



Alan White: 'A Night in Innsmouth'.

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BACK COVER: 'Golden Bridge in Da Nang, Vietnam.'

PHOTOGRAPHS: Marc Ortlieb (p. 5); Joseph Nicholas (p. 7); Karen Schaffer (p. 7); Robert Lichtman (p. 11);
John Litchen (pp. 12, 13, 17, 18, 39, 40); Andrew Darlington (p. 29); Robyn Whiteley (p. 30); Casey Wolf
(p. 46); Robert Day (p. 60).

ILLUSTRATION: Stephen Campbell (p. 24); Carol Kewley (pp. 26, 34); Denny Marshall (pp. 28, 50, 69); David
Russell (p. 36).

3 I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS, PART 1

3 BRUCE GILLESPIE
2021: A LOCKDOWN LIFESTYLE

5 TRIBUTES:

5 JUDITH HANNA (1954–2021)
TRIBUTES FROM JOSEPH NICHOLAS
AND MIKE GLYER

9 DOUGLAS BARBOUR (1940–2021)

10 CAROL CARR (1938–2021)

11 GENIE DEMODICA (1952–2021)

11 CHARLIE WATTS (1941–2021)

12 Nanci GRIFFITH (1953–2021)

12 MONICA LITCHEN (1940–2021)

BIOGRAPHY AND TRIBUTE BY JOHN LITCHEN

19 ED MESKYS

TRIBUTE BY JOHN HERTZ

20 I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS, PART 2

20 LETTERS

MARK PLUMMER :: SALLY YEOLAND ::

ROMAN ORSZANSKI :: DAMIEN BRODERICK ::

JOHN HERTZ :: ROB GERRAND ::

STEPHEN CAMPBELL :: PERRY MIDDLEMISS ::

JERRY KAUFMAN :: ANDREW DARLINGTON ::

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STEVE JEFFERY :: JOHN LITCHEN ::

TONY THOMAS :: CASEY WOLF ::

LLOYD PENNEY :: LEIGH EDMONDS ::

ROBERT DAY :: PETER ROGAN ::

CY CHAUVIN :: DON ASHBY ::

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER

75 WE ALSO HEARD FROM ...

71 THE CALLEGARI BOOKS COLUMN

DENNIS CALLEGARI AND BRUCE GILLESPIE

77 THE FIELD

COLIN STEELE

I must be talking to my friends

2021's lockdown lifestyle

In 2020, I welcomed lockdown. It worked for me.
But 2021? ...Aargh! The surprises keep coming.

After printing issues of my magazines for at least 37 years, Copy Place in Bourke Street has been forced to close by the Covid shutdown of firms in the CBD. By 30 June, almost the only work they were receiving was, I suspect, from SF fans who still printed with them. Steve (the genial and efficient manager) has been there for 36 years, and now needs to fill in job application forms for the first time in his life. Lindsay (who bought the business in the early 80s) has retired, but Sue (front desk) and Michael (DTP whiz) need jobs. The Federal Government's Jobkeeper program kept the firm going last year, but of course there's no support this year.

Right at the moment I cannot even print a file copy of any of my magazines, as the home laser printer's double-sided printing feature has become unreliable. I can print only one sided. I can no longer produce copies for contributors or those people who cannot receive magazines in PDF format. Several people have suggested replacement printing firms, but who can replace a working relationship that has solved many of my problems for nearly 40 years? Thanks, Copy Place.

Not that I can send print copies of *SFC* to send to friends in the USA. In May, I sent an envelope containing *SFC*s 105 and 106 to a few people. Four of the copies sent to addresses in USA were returned in June, not allowed to be delivered to US addresses. The copies sent a second time to a few people, such as William Breiding and Denny Marshall, bounced a second time. I've given up further attempts to send them. On the other hand, friends on the West Coast, such as John Hertz and Robert Lichtman, received their copies, as did friends on the East Coast, such as Martin Morse Wooster.

Since then, all US friends have been told they cannot send to Australia anything heavier than an ordinary envelope. I'm not sure I will ever see a printed copy of William Breiding's *Portable Storage* 6, for instance.

It looks as if I have little choice to carry out the

threat/ promise I made about five years ago to go all-PDF, despite (a) those people who simply don't have computers and *must* have their copies of the latest *SFC* and (b) people who do have computers but demand print copies anyway — or have Covid-year difficulties finding any way of printing a copy from a PDF.

If I can go all-digital, I can publish more often, or at least more flexibly. I'll just have to lose some very loyal readers. It's tempting to publish in the way Perry Middlemiss does, for instance.

If you receive a copy in the mail of this issue of *SF Commentary*, you will know I've solved the printing problem, at least for now.

Any good news around here?

Elaine and I have both had both **AstraZeneca vaccinations**, without side effects. We are told that we can still be infected, but not really badly. We won't be leaving the house much, now matter what 'freedoms' are announced. With about 2000 infections per day in Victoria, we will be doing little except buying stuff at the few food shops that are open in the local shopping plaza.

We have finally become hooked into the **NBN** system, at least a year after everybody else. The Telstra guy visited a few days after the NBN system installer, so we had no interruption to service. I've been worrying about the changeover for years. However, the NBN service is much slower than the cable service we had from Telstra itself. In the world of digital, everything goes downhill.

Suddenly in June I was offered three **indexing jobs** in a row, after having received no jobs since two in March, and none before that since September 2020. Nice to have a bit of brain stimulation and headline-hitting work. One of the books I indexed is already published. I'll review it as soon as possible.

Elaine has been teaching me to **cook**, sort of. I'm not much good at chopping vegetables. But I can put together a simple dish from a recipe. For the life of me, I could not figure out how to read a

recipe before 2020. Elaine has been trying many new dishes, from either her stash of recipes or from those published in *The Age* and the weekend magazines each week. We've eaten wonderful pastas and dahls and casseroles and curries. Nearly everything tastes better than anything one could order in a restaurant.

Elaine plays **a CD a day** according to a system she worked out some years ago. Some of the CDs I've heard before, because I bought them. Many of them I've never heard before, even though I bought them. Some are CDs that Elaine bought when she was buying classical CDs. Lots of Bach and Beethoven, but also the complete Rodney Crowell. She had just finished playing almost all of Nanci Griffiths' CDs, only to receive the recent news that she has died at the age of 68.

And, of course, I've been playing lots of the **new CDs** I've bought this year or in earlier decades. Not too many of the jazz items, as Elaine doesn't like jazz. Best of the year so far have included **First Aid Kit's** take on Leonard Cohen's songs, *Who By Fire*, completely ignored by radio stations that usually play their CDs. Also **John Hiatt and the Jerry Douglas Band's** *Leftover Feelings*. And many others, including a raft of Australian new releases in September.

I've been watching lots of **movies**, many of them on discs that Dick Jenssen has given me or lent to me, or John Davies has sent me. I have enjoyed watching lots of *films noirs* during recent months, and some of the movies that Josef von Sternberg made with Marlene Dietrich in the 1930s (brilliant movies, not much remembered until now). Best of the year so far has been not a movie but an eight-part TV series on disk: *Bodyguard*. No sign of it on disk in Australia, but PlayMusic in the city was able to import a British copy.

Despite problems with the international mail, **people keep sending me things**: parcels in the post that light up the day. Recently **Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice** sent me their new novel *The Five Star Republic*. :: **William Breiding** was able to send me *Portable Storage 5*, but the US Post Office won't allow him to send to Australia *Portable Storage 6*. :: **Irwin Hirsh** sent me some packets of books, surplus to requirements at his place. :: **John Davies** sent me some fabulous packets of Blu-rays, as I've men-

tioned. The most recent is *The Complete Rupert Davies Miagret*, a set comprising 11 Blu-ray discs plus a 120,000-word book! :: **Colin Steele** sent me several books that I could not find around Melbourne. :: And **David Russell** recently sent me his first and only fan-art fanzine, *Volcanic Cats*.

Can life get better? I'd like to be able to take a walk without wearing a mask. I'd like to be able to visit Readings in Carlton and PlayMusic in the city, and eat out occasionally. Try as they might, the local restaurants' takeaway meals don't match the sit-down equivalents. Elaine would like to be able to catch up with her sisters and their families, and I'd like to be able to visit my sister Jeanette up the country. But apart from the niggly bits, life isn't much different under lockdown than during ordinary life. If only there wasn't that clever little virus out there taking over the world despite the best efforts of Dan Andrews and his crew. If only there weren't those stupid humans who keep spreading it all around.

Life is good — with crossed fingers.

Rock on

As soon as I thought I might wrap up my account of recent events, a **5.9-scale earth tremor** rattled the windows and floors in Greensborough — and the rest of Victoria and bits of some other states. I had never really felt an earth tremor until Tuesday, 21 September, 9.15 a.m. I suppose that most ANZAPA members felt it too. I remember the 1977 earth tremor. I was lying in bed, and thought that Apple Blossom had somehow sneaked into my bedroom at Johnston Street in Collingwood and jumped on the end of the bed. A few years later, when Elaine and I had moved to Keele Street Collingwood, I was taking an afternoon nap and missed that tremor altogether. But last Tuesday, I was swaying with the floor and hearing the windows rattle and wondering where was the right spot to flee unto. Not that anything fell, or even cracked. But it was a new experience. Everybody is waiting for the next sign of the apocalypse.

— **Bruce Gillespie, 25 September 2021**

Time's wingèd chariot hurried near

In one week, the last week of September, almost every day brought news of another death in the SF family, in particular the *SF Commentary* family. Also important to me were two other deaths — musicians I've never met but whose work I've admired greatly.

Judith Hanna (1954–2021)

On 6 September, **Joseph Nicholas** sent the following message to his friends:

Judith has gone — 4.30 a.m. today in the Whittington Hospital in Archway, North London. A great light has gone out of my life.



Adelaide station, 1980, post-convention: Judith Hanna in front of Marc Ortlieb and Sean McMullen in front of Andrew Brown. (Photo supplied by Marc Ortlieb.)

Elaine and I first met **Judith Hanna** when she visited the slanshack at Johnston Street Collingwood in 1977. She had moved from Western Australia to Sydney some time before, but was visiting Melbourne for (I suppose) a convention. She was great company, and we were very pleased to learn a few years later that she had got together with visiting British fan Joseph Nicholas (on his 1981 GUFF trip). She moved to Britain to be with him, and they were married in 1983. During recent years she had been returning to WA once a year to visit her mother. During one of those trips, she and Joseph attended a fannish get-together at the Mail Exchange Hotel in Melbourne. They also took the train to visit us in Greensborough. Judith and Elaine had been in the Secret Garden apa, which became an e-group sometime later. The main interest of both of them has been gardening.

Judith's contribution to fandom

In *File* 770, **Mike Glycer** writes:

JUDITH HANNA. Fanzine fan Judith Hanna died September 6 of cancer. She is survived by her husband, Joseph Nicholas. The Australian-born Hanna was a member of the Sydney University Tolkien Society. She emigrated to the UK

in the early eighties. She was a member of the Australia in '83 bid committee. Hanna wrote for many fanzines, and with Nicholas published *FTT*, which won the Nova Award in 1990. She was a reviewer for *Vector* and *Paperback Inferno*,

among others. Her fanwriting was selected for *Fanthology* '88, *Fanthology* '89, and *Fanthology* '93.

— Mike Glyer

Joseph Nicholas: Two eulogies for Judith Hanna

Funeral eulogy for Judith Hanna

It's not possible, in a few minutes, to encompass everything about Judith — especially what she meant to me in the nearly forty wonderful years we had together. You may have seen the short obituary of her, by me, which appeared in the *Guardian's* 'Other Lives' section a fortnight ago. As I said in that, her life and career exemplified the principle of 'being the change that you want to see'.

We met in Sydney in 1981, where she had been doing a variety of part-time jobs, including at one point being an assistant to the Australian painter Arthur Murch. She joined me in London the following year, and from the early 1980s onwards worked for a variety of organisations which wanted to change the world, or at least Britain, for the better — the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; the Campaign for Better Transport, where she took a particular interest in local street environments; the Commission for Racial Equality; and finally for *English Nature/Natural England*, where she took the lead in promoting the now widely accepted health benefits of everyday contact with the natural world. As she said later, when interviewed for a professional journal before she retired from *Natural England*, she fell into these jobs rather than aimed specifically at them — a clear natural aptitude which helped her succeed at anything she tried.

However, it's the actions she took locally, in Tottenham, for which many here will remember her. She set up and organised the first few of the annual seed swaps, to bring local gardeners together to exchange seeds and ideas. She led or participated in local initiatives to transform unloved and overgrown open spaces into community gardens. She initiated discussions among local residents on traffic calming schemes, or low-traffic neighbourhoods as they're now called, and pressed local councillors to follow through on their implementation. Above all, she had time for others and gave freely of her knowledge and expertise. She was a real light in the community, and an inspiration to others — literally: her sister Zena's children cite her specifically for the fact that they now work for

environmental causes in their native Australia.

When she wasn't working to improve the local environment, we were tripping off to places in the UK and overseas which interested us. For example, we went to Soviet Central Asia (in the years when there still was a Soviet Central Asia) because we had become fascinated by the ancient Silk Road and wanted to see the old cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. For another example, we went to Egypt on the eve of the first Gulf War, because most tourists had fled for home and we therefore had the Theban necropolis almost to ourselves. We went cruising in the Adriatic, because we'd never been cruising before. We went on a cycling holiday in Brittany, and may have been among the last people to be allowed to walk amongst the menhirs at Carnac. And of course we made many visits to Australia — going on holiday to lie on a beach wasn't for us. Our holidays were always 'pound that pavement, visit that museum, take that photograph'. And then come home for a rest.

We doubtless struck some people as a bit eccentric — not just because we followed our interests irrespective of what other people might think, but also because, like all couples who have been together for many years, we had evolved our own methods of signalling and communicating. We sometimes conversed in a language we called 'Eurish', which (you'll have guessed this) consisted of a mix of European languages, but on top of that had our own private language, which baffled everyone else — as an American friend once put it to me, 'You have the most elaborate private language of any couple I know.' And there were the Judithisms: the particular expressions that she alone used, to me. An example: I enjoy Scandinoir dramas on BBC Four, which she didn't, labelling them 'Judith-repelling television'. As the programmes started, she would ascend the stairs with the stern instruction: 'Remember to put yourself to beddy afterwards, dear.'

