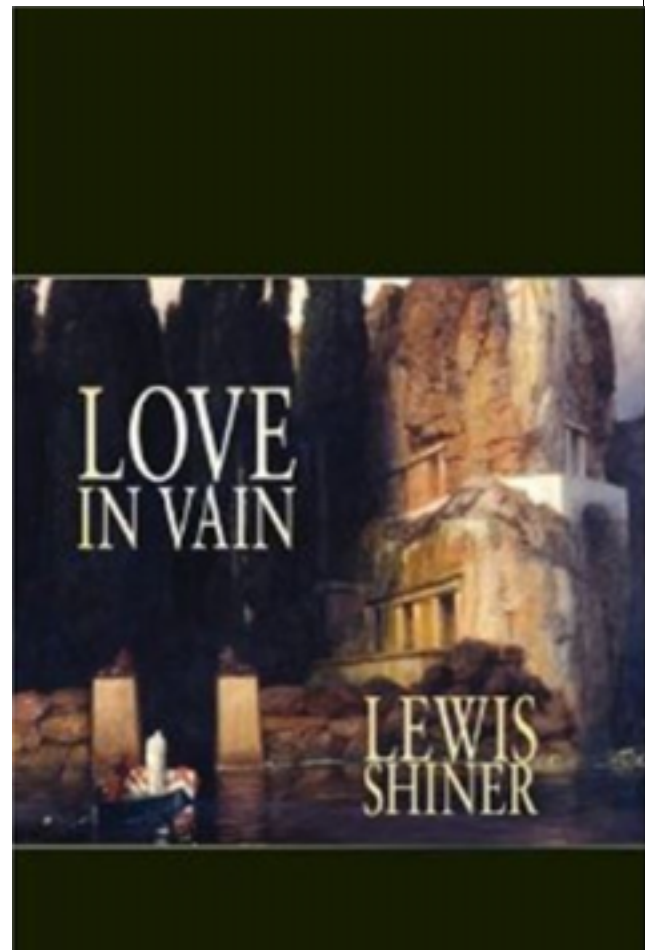
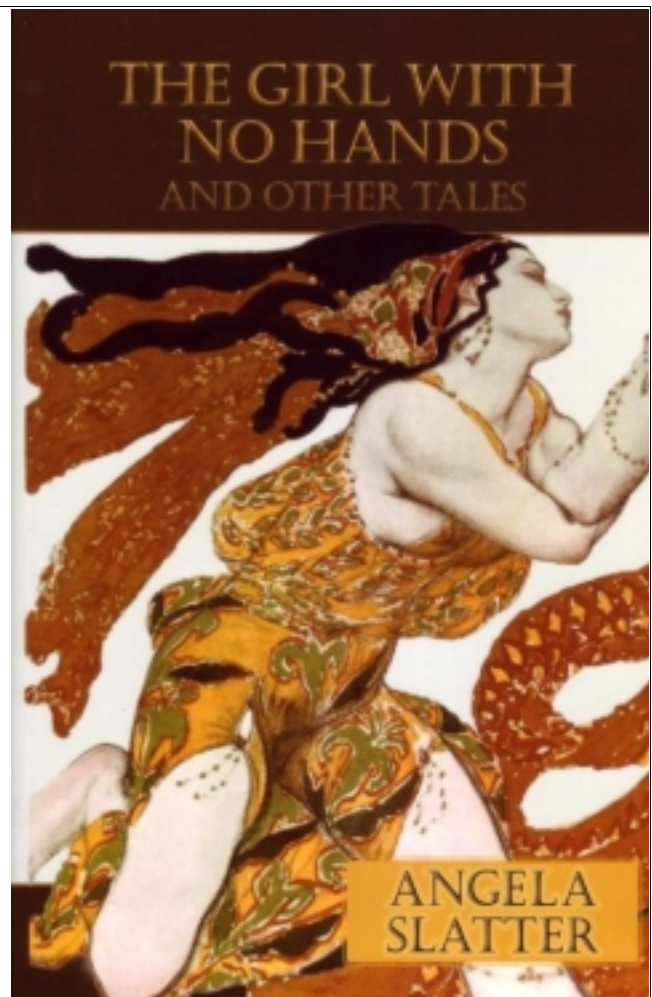
the jacaranda tree in his garden. Set in the 1840s, this story sees James all too happy to take this strange, mute woman for his wife, despite the warnings of the Indigenous workers on his farmstead. Jealous of his new wife's affinity for the jacaranda tree, and fearful that she will disappear back into it, James orders all such trees in the area cut down, but one stubborn tree remains standing.

'Red Skein' reworks the ubiquitous Red Riding Hood myth, empowering Matilda by making her more than capable of defending herself in the forest. The story also focuses on the relationship between the young girl and her grandmother, who is here decidedly not enfeebled. Similarly, 'The Little Match Girl' empowers the ordinarily pathetic match girl from Hans Christian Andersen's story by making her fully grown and with the ability to choose her own end.

'The Dead Ones Don't Hurt You' is one of the few contemporary tales in *The Girl With No Hands* and, initially at least, it is also written in one of the lightest tones in the volume. After a string of abusive relationships, Melanie bites the bullet and orders a EZ-Boy, an 'ever-faithful Zombie Boyfriend' (p. 140). The zombie, whom she calls Billy, is perfectly docile, all too happy to clean Melanie's house during the day and, as she boasts, 'never complains about, y'know, eating at the Y' (p. 142). Billy's passivity and his failure to interpret ambiguous instructions turn Melanie from abused to abuser, and that's before the appearance of an EZ-Girl.

'Light as Mist, Heavy As Hope' is a retelling of *Rumpelstiltskin*. In it, Alice is brought to the attention of an impoverished king when her father boasts of her skill in weaving straw into gold. Alice is also in danger of being molested by her widowed father, due to her resemblance to her mother. In the castle, the girl is forced to attempt the impossible task under threat of strangulation, but a mysterious helper comes to her rescue. On the first two nights, Alice is able to pay the extortionist with her mother's jewellery, but on the third, only her as-yet unconceived child will suffice. Alice is forced to desecrate her mother's grave to escape this unwanted fate.

The title story, 'The Girl With No Hands', is a particularly gruesome yarn in which the greedy Miller trades 'whatever is sitting in [his] backyard' (p. 180) with the Devil in exchange for unimaginable wealth. Unfortunately, the Miller finds his daughter, Madchen, in the backyard when he returns home, and thus begins a rapid fall from grace for all concerned. Madchen's mother Hilde vainly tries to stop her daughter from becoming the Devil's bride, and the odious Miller chops off the girl's hands at the Devil's request in response. Madchen flees and eventually marries a king, but



her new-found happiness is again imperilled by the Devil's trickery.

The Girl With No Hands and Other Tales is a collection of intelligent, lusciously written fairytales with modern sensibilities. In these pages, our heroines almost never bow before the might of their often-boorish fathers and husbands, and the resulting fare makes for highly entertaining reading.

LOVE IN VAIN

Lewis Shiner (Ticonderoga Publications; 2009)

Lewis Shiner is known to me as one of the early cyberpunk authors, but his collection *Love In Vain* isn't cyberpunk. It's not even science fiction for the most part. It is, however, very good. Published by Ticonderoga in 2009, this collection of nearly two dozen stories showcases Shiner's abilities at lengths ranging from flash fiction to novelette. Personally I found his longer works more interesting, not least the newer, previously uncollected 'Perfidia'.

In 'Perfidia', Frank Delacorte, a collector with a penchant for eBay auctions, stumbles on a highly irregular recording of a Glenn Miller song. In his attempt to unravel the mystery, Frank travels to Paris to trace the recording back to its original owner. Meanwhile, Frank's father, who had been one of the American soldiers that liberated the Dachau concentration camp at the end of World War II, lies dying in a US hospital. Shiner's depiction of Paris circa 2000 is particularly atmospheric, and the story of Miller's last tape is original and engaging. My only complaint is that the story ended long before I would like it to, which I guess is a compliment to Shiner's technique, given that 'Perfidia' is around 50 pages in length.