I think we led a pretty full life. We read science fiction and published fanzines, the very thing



Judith Hanna in the allotment garden.
(Photos: *above*: Joseph Nicholas; *below*: Karen Schaffer.)



which had brought us together in Sydney in 1981. We went walking in the countryside around London. We read archaeology and history, because we thought that the lives of real people (even if dead) were more interesting than the invented lives of made-up people in novels (with some exceptions, obviously). We visited museums and art galleries, and enjoyed the lecture programmes they offered. In retirement, she joined a dance group of fellow retirees, just because. She constructed dolls' houses. (We have four of them.) She worked on tapestries while watching *Gardeners' World* on Friday evenings. She did knitting and crochet — some of the crochet done with plastic bags which had been cut into long strips of what she called 'plarn', plastic yarn, to make a hyperbolic coral reef with which she won a prize at the Lordship Rec Flower and Produce Show a few years ago. And of course there was the gardening, the great passion of her life. 'I've got an allotment', she said to me one evening in 1996, and I thought that was too much to take on given that we'd only been in our house a couple

of years and were still creating a garden for it. But we've had that allotment ever since, and were in the process of reorganising it when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in the autumn of last year.

She seemed to have beaten it, with the successful removal of the tumour, but what we thought was an adverse reaction to the drug she was prescribed after the operation turned out to be the cancer striking back. We were both devastated to be told that it was incurable, and that she had only a few short weeks of life left to her; but in her last days she displayed a truly amazing stoicism. 'Sorry dear,' she said, more than once, 'I've got the easy part. I'm leaving you with all the paperwork.'

What she's also left us with is the memory of her and all the things she did. And she's left me with the memory of the warm, loving, kind wife, best friend and soulmate that she was and always will be.

— **Joseph Nicholas**, Enfield Crematorium,
24 September 2021

Joseph Nicholas' Guardian obituary: Judith's contribution to the gardening and environmental movements

Judith Hanna worked to bring about a change in attitudes to protecting the natural environment

During her 30 years of working for a range of campaigning bodies and NGOs, my wife, Judith Hanna, who has died aged 67 of liver cancer, saw concern about the environment go from a fringe issue for community activists to a mainstream subject with a professionalised career structure.

Her life and career embodied the principle of 'being the change you want to see', through such local activities as organising annual seed swaps, promoting community gardens, calling for traffic calming measures in residential streets and, at national level, working for nuclear disarmament and better public transport. In her final role, as a social evidence principal specialist at Natural England, she promoted the now widely accepted health benefits of everyday contact with the natural world.

Judith was born in Nowra, New South Wales, the eldest of six children of Valmai (nee St Clair) and Jack Hanna. Her father was a naval aviator and Judith went to school in various locations according

to her father's naval postings. When he later became a sheep farmer the family settled in Kojonup, Western Australia, where Judith completed her secondary education before undertaking a degree in anthropology and linguistics at the University of Western Australia, in Perth.

She and I met in Sydney in 1981 through a shared interest in science fiction. The following year she moved to be with me in London, where I worked as a civil servant; as she subsequently put it, she 'never quite got away'. We married in 1983.

Judith became PA to the general secretary and chair of CND (then Bruce Kent and Joan Ruddock) during its glory days of the mid-1980s, and organised the CND Express campaign bus in the run-up to the 1987 general election.

After that, she moved on to become assistant director of Transport 2000 (now the Campaign for Better Transport), often being interviewed on Radio 4's *Today* programme and sometimes breakfast television on a range of transport-related issues. While there, she helped set up the Environmental Transport Association, the green alternative to the AA and RAC.

After the 1992 election, Judith moved on again,

to become editor of the specialist publication *Local Transport Today*, during which she was awarded the Chartered Institute of Transport's 1993 medal for transport journalist of the year.

This was followed by a few years at the Campaign for Racial Equality (as it then was) and Volunteering England before, in 2002, she joined English Nature/Natural England as a social policy adviser.

Until retirement in 2013, she worked alongside scientists who were initially resistant to the idea that their work could have sociological and psychological dimensions, but came to respect her keen insight into the health benefits of contact with the natural world.

Judith and I settled in Tottenham, north London, in 1993, and in retirement we were involved in various local campaigns and community organisa-

tions. We kept abreast of scientific developments, especially new discoveries in the story of human evolution; enjoyed the lecture programmes of the cultural institutions, such as the British Museum, that we supported; spent weekends away in interesting parts of Britain; and travelled to various foreign destinations, including many visits to Australia.

But our chief leisure interest was gardening, at home and on our allotment. We were reorganising the latter when Judith was diagnosed with cancer in autumn last year.

She is survived by me, her mother and her siblings, Julian, Peter, Zena, and Roslyn. Her brother John predeceased her.

— **Joseph Nicholas,**

12 September 2021, *Guardian* 'Other Lives' section

Douglas Barbour (1940–2021)

No sooner had I finished writing most of **brg** 118 (the October issue of my little ANZAPazine) than I received the news of the death of somebody I have regarded as a good friend since the 1970s: **Doug Barbour**, who has lived and worked during most of the last 50 years in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

On 8 August, he sent an email message to me and other friends:

My cancer has returned rather strongly and instead of managing the cancer, the doctors are

managing the symptoms or something, and giving me less than a year, though they'd like to be wrong, and so would Sharon and me. Anyway, you are an old friend, and I thought I should let you know.

I am able to delve or dive into SF/F, and having gone through all the Malazan Empire books, am now rereading Iain M. Banks's later works, both taking one out of oneself, and slowly, for me these days.'



The interesting thing about this photo of Doug Barbour (l.) and Eli Cohen (r.) is that it is one of two photos of Doug I have in my whole collection. It is obviously taken in the 1970s, perhaps even at a convention I attended in 1973. He was 33 in 1973, and he had not appeared to age when Elaine and I met him during two visits to Australia in the 1990s. He always seemed much younger than me.



A day or two before his death, Doug let his Facebook friends know that he was about to die. This gave us the opportunity to tell him how much he meant to us. Tributes poured in, mainly from his ex-students, who told of his extraordinary teaching skills. There was also a tribute from one of Australia's best-known poets, **Robert Adamson**:

Sharon, so very sorry. Douglas was a great inspirational poet and critic. Our condolences and love. Bob and Juno. :: The other poet with Doug was Stephen Scobie. They were great together performing their work, also Stephen wrote one of the best books on Bob Dylan of all the hundred plus published so far. It's called *Alias*, really excellent. (They stayed with us here on the Hawkesbury river on that trip.) I'll miss Douglas. He was a wonderful person as well as a brilliant poet and critic.

On 27 September, **Sharon Barbour** posted on Facebook that the indefatigable Doug Barbour had left us on the 25th.

It turns out Doug was seven years older than me (he had turned 81), but he always seemed younger. When I first met him during my 1973 trip to USA, he talked about his many enthusiasms. He was still completing his PhD then. He had had difficulties completing a PhD in Canada on SF writing, but it did happen. He became the first Canadian to be awarded a PhD with a thesis investigating science

fiction writers: Samuel R. Delany and Ursula K. Le Guin. He became a teacher, research, writer, and poet, based at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. He has been a tireless writers of letters of comment and articles for my magazines. We have shared many enthusiasms, science fiction and fantasy writing in general, as well as music (classical, jazz, and what is now called Americana), and poetry.

Doug was a well-known Canadian poet and critic. I don't have a copy of *Worlds Out of Words: The SF Novels of Samuel R. Delany* (1979, his first major book, based on his PhD thesis, but he did send me *Lyric/Anti-lyric: Essays on Contemporary Poetry* (NeWest Press; 2001) and two books of his poetry. He undertook several poetry-reading tours of Australia with his colleague **Stephen Scobie**, during which he met and made friends with far more Australian poets than most Australian poets ever meet. He and Stephen also took me to the local chapter of the Bob Dylan Appreciation Society (or whatever it's called), the members of which looked at me as if I were a bug just landed from Outer Uranus. (I have nearly all of Dylan's albums, chaps!)

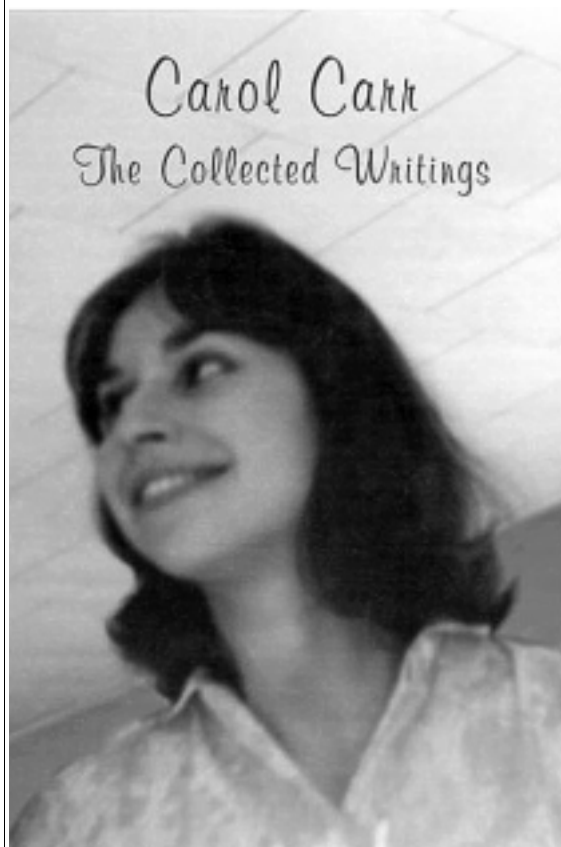
Doug was diagnosed with lung cancer in one lung a while ago, but only very recently had the cancer spread throughout his body.

Elaine and I met Sharon on only one of his trips to Australia. Our very best wishes to her.

Carol Carr (1938–2021)

I first met **Carol Carr** in 2005 during my Bring Bruce Bayside trip to the West Coast of the USA. She was already famous, not only for being the wife of Terry Carr until he died in 1987, but also for being a writer and a good friend of many US fans. After Terry died, Robert Lichtman helped Carol organise his huge fanzine collection for its eventual sale. In doing so they began a relationship which eventually led to them marrying in 2000. When I visited the San Francisco Bay Area, Robert was still living away from Carol, in Glen Ellen, until he could retire from his government job in Santa Rosa. She lived in Oakland, and he would spend all weekends, holidays, and vacations with her there. I was happy that Carol visited that year's Corflu in San Francisco, and we got to talk. She was a dazzling person, and many (Robert most of all, of course) will find it hard to take in the fact that she has left us.

I'm less familiar with Carol's fiction, but I remember enjoying her short story 'Look, You



Think You've Got Troubles', which first appeared in Damon Knight's *Orbit 5* (1969) and has been reprinted more than a dozen times, including in Jack Dann's *Wandering Stars* collection (1974).

Her *Carol Carr: The Collected Writings* (2013) includes a rich collection of both her professional stories and her fanzine articles. I wish I had a copy, but I missed the notice of its publication.

Genie DeModica (1952–2021)

Genie DiModica was a much shyer person than most fans I know. She was part of a group of fans who had moved from Cleveland to New York after graduating in the early 1970s. I met her at a party at the home of Jerry and Suzle Kaufman. I must have also met her at Aussiecon in 1975. She became rather better known than she would have liked when she was taken ill during the after-convention train ride to Ballarat. Jerry Kaufman and Suzle might be able to tell me about what she has been doing during the last few decades.



Carol Carr (l) and Robert Lichtman (r.) on their wedding day in 2000.

Musicians winged by time

Charlie Watts (1941–2021)

Charlie Watts? He was the rock musician I would most have liked to have been. Not that I would have liked to *be* him, but I would have enjoyed drumming for a living. Everybody liked his sense of modesty, his love of music, including an encyclopedic knowledge of jazz, and his general ability to withstand the egomaniacal Mick Jagger. When I listened to the first Rolling Stones album for the first time, what I noticed were not Mick Jagger's vocals, which I've never much liked, but the brilliance of the rhythm section — Charlie Watts on drums, Bill Wyman on bass, and Ian Stewart on piano. When Charlie got going with that special backbeat, you wanted the song to keep going forever. He did not inflict fancy drum solos on his fans, or very rarely. The only diva drum solo I can

remember is on a mid-1960s single, 'We Love You', which was barely played on radio. You can find a superb trio of drums, bass, and piano at the end of 'Salt of the Earth' (*Beggars Banquet*). I also bought Charlie's jazz CDs, such as *From One Charlie to Another*. (Not that I knew anything about Charlie Parker then.) Some of the jazz CDs have tunes that might have been hits if they had been played on Top 40 radio. The Stones always claimed they could not keep going without Charlie Watts — but such is the nature of Mick and Keef they have already picked a new drummer, Steve Jordan (excellent on Keith Richards's *Expensive Winos* albums) and have resumed the American tour so rudely interrupted in March 2020.

Nanci Griffith (1953–2021)

I was really shocked to hear of the death of **Nanci Griffith**, sweet ballad/folk singer from Texas. She had had several fights with cancer, before losing. I had wondered why she had not released a CD for some years. That was because she had retired in 2013. But in the years from 1978 (*There's a Light Beyond These Woods*) to 2013 she produced albums

of some of the most delicious singing I've heard, and wrote many great songs of her own.

Born 6 July 1953 in Seguin, Texas, Griffith was raised in Austin. According to a 1999 profile in *Texas Monthly*, she wrote her first song and played her first gig at age 12. I found her work in 1984 (on *Once in a Very Blue Moon*).\

And, after all that bad news during the last week of September, I received the following from John Litchen, long-time Melbourne fan (who moved to Queensland 27 years ago) and supporter of my magazines.

Monica Litchen (1940–2021)

John Litchen's biography of his wife Monica

Monica Marina Correa Marquez was born on 12 April 1940 in Curepto, a small town in Chile, a few hours' drive south of the capitol Santiago. Her father owned a small farm and produced wine.

Correa was her family name (after her father), and Marquez was her mother's family name. In Chile, the mother's family name is always a part of

a person's full name. When we married, technically in Chile she would have been known as Monica Marina Correa Marquez de Litchen, but in Australia she dropped her two family names and took mine to become Monica Marina Litchen. (Marina was also her mother's given name.) Oddly enough, our wedding was not registered in Chile, since we didn't know we had to do that, so she is regarded there as a soltera, an unmarried woman, and is recognised only by her maiden names.

Monica never actually spoke much about why she left Chile in 1970, only referring to the reasons in passing a few times. She was 30 years old, a single woman, who saw no prospects of having a good life in Chile at that time. It must have taken a lot of courage at her age to give up her life in Chile, to go somewhere foreign where a different language was spoken, to try to start a new life. She was very close to her mother and missed her immensely, as she did her three brothers and their extended families. But she took the chance, and left in search of a better life.

At the time when she left, the government of Chile had elected a Communist leader who almost immediately started nationalising business, industry, and land ownership. She, like many others, disagreed with what the government was doing, but being single, not tied down with a husband or children, she could leave in search of somewhere





Above: (l.) Sally Yeoland and (r.) Monica Litchen during Monica and John's honeymoon trip to Canberra, 1973.

Right: Monica and John in their wedding day.



better. She also told me, as a joke, that there were no interesting men in Chile, and she would have to look elsewhere. There must have been some truth in that, because she was still single, in a country where generally women were married in their early twenties.

Monica was one of many (thousands) who took the opportunity to migrate to Australia. I have a vague recollection that in the 1970s Australia was promoting the immigration of single women to the country because there was a perceived shortage of women and oversupply of men. South American women had no trouble getting visas for permanent residency in 1970.

There was a wave of immigrants from Chile in the 1970s, people escaping the harsh regime imposed by Allende. The same thing happened years later when Allende was removed by Pinochet and the chiefs of the armed forces, creating another wave of people fleeing what they saw as another, quite different, oppressive dictatorship. And so it goes.

She arrived in Sydney in October 1970 with two other women and joined a small community of people, mostly single women around her age (30 to 35) who had all migrated from various South American countries for similar reasons; escaping political repression, in search of an opportunity for a better life.

Monica, who had secretarial qualifications as well as a degree in Humanities from the Universidad Catolica de Chile, and could speak rudimentary English, found herself a job as a receptionist in the Radiology Department of a hospital in Sydney. Here, she met my cousin Mary, who also worked in that department.

When the girls decided to move to Melbourne 10 months later, Mary was also visiting her brother

who lived in St Kilda. She caught up with Monica and her two friends, who had rented a small apartment in Elwood. She rang Mum, her auntie, and explained why she was in Melbourne, and Mum immediately asked her to bring her two friends from Chile with her, "so John can practice his Spanish". It was September 1971.

I had recently come back from Mexico where I'd spend a year, but because I was not speaking any Spanish at home since returning in 1969, it was quickly disappearing. I was looking forward to talking to someone in Spanish again.

When the girls arrived with Mary and she introduced them to us, I knew right at that instant the Monica was the one for me. I was 31 years old (eight days older than Monica), and well past the time most men settle down. Until I saw her, I had been unaware of how lonely I had been feeling.

There was a song, a Cuban rumba I used to play with the band in Acapulco, called 'Que Linda Va': 'How beautiful she goes'. The very first line says, 'When I saw her for the first time, I fell in love' (*Cuando yo la vi por primera vez, yo me enamoré.*) It goes on to say how beautiful she walks, how beautiful is her smile, how wonderful is her soul and so on. It sounds much better in Spanish than it does in English.

Monica was like that. There was something that emanated from her, that filled the room with a feeling of love and caring generosity, and her smile lit up the room. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her, the moment she looked into my eyes when we were introduced and I shook her hand. Her smile just filled me with joy.

As I found out a few days later when helping her and her friends sort out a problem with the St Kilda police regarding a robbery of all their clothes from the flat while they were at work, she felt the same way about me. From that moment on near the end of September 1971 we were inseparable. We were together for 50 years, and married for 48 of them. Sadly, she passed away on 26 September 2021, 50 years from the day when we first met.

John Litchen tells of Monica's last weeks

The last two weeks have been the worst in my life. After injuring my pelvis in a fall necessitating a night and a full day in hospital since I couldn't walk, with the doctors thinking I'd cracked a bone, it turned out all the damage was soft tissue damage, with no fractures. Which was confirmed after both x-rays and CAT scans. On pain killers and anti-inflammatories, I gradually became able to walk after about seven or eight hours, although I had to use walking sticks. The pain in the hip persisted and I couldn't put any weight on the right leg. In order to move it I had to lean on the walking stick so no weight would go down onto the right leg, then I could move the leg forward, where I would lean on the walking stick again to take the weight while moving the left leg. It took several hours of lying on the bed, and only standing up or sitting on the edge of the bed from time to time, before I could attempt to walk. And then it was only small tentative steps using two walking sticks for support.

But the big problem was that there was no one at home to look after Monica, and she needed care full time since she was basically unable to do anything unassisted. She couldn't get out of bed, she couldn't stand up without me supporting her, she couldn't go to the toilet etc. My son called the organisation that was looking after her care package and they came to see what they could do. The only solution was to send Monica to the local hospital (where I was) so she could be looked after because her full-time carer (me) was in the hospital.

When they brought her in the day after I had been admitted, the nurse came with a wheelchair to get me so I could see her where they were processing her at the emergency entrance. They later moved her into the same temporary short stay ward in the bed right next to me. That was great because I could easily manage the few steps between the two beds, and could stand beside her. When the evening meal arrived, I helped feed her because there was no one else to do it. All the nurses were busy since we were in the emergency ward. Monica looked bewildered and had no idea of where she was.

She didn't even know who I was at first when they took me to see her at the processing entrance.

¿Quien eres tu? she asked. 'Who are you?'

¡Hola Monica, Soy tu marido John. ¿No te acuerdas?

'Hi Monica, I'm your husband John'

Then her eyes lit up and she smiled.

They sent me home later that night, around 9 p.m., not long after they moved her into another ward and a private room. It was 9 September 2021. She stayed in the hospital for another two days. I would go every day to the hospital to be with her, and it was obvious that she was deteriorating quite noticeably. They really didn't do much for her in there. They had given her a bath because she had soiled herself with no one at home to help her. They had to do that with two nurses taking her clothes off, fitting her into a sling with which they moved her into the adjoining bathroom.

When I came in next to see her, I was limping and using one walking stick for support, and she was half sitting up in a hospital gown in the bed. The TV was on but without sound. She was just staring at the blank wall. I gave her some water to drink, but she seemed hardly able to swallow it. Her mind had wandered and she wasn't really aware of her surroundings. This is not good, I thought. I tried to engage her in conversation but she wasn't taking much notice of me. When the evening meal arrived, there was no one there to help feed her.

'I'm not hungry,' she said. But when I started to feed her what looked like a vegetarian shepherd's pie with some other steamed vegetables beside it, she ate readily enough. She was quite hungry. She'd had hardly anything to eat all day, or to drink, so she was dehydrated. And cold. Dry hospital rooms don't help if you are slightly dehydrated. They only make it worse.

The next day was the same. Sometimes she would know who I was and at other moments she seemed to drift off while staring into 'space' or at the blank wall opposite the bed. I stayed with her all afternoon and again helped her with the evening meal.

The nurse in charge said they were going to send her home later that day, but the doctor hadn't signed the discharge letter (of which we never received a copy), and it was too late to book an ambulance. She would have to wait until the next morning. That meant she was three days in the hospital.

Finally, they sent her home in an ambulance around 11 a.m. the following morning. They called from the hospital to say she was on her way. The ambulance arrived and they brought her in. She was still wearing her hospital gown. They gave me

a bag with her belongings and then transferred her with some help from me from the stretcher into her wheelchair. Then they left.

She was happy to be home, and her mood immediately brightened. Unfortunately, she had gone so far downhill with that short stay in the hospital that it was much harder to transfer her from the chair to the toilet and the ensuite where I could wash her, remove the hospital gown, and get her dressed in her own clothes.

As I was still recovering from the fall, it was really difficult for me the first day back. She had no strength in her legs after three days in a hospital bed, and I had to hold her up with one hand while trying to dress her or wash her with the other. Once I got her cleaned and changed, we headed back to the lounge room and she stayed in her chair by the window looking out over the back yard. We had a cup of tea together and a small sandwich for lunch. She seemed really happy to be home. She was smiling and we chatted a little.

She picked up after a couple of days and things were much better. But she was still suffering pain in her legs, sometimes her groin or stomach, as well as being highly sensitive to a touch on her arm or shoulder. A couple of times she vomited for no particular reason, and went all clammy and white, but this would quickly pass and she kept insisting that she was okay.

She started to feel much better, much more like she had a few weeks earlier. She'd been home almost two weeks when my sister Christine rang on the Thursday and said she would like to come for a visit. She had no idea that both of us had been in hospital for different reasons.

'Yeah, come down. I've got a copy of my latest book for you.'

'That's great.'

She rang back a few minutes later and asked if Tony could come with her, since he hadn't seen either of us for far too many years. Tony was the younger of her two boys.

'Bring him along. It'll be good to see him again.'

'We'll come down tomorrow for afternoon tea. I'll bring some cakes.'

'Fabulous.'

Friday, Monica had been home for just on two weeks and she was happy to see Christine and Tony. She didn't recognise him at first, but when Tony said who he was she remembered. It had been 15 years since either of us had seen Tony. We had a lovely afternoon together. Tony took a couple of photos of us together, which was nice, even though the photos aren't that flattering. They were the very last ones I will ever have of her. But I didn't know that at the time.

After they had gone, I asked if she remembered

who had visited us and she said immediately 'Cristine and Tony. It was a long time since I saw Tony.'

'Yes, it was.' I was happy she remembered so clearly.

'It was a lovely visit.'

Sometimes her memory was a bit vague, the result of her NP Hydro Kefalas, which puts pressure in certain areas of the brain, causing damage. Balance and the ability to control muscles in the legs and arms are one of the side effects. Memory loss or fragmented memories are another awful effect. Incontinence is a major effect, all caused by the ever-increasing pressure of fluid in the brain affecting areas that control motor function and nerves. It also affected her speech, making it difficult for her to pronounce words in English. Sometimes it was a real battle to get the words out, in which case she would get frustrated and switch to Spanish.

For me, it was so painful to see her deteriorate, there were times I just wanted to sit down and cry. But I had to put on a brave face and try to cheer her up as much as I could. It was not fair that someone so beautiful and loving could be put through that. But even when she was at her worst, she often asked how I was, if I was okay. She cared so much; it was unbelievable. As I sit here and write this a few days before the funeral service, I now realise how rapidly she had deteriorated, and that with helping her every day, I didn't see it so much, because it was only a little each day, and some days she would be better than others. But the last few months were not good. Sometimes she would tell me how lucky she was to have me by her side, but the truth is, I was the one who was lucky to have her. She filled our life with joy. She filled me with joy.

Over the last few months, she often said to me in Spanish, '*Siento mal*' ('I don't feel good'), and quite often, '*Estoy Muriendo*' ('I'm dying'). Her English (a second language she learnt in her late twenties) started to disappear, or she would have trouble getting her tongue around the English words, so she reverted to her native Spanish. Which was fine because I had no trouble speaking with her in Spanish.

On Sunday morning, 26 September 2021, around 6 a.m. I woke up to find her struggling to breathe.

She was gasping, her chest heaving and the sound she was making was frightening.

I leaned over and tried to comfort her, but she was barely aware that I was there. Her eyes were open but unfocused. I felt her shoulder and it was clammy. Her face was as white as porcelain, not her usual colour. I jumped out of bed and ran around to the other side of her bed to lift her up so she

could breathe a bit better. (A few months earlier we had gotten rid of our queen size bed and replaced it with a hospital-type bed for her, and a regular one for me. With her bed I could raise or lower it, could lift the feet the centre or the head, whatever was needed to make it more comfortable for her.)

She calmed down a bit as her breathing eased and she realised I was beside her.

She managed to say, '*Me duele, me duele el pecho*' ('It hurts, my chest hurts').

She was very pale and her back was clammy and sweaty. After a few moments her breathing eased and she seemed more relaxed. The chest pain had gone, but she still had breathing problems. It would become very quiet, as if she was holding her breath, and then her abdomen would start pumping as she tried to suck more air into her lungs.

'I'll call an ambulance,' I told her, but she insisted she didn't want to go to the hospital.

'No quiero ir al hospital, llama un doctor.'

'I can't call a doctor on Sunday. I can call 000 and get an ambulance. They will take you to the hospital.'

Then the ragged breathing would start again, and the same breathing cycle would repeat.

After half an hour she settled a bit. Some colour came back into her face, and the clamminess disappeared. She seemed a lot better, but she kept repeating that she was dying.

There was nothing I could do, and in fact had no idea of what to do. But we waited to see if she would improve and for a while, she seemed quite relaxed. But then the ragged breathing started again.

It was becoming far too erratic.

'I have to call an ambulance.'

She looked at me but didn't say anything.

I called 000 and explained what had happened and the lady kept me on the phone while the ambulance was on its way. She kept asking how Monica's breathing was and was relieved when I told her she was still breathing, though it was uneven and at times very laboured. She stayed on the phone with me until the paramedics walked in the front door, which thankfully was only about ten minutes after I'd called. They were very quick.

The ambulance arrived at 11 a.m., with two paramedics and another extra person who had equipment to deal with a heart attack. They checked her and connected a portable ECG monitor to check her heartbeat. They transferred her to a stretcher and off she went in the ambulance to the hospital. She was not happy to be going to the hospital, but what alternative did I have?

'You did the right thing to call us,' one of the paramedics told me.

Half an hour after they left, I went to the hospital

and they told me they'd put her in an isolation ward and I couldn't see her. The reason they put her there was because of her very laboured breathing. All patients with breathing problems went in there. That included patients with Covid. Fortunately, there were none there at that time.

I insisted that I should be with her, and eventually, because she was only speaking in Spanish and they couldn't understand her, they allowed me to come into that ward so I could translate for them and they could get a rundown on her medical condition from me, which would help them understand her situation.