'Love in Vain' features the first of this collection's failed marriage narratives. Dave McKenna is an Assistant District Attorney tasked with interviewing Charlie, a convict who has confessed to far more murders than he could ever have possibly committed. He even admits to made-up murders, but oddly enough many of the facts he provides turn out to be true. Dave has problems of his own, primarily his tenuous relationship with his wife Alice. Dave's old friend Jack tries to lift him from his funk by taking him to see an old flame, Kristi Spector, who is now an exotic dancer, but nothing much seems to help. Jack explains: 'There's things you don't want in your head. Once they get in there, you're not the same any more' (p. 61). Dave's personal problems, coupled with the stress of dealing with the unreliable Charlie, begin to loosen his grip on reality, and by the end of the story Dave is poised to lose more than just his home and marriage.

'Scales' features a female narrator with relation-

ship problems of her own. Her marriage to Richard having hit rocky ground, she becomes increasingly concerned as her husband begins to behave erratically. The problem seems to be one of Richard's students, Lili, who appears to have a particularly insidious hold over him. Having finally had enough of her husband's cheating, she makes off with their infant daughter, Emily, but like most breakups it's not as straightforward as that. Here Shiner verges on the territory of the fantastic, as Lili seems to be not only an adulteress, but perhaps not wholly human.

Fathers come in for a bit of a beating in *Love In Vain*, and 'Match' is the purest example of this. Fathers in these stories are generally aged, inflexible, and cruel, but the son in 'Match' isn't much nicer himself. Tennis provides the arena for a clash of wills between the frail and disapproving father and the absent, ungrateful son. The son wins the battle on the day, but loses the war as the father suffers his latest mini heart attack. 'Match' is a good example of the emotional power of Shiner's writing, which here as elsewhere is typically devoid of literary flourishes.

Another powerful realist tale is 'Dirty Work', in which a down-and-out type falls in with an ex-school mate of his, Dennis. Dennis has made good for himself in the world, and is now working as a lawyer getting rapists off their charges, even if some of the proceeds do seem to find their way up his nose. Dennis gives our protagonist a job trailing Lane Rochelle, an alleged rape victim. Feeling bad about the whole thing, but entirely too poor to contemplate knocking the money back, he starts following Lane around with a minimum of stealth. Perhaps significantly, 'Dirty Work' is one of the few stories in *Love In Vain* where the protagonist is fairly happily married. Things turn nasty when the rapist Javier turns up at Lane's house, but both he and our protagonist get their just desserts.

'Primes' is just as good as the stories described above, and it's one of the few in this collection to contain science fictional elements. As Shiner explains in his Afterword, many of his stories are about failure: failure in relationships, failure at work, failure at life. In 'Primes', Nick returns home from work to discover that not only is his house now occupied by his wife's dead former husband, but also that he has been made redundant at work by a cosmic occurrence on the grandest of scales. Two parallel universes seem to have merged into one, doubling the world's population in an instant. This soon has disastrous consequences, and poor old Nick loses pretty much everything in the reshuffle that follows.

There are other kinds of stories in *Love In Vain*, and most of them are better than decent. The shorter works tended not to appeal to me as greatly

as those described above, but there is one historical ghost story, 'Gold', which I found quite evocative. Famous personages like Elvis Presley, Nikola Tesla, and Lee Harvey Oswald feature in the shorter fantasies, and many of Shiner's tales revolve around rock and roll in one way or another. 'Jeff Beck' was

my favourite of these. This is my way of saying that Shiner is a versatile writer whose work is likely to appeal to a variety of audiences, and thus you're likely to find something to like here, too.

— Guy Salvidge, 2012

Henry Gasko

Anything-the-author-needs-for-the-plot magic

THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE by Neil Gaiman

Every time I finish a **Neil Gaiman** juvenile novel, I wonder why I bothered. You get the same old elements every time — there is olde and ancient magick; fey and whimsical magic, anything-the-author-needs-for-the-plot magic. There is a brief mention of Dark Matter but no real attempt to paint this as anything other than pure fantasy. And there are plot twists and turns with little relation to common sense, and characters as shallow as a puddle of rainwater. In fact, you suspect there might be a problem as soon as you see the cover of the book, where the author's name is significantly larger than the title of the book.

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, a young unnamed boy is living with his poor family in the country. One day their lodger, an opal miner (not that this is important to the plot) first appears to kill the boy's kitten, and later apparently commits suicide near their home. The boy lives near three women from different generations of the same family; they are the custodians of the old and ancient magic. For some reason, the lodger's death unleashes terrible forces which only they can confront in order to restore balance to the world.

The youngest character, Lettie Hempstock, is only twelve and obviously still learning the ancient magic business, but she begs her mother to allow her to do battle with the menace on her own. Her mother reluctantly permits her to set off, after warnings about the great danger.

'Oh,' says Lettie, 'and can I take the young boy from down the road, who knows nothing about magic or the dangers we will face, and has no obvious reason for coming along?' 'You know how dangerous this could be don't you?' admonishes her mother. 'Oh please, Mommy!' 'Well alright then.' Seriously, that is just about the level of logic

in the plot. I know it is meant for young readers but that is all the more reason that the author should maintain fairness in the internal logic of the story.

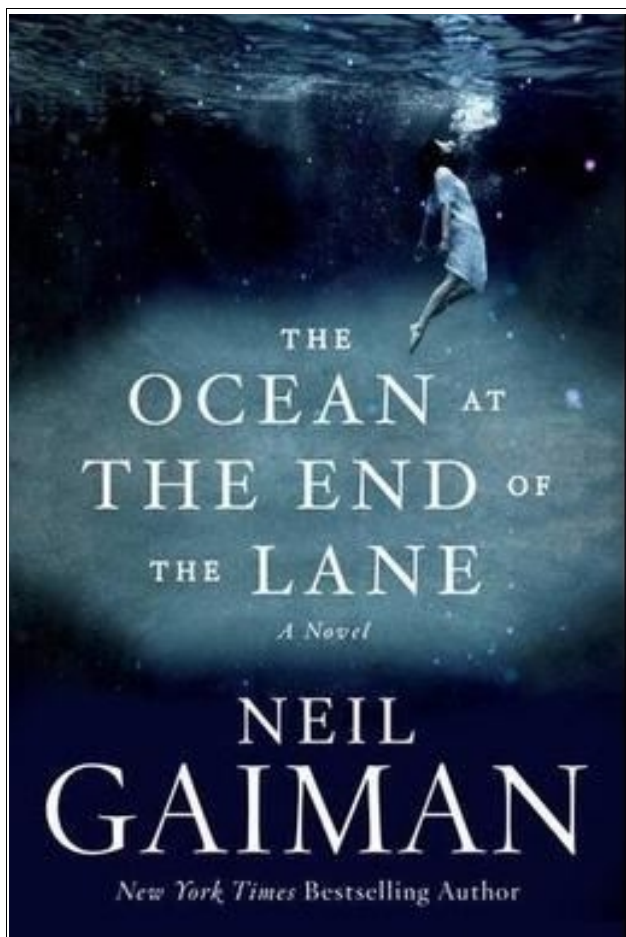
Nevertheless, the pair set off on their meta-physical journey and, sure enough, just as things are going well, the boy disobeys Lettie's instructions to always keep hold of her hand. In that instant, he is afflicted with a 'wormhole' in the sole of his foot: a small opening in space and time. He fails to tell Lettie, and they return to the outside world.

The wormhole begins to fester, and soon allows an evil creature named Ursula to come into his family, ostensibly as a housekeeper, while his mother suddenly leaves on an extended trip. Ursula quickly infiltrates the family, winning them all over through various means, including the sexual seduction of the boy's father. Only the boy can see the evil that has entered their home. Ursula attempts to imprison him but he escapes and runs to Lettie's house for help. Lettie summons the previously unseen 'hunger birds' and with their help she battles the baddie and vanquishes her.

The End, you might think. But then something very strange happens (and I don't mean in a magical sense). We are at 40,000 words and it is almost as if the author suddenly did a word count. 'Oh my god! What did that contract say again? Oh, damn! Wait, I have an idea.' Type, type ... type, type ... type, type. 'There, 60,000 words — that should do it.'