They knew she'd had a heart attack so they took an x-ray, which showed she had a blocked artery leading into the heart. She would need to have a stent inserted to open the artery. They notified the Gold Coast University hospital, where the cardiac ward was located, and said they would transfer her up there as soon as they could get an ambulance. Meanwhile they'd put cannulas in her arms to take blood for testing so they could administer medications. That was very painful. She had a blood pressure sleeve on her arm so they could monitor her pressure, and an oxygen tube into her nostrils to make sure she got enough oxygen. They had continuous readings coming from the ECG, which was connected to her through various leads on her back and chest. They also gave her a diuretic to help get rid of the fluid in her lungs, which they told me was a result of the heart attack, and that necessitated inserting a catheter into her bladder to drain the urine. They wouldn't let me see them do that. They closed the curtains to hide the bed and told me to wait over by the reception desk. I heard her scream and call out loudly '*Me duele tanto, me duele tanto*' ('It hurts so much'). She kept saying it over and over until they'd completed the insertion of the catheter.

It was a horrible thing for her to suffer so much, in pain while all this was being done, but she settled down after a while. But all she would say while I was there with her was '*Me duele tanto, estoy muriendo*' ('It hurts so much, I'm dying').

The attending chief nurse told me the doctors in the cardiac ward would assess her and probably do the operation early the next morning. They had called for an ambulance to transfer her, but there would be a long wait because they were all busy.

We waited and waited. I comforted her as best I could, talking softly to her and she answered me a few times. She even corrected my grammar when I said something Spanish that was incorrect. They'd given her a pain killer via a tablet crushed in a teaspoon of jam, which she ate with relish because she'd had nothing to eat all day. She was too sick for them to even think of giving her anything other than a little water.



Monica, in hospital, 2021.

Finally, at 7 p.m., about eight hours after she'd been admitted, the ambulance people arrived to transfer her to the main hospital. They disconnected her from all the stuff she was connected to in the ward, transferred her to the stretcher, and reconnected her to portable equipment. I followed them down to where the ambulance was parked at the emergency entrance. She looked lost. She had no idea of what was going on other than it was painful and awful. They told me if I followed them to the other hospital, I wouldn't be able to be with her until they'd settled her into the cardiac ward, so I went home. I told her I would ring the hospital in a couple of hours to see how she was going and would come and see her in the morning. I don't think she was aware of anything I said. I waved to her just as they were closing the ambulance door. Whether she saw me do that or acknowledged it I have no idea.

I was feeling horrible myself, and concerned about what was happening to her. The ambulance hadn't left as I walked across the street to the car park, but as I drove out of the car park it turned into the road behind me. I don't remember the drive home, only that I was walking in the front door. Brian was in the kitchen and wanted to know what had happened and how she was. By the time I'd finished telling him it was 8.25 and I said, 'I'm going to ring the hospital and see how she is.'

I was looking for the number to call them when the phone rang. It was the doctor from the cardiac ward at Gold Coast University Hospital and he said straight up 'There's been an incident.'

'What kind of incident? What does that mean?'

They had assessed her condition and were going to do the operation to insert the stent, that same night. They didn't want to wait until the morning.

Her heart had stopped and we can't get it started again.

'The nurses are still doing CPR. She's had no

heartbeat for the last ten minutes. What do you want us to do?'

'Well, you should know better than me what to do. You're the doctor'

'The thing is,' he explained, 'if we can revive her, she will have considerable brain damage, and we have no idea of what she would be like. Has she told you what she would like in a situation like this?'

Actually, she had, and we had a signed Medical Power of Attorney. We'd done this with our GP about 10 years ago. If her condition was bad, or in a vegetative state, she didn't want invasive surgery or to be revived.

I told the doctor, 'If you think she would have irreparable brain damage which would make what was left of her life an absolute misery, then you can stop trying to revive her.'

He acknowledged what I said. She'd already been dead for ten minutes when he rang.

I told him I would come there right away. I wanted to see her, and of course, talk to them.

It was 9 p.m. when I reached the hospital and it was closed. Everything was shut. I managed to get in through the emergency entrance, and someone took me up to the fourth floor where she was in the cardiac ward.

A nurse asked me to wait in a quiet room while she went and got the doctor. He turned up a few minutes later with head of the cardiac department, and they explained what they had been doing. They had examined her and decided it was an emergency and they would do the operation immediately rather than waiting until the next day.

While they were trying to explain to her what they were going to do, she was speaking in Spanish to them which they could not understand. They said she didn't appear to be in any pain at that point and was relaxed, then she went quiet and her heart just stopped.

They immediately commenced CPR but could not find a heartbeat and could not get it started again, that's when the doctor rang me. They also said that her blood tests showed a massive build-up of acids in her muscles which were killing muscle tissue, which explained the loss of use of her legs and partially her arms over the last two weeks. It would also explain her very erratic heartbeat while she was in hospital. They said she'd had a massive heart attack; but I think she'd had a series of small heart attacks which built up enough damage so that when she had another one on the Sunday morning around 6 a.m. it was cumulative and overall looked massive.

She knew she was dying, which is why she kept

telling me that over the last three or four weeks in particular. But that is an assumption on my part, because it's really hard to know if that was something she really meant or knew, or simply was an expression that people say when they don't feel good. In any case, I do think she'd decided after all the indignity of being in a hospital and connected to various machines and monitors, that it was all too much to bear. She didn't want to suffer it anymore and she let herself go. They told me she stopped talking, went very quiet, and died. The nurses immediately commenced CPR, but it didn't work and after ten minutes of that the doctor rang me to explain what had happened.

My regret is that I hadn't followed the ambulance from the Robina Hospital up to the Gold Coast

University Hospital, to be with her. I would have been there at the end, and perhaps it would have been some comfort for her ... and to me as well. I also regret not thinking to ask the doctor what she had said just before she died. I was so upset I did not think of it. He may not have understood her, but he could have been able to repeat something of what she had said. It probably would have made sense to me.

After I had finished speaking with the doctor and the head of the cardiac department a nurse came in and asked if I would like to see her, to sit with her for a while.

She took me into private room and there was my beautiful Monica lying on a bed with a sheet covering her up to her neck. Her colour was good, her face was relaxed, exactly as if she was asleep. I kissed

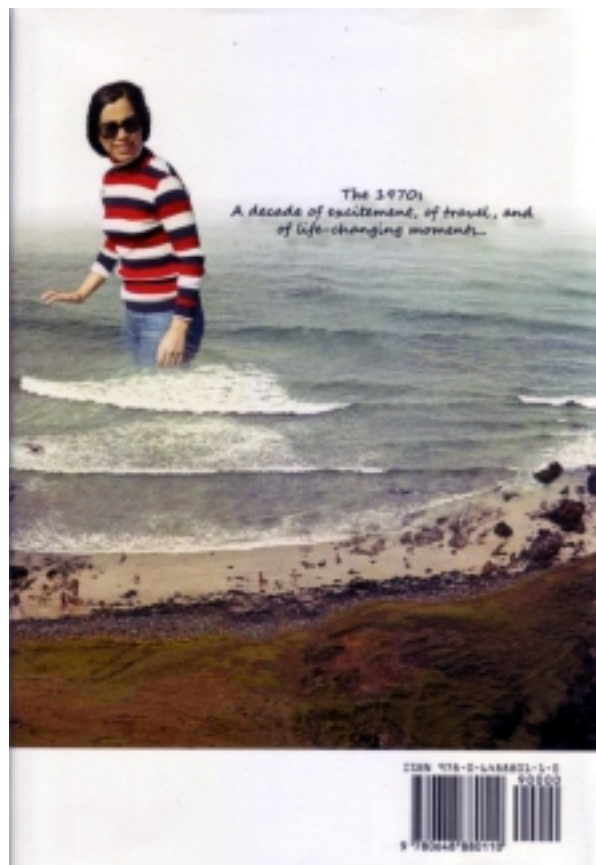
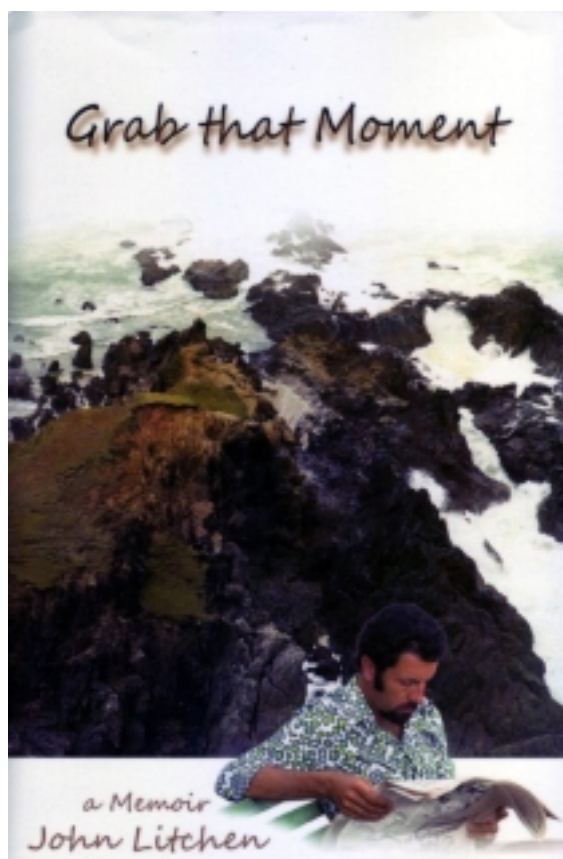
John Litchen's GRAB THAT MOMENT

his account of the heady days of the 1970s, when life was a great adventure, and he and Monica met and married.

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her on the forehead and she was still warm, exactly as she would have been if she was asleep in bed at home. I told her how much I loved her, and that I would miss her so much for the rest of my life no matter how long or short it was to be. And then I started crying and held her delicate hand in mine. Her fingertips were just starting to get cool.

When I had calmed down, I wiped the tears from my eyes and went back outside the room to the nurse's station and one of them explained what would happen. She would be taken down to the hospital mortuary where she would stay until whatever funeral home I get to arrange the funeral would come and collect her. They would also take care of the death certificate and notify the registrar of births and deaths so I wouldn't have to be concerned with that. They gave me an information booklet about what to do when someone dies, which was of some help over the following days.

We were inseparable. We'd been together exactly 50 years on the day she died, 26 September, and married for 48 of them.

She was the best thing that ever happened to me. She was my whole life.

I'm not sure yet how I will manage without her, but I guess I will.

Even though the house is empty and lonely, in the back of my mind, I keep expecting that she will come home from the hospital, just like the few other times she'd been in the hospital.

But this time it's different, and she won't be coming home.

It will sink in next Tuesday when we will have a quiet funeral service. Oddly enough, I am looking forward to the service because it will give me some certainty and 'closure', as they say.

— John Litchen, 2 October 2021

John Hertz remembers Ed Meskys (1936–2021)

Ed Meskys (1936-2021) (for the sound of 'sh' in English share, 'mesh keys') left for After-Fandom on 25 July 2021. He was 85.

He'd been blind since 1971. I'll go ahead and say a light has gone out. Not all light is physical, as he and anyone acquainted with him knew.

Born in Brooklyn to Lithuanian parents, speaking Lithuanian at home and learning English as a second language, by the mid 1950s he was living in the San Francisco Bay area, by the mid 1960s New York (BS.cum laude, MS Physics, St John's University), then New Hampshire with winters in North Carolina. He worked at the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory and the NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) Goddard Institute for Space Studies. He taught Physics at Belknap College, Center Harbor, New Hampshire.

He co-founded *Locus* with Charlie Brown and Dave Vanderwerf. His own fanzine *Niekas* (Lithuanian, 'nothing'; see <https://salfanac.org/fanzines-JNiekas/>) was a three-time Hugo finalist, winning once. It was at first mimeographed, later printed, strong verbally and graphically. The title, like much in our world, was sparked by Peggy Rae McKnight (as she then was; later Pavlat; later Sapienza). Her fanzine was *Etwas* (German, 'something'); they traded. She thus gave Something for Nothing.

He was a pioneer of Tolkien fandom in the

United States, president of the Tolkien Society of America 1968–1972, a Guest of Honour at Mythcon VI. He was an enthusiast of Gilbert and Sullivan, and Georgette Heyer. Also subway and elevated railroad lines; he had many years of *Headlights* published by the Electric Railroaders' Association, and an almost complete run of *Transit*, published for New York City Transit Authority employees 1954–1957.

I saw him at Lunacons (hosted by New York SF club the Lunarians). At his table in the Dealers' Room he showed me how he kept \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20 bills folded into different shapes he could identify by touch. Curiously, we never talked of Heyer — although he had been in the Almack's Society for Heyer Criticism and I long hosted the Regency dance at Lunacon. Too much about science fiction, fantasy, fandom engaged us. I did tell him he was good for Nothing.

In the *Niekas* 46 letter column Walt Willis said 'This [i.e. previous] issue of *Niekas* must have some claim to be the best fanzine of its kind ever published ... For standard of content and sheer magnificence of presentation, it is hard to see how it could be surpassed ... I am proud to have met you at Magicon [50th World Science Fiction Convention; Willis was Fan Guest of Honor; I saw Meskys there too]. RIP.

Feature letter from Mark Plummer: A tribute to Yvonne Rousseau

MARK PLUMMER
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Thanks so much for putting together that tribute to Yvonne. As I think you know, she was one of the first Australian fans we met and one of the incentives to visit in 1999 and to keep coming back.

You fill in some of Yvonne's earlier fannish history, including some stuff that I didn't know.

My own association with her goes back about 25 years, a period that feels trivial in present company.

Around 1990 I started hearing a lot of chatter about an American magazine called *Science Fiction Eye*. Their schedule was erratic and in the pre-internet world each issue was unheralded, but at some point, whether it was in a London shop like Forbidden Planet or the Fantasy Inn or a convention dealers' room, I picked up a copy of No. 7. Given the date it could have come from a dealer at the Dutch Worldcon.



I read that issue cover to cover, after which *The Eye* pretty much immediately became *the* publication so far as I was concerned. I tracked down the previous six issues and each unpredictable new release an immediate guaranteed purchase. No. 7 featured many of the essential writers of the day, people like Pat Murphy, Lisa Goldstein, Karen Joy Fowler, Paul di Filippo, Bruce Sterling, and Lucius Shepard, their presence giving an endorsement by association to the unfamiliar fellow contributors, people like Yvonne Rousseau.

There was a substantial interview with Connie Willis, dwelling in large part on the story 'All My Darling Daughters' from her 1985 collection *Fire Watch* and then recently reprinted in Ellen Datlow's *Alien Sex* anthology. The interview was followed by 'Attack of the Easter Bunny: Some Serious Misgivings about "All My Darling Daughters"' by Lucy Sussex, and Yvonne contributed additional commentary under what I now know to be the editor's title, 'Fucking the Frightened'.

Here were several pages devoted to detailed, smart, literary discussion of a single novelette first published five years earlier, a story I hadn't read and wouldn't read until the Datlow anthology got a paperback release about a year later. It maybe says something that at this remove I remember the commentary far more clearly than the story itself.

I shouldn't over-endow Yvonne's appearance with personal significance, as it was rather the case that just about everything in *The Eye* was influential and inspirational. It was though sufficient that I remembered the name when Yvonne joined the Acnestis apa in December 1994.

Acnestis was always a largely British apa, with the only other non-UK contributor before Yvonne being Sherry Coldsmith in Texas. Sherry dropped out shortly after Yvonne joined, but was in turn replaced by one Bruce Gillespie keeping up the international component. It seemed like a tight-knit group, although looking at those mailings now I see a surprising number of names that I haven't seen in years and a few people I barely remember (Daniel Buck? Andrew Dey? Rosemary Gray?). You just inspired me to try googling 'Jilly Reed' for instance, but aside from a few twenty-something-year-old

fannish references I don't see anything. I wonder what happened to her?

Let me guess: everybody on Facebook is in touch with her all the time.

Starting in January 1995, Yvonne contributed monthly issues of *Pursued By Oysters, Armed With Oyster Knives*. Her contributions were two or four sides, and I had thought them fairly short, but on checking I see they were rather typical for the apa at the time. Having become used to the epic mailings produced by Anzapa these days, I'd forgotten how slender *Acnestis* often was, a mere 26 pages in December 1994. Only contributions from Maureen Speller and later you cracked double-digit page counts during 1995. I recall Yvonne's writing as two columns of small print, information dense, none of that apa makeweight wordage, and looking at them again — I've just exhumed those mailings from the garage — I see just how much was in them. It's age, doubtless, but some of the font sizes are now quite challenging. We were so much younger then.

In her introductory contribution in January 1995, Yvonne invoked Molesworth, but found that the apazine medium was incompatible with his injunction that 'all new bugs should take a vow of silence for one year'. She felt more comfortable with 'the chronicler's other great guideline', that 'new bugs should not shout molesworth is a grate big wet then run away to matron.' 'I do pledge this,' Yvonne wrote.

In this she was, she felt, demonstrating 'two potentially irritating addictions — to quotations and to parentheses'. Yvonne's year in *Acnestis* coincided with a fairly fallow time for me. Both Claire and I were heavily involved in the Glasgow Worldcon of that year and I contributed little, and what there is I'm reluctant to revisit.

Looking at Yvonne's contributions now — oddly I remember them being on green paper but actually the colour changes from issue to issue — I certainly don't feel a sense of irritation, but rather see her unerring ability to conjure just the right reference for the moment, reinforcing the sense that she had read everything. Her list of 100 writers for an isolated island in August found room for Austen, Heyer and Le Guin, Pratchett, Paretzky and Thomas Love Peacock, G. K. Chesterton and Dave Langford, among many others.

Oh, and 'Yvonne Rousseau (a specialist interest for me).'

I see that in September she said to you, 'As I have said to you by telephone, I can't myself master the Art of the Apazine', a form of which she considered you an exemplar. I don't disagree with the latter sentiment, but I think she sells herself seriously short here. You say in *SFC* that Yvonne 'appeared

much younger than her age'. In that same apazine she said that 'my own appearance of youth seems to be caused by a baffling optical illusion that afflicts my friends but not me'. She had then just turned fifty.

The last apazine, *Pursued by Oysters* No. 12, appeared in December 1995 after which she left to work on her novel. She did produce a No. 12a in July 1996 in advance of her first and only trip to the UK, and helpfully adorned it with a small picture of the author so we could recognise her and 'you will at least feel total confidence that any tall tanned red-head with spectacles and big hair that you encounter ... isn't me'. It is I think typical of Yvonne that what is essentially a travel itinerary still finds space to invoke and sometimes quote Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Sylvia Townsend-Warner, Dorothy Sayers, Sylvia Plath, Henry Handel Richardson, and Kim Stanley Robinson.

Yvonne and John Foyster attended the Worldcon in Los Angeles before a 10-day trip to this country.

I first met Yvonne at the First Thursday pub meeting on 5 September, the day she and John arrived in the UK, and also the day on which I first learned that you were to be Aussiecon 3 fan guest of honour (news travelled more slowly then), and again at a party at Joseph's and Judith's house in North London on what I deduce must have been Saturday 14 September. You say that Yvonne was shy and you 'had to listen carefully to hear what she said' and that was my experience too, although it was worth listening.

I don't recall when exactly we started to send fanzines to Yvonne, but probably fairly early on if not right from the start. The earliest letter in my files dates from December 1996, commenting on issue No. 4. Much as I love Yvonne's writing in all its forms, I think the letter was her natural medium, whether an actual letter, a brief card, or later an email. As you say, 'It was a privilege to receive a letter from Yvonne', and I fear I was inadequately responsive, both in quality and volume. Looking back at those old *Acnestis* mailings, I'm reminded that Yvonne's style was similar to that of the late K. V. Bailey. In *Acnestis* and in letters of comment Ken would identify the way that something you'd written cleverly referenced Chaucer, Dostoyevsky, and G. Peyton Wertenbaker, and do it in such a way that you could almost believe that you'd done it deliberately.

We wrote in *Banana Wings* 15 about our reasons for deciding to go to Aussiecon 3, our first non-European Worldcon, and you and Yvonne were very much a part of that. I recall Yvonne offering advice to travelling innocents, and this was prob-

ably when I first encountered her talent for being able to include some apposite clipping with her letter, something saved years earlier as if an anticipation of this need. Later I came to think of her as like a somewhat slower version of a Google search, and one that came with additional appended results which weren't ostensibly related to what you were looking for but she thought you'd like it anyway.

And so yes, Adelaide seemed an obvious stop on our trip, and we met Yvonne there the weekend before Aussiecon 3 and again in Melbourne at the convention itself. One small detail that's missing from your coverage in *SFC* 106. In my mental image of Yvonne she is always wearing a large, chunky black jumper. I'm not saying she always wore it, and maybe it wasn't the same black jumper and she rather had a succession of them, but to me that's the definitive Yvonne look. And yet it doesn't feature in any of your photos. Perhaps I think of it because of our tendency to visit during your winter months

We met Yvonne during most if not all of our subsequent Australian trips, and we continued to send her fanzine and she sent us letters. The last time we met would have been in August 2016, our last trip down your way. We were staying with Damien and Juliette, who politely indulged my suggestion that we should go to a particular brunch cafe even though it was Sunday and it was of course crammed. Yvonne joined us there, although I could barely hear her. I'm pretty sure we didn't then know about the Parkinson's diagnosis, although equally I can see that it's not something Yvonne would have talked about.

Afterwards we went back to her house in Klemzig, where she was in the throes of preparing for her move back to Melbourne. John Foyster's magazine and fanzine collection had already gone to Monash, and we were able to admire the now-empty cupboard embellished with fancy crystalline structures, the remnants of a (thankfully) now terminated white ant infestation. They like glossy paper, I learned.

The remnants of John's book collection was in the garage, on shelves of questionably stability and with some volumes showing signs of suboptimal storage conditions. Yvonne encouraged us to take anything we wanted, but I restrained myself to two

small paperbacks, mindful of the tyranny of baggage allowances and the knowledge that we're not exactly overflowing with storage space here in the Shirley Road fan household.

Afterwards we sat on the floor and talked fandom and books, and Damien took away an old *Britannica* as part of the decluttering — or perhaps more accurately the clutter transference. That was the last time we saw Yvonne, and it seems a good final memory.

I've mentioned in ANZAPA that during a working-from-home telephone conference last year during which I had to listen but with nothing to say I spotted a book on our shelves, a misplaced copy of *Blessed City: Letters to Thomas Riddell 1943* by Gwen Harwood. Inside was a 2003 note from Yvonne, saying that she found the letters 'both fascinating and astonishing. I hope you will think so, too.' I wrote to her, somewhat belatedly (17 years!), to assure her that I did. Another volume of Harwood's letters says of her: 'She had a quicksilver intellect and a rare ability to go directly to the heart of whatever occupied her. Generosity of spirit, biting wit, and a superb command of language characterise both her poetry and her letters to friends', and aside from the poetry that could be Yvonne — although I'm sure she could turn her hand to poetry if she wanted.

And in one of her letters Harwood writes, 'In the weekend I'll answer your letter, which is full of interesting thoughts, and I shall tell you various things about aunts, tomato-vines, hats, hell-fire, etc.' That made me think of Yvonne too.

I realise, Bruce, that this letter only really concerns itself with the first dozen or so pages of *SFC* 106. Elsewhere there is of course the usual fine selection, but this will have to do for now, not least because I've just realised I'm supposed to be making dinner!

(7 August 2021)

[*brg* This letter was also intended as the introduction to the 'Klemzig Letters', an edited collection of Yvonne Rousseau's correspondence with Mark and Claire. It appeared in the August mailing of ANZAPA, and will appear in a future *SF Commentary*. But there was no room for it in this issue.*]

SALLY YEOLAND
Box 4049, Gilberton LPO,
Preston VIC 3072

I loved what you wrote about Yvonne in ANZAPA

(and then in *SFC*). I started writing about her some time ago, but just wasn't in the right state of mind to finish it for the latest ANZAPA mailing. It will have to wait until June. But also I'd want Vida to read it first and make sure she's OK with it.

(13 April 2021)

ROMAN ORSZANSKI
PO Box 3231, Rundle Mall,
Adelaide SA 5000

Yvonne Rousseau will be much missed: that shy, impish smile when she's up to mischief. I recall her lobbying on the Best Fannish Cat Ditmar, chatting to fans on the phone to arrange the required outcome. And that oh-so-innocent denial of any wrongdoing! *sigh*

We are thankful for having known her.

(14 April 2021)

DAMIEN BRODERICK
128 W. French Place,
San Antonio TX 78212, USA

The reflections on Yvonne in *SFC* 106 were harrowing but necessary. Andrew Darlington's ruminations on John Brunner were also valuable, although stopping rather too abruptly.

Newspaper reports here indicate that Australia is rapidly becoming parched and/or drowned out Desolation Row. Frustrating.

(1 May 2021)

JOHN HERTZ
236 S. Coronado St., No. 409
Los Angeles, CA 90057, USA

Thanks for sending your note about Yvonne Rousseau to File770.com. I saw it there: [http://file770.com/yvonne-rousseau-1945-2021/15 Feb 21](http://file770.com/yvonne-rousseau-1945-2021/15_Feb_21)

What a loss her departure is. Your note, as I saw it, was a good appreciation in text and photographs, well reflecting her and her contributions, well suited to the forum where it appeared. I've been thinking grief a compliment to the one gone. As Nabokov used to say, ponder this.

I'm thankful Providence gave her, or chance allowed her, that she did much.

(19 February 2021)

Yvonne and I only met in person during my DUFF trip. But she was a faithful *Vanamonde* correspondent before and since. As you say, it was a privilege to receive a letter from her.

I'm certainly for reading works written before 1900 — or 1800 — or 1700 — or 1300: I've recommended *Poems of the Masters*, the translation by Red Pine (literary name, in homage to the Taoist immortal so called) of the Sung Dynasty anthology

whose title could be rendered *Poems of a Thousand Masters* or *A Thousand Poems of Masters* (in any case 'thousand' not to be taken literally — like 'a thousand pardons' — but see the *Pogo* episode with Alf & Reggie, and Porky, *The Incomplete Pogo* No. 21, 1954).

If Jane Austen had a theme — a consideration that almost insults her — it would be 'Don't make windows into mirrors.' Of course her writing — or Dickens' — or Li Pails' — is hard for us. Even with the help of Richard Feynman it's easier to say 'Think like a Martian' (also not to be taken literally, unless real surprises await) than to do it. We glance at these authors, but they are not us (to reverse another *Pogo* moment). We look for ourselves there; having no success, we deem that the work has failed us. This is particularly sad of SF fans, SF being in principle a string of pearls on the thread of Minds as good as you but different.

A brave re-translation of 'Love your neighbors like yourself' has been 'Love your neighbours, for they are like you.' I'd go further: 'Love your neighbours, for they are not like you.'

(16 July 2021; received 13 August 2021)

You've seen this (in *Vanamonde* 1390); perhaps you might like to reprint it. I've given it a title.

A Genuine Fire and Reality

The word *amateur* has come by the thousand oddities of language to convey an idea of tepidity; whereas the word itself has the meaning of passion. Nor is this peculiarity confined to the mere form of the word; the actual characteristic of these nameless dilettanti is a genuine fire and reality. A man must love a thing very much if he not only practises it without any hope of fame or money, but even practise it without any hope of doing it well. Such a man must love the toils of the work more than any other man can love the rewards of it.

— G. K. Chesterton,
Robert Browning, ch. 4 (1903)

This early Chesterton (1874–1936; R. Browning 1812–1889) is already poetic and paradoxical. Reason for him was so consistent with them I hate to complain that 'without any hope of doing it well' at best begs a question. Behind 'without any hope of fame or money' he may have had in mind Johnson's famous 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money' (Boswell's 1791 *Life of Johnson* at 5 April 1776), but if so, GKC, who remembered what he read, must be charged with Boswell's saying, immediately before, that Johnson's 'indolent disposition made him utter' it. Nor am I so sure about 'toils'. Shouldn't we say we

love the work, and its produce, more than we care about its labour or its pay? Anyhow his thrust is against taking amateur to mean tepid. Amateurs and professionals are on different paths. You can walk either; or both.

(from *Vanamonde* 1390; sent 14 July 2021)

ROB GERRAND

11 Robe Street, St Kilda VIC 3182

Thanks for *SFC* 106, another superb issue, if sad because of the tributes to Yvonne Rousseau.