So the hunger birds, allies just a few pages ago, suddenly become the über-baddies who must themselves be fought in the final third of the novel. Obviously I don't know if this is what really happened. But this is just such a sudden u-turn, without any foreshadowing, that it seems the only logical conclusion.

This is not to say that the book is entirely bad. As a writer, Gaiman is a competent enough techni-



cian. The depiction of Ursula would certainly have some real menace to the target audience of seven-to-twelve-year-olds (although I am not sure what they, or their parents, will make of a sexual seduction scene in a book aimed at a largely pre-pubescent audience).

And while the country setting is only poorly depicted and largely irrelevant to the plot, the *Afterward* makes it clear that it holds personal significance for Gaiman. Indeed, reading the *Afterward* was the only time I felt any real connection to the story; until then, it seemed to be merely a typing and contractual exercise with very little to engage the reader emotionally. A great pity — I really did enjoy the *Afterward*.

— Henry Gasko, 2015

Murray MacLachlan

Three Arthur C. Clarke Award nominees

THE BOOK OF PHOENIX

by Nnedi Okorafor (2015; Hodder & Stoughton/Hachette; 232 pp.)

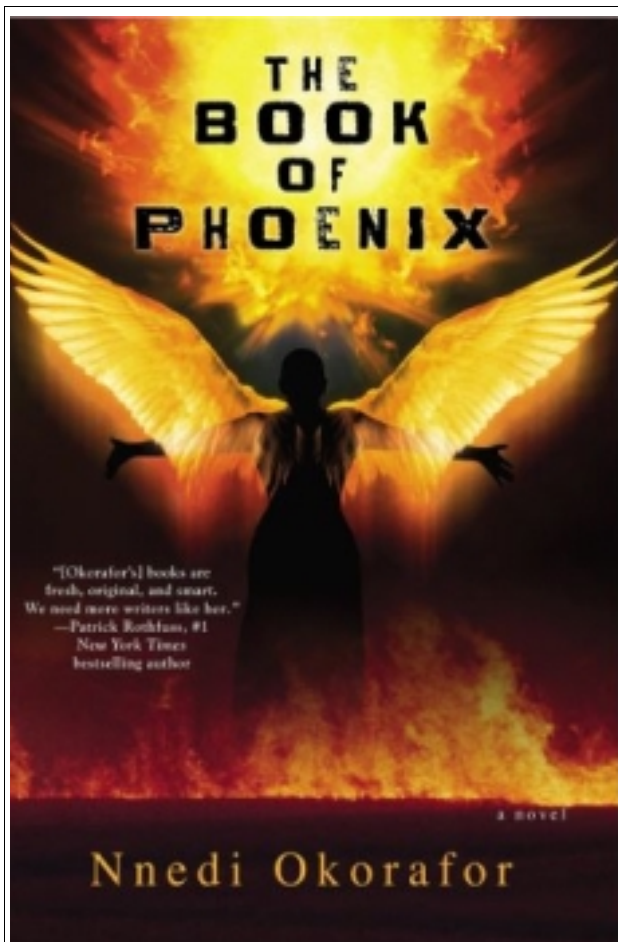
The Book of Phoenix is a superhero revenge fantasy. It gets over the line as an Arthur C. Clarke Award candidate because it has post-colonial trappings and some observations on the nature of story.

Most of the narrative tells of the coming of age of the Phoenix of the title and how, having learned of her powers, she uses them against her evil creators.

Phoenix is a radically genetically engineered human being, created and raised in a research institute run by LifeGen, a quasi-corporate that feeds off and perpetuates a near-future US government. We accompany her as she learns of her

powers: as a Phoenix: she can fly; can burn with the heat of a sun, consuming herself in the inferno and regenerating back to life; she can step into a niche in time and travel anywhere in time and space. Phoenix learns she is a weapon, an object, and definitely not human — she is an ABO, an Accelerated Biological Organism. She is property. Her companions, also ABOs, include a man who can walk through walls and whose modifications are so substantial that he lives on glass and sand, and can die from eating an apple.

The story is straightforward. At the same time as Phoenix learns of herself, she is learning of LifeGen's Towers and the other creations made in them. It is central to Nnedi Okorafor's narrative that all the ABOs who have had their DNA twisted are of African origin — Mother Africa's human legacy has been bastardised in yet another chapter



in the multi-millennia history of white colonisation and oppression, and in Okorafor's novel the latest oppression has a peculiarly modern twist. Phoenix discovers LifeGen's greatest evil: in one Tower is a woman named HeLa, an immortal whose genes come from Henrietta Lacks, the African American woman whose cells were harvested and lived on beyond her death, unknown to her family. HeLa's blood is an elixir of immortality which has been sold to seven billionaires. HeLa tells Phoenix, 'They will never die. These men who are still billionaires and garner great influence. In a matter of years, the world will be theirs. Because of me.'

It is implied that the seven billionaires who take the elixir of life from the unwilling HeLa are proximate to the seven towers in the seven American cities; after killing HeLa — at her request — Phoenix destroys those cities and much of the developed world in a firestorm that has surprisingly few enduring effects in Africa. For example, a civilisation of sorts is able to continue.

The Book of Phoenix has a framing story that some readers will seize on to describe this novel as innovative. Two centuries after the Phoenix apocalypse, a man in Africa hears Phoenix's story and retells it. He's from a people who have been slaves and, although free, remain colonised in thought. His version of Phoenix's story perpetuates his people's traditions about why they should suffer.

Phoenix-as-narrator describes his take on her story as 'shit' and the author muses on the point that stories, upon release into the world, no longer belong to their authors.

The Book of Phoenix is memorable for its rage and its narrative of colonialist oppression of bodies, selves and minds. This is the politics of *The Island of Dr Moreau* made explicit, and it is a tragedy of our times that nowadays the only path in fiction to escape the corporate Moreaus is a silly superhero fantasy. As for the framing story, which the *Chicago Tribune* described as 'nothing short of spectacular', it's not. Instead, 40 years after Samuel Delany speculated in books such as *Empire Star* on how we shape narratives to serve our societal ends, we appear to have gone no further.

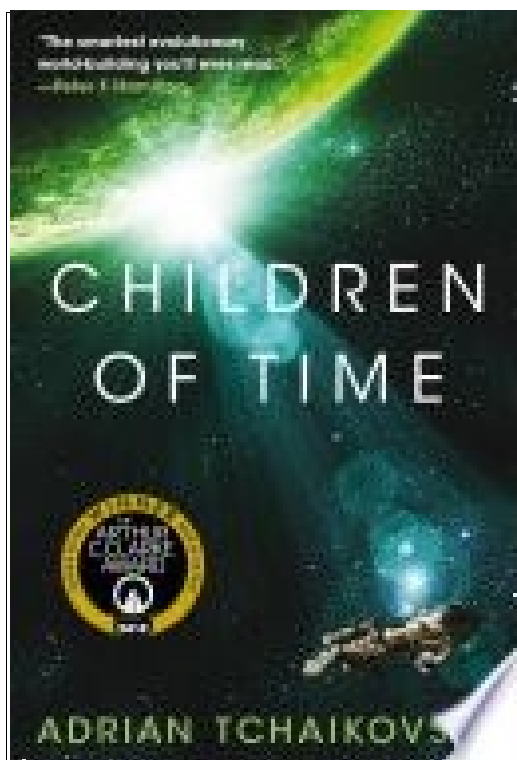
In making my comments I'm mindful that I'm a privileged white male. I well recall a few decades ago a white male Australian SF critic expressing empathy with Joanna Russ's politics, and feeling bruised when denounced by her for doing so. I'm also mindful that at the present time, science fiction is grappling with a strident group who denounce anything that challenges their paradigm of entitlement as being the work of social justice warriors; they use the term as a pejorative. Based on her subject matter, I'm willing to fight in the trenches on behalf of Nnedi Okorafor, if she wished to enlist a foot soldier. But if I were to die in that trench, the irony is that I would do so while defending a book that from the narrative point of view is merely adequate.

CHILDREN OF TIME

by Adrian Tchaikovsky (2015; Pan Macmillan; 606 pp.)