I enjoyed Jenny Bryce's and Tony Thomas's reviews of the Booker contenders; I haven't read any of them, and their comments means I'll get to a shorter list than the judging panel decided. I also liked Tony's list of other books he'd read last year that he classed as at 5-star level, including Jack Vance's *Emphyrio*, with which rating I agree, and the fact he rated Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Besides Ourselves* ahead of the 2014 winner, Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which I gave up reading, having become annoyed at his depiction of a female character. Fowler's novel is maybe the best she's so far written, and she's written some beauties, and will stand the test of time.

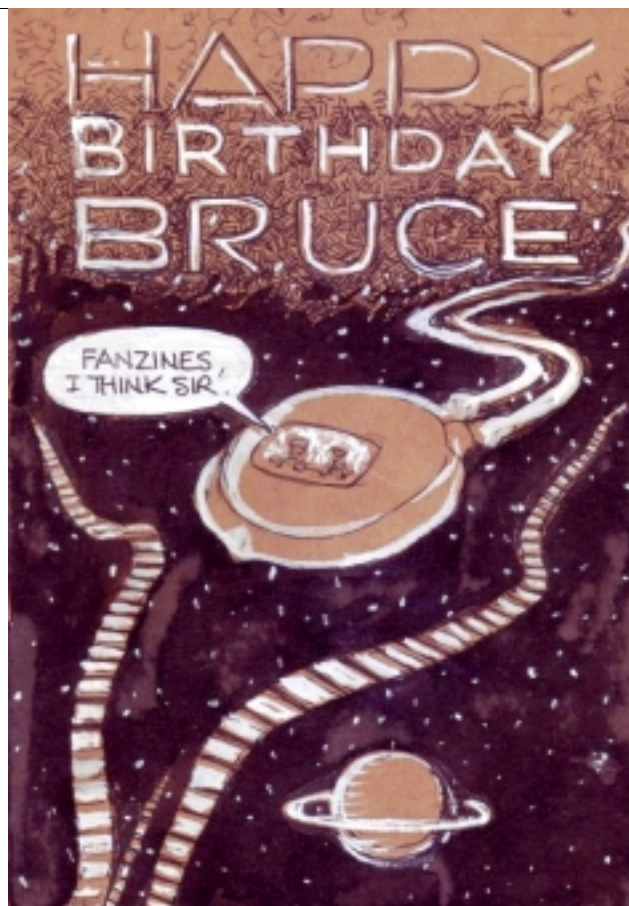
John Litchen refers to Mary Doria Russell's books *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*. He said he hasn't read her novel set in Italy during the Second World War because he's 'not much into war stories'. That book, *A Thread of Grace*, is more about the Italian resistance movement, and how the members looked after the fleeing Jewish refugees, than a war story, and it's masterly, a better novel perhaps than *The Sparrow*.

I also liked Andrew Darlington's survey of John Brunner's early work. I've recently reread his *Traveler in Black* set of linked stories written in the 1960s, which holds up exceptionally well. I think he is a much underestimated writer, and there's a lot more to him than the stand-out novels *Shockwave Rider*, *Stand On Zanzibar*, and *The Sheep Look Up*.

Reading Perry Middlemiss's overview of the Hugo Award contenders from 1960 brought back memories of some fine novels. Of the five contenders, to my mind *A Canticle For Leibowitz* is the outstanding novel and deserved the Hugo, but both *Deathworld* and *The High Crusade* still hold up very well. I'll have to reread *Rogue Moon*, as I didn't share the enthusiasm for it back in the day.

Perry has drawn my attention to *The Lost Kafoosalum* by Pauline Aswell, someone I'd never heard of before, so I'll try to track down her stories.

I've recently read two fine novels: John Birmingham's *The Cruel Stars*, classic space opera in the vein of Peter Hamilton, and I look forward to its sequel



Stephen Campbell's card for my 74th birthday — but it will be nearly my 75th by the time you see this.

when it gets published later this year, and Michael Swanwick's *The Dragons of Babel*, a deliciously amusing black comedy. I have his *Chasing the Phoenix* ready to be read soon.

(12 May 2021)

STEPHEN CAMPBELL

**20 Bostock Street,
Warrnambool VIC 3280**

The sadness of these times is added to by the passing of Yvonne Rousseau. I only spoke to her a little, and respected her shyness. I loved the photo on the cover of *SFC* 106 of Yvonne, showing her in a youthful beauty, with open delight in her smile. Australian SF fandom is the less without her; global SF fandom, the same.

I'm always confused but never surprised in the event of deaths to those known to me. I yearn to mourn but am stuck with merely a resignation to our mortality and the sorrow of the loss of another soul.

'I Must Be Talking to My Friends' reminds me of the existence of the living, and it is this I am

attracted. I always enjoy the articles, lists, and reviews that you publish, for the forum is intellectual and cohesive and provides much fact. After this feast you present a cornucopia of personalities in the form of letters of comment. I have been reading these letters for many years now, and many names have become familiar, and their histories of events, both good and ill, become an anchor to my perception of them, even though we have never met. This is the splendid nature of fanzine communication. I consider it unique, as well as authentic culture. The tactile nature of the fanzine has always been very dear to me. I can put it down anywhere and pick it up as I'm reminded of something it makes me think about. Because this is what science fiction and the people who practise it as a form of being give me things to think about: the curiosity of things unknown and the mystery of reality. I've always felt that as an 'artist' I have a responsibility to try to show another way of seeing. Science fiction and fandom have given me another way of seeing, and I hope my art will reflect that in spirit: the wonder of our interest and the interest of our wonder.

(9 June 2021)

I have just returned to this letter, on 24 June, after a health event occurred that sent me to St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne. I am now back in the caravan at Peter's place in Warrnambool and going through the disciplines of healing. My spirits are high after being flown back by night, heading towards the sunset for about 45 minutes. The lights of civilisation are astounding at an altitude of 14,000 feet. In reward for my suffering I have come back here to find **brg** 116 and a letter from Leigh Edmonds. Leigh thanked me for a painting I did for him and Valma. He made astute comments about its relationship to myself. We share a liking of honesty.

Sincere thanks, Bruce, for paper copies of your work, because they keep me in touch with things made of love, and for this I'm always grateful.

(24 June 2021)

[*brg* As you'll see from the beginning of this issue, I might not be able to keep producing any paper copies, not even for you and David Russell. But if you receive paper copies of this *SFC* or recent issues of **brg, you will know that the situation is saved for the time being.]**

Feature letter from Perry Middlemiss: Yvonne Rousseau bibliography, part 2

PERRY MIDDLEMISS
32 Elphin Avenue,
Hawthorn VIC 3122

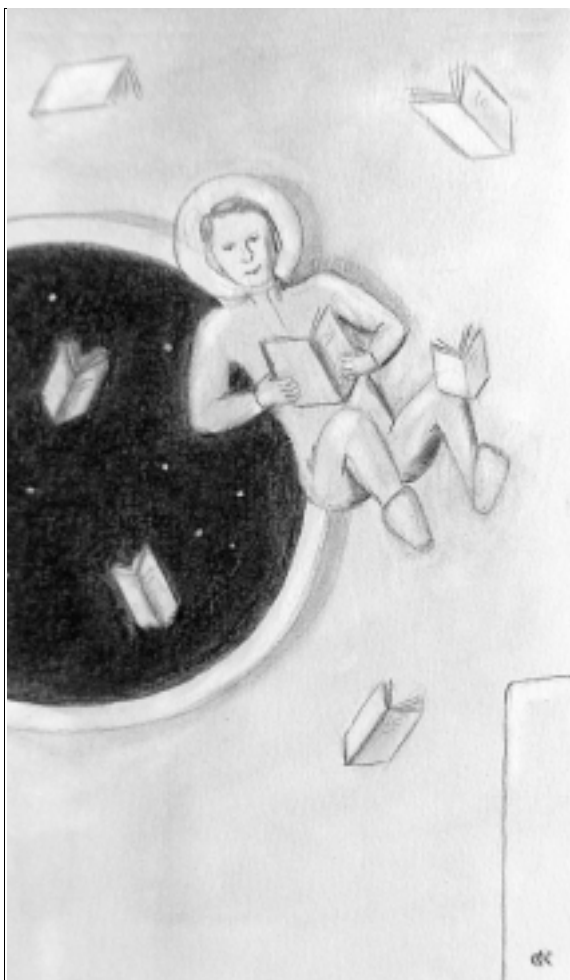
Sitting back at home after a week away and undertaking fanzine activities on a cold Sunday morning I found your pieces on Yvonne Rousseau.

While I can't specifically find the essay re the 'Lost Child' theme you mention I can send you the current list of entries written by Yvonne in the Austlit database. You will see few fanzine entries. It's the nature of this database that some areas have been completely neglected. More projects for me later I suspect.

- 1 'Walking through Walls' Yvonne Rousseau, 2009, criticism
Appears in: *Chained to the Alien : The Best of Australian Science Fiction Review* 2009 (pp. 144–147)
- 2 'A Symposium on George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*' John Baxter, Russell Blackford, see more, 2009, criticism

Appears in: *Chained to the Alien: The Best of Australian Science Fiction Review* 2009; (pp. 70–100)

- 3 'Morals, Ethics, and Viewpoints' George Turner, Yvonne Rousseau, 2009, criticism
Appears in: *Chained to the Alien: The Best of Australian Science Fiction Review*, 2009; (pp. 52–69)
- 4 'Dreadful Suspicions : On the "Ethical Culture" Trilogy of George Turner: *Beloved Son*, *Vanegloria*, and *Yesterday's Men*' Yvonne Rousseau, 2009, criticism
Appears in: *Chained to the Alien: The Best of Australian Science Fiction Review*, 2009 (pp. 43–51)
- 5 'SF and the Dirty Little Virgin' Yvonne Rousseau, 2009, criticism
Appears in: *Chained to the Alien: The Best of Australian Science Fiction Review*, 2009 (pp. 17–23)
- 6 'The John Foyster Funeral' Yvonne Rousseau, 2009, column
Appears in: *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, Vol. 17 No. 2 (Issue 46)



- 2009 (pp. 57–71)
- 7 'Life of Twists and No Turns' Yvonne Rousseau, 1999, review
Appears in: *The Age*, 6 November 1999 (p. 11)
Review of *George Turner: A Life* Judith Raphael Buckrich, 1999, biography
 - 8 *Minners Marooned and Planet of the Marsupials: The Science Fiction of Cherry Wilder*. Yvonne Rousseau, New Lambton: Nimrod Publications, 1997, criticism
 - 9 'Possum Lover' Yvonne Rousseau, 1995, short story, fantasy
Appears in: *She's Fantastical: The First Anthology of Australian Women's Speculative Fiction, Magical Realism And Fantasy*, 1995 (pp. 138–166)
 - 10 'The Listener' Yvonne Rousseau, 1994, short story, science fiction
Appears in: *Alien Shores: An Anthology of Australian Science Fiction*, 1994 (pp. 215–232)
 - 11 'Mundane in Murnania' Yvonne Rousseau, 1992, biography
Appears in: *Tirra Lirra*, Spring, vol. 3 no. 1 1992 (pp. 39–40)
 - 12 'Pensive Seductions' Yvonne Rousseau, 1989, review
Appears in: *The Age Monthly Review*, February,

- Vol. 8 No. 10, 1989 (pp. 7–9)
Review of *Midnight Snow* Vera Newsom, 1988, selected work, poetry
- 13 'Pensive Seductions' Yvonne Rousseau, 1989, review
Appears in: *The Age Monthly Review*, February, Vol. 8 No. 10, 1989 (pp. 7–9)
Review of *The Trust* Jennifer Maiden, 1988, selected work, poetry; *Redshift/Blueshift* Chris Mansell, 1988, selected work, poetry; see more review subjects
- 14 Untitled, Yvonne Rousseau, 1988, review
Appears in: *The Age Monthly Review*, August, Vol. 8 No. 5, 1988 (p. 22), Review of Blair John Scott, 1988, novel
- 15 Untitled, Yvonne Rousseau, 1988, review
Appears in: *The Age Monthly Review*, August, Vol. 8 No. 5, 1988 (pp. 22–23) Review of *Bleak Rooms* Peter Goldsworthy, 1988, selected work, short story
- 16 'A Commentary on Chapter Eighteen' Yvonne Rousseau, 1987, criticism
Appears in: *The Secret of Hanging Rock: Joan Lindsay's Final Chapter*, 1987 (pp. [35]–54)
- 17 *The Secret of Hanging Rock: Joan Lindsay's Final Chapter*. Joan Lindsay, John Taylor, see more, North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1987, selected work, extract, criticism, essay, historical fiction, mystery
- 18 *Australian Science Fiction Review. Second Series*. Janeen Webb (editor), Lucy Sussex (editor), Yvonne Rousseau (editor), Russell Blackford (editor), Jenny Blackford (editor), John Foyster (editor), 1986, periodical
- 19 'The City-Scape as Fiction' Yvonne Rousseau, 1986, review
Appears in: *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (Issue 22), 1986 (pp. 15–19) Review of *Urban Fantasies*, 1985, anthology, short story
- 20 'The Top Writers Gather For Aussiecon Two' Yvonne Rousseau, 1985, criticism
Appears in: *The Age*, 17 August 1985 (p. 13)
- 21 'The Science Fiction Invasion: A World Convention Becomes Aussiecon' Yvonne Rousseau, 1985, criticism
Appears in: *Australian Book Review*, October, no. 75, 1985 (p. 19–20)
- 22 'Mr Lockwood's Narrative' Yvonne Rousseau, 1985, short story, science fiction
Appears in: *Strange Attractors: Original Australian Speculative Fiction*, 1985 (pp. 62–74)
- 23 'Beauty and Desolation' Yvonne Rousseau, 1984, review
Appears in: *Australian Book Review*, February–March, no. 58, 1984 (p. 20)
Review of *The Beast of Heaven* Victor Kelleher, 1984, novel