One of science fiction's virtues is that you can do things in it that simply are not possible in any other genre. The critic Brian Stableford has said that this truth, while liberating, also imposes an ethical responsibility on the author. With all the myriad worlds of possibilities open to them, why would writers do anything but take them to the farthest extent possible? Stableford suggests that science fiction is fundamentally positive, a romantic literature, and is the only literary form where the author can — and therefore should! — have the whole human race living happily ever after. In *Children of Time* Adrian Tchaikovsky does this, and it's an impressive achievement — even more so considering it's his first science fiction novel.

He's certainly not afraid, and knows his stuff. *Children of Time* starts in the near future and finishes in deep time, tens or hundreds of millennia from now. Its story addresses one of the great science fiction themes, an idea that can't be addressed in



any other literature, that of uplift.

Uplift is where an entire species is elevated from non-sentient to sentient. If humans do the uplifting, then we create the aliens that mean we are no longer alone in the universe. How do we act? How do we respond? David Brin, who created the term and explored the concepts in his 'Uplift War' series and won some Hugos along the way, put forward a mercantile view: the uplifted species has a debt to pay to the species that uplifted them, whether or not the uplifted species wanted it. This is the indentureship model of uplift, a form of slavery that stretches across generations. It does not take an Okorafor to point out that this reeks of colonialism.

Tchaikovsky takes a gifting approach. A starship, named the *Brin* (see? he knows his stuff) seeds a world with DNA technology that will uplift all candidate species that are receptive to it. Unfortunately the monkeys that also should have landed on the planet, don't. The uplifting technology finds and uplifts another species. Meantime, the *Brin* has various misadventures that are symptomatic of greater issues back on Earth. Earth falls; the *Brin* is no more; all that remains is a cyberintelligence keeping watch over the failed experiment on the world below.

Millennia pass. Tchaikovsky is telling a long story, and confidently moves it forward by thousands of years across a few pages where necessary. Humans have finally rebuilt their civilisation and are fleeing their dying planet having built their last starship from Earth, a generation ship to find somewhere — anywhere — to colonise. There is nowhere except the world where the monkeys

should be, and it's guarded by a half-mad artificial intelligence that is now trying to make sense of the signals it's receiving from an intelligent species on the planet below.

On the spaceship is a linguist who doubles as a historian. He's a dour and somewhat obtuse character who comes late to the realisation that the woman who keeps waking him up from cold sleep is in love with him as well as requiring his skills for negotiating with the hostile AI. It's his narrative and the prose reflects his dispassionate outlook.

Meantime there are all the crises that happen in space opera (except for military balls and descriptions of uniforms) such as mutinies, battles in deep space and crash landings, as the humans make their way to claim the planet. Some of this material is a little overwrought.

But that's half the story. In science fiction we have had planets as characters. Tchaikovsky gives us a race as a character: *Children of Time* is the story of an animal species achieving sentience, developing a civilisation, domesticating itself, overcoming its origins, and taking its place in the universe. Tchaikovsky cleverly does this by some nifty genetic engineering that allows race memory to be passed on from generation to generation, coupled with each generation's viewpoint character having the same name as its distant ancestor or later descendant. I found the narrative absorbing.

The climax is a battle between human and alien, and it is as much a contest of ideologies as of species. Civilisation wins, and the whole human race does live happily ever after.

This is epic science fiction, full of ideas and action, and although the style is standoffish and the start is a bit lumpy I found it a page-turner. Highly recommended as a novel, and as a new touchstone in one of science fiction's core themes: uplift. A considerable achievement.

EUROPE AT MIDNIGHT

by Dave Hutchinson (2015; *Solaris/Rebellion*; 303 pp.)

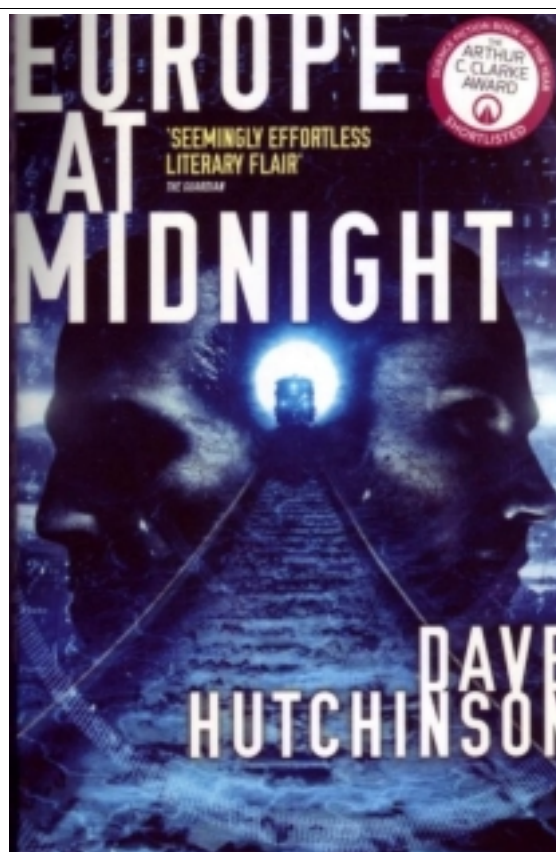
This fantasy novel takes a science-fictional approach to telling a spy story. The spy story wins through, even though I found it a very confusing book to read. Part of that is explained by it being Book 2 in a trilogy or series. Part of it is the telling, where much of it is told from the first-person point of view, and the narrator or narrators each come from three alternate worlds but all are English. Part of it is the format of the spy story itself, which lends itself to bluffs and double-crosses and other things that confuse the reader. Finally, part of it is this reader; I've never been able to follow this sort of story. Even when Agatha Christie has Revealed All

and I go back to find the Vital Clue, I still don't get it. I abandoned her books in my early teens. Later I discovered Len Deighton and John Le Carré, who were also confusing but in a good way. **Dave Hutchinson's** *Europe at Midnight* is in the tradition of Le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, as set in a many worlds venue.

The story would fall apart if you took out the many-worlds thing, so *Europe at Midnight* is definitely science fiction. The story starts in a 200-mile wide polder of an alternate England, where the entire world is a University town. Another world is an alternate Europe populated only by the English and where R. F. Delderfield would feel at home. Finally there is a near-future version of our world where Europe is a mess of Balkanised microstates, Brexit writ large. All are dystopias; no matter which world you are in, here the nearest thing to happiness is to achieve a comfortable state of boredom but mostly people are afraid, and why not? For how does one protect one's borders when a foreign power shares the borders with you?

Europe at Midnight tells of the spies and spymasters whose task it is to protect those borders, and of how one spy who walked between worlds tries to find a place for himself in the other ones. Germ warfare and nuclear holocaust are the larger tragedies that background the smaller brutalities of the spies — the murders, disappearances and betrayals. The irony is that everyone is allegedly English; in truth some are very foreign indeed.

Hutchinson's success is in his voice and tone. The writing is excellent thriller noir, to the point where small missteps come as something of a shock: would someone from a long-isolated world really



say, 'at the drop of a hat'? Everything — the worlds, the people, the morals — is in shades of grey.

This interesting book could be less confusing. Part of a series, its conceits do linger in memory but overall *Europe at Midnight* does not reach the heights I would expect of a stand-alone novel.

— **Murray MacLachlan**, 2016

IAN MOND loves to talk about books. For eight years he co-hosted a book podcast, *The Writer and the Critic*, with Kirstyn McDermott. Recently he has revived his blog, *The Hysterical Hamster*, and is again posting mostly vulgar reviews on an eclectic range of literary and genre novels. You can also follow Ian on Twitter (@Mondyboy), contact him at mondyboy74@gmail.com, or read his reviews every month in *Locus*.