- 24 'A Modern Myth of Insanity' Yvonne Rousseau, 1983, review
Appears in: *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (Issue 13), 1983 (pp. 21–22)
Review of *Lavington Pugh* Jay Bland, 1982, novel
- 25 'Dreams and Poems Both Profound' Yvonne Rousseau, 1983, review
Appears in: *Australian Book Review*, August, no. 53, 1983 (p. 22)
Review of *Dreamworks: Strange New Stories*, 1983 anthology, short story
- 26 'The Disquieting Terrain of the Spirit' Yvonne Rousseau, 1983, review
Appears in: *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, vol. 5 no. 3 (Issue 15) 1983 (pp. 103–106)
Review of *The Plains* Gerald Murnane, 1982, novel
- 27 'Classical View of Wartime' Yvonne Rousseau, 1983, review
Appears in: *The Age*, 27 August 1983 (p. 10)
Review of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* M. Barnard Eldershaw, 1947, novel
- 28 Untitled, Yvonne Rousseau, 1983, review
Appears in: *Australian Book Review*, April, No. 49 1983 (pp. 2–3)
- Review of *Australian Science Fiction*, 1982, anthology, criticism, extract, short story, poetry
- 29 'Evil the Price of Freedom?' Yvonne Rousseau, 1983, review
Appears in: *Australian Book Review*, June, No. 51, 1983 (p. 14)
Review of *Yesterday's Men* George Turner, 1983, novel
- 30 'Rewarding' Yvonne Rousseau, 1982, review
Appears in: *Australian Book Review*, June, No. 41, 1982; (pp. 21–22)
Review of *Vaneglorry: A Science Fiction Novel* George Turner, 1981, novel
- 31 'Eurydice in the Underworld' Yvonne Rousseau, 1982, short story
Appears in: *Meanjin*, Winter, vol. 41 no. 2, 1982 (pp. 256–263)
- 32 'The Truth About Oscar' Yvonne Rousseau, 1981, short story, science fiction
Appears in: *The Bulletin (Literary Supplement)*, 22–29 December, Vol. 101 No. 5294, 1981 (pp. 181–183); *Matilda at the Speed of Light: An Anthology of Australian Science Fiction*, 1988 (pp. 77–84)
- 33 *The Murders at Hanging Rock* Yvonne Rousseau, Fitzroy: Scribe, 1980, criticism
(16 May 2021)

Feature letter:

John Bangsund, Yvonne Rousseau, and 2020's Bests

JERRY KAUFMAN
PO Box 25075, Seattle
WA 98165, USA

SFC 103: I read your special Bangsund issue on line. I especially loved his parody of T. S. Eliot with all those references to sf and fandom buried within. I also particularly like 'How I Became an Editor'. My only direct contact with John, an anecdote I included in my DUFF trip report and in Facebook comments, is of my visit to him in 1983. Too bad my memory has elided any conversation, only retaining my successful digging into boxes of John's extra copies of his own fanzines. (I did not encounter any redbacks, happy to say.)

SFC 105: Thanks for your reviews of things that came in the mail, especially of *The Jonbar Point*. I saw that *Ansible* had published this, but wondered if it would have survived the passage of time and be

interesting. You've persuaded me. I already knew I liked Aldiss's nonfiction writing (reader, I published two books of it). I'm not sure if I noticed before that Chris Priest wrote an introduction, and that's an additional selling point.

I'm glad you included the photo of Andrew Brown in the set of *Anti-Fan* shots. I remember that tee shirt from the time that Andrew lived briefly in the US and attended a couple of conventions. I think he had already cut his hair, and he certainly looked healthier when not in zombie makeup.

Martin Morse Wooster says that coming away from a musical performance gave him 10 minutes of 'great and uplifting beauty that put me ... on a higher plane of existence. That's different from "acquiring information"'. Would I be splitting hares (or hairs) to suggest that the beauty and sense of a higher plane are the 'information' being acquired? That's a broader definition of information, I know. But before hearing the music, perhaps Martin didn't know, or had to be reminded, that such beauty and such a higher plane existed.

I've tried to watch several of Tarkovsky's films recently, and found them much too slow-paced for my attention span. I did sit all the way through *Stalker* to get to the payoff of the main character's daughter's telekinesis, but I was hoping for more. I've never read the source novel, and am curious about it, and how it presents its mysterious region.

And I'm also curious about Michael Dirda's numerous books. The most intriguing is the one he was working on when he wrote to you, *The Great Age of the Storytellers*. He's including a number of writers I've read and some I've never heard of. A good mix. I'll have to check the Seattle Library to see what they have.

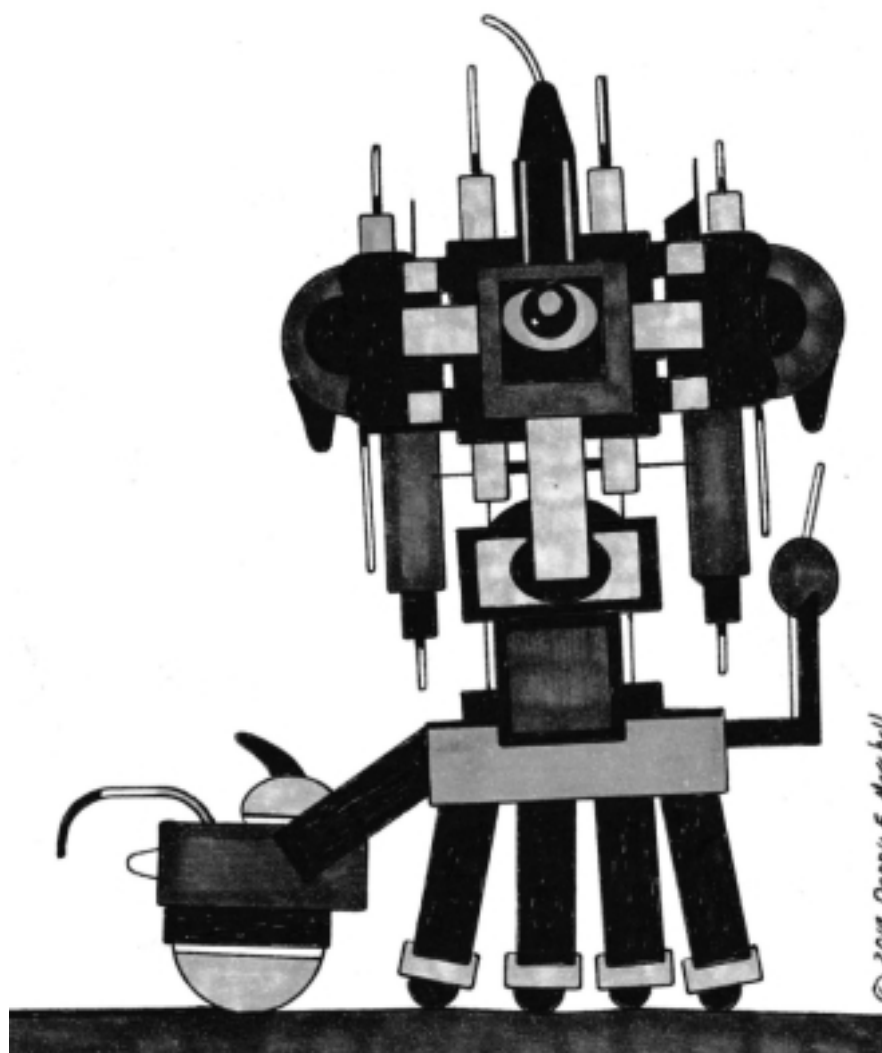
[*brg* It hasn't appeared yet. I'm not even sure that Michael has finished writing and editing it.*]

I compared my reading with that of Rob Gerrand. I believe I've read 41 of his 100. I started one or two without finishing them. And I've read a number of books by some of the authors other than the one Rob includes. I didn't count *The Facts of Life* by Graham Joyce, but I'm sure I've read at least others by him, for example.

Thanks for including Michael Bishop's family letter and Giampaolo Cossato's letters and maps of Venice. The city, like many in Italy, fascinates me, but I'm not sure I'll ever visit them. Speaking of Italy, we've watched four episodes (of six) of a CNN series *Searching for Italy*, in which actor Stanley Tucci explores different regions, with an emphasis on cuisine. We've seen Rome, Sicily, Tuscany, and Naples. I recommend them.

Among Colin Steele's reviews this issue, I found the two about books and the one looking at two H. G. Wells biographies the most interesting, all books I would like to read. I also found his review of *Piranesi* interesting because I finished the book just a few days ago, and posted a brief review of my own on Facebook. Perry Middlemiss may include it in an upcoming issue of *The Alien Review*, if he finds it of interest.

I liked Alan White's *Experimental Pendulum* art-



work. It reminds me of Poe's story (which I'm sure is deliberate) and the frame, despite the screws, of some Chinese art I've seen.

(13 May/11 July 2021)

SFC 106: Thanks for the tribute to Yvonne Rousseau, especially her memoir of her first contact with fandom. So far as I can remember, I did not meet her in 1983 during my DUFF trip, and only knew of her through your pages. (I didn't receive *ASFR* (2nd series).) I've also not read either *Picnic at Hanging Rock* or *The Murders at Hanging Rock*, though I've seen the film several times. In any case, Yvonne sounds like someone I would have enjoyed knowing.

I've read four of the Hugo-nominated novels that Perry Middlemiss assesses. (For some reason, I've tried next to no Harry Harrison work.) Based on extremely dim memories of the four, I would rate *Rogue Moon* a bit higher than *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. This may be because inexplicable alien artifacts and structures give me a great sense of wonder. And maybe the idea of recurrences of total

destruction of civilisation is too pessimistic, although I can't claim that it's implausible.

I'm sure I read a fair number of John Brunner Ace Doubles and other early work, but can't call any specific work to mind. I no longer have those books; my selections are mainly the big ecological disaster novels, along with the Ace Specials edition of *The Traveler in Black* and *Shockwave Rider*, which I read to prepare for a panel discussion at, I think, Potlatch. My lasting impression is that those early paperbacks involved space adventures in which the character went searching for the supposedly mythical planet Earth.

Andrew Darlington points out that the *Science Fantasy* cover art for *Earth Is But a Star* includes elements resembling those of Yves Tanguy. Later in his essay, Andrew mentions the Richard Powers cover art for *Out of My Mind*. In Vincent DiFate's lectures on sf illustration, he always likes to show how Powers was also influenced by Tanguy.

Three of Jennifer Bryce's best novels of 2020 aren't novels — Woody Allen's book is autobiography, Mary Trump's is family history, and *The Cut Out Girl* is biography — I think. Is this allowed? In any case, thanks to Jennifer for reviewing her year, and to her and Tony Thomas for their bits about Booker Prize-listed work, giving me a better idea of what gets considered for that award.

The idea that Doug Barbour is 80 is fantastical enough without knowing how actively he still pursues good music I hope that his cancer treatment has gone well.

[*brg* It didn't. See the 'Tributes' section at the beginning of this issue.*]

Tony Thomas talks about a Chris Priest novel new to me, *The Quiet Woman*. I like Chris's work a lot, and will have to look for this one. I'll also have to find out what it's about, as Tony doesn't say much about it except that it has a female protagonist. I wonder if the title is a reference to *The Quiet Man*, the John Ford movie.

Steve Jeffery seems say that *Joker*, *Batman*, and *Iron Man* are all Marvel Universe movies. He's confused, as *Joker* and *Batman* are both part of the DC group of characters. In fact, the *Joker* is Batman's most prominent nemesis. It would be fun to see some Marvel/DC crossovers, but I doubt that'll ever happen — unless Disney buys DC.

Patrick McGuire expresses surprise that John Hertz has no email 'because he contributes to the *File 770* site'. Patrick may have noticed that Mike Glyer always says that John's contributions, or at least his comments, come by carrier pigeon. John had been contributing birthdays of prominent fans, artists, and lesser known writers to the Birthday section for over a year.

I'm planning to go back through efanazines.com to read through the issues you weren't able to send me, and will read future issues there. I'm also reading Fictionmags in digest format, and see there will be much I can skip as being of no interest to me, like the question of the two Frederick Moors.

(13 July 2021)

ANDREW DARLINGTON
Spa Croft Road, off Manor Road,
Ossett, West Yorkshire WF5 0HE, UK

I've just checked through my files and as it happens I haven't actually written anything else about John Brunner. Perhaps I should? These pieces that I write are my own tributes to stories and writers that mean a lot to me. I encountered that issue of *Science Fantasy* with 'Earth Is But A Star' fairly early in my explorations of the genre, when I was rummaging around in second-hand bookshops getting the basis of my collection together. It immediately made a very great impression on me. Hence my revisit. Yes, it lives up to my memories in every way. It still stands out as a charming tale.

(15 May 2021)



Andrew Darlington at Grasmere.

DAVID GRIGG
100 Redleap Avenue,
Mill Park VIC 3082

More than 46 years after I wrote it, 'A Song Before Sunset', the first story I ever had published, keeps on keeping on, being reprinted and earning me a little cash. Wish that were true of everything I wrote! (<https://unfitmag.com/2021/05/16/a-song-before-sunset/>) It was first published in *Beyond Tomorrow*, Lee Harding's anthology.

It's also kind of annoying that the first story I ever had published is regarded as the best I ever wrote! All downhill from there, apparently.

The story has had a varied life since then. It was picked up for an online audio version, which is where John Joseph Adams heard it and picked it up for his best-selling *Wastelands* anthology in 2011.

I sold an option on the film rights in 2018, but I suspect that will never appear.

(17 May 2021)

ROBYN WHITELEY
Buninyong, VIC 3357 (relocation)

I have left my home of 38.5 years in Richmond and, after living with my sister in Ballarat for five months, I have now been in my new house in Buninyong for two months. I have attached a photo, taken today.

What spurred me to write to you today was an adventure that my sister (who has a new house next door to me) and I had this afternoon. We found an Australian native bird, a tawny frogmouth, on the ground under a tree near my house. We think it was injured, so with the help of a neighbour whose dog actually alerted us to the bird, we got it into a crate and took it to the town vet. We hope that it will be saved and able to return to the wild. I forgot to get a photo of 'our' bird, but I'm attaching one I took of a bird of the same breed in 2019, though it suffers somewhat from being a photo of a photo in my 2019 photo book.

It was birds that sparked my email in January and it's a bird that has sparked this email today. If all goes well, I might be on holidays in Queensland in July, and I can produce for you some typical travel tales.