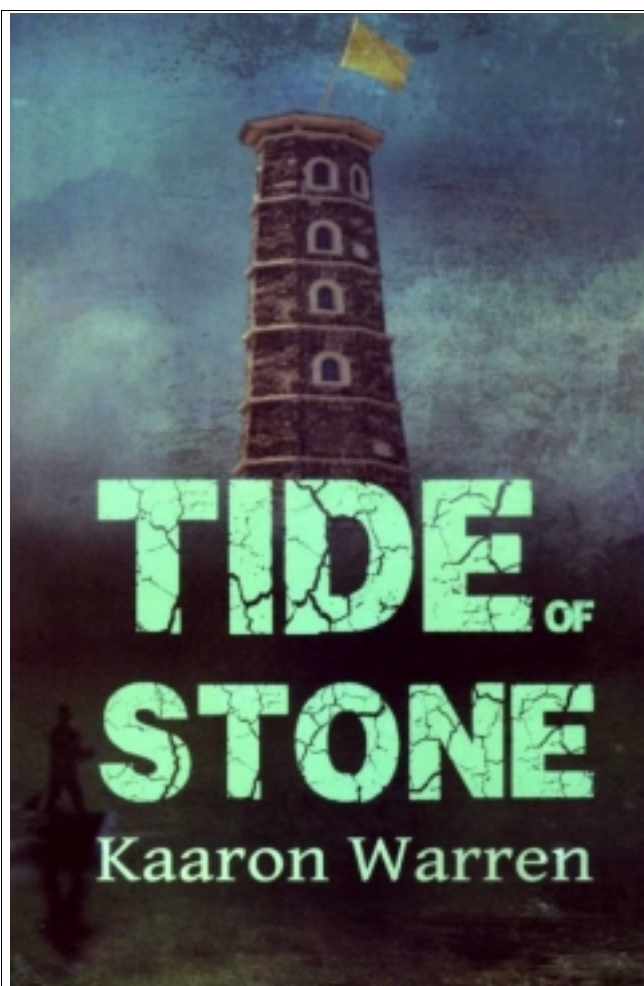
Ian Mond

Thinking outside the ordinary

TIDE OF STONE

by **Kaaron Warren** (Omnium Gatherum; 2018; 374pp.)

When the Time Ball Tower is first mentioned in **Kaaron Warren's** terrific new novel *Tide of Stone*, I thought it was an invention of the author. I had no



idea they existed and that I'd been living near one my entire life. For those, like me, ignorant of this ancient time-keeping device, a Time Ball is an apparatus situated at the top of a tower, sometimes a lighthouse, where a large stone or metal sphere is dropped at a precise hour each day to inform shipmasters of the time. The Towers that still stand, such as the one in Williamstown, Victoria, Australia, are mostly tourist attractions.

That's not the case for the Time Ball Tower constructed in the fictional town of Tempuston. It doesn't draw a crowd, and it doesn't measure time. Rather, since 1868 it's been repurposed as a prison for men and women who have committed the most heinous crimes. Before they are sent to the Tower criminals are given a choice: they can be put to death or, as the first judge to commit someone to the Tower explains, 'We can give you something few men have had. Eternal life.' If they choose life — they all do — criminals are force-fed a preservative that pickles the body, leeching out the moisture, gradually transforming them into undying, brittle skeletons. A living death.

The book opens with a first-person account from Phillipa Musket. She has been bestowed the great honor of becoming the 147th Keeper of the Time Ball Tower, a privilege granted to her family for generations. Not everyone, though, is pleased for

Phillipa. Her best friend, Renata, hates the Tower; her family has 'been fighting the process of mortification' since the first prisoner was brought to Tempuston. Phillipa, though, is clear in her convictions and her responsibility to safeguard society from the evil warehoused in the Tower. She even tends daily to the desiccated cadaver of Burnett Barton, the man who oversaw the construction of the Tower back in 1868, who took on the role as the first Keeper and who drank the preservative that continues to keep him alive.

Warren dedicates *Tide of Stone* to her parents, whom she thanks for 'teaching me to think outside the ordinary'. This attitude permeates the novel, and is evident when Phillipa, as part of her preparations, accesses the records kept by each Keeper. Rather than provide the odd snippet or highlight from a report, Warren, thinking outside the ordinary, invites us to follow Phillipa's lead and read every single account. What should be tedious — more than half the novel is devoted to these records — is instead utterly fascinating, tracking a complicated lineage of brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts. Sometimes the reports are in conversation with the Keepers that have come before, and sometimes they provide advice, helpful tips, for those that are to come. What's striking, though, is how attitudes remain consistent over a century and a half. The Keepers detest the prisoners, reviling each new arrival. They don't mention torture, but they warn against showing any pity or sympathy to these wretched creatures. The accounts, most of them less than half a page, provide us with an uncompromising, unflinching portrait of evil. It's impossible to look away.

As much as the Keepers reinforce the awful crimes committed by the prisoners, the cumulative effect of reading every report creates the impression of a tightly knit community that's rarely questioned the morality of the Tower. When Phillipa takes her turn as the Keeper, she doesn't immediately recognise what we, the reader, already apprehend, that whatever evil these men and women perpetrated, their punishment has lost any meaning or value, if it had any at all. This is suffering for the sake of suffering, meaningless, cruel, and devoid of humanity. The message of this novel isn't that incarceration is wrong or unjust, it's that any punitive action, no matter how gruesome the crime, needs to contain an element of compassion. It needs to reflect us at our best, not at our worst. Sadly, in the current climate, where politicians frame punishment as a form of community retribution, this is a minority view.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that the *Tide of Stone* is an overly earnest or academic novel. It's also creepy as all get out. Aside from keying into the themes of the story, the

Keeper's reports build an atmosphere of existential dread; you're never the same after you've spent some time with the prisoners. Once we get inside the Tower, Warren doesn't hold back from assailing us with the sights, sounds, and smells of the place, all of it punctuated by the maddening, daily clang of the Time Ball. There are also secrets to be revealed — that I won't spoil here — a truth that's as monstrous as any of the crimes committed by the prisoners.

With *Tide of Stone*, Kaaron Warren proves that horror fiction can do more than just deliver disturbing imagery and violence. It can also compel us to confront our own assumptions and moral principles, to look outside the ordinary.

— Ian Mond, 2018

FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD

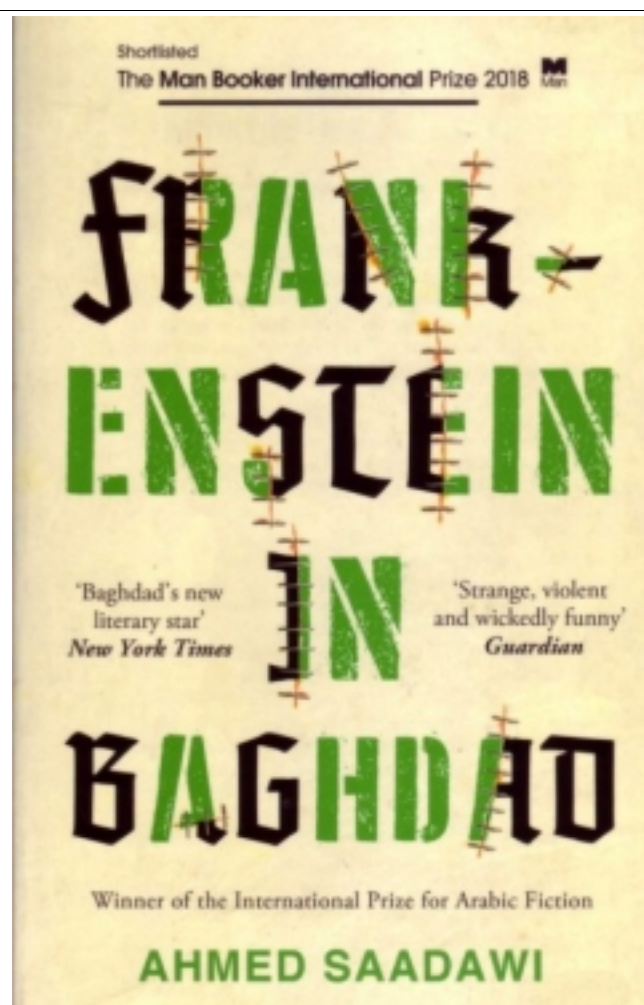
by Ahmed Saadawi, translated by Jonathan Wright (Penguin Books; 2018; 288pp.)

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* places the eponymous monster amongst the suicide bombings and devastation of Baghdad in 2005. It opens with an attack on Tayaran Square where a soul, torn from its body, finds a home in a vacated corpse. It's no ordinary cadaver, but rather a stitched-together amalgamation of parts, the remains of the people who died in previous attacks. This grisly conceit, inspired by but not beholden to Mary Shelley's classic, sets the scene for a funny, tragic, powerful, and deeply moving novel about Iraq and its people, and makes *Frankenstein in Baghdad* firmly of interest to genre readers.

Our Victor Frankenstein is Hadi the junk dealer, famous for his shaggy-dog tales. Unlike Victor, Hadi isn't obsessed with the notion of creating life in inanimate matter; he wants to provide the scattered remains of the innocent a proper burial. Hadi plans to stitch together the grisly body parts then leave the complete corpse on the side of the road to be collected by the authorities. After the Tayaran Square bombing, he finds the final piece for his cadaver:

It was a fresh nose, still coated in congealed, dark red blood. His hand trembling, he positioned it in the black hole in the corpse's face. It was a perfect fit, as if the corpse had its own nose back.

Aside from Hadi and his creation, Saadawi introduces the reader to a number of characters, each of whom embodies an aspect of Iraq. The sense of loss and death is embodied by Elishva, the widow, waiting patiently for the return of her son, Daniel, who disappeared during the Iran–Iraq War



(a reminder that the countries' battle wounds run deep). The naïve hope for a better future is embodied by Mahmoud al-Sawadi, an ambitious journalist desperate to give his people a voice. The sheer lunacy of the war, of all wars really, is embodied by Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, the head of a secret organisation funded by the United States, the Tracking and Pursuit Department, that relies on astrologers to predict the site of the next bombing. And then there's Whatshisname, Hadi's creation, an animated, self-aware corpse, a literal embodiment of the Iraqi people. What does he represent? Revenge and justice, of course.

At one point, Hadi admits to Mahmoud that he patched together the monster, though unlike Victor Frankenstein, who follows his creation to the ends of the Earth, Hadi absolves himself of all responsibility. Still, he promises Mahmoud an interview with Whatshisname. What Mahmoud receives is a taped recording of an articulate man. Whereas the rest of the novel has a wry, sardonic, almost playful tone, when Whatshisname speaks the passion, the righteous fury is palpable. He explains that he murders on behalf of the innocent, whose blood and flesh constitute his body:

'Will I fulfil my mission? I don't know, but I will

at least try to set an example of vengeance — the vengeance of the innocent who have no protection other than the tremors of their souls as they pray to ward off death.’

In the same interview, Whatshisname considers the provenance of his body parts. These limbs and organs have been sourced by his growing number of followers to replace those parts that are rapidly decaying. Whatshisname requests that his assistants not bring him ‘illegitimate flesh — in other words, the flesh of criminals’.

But he acknowledges that, as hard as they might try, his followers can’t vouch for the purity of the body parts. He therefore speculates on how this will affect his soul. This debate — is Whatsitsname good, is he evil, is he something in between? — is part of a wider existential discussion about Iraq and its people, in particular, their sense of futility, their desire for justice against those who have devastated their country, and, above all, their yearning to lead ordinary lives.

While the subject matter is heavy, what makes *Frankenstein in Baghdad* so readable, so entertain-

ing, is Saadawi’s tongue-in-cheek attitude. He never allows us to forget the human toll, the senseless death, torture, and misery, but he also has fun at the expense of those in power, especially the ridiculous, Monty Pythonesque Tracking and Pursuit Department. There are some laugh-out-loud moments as the junior astrologer embarks on a Machiavellian plan to overthrow the senior astrologer (with the help of a certain patchwork cadaver). Less successful is Saadawi’s effort to inject ambiguity into the narrative, suggesting that Whatshisname is a rumour, a myth, a figment of the imagination. The symbolism of Whatsitsname is strong enough without muddying the waters.

Frankenstein in Baghdad was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize, and it is brilliantly translated by Jonathan Wright. I’d like to think that the novel will also garner serious interest from genre awards. It’s certainly deserving of our undivided attention.

— Ian Mond, June 2018

THE OVERSTORY

by Richard Powers (2018; Heinemann; 502 pp.)

James Bradley was insistent that I read *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. I’m not saying he’s been asking me every second day if I’ve read it, but I’ll be asleep or in the middle of a meeting, or taking a dump, and suddenly there’s James Bradley, on Facebook Messenger, enquiring as to whether I’ve started *The Overstory*. So, just to shut him up, I’m going to read this vast novel. Apparently, it’s about trees.

Knee-jerk observations

The opening chapter is set around the 1850s, where newly arrived immigrant Jorgen Hoel meets Vi Powys in Brooklyn. They get married, travel out to Fort Des Moines in the newly established state of Iowa, and begin to farm the land. Vi becomes pregnant, but it doesn’t end well.

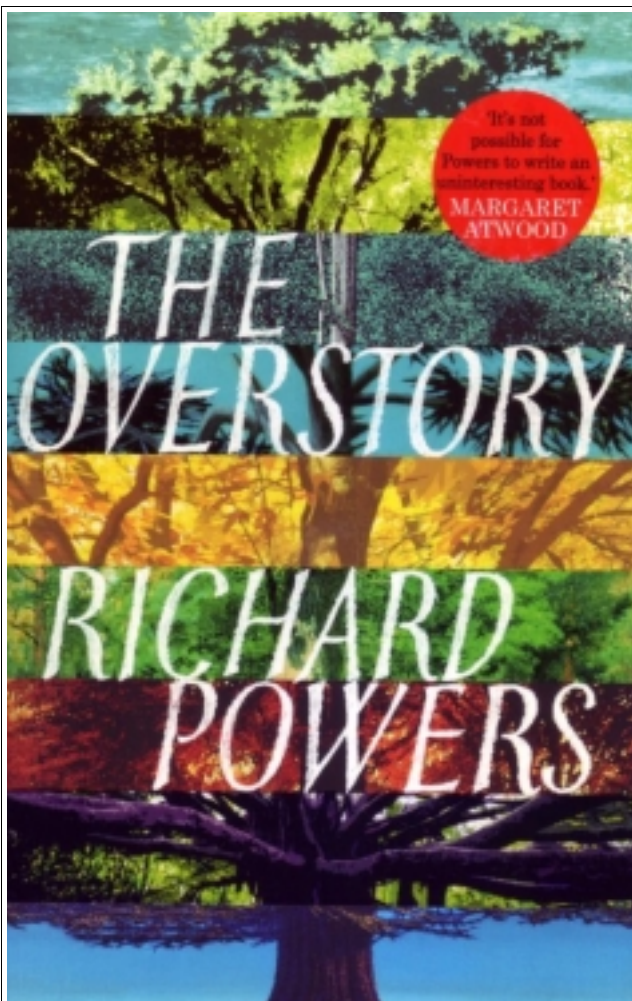
Their firstborn dies in infancy, killed by a thing that doesn’t yet have a name. There are no microbes, yet. God is the lone taker of children, snatching even placeholder souls from one world to the other, according to obscure time-tables.

In the space of four or five pages, 50 years pass by. Jorgen Hoel dies, his eldest son takes over the

farm, and all the while the one remaining chestnut tree watches on. However, in 1904 chestnuts are under attack from a blight that eradicates them in the thousands. (This is the first time I’d heard of the great chestnut blight of 1904.)

Within a year, orange spots fleck chestnuts throughout the Bronx — the fruiting bodies of a parasite that has already killed its host. Every infection releases a horde of spores on the rain and wind. City gardeners mobilize a counterattack. They lop off infected branches and burn them. They spray trees with a lime and copper sulfate from horse-drawn wagons. All they do is spread the spores on the axes they use to cut the victims down. A researcher at the New York Botanical Garden identifies the killer as a fungus new to man. He publishes the results and leaves town to beat the summer heat. When he returns a few weeks later, not a chestnut in the city is worth saving.

Death races across Connecticut and Massachusetts, jumping dozens of miles a year. Trees succumb by the hundreds of thousands. A country watches dumbstruck as New England’s priceless chestnuts melt away. The tree of the tanning industry, of railroad ties, train cars, telegraph poles, fuel, fences, houses, barns, fine desks, tables, pianos, crates, paper pulp, and endless free shade and food — the most harvested tree in the country — is vanishing.



Horrible and fascinating in equal measure.

A five-year-old in Tennessee who sees the first orange spots appear in her magic woods will have nothing left to show her own children except pictures. They'll never see the ripe, full habit of the tree, never know the sight and sound and smell of their mother's childhood. Millions of dead stumps sprout suckers that struggle on, year after year, before dying of an infection that, preserved in these stubborn shoots, will never disappear. By 1940, the fungus takes everything, all the way out to the farthest stands in southern Illinois. Four billion trees in the native range vanish into myth. Aside from a few secret pockets of resistance, the only chestnuts left are those that pioneers took far away, to states beyond the reach of the drifting spores.

Since 1903 three generations of Hoels have taken a single photo, every month, of their lone chestnut tree. I provide that context so you can experience the full, astonishing effect of the following excerpt:

The photos hide everything: the twenties that do not roar for the Hoels. The Depression that costs

them two hundred acres and sends half the family to Chicago. The radio shows that ruin two of Frank Jr.'s sons for farming. The Hoel death in the South Pacific and the two Hoel guilty survivals. The Deeres and Caterpillars parading through the tractor shed. The barn that burns to the ground one night to the screams of helpless animals. The dozens of joyous weddings, christenings, and graduations. The half dozen adulteries. The two divorces sad enough to silence songbirds. One son's unsuccessful campaign for the state legislature. The lawsuit between cousins. The three surprise pregnancies. The protracted Hoel guerrilla war against the local pastor and half the Lutheran parish. The handiwork of heroin and Agent Orange that comes home with nephews from 'Nam. The hushed-up incest, the lingering alcoholism, a daughter's elopement with the high school English teacher. The cancers (breast, colon, lung), the heart disease, the degloving of a worker's fist in a grain auger, the car death of a cousin's child on prom night. The countless tons of chemicals with names like Rage, Roundup, and Firestorm, the patented seeds engineered to produce sterile plants. The fiftieth wedding anniversary in Hawaii and its disastrous aftermath. The dispersal of retirees to Arizona and Texas. The generations of grudge, courage, forbearance, and surprise generosity: everything a human being might call the *story* happens outside his photos' frame. Inside the frame, through hundreds of revolving seasons, there is only that solo tree, its fissured bark spiraling upward into early middle age, growing at the speed of wood.

The Hoel chapter ends in tragedy — for the family, not the chestnut tree — but rather than linger, the next section of the book concerns Winston Ma who left China before Mao's Communist revolution. He brings with him to America three jade rings and an ancient scroll. In this scene, Winston's daughter, Mimi, is shown the rings for the first time.

He took her into his study. There, he showed her things she still couldn't grasp, a day later. He unlocked the filing cabinet and removed a wooden box. Inside it were three green rings. 'Mao, he never know about this. Three magic ring. Three tree — past, present, future. Lucky, I have three magic daughter.' He tapped his finger on his temple. 'Your father, always thinking.'

He took the ring he called *the past* and tried it on Mimi's finger. The twisting green foliage mesmerized her. The carving was deep — branches beyond branches. Impossible that anyone could carve a thing so small.

‘This all *jade*.’

The centuries-long life-cycle of the fig, beautifully depicted by Powers.

Miles below and three centuries earlier, a pollen-coated wasp crawled down the hole at the tip of a certain green fig and laid eggs all over the involute garden of flowers hidden inside. Each of the world’s seven hundred and fifty species of *Ficus* has its own unique wasp tailored to fertilize it. And this one wasp somehow found the precise fig species of her destiny. The foundress laid her eggs and died. The fruit that she fertilized became her tomb.

Hatched, the parasite larvae fed on the insides of this inflorescence. But they stopped short of laying waste to the thing that fed them. The males mated with their sisters, then died inside their plush fruit prison. The females emerged from the fig and flew off, coated in pollen, to take the endless game elsewhere. The fig they left behind produced a red bean smaller than the freckle on the tip of Douglas Pavlicek’s nose. That fig was eaten by a bulbul. The bean passed through the bird’s gut and dropped from the sky in a dollop of rich shit that landed in the crook of another tree, where sun and rain nursed the resulting seedling past the million ways of death. It grew; its roots slipped down and encased its host. Decades passed. Centuries. War on the backs of elephants gave way to televised moon landings and hydrogen bombs.

The bole of the fig put forth branches, and branches built their drip-tipped leaves. Elbows bent from the larger limbs, which lowered themselves to earth and thickened into new trunks. In time, the single central stem became a stand. The fig spread outward into an oval grove of three hundred main trunks and two thousand minor ones. And yet it was all still a single fig. One banyan.

This is the opening sentence of Neelay Mehta’s chapter:

The boy who’ll help change humans into other creatures is in his family’s apartment above a Mexican bakery in San Jose watching tapes of *The Electric Company*.

Not every tree in this novel is made of wood:

There’s a thing in programming called *branching*. And that’s what Neelay Mehta does. He will reincarnate himself, live again as people of all races, genders, colors, and creeds. He’ll raise decaying corpses and eat the souls of the young.

He’ll tent high up in the canopies of lush forests, lie in broken heaps at the bottom of impossibly high cliffs, and swim in the seas of planets with many suns. He’ll spend his life in the service of an immense conspiracy, launched from the Valley of Heart’s Delight, to take over the human brain and change it more than anything since writing.

I’m only a quarter of the way through *The Overstory*, but I’ve learnt more about trees and the ecosystem than at any other point in my forty-three years on this planet. That’s both an indication of how passionate the novel is on the subject and an indictment of how little I know.

The things she catches Douglas-firs doing, over the course of these years, fill her with joy. When the lateral roots of two Douglas-firs run into each other underground, they fuse. Through those self-grafted knots, the two trees join their vascular systems together and become one. Networked together underground by countless thousands of miles of living fungal threads, her trees feed and heal each other, keep their young and sick alive, pool their resources and metabolites into community chests ... It will take years for the picture to emerge. There will be findings, unbelievable truths confirmed by a spreading worldwide web of researchers in Canada, Europe, Asia, all happily swapping data through faster and better channels. Her trees are far more social than even Patricia suspected. There are no individuals. There aren’t even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest. Competition is not separable from endless flavors of cooperation. Trees fight no more than do the leaves on a single tree. It seems most of nature isn’t red in tooth and claw, after all. For one, those species at the base of the living pyramid have neither teeth nor talons. But if trees share their storehouses, then every drop of red must float on a sea of green.

College University student Olivia Vandergriff was dead for a good minute after accidentally electrocuting herself. Since her heart restarted, she’s been guided by ‘beings of light’ who have a mission for her. I assume it has to do with trees.

She wakes early, stiff with cold, under a pile of clothing. The car is filled with beings of light. They’re everywhere, unbearable beauty, the way they were the night her heart stopped. They pass into and through her body. They don’t scold her for forgetting the message they gave her. They simply infuse her again. Her joy at their return spills over, and she starts to cry. They speak no

words out loud. Nothing so crude as that. They aren't even *they*. They're part of her, kin in some way that isn't yet clear. Emissaries of creation — things she has seen and known in this world, experiences lost, bits of knowledge ignored, family branches lopped off that she must recover and revive. Dying has given her new eyes.

You were worthless, they hum. But now you're not. You have been spared from death to do a most important thing.

What thing? she wants to ask. But she must keep silent and still.

Life's moment is here. A test that it has not yet had.

A third of the way through and our narratives are starting to converge. Olivia meets Nick Hoel — it's his family who photographed the chestnut tree — and both of them head off to protest the cutting down of redwoods. Mimi's office looks out on a small pocket of pines that are also facing the axe. She loves these pines; their scent of vanilla reminds Mimi of her father. At the same time Doug Pavlicek (introduced to us earlier in the novel), whose plane was shot down during the Vietnam War and who now spends his days planting trees, sees the announcement for a Town Hall meeting about the very pines that Mimi so loves.

'Try me.' Turns out Dougie passed it on the way here. He doubles back along the route he came. He smells the little pocket park before he sees it — like a slice of God's birthday cake. The condemned trees all have three needles to a bundle, large orange plates. Old friends. He sets up base camp on a bench under the pines. He lets the trees comfort him. It's dark, but the neighborhood seems safe. Safer than flying transports over Cambodia. Safer than a lot of bars he's fallen asleep in. He'd like to fall asleep here. Fuck practicality and all its binding obligations. Give a guy a night outdoors, with nothing between his bare head and a seed rain. The twenty-third, it occurs to him — town meeting is only four days away.

All those twirling blades and talk of shredding and grinding. The suggestion of an abattoir is deliberate.

In half a mile, they're up against human ingenuity at its best. She can name the metal beasts better than she can name the different trees. Down through the clearing, there's a feller buncher, snatching batches of small trunks, delimbing them, and bucking the logs to fixed lengths, doing in a day what a team of human cutters would need a week to get through. There's a self-loading forwarder trailer, stacking

the cut logs into itself. Nearer by, a front loader extends the roadbed, and a scraper rough-grades it prior to the arrival of the roller. She's learned of machines that drop their maws onto fifty-foot trees and grind them to the ground faster than a food processor can shred a carrot. Machines that stack logs like toothpicks and haul them to mills where twenty-foot trunks twirl on spits so fast that the touch of an angled blade shaves off the flesh in a continuous layer of veneer.

One massive tree:

'There it is,' Loki says, pointlessly. 'There's Mimas.'

Sounds come up and out of Nick's mouth, syllables that mean, loosely, *Oh, my hopeless Jesus*. He has seen monster trees for weeks, but never one like this. Mimas: wider across than his great-great-great-grandfather's old farmhouse. Here, as sundown blankets them, the feel is primeval, darshan, a face-to-face intro to divinity. The tree runs straight up like a chimney butte and neglects to stop. From underneath, it could be Yggdrasil, the World Tree, with its roots in the underworld and crown in the world above. Twenty-five feet aboveground, a secondary trunk springs out of the expanse of flank, a branch bigger than the Hoel Chestnut. Two more trunks flare out higher up the main shaft. The whole ensemble looks like some exercise in cladistics, the Evolutionary Tree of Life — one great idea splintering into whole new family branches, high up in the run of long time.

'Our brains evolved to solve the forest':

'Here's a little outsider information, and you can wait for it to be confirmed. A forest knows things. They wire themselves up underground. There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows *aware*.'

Her words sound far away, cork-lined and underwater. Either both her hearing aids have died at once or her childhood deafness has chosen this moment to come back.

'We scientists are taught never to look for ourselves in other species. So we make sure nothing looks like us! Until a short while ago, we didn't even let chimpanzees have consciousness, let alone dogs or dolphins. Only man, you see: only man could know enough to *want* things. But believe me: trees want something from us, just as we've always wanted things from them. This

isn't mystical. The "environment" is alive — a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other. Love and war can't be teased apart. Flowers shape bees as much as bees shape flowers. Berries may compete to be eaten more than animals compete for the berries. A thorn acacia makes sugary protein treats to feed and enslave the ants who guard it. Fruit-bearing plants trick us into distributing their seeds, and ripening fruit led to color vision. In teaching us how to find their bait, trees taught us to see that the sky is blue. Our brains evolved to solve the forest. We've shaped and been shaped by forests for longer than we've been *Homo sapiens*.'

The gist of it

There isn't an ounce of subtlety in Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory*. This is not a bad thing. I hate confrontation, but when anti-vaxxers, flat-earthers, and climate change deniers are influencing public policy (well, maybe not the flat-earthers) it's time to shoot for the heart rather than the head. Richard Powers does precisely that. His passion for the environment, his fury at the wanton destruction of the forests, his deep love for trees in all their variety and complexity makes abundantly clear as to how poorly we've treated the natural world. Given the novel is 500 pages long, it's astonishing that Powers can sustain the intensity, pitched at 11, and maintain the reader's interest.

He achieves this by introducing us to eight very different but sympathetic characters. Nick Hoel is an artist living in the crumbling ruin of his family farm; Mimi Ma is an engineer haunted by the suicide of her father; Adam Appich is an autodidact whose life changes when he reads the work of a famed psychologist; Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly are a married couple drifting apart; Douglas Pavlicek is a Vietnam veteran looking for a cause; Neelay Mehta is a disabled software developer who

creates complex, insanely popular, virtual worlds; Patricia Westerford is an academic ridiculed by her colleagues when she posits that trees communicate with each other; and, finally, Olivia Vandergriff, is a student who, following a near-death experience, believes spirits are communicating with her. Olivia is the lynchpin that draws most of these characters together. Her desire to save the trees becomes an obsession for followers like Douglas, Nick, and Mimi.

The majority of environmental novels I read are science fiction dystopias where the climate is fucked, the forests have vanished, and half the planet is flooded. There's a pessimistic (and to be fair realistic) tone to these stories (unless, of course, it's written by Kim Stanley Robinson) that strive to understand how we will survive as a species. Reading a book that provides a recent history of how humanity has gradually destroyed the eco-sphere isn't so much pessimistic as anger-inducing. For a good chunk of this book, I was in a state of apoplexy as capital and greed take precedence over conservation and protection of our resources. This is a novel that not only opened my eyes to the glory and majesty that is a single chestnut tree but also reinforced how little I know about the intricate connections and interactions that make up the natural world.

The novel does run out of puff toward the end, it's possibly 50 pages too long, but that doesn't undermine how essential and vital this book is. Maybe it's all too late; maybe *The Overstory* is a pointless scream into a deep, uncaring void, maybe those science fiction dystopias are all we have to look forward to. Still, I'm heartened that this book exists.

Finally, take a bow, James Bradley. You drove me mad, but you were right about this book.

— Ian Mond, 2018

Michelle Worthington

Taking courage in a dangerous Australia

THE DOG RUNNER

by Bren MacDibble (Allen & Unwin)

[First appeared in [worthythoughts online](#)]

What I like about Bren MacDibble is that she doesn't preach and she doesn't patronise her readers. So many authors like to take a stance and they then proceed to hit you over the head with their beliefs. They try to make you feel stupid for

believing in what you think and often they will ridicule the reader for not believing in what they believe is true and right. Bren MacDibble doesn't do this; she shows us what a better way is and she lets us decide. She did this with the wonderful *How to Bee* and continues to do this with her new book *The Dog Runner*.

The Dog Runner is set in the not-too-distant future. Australia has succumbed to a fungus that has wiped out grass and led to worldwide famine. The world we live in is in anarchy — there is little food, nothing grows, livestock are dead, and life is dangerous.

Ella lives with her father, mother, brother, and their dogs. Ella's mother has been working outside the city and Ella's father goes off to find her and bring her home. Ella and Emery's father is gone for a long time and it doesn't look like he and Ella's mother are going to return. Life in the city is becoming more precarious each day and so Ella and her brother Emery decide to set off to the country where Emery's mother lives.

With the help of five dogs and a dogsled, they leave the city and head out into the country. Emery and Ella know that no one can be trusted and they know that food and water on their journey will be scarce and that their journey will be filled with danger, but they feel that it is a better option than remaining in the city.

The Dog Runner moves at a cracking pace — an exciting and brilliant read. Ella is an exceptional voice. She is a young character but by no means a naïve character. Ella isn't tough and experienced but she has a quiet strength about her. She bravely steps up and takes on challenges that in her previous life she would have found terrifying. Through all the dangers and challenges Ella doesn't become hardened by what she sees and experiences; she always remains hopeful about the future.

The Dog Runner is thought-provoking. MacDib-



Bren MacDibble wins the New Zealand Book Award for Children & Young Adults, 2019.

ble gives the reader a warning about the hazards and perils of monoculture and shows us that we lack diversity in our crop growing, *but* she also offers solutions. She introduces the reader to native plants and shows us how to think differently about growing our crops so that we don't exhaust and drain the land. It is quite the writer who is able to weave all this into a book that will excite young readers.

I have two copies of this book in my school library and both books are currently on loan and there is a waiting list for these books. As soon as I describe it to the boys they want to read it. *The Dog Runner* is brilliant — thought-provoking, intelligent and exhilarating.

— Michelle Worthington, 2020

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