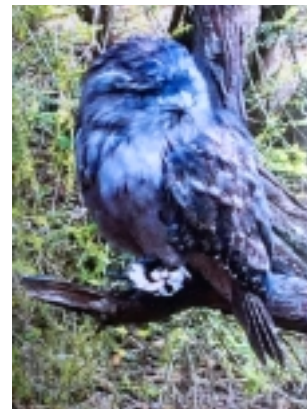
(1 June 2021)

MICHAEL BISHOP
PO Box 646, Pine Mountain
Georgia 31822, USA

My calmness really derives in large measure from the support I'm receiving, from my wife Jeri and from friends and neighbours, one of whom left a chicken-casserole dish, frozen but oven-ready, on a small wrought-iron stand on our front porch. (Unfortunately, despite being warned that this would happen yesterday morning, both Jeri and I forgot it was out there until about 5:20 p.m. our time here in the U.S., and now we're concerned that we may have left it out too long to cook. I'm ready to do it, but Jeri's always concerned that we'll ingest some sort of thawed mould or bacteria.)

As far as the pandemic goes, President Elect Biden and current Vice President Pence both took coronavirus shots yesterday to demonstrate, to everyone, that the vaccine is safe, although I'm convinced that Trumpites are either paying no attention at all or waiting until one of these men or some early-vaccinated healthcare workers up and die as a result of the botched Pfizer concoction. Trump himself claims credit for the vaccines that have come online, as a direct result of his administration's Operation Warp Speed, but the man himself has done all in his power to convince his followers that the coronavirus is a Chinese attack abetted by evil in-country Democrats, or a hoax, and that nothing the government has come up with is going to work and that 'herd immunity' is what everybody needs. He can't put two logical statements together in a row. The second contradicts the first, or vice versa, or however that works in the man's ego-fuelled mental landscape.

You and



Left: Robyn's new home in Ballarat. Right: Tawny frogmoth.

Elaine are indeed lucky to live in a country where federal and state governments appear to be working hand in hand for the good of everyone. Here, state governments often do better than the federal one, given our current crazy lame-duck leader (not fully gone until 20 January, I believe), who is trashing everything in his power so that the Biden administration will have a bigger mess to work with than it would've had if only Joe had been able to take over the day after the election.

(December 2021)

Yesterday, University of Florida Associate Professor of English Terry Harpold notified us that the IAFA (International Association of the Fantastic in the Arts) had chosen the 2021 winner of the Jamie Bishop Memorial Award and announced the Award at its annual conference in March.

Each year the Award goes 'to the author or authors of a critical essay on the fantastic written in a language other than English', and it's presented in Jamie's memory because he was a speaker and a teacher of German, as well as an artist who created digital artwork for SF and fantasy titles.

Tomorrow will be the 14th anniversary of the events at Virginia Tech that took his life along with those of 27 students and four other teachers. So word of this year's Award came at a sensitive but entirely appropriate time.

Wrote Prof. Harpold, 'There were submissions in nine languages. Eighteen judges from Europe, Canada, and the US reviewed the candidates, and three finalists and one overall winner of the Award were chosen.'

The three finalists this year were Marcellin Block for a paper in French, Tessa Sermet for another essay in French, and YPenney Xuying in Chinese on the work of Liu Cixin.

The overall winner, Maria Belliaeva Solomon, an associate professor at the University of Maryland, received the Award for an essay in French on Gerard de Nerval's first work of prose fiction, the 1832 story 'The Enchanted Hand,' which was published in the *Revue Nerval*.

(16 April 2021)

I'm doing a full-scale revision of *No Enemy but Time* for a 40th anniversary edition next year, finishing reading a very long novel by Atticus Lish (*Preparation for the Next Life*), continuing to go with Jeri to visit her mother every day (and to show her a new DVD), and continuing research for a novel that I keep putting off writing because of everything else going on. Still, I'm delighted to have Nos. 105 and 106, and will indeed read them!

(16 May 2021)

VAN IKIN

36 Lalina Way, Wanneroo WA 6065

Sorry to have been out of contact for so very, very long — but there's been a good reason and it had nothing to do with coronavirus. I am one of the few people in the world for whom coronavirus was, perversely, a blessing in disguise. Since the middle of 2019 I had been having eye problems initially diagnosed as 'persistent blepharitis'. The treatment involved applying oily ointment to each eye every three hours of the waking day — which in practice meant attending to one eye every 90 minutes, because the eyesight is extremely blurred for the first 30-plus minutes after application. This meant I could not easily go anywhere — including to uni (80 minutes travel away) to have face-to-face meetings with my few remaining students. I think they worried that this represented 'loss of interest' on my part.

Then, early this year — against the backdrop of the eyes continuing to drive me nuts — I started to find that I felt increasing stomach discomfort most nights after the evening meal. This meant an even stronger drive to go nowhere and just stay home — and then of course Covid-19 came along and mandated that very thing! It's in that sense that it was a very bleak kind of blessing-in-disguise.

It turned out that I have been suffering from Crohn's Disease (permanent, incurable, but not life-threatening): it had been attacking my eyes and then started on my gut, almost blocking a 14-inch section of bowel. I lost 22 kg in the course of the year; I ended up on a liquids-only diet for 12 weeks in order to stay alive until surgery could be arranged; and I've now been home for nine weeks and am technically in 'Crohn's remission'.

I actually feel pretty good, apart from needing rest and needing to rebuild muscles — so I have been very fortunate. It will take another 6–12 months to achieve full recovery, they say.

The 2019 issue of *Science Fiction* is just waiting for me to get it to the printer, and work is well advanced on the first (of two) 2020 issues. The aim is to try to catch up on 2020 by the end of 2021 which of course won't happen (it never does) but it's a worthy grail.

I hope you've survived 2020 unscathed, given what Victoria has had to go through. I join everyone in hoping that 2021 is much better, but I have a lurking fear that the slippery little virus might find a way to sidestep our best vaccination efforts, so I'm hoping for the best but bracing for somewhat less.

(1 March 2021)

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

Nos. 103 and 104 of *SFC* were a welcome surprise. Of course the PDF would have been equally appreciated.

I would like to contribute but, at the moment I do not trust the usual method. My local post office has been closed due to COVID and the mail does not always enjoys a proper delivery. I will reconsider as soon as COVID starts seeing the end of the tunnel.

The inoculation campaign is now on the way all over Europe, but high hopes have better to be kept in check. And there are also the variants to consider. Apparently we can now 'proudly' boast a just discovered Italian one.

At the moment the whole of Italy (and most European countries) are in Red Zone, and to move around you need (again) a specific document. Cases have been spiking and so have the daily number of deaths.

And my daughter is still holed up in Bruxelles.

I find it hard to use the words 'happy', 'best', 'merry'. I can only embarrassingly whisper them.

May good health be with you both.

(23 December 2021)

WILLIAM BREIDING
3507 N. Santa Rita Avenue, #1,
Tucson AZ 85719, USA

I had two dreams about you last night. (Again.) In the first I had relocated to the Australian Outback and you and Elaine had me in for a visit and were showing me some strange and arcane items while admonishing me for not having come in when you had invited me to a party, and that I should be more social!

In the second dream I decided the best way to demonstrate how *sercon* was best done was to just republish a compete issue of **brg**. Then I spent the rest of the dream figuring out how I was going to lay the issue out so that it fit properly with the rest of the material.

The last I remember dreaming about you was when I still in West Virginia — we went for a hike into the Outback. When we stopped at a store for supplies Leigh Edmonds was the proprietor!

Always in my dreams ... William.

(29 March 2021)

LEANNE FRAHM
Seaholme VIC 3018

Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 105 and the bonus **brg** 114 — they came as a pleasant surprise! I haven't yet read *SFC*, but flicked through the ANZAPA contribution.

I've never done Zoom, but of course Jen was, and is still, using it all the time, including one memorable midnight gig as a speaker for a conference in Brazil. As it was through an interpreter, she's got no idea whether it was successful! Her main problem is keeping her cat away from the camera.

Once again I'm in awe of the amount of books, movies, and music you can get through in a year, even a year that kept us at home much more than usual, although I suppose the lack of work has contributed to that. Good to see, though, that Elaine is doing well in that regard.

I was interested in your comments on Josephine Tey. I've never read her, but I have a large collection of Ruth Rendells, and I would have said much the same thing about her as you did of Tey — her descriptions of both countryside and city and characterisations are involving, although towards the end of her writing career, both fell off markedly; unsurprisingly, considering that she continued writing to such an age. But I must try to find some Tey copies, although I suspect they're well out of print.

If one can say they adore the cover of a fanzine, then I adore Carol Kewley's cover of *SF Commentary* 105. E. M. Forsster's 'The Machine Stops' has been one of my favourite short stories, simply because I'm amazed every time I read it or think of it that it was written in 1909. So incredibly prescient. And how much more so last year, when we were all confined to our cubicles and communicated electronically. Brilliant, and Carol Kewley's work is perfect for it. Thank you for that.

I've had some work that's kept me busy for a little while, although unfortunately not for the Uni, which seems to have dried up completely. Jen's written another book on her specialty, and I edited it chapter by chapter. She's typeset it herself (on a remarkable program she showed me) and now it's all finished so I've just gone through it as a whole. It was good to have something real I could get my teeth into for a while.

(3 April 2021)

ANDY ROBSON
63 Dixon Lane, Leeds LS12 4RR,
Yorkshire, UK

Wow! Here we are in the eighteenth month of lockdown desperately hoping nothing breaks down as parts are impossible to buy and you may have to travel to three or four cities to get an electric kettle. Many thanks for *SF Commentaries* 105 and 106.

[*brg* Andy was kind enough to send several high-denomination pound notes attached to an undated issue of a fanzine *Selexio Fiction Issue*, photocopied, typewritten, which from its appearance might have been published any time in the last 40 years.*]

I didn't send the enclosed issue of *Selexio* when it was produced since it's not exactly SF — although some items are, in a kiddie-like fashion. Sadly I've been unable to track down some of the writers (though it's possible one or two are deliberately refusing to admit authorship).

It's interesting that a lot of Australian writers set their books in England despite never having been here. This reminds me of early twentieth-century English and American writers who set their tales in Africa or India: Rudyard Kipling and suchlike. After World War II too many people could call their bluff. (Apart, of course, from the notorious Peter Thompson, who wrote travel tales of the non-existent Mediterranean jungles and steaming Swedish swamps before becoming the high priest of the Church of the Sub-human.)

Congratulations on making 51 years of *SF Commentary* — especially for carrying people along with you for all that time. My publishing problem was that the members of my initial audience were already in their seventies. There must have been something 1920s about it — those guys would now be 120. I just couldn't carry them through. (Present-day bands like Ward Thomas will know that feeling of facing an audience with white beards and suede shoes.)

[*brg* That's the second completely unfamiliar reference in this letter. I've never heard of the Peter Thompson of whom you write, although there are various Australian well-known people named Peter Thompson. And I've never heard of a band called Ward Thomas.*]

My favourite lockdown quote at present came from an actor who said that on the fourth day of lockdown he decided to sit in the window and count the people going past. It was raining at the time. He got up to three and promptly fell asleep. He said, 'And to think of all those years I'd wasted on sheep.'

I've been along only a part of the Mills & Boon motorway section. Closer to home is a half-mile stretch of roadway made from a compression of broken glass. Never mentioned is the fact that one side is flanked by a now-departed ceramic toilet factory, and the other by an unmade road titled Wood Lane. The future of such projects was doomed as both paper and glass can be recycled for greater profit. (Maybe there's still hope for a roadway made of spent mobile phones.)

There's not much science in SF these days; it's more Psycho-Fiction (unless you want to include the magical realism stuff, which could be medieval, pre-Newtonian alchemy). I can't face novels these days. I prefer biographies — going out and misbehaving is a major attraction. I'm not interested in the Rasputins and recluses; let's have showmen and divas. I would've thought people would be watching the skies on these clear summer nights, but UFO reports are strangely absent. Maybe H. G. Wells was right after all; nobody wants alien flu.

Lech Keller's letter revealing that the homeless from Poland would go to underground inspection chambers for the winter probably explains a mystery of a few years back. A homeless Arab guy (who didn't seem to speak English) moved into a large storm drain culvert underground. Inevitably, torrential winter rain flooded the entire area to a depth of two feet. He was never seen again, presumably swept down river.

(Arrived 16 July 2021)

Feature letter: Steve and Vikki linger through lockdown

STEVE JEFFERY
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Oxon OX5 2XA, UK

SFC is starting to sound like a never-ending game of catch-up when you write that in finishing this issue you are knee deep in mailing comments that already look to extend into issues 106 and 107. It sounds like the position I am currently in at work

where we seem to be playing a constant game of whack-a-mole with software development and testing: as soon as we find and fix one bug I find two more that appear in the new fix. Still, it keeps me occupied (and the developers more than occupied trying to keep up) and establishes my reputation as someone who can find a way to break any new feature they throw at me. Strangely, the code team seem more reassured than annoyed by this, but since this is pretty critical medical device software, it's best that we break it early during testing than discover these obscure bugs from people who are using and relying on it.

It's also a situation I remember from my days as *Vector* reviews editor, juggling reviews coming back in and books being sent out. Fun at the time, but not a place I want to or could afford to revisit now. I like having my weekends back (though they are now more and more being taken over by work: one of the disadvantages of being able to work remotely if there is no clear distinction between office hours and personal time, especially when the most productive time is outside office hours and the interruption of a constant stream of back to back online meetings).

We have now both had our first Covid vaccinations. Mine was on my birthday last week, the second birthday that I've now spent in lockdown. It turned into something of a strange day. We were so focused on getting out to the local vaccination centre at Kassam Stadium (which, just under eight miles away, is the furthest I've been in the last 12 months) that it wasn't until we were on the way back that Vikki remarked, 'You know we've completely forgotten what day this is.' As time goes on, I'm more than happy to forget each new birthday, but Vikki wasn't having any of it, so we settled down with a coffee and a pile of presents before I had to scoot back upstairs for the afternoon meetings. (Vikki has never worked on her birthday; I nearly always do. I even spent my 50th sitting a course exam.)

Due to a bit (OK, quite a lot) of advance prompting, I already had a fair idea of what would be inside a few of those birthday wrappers, two of which were prompted by a previous review article in *SFC*: Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and *Orfeo*. It may have also been *SFC* where I discovered there was a fourth Cass Neary book from Elizabeth Hand, which also went straight into my Amazon wish list. If so, thanks for that. But Vikki likes to sprinkle in the odd surprise present I wasn't expecting, so there was also a copy of Ishiguro's *Kara and the Sun* (we's been listening to this on *BBC Book at Bedtime*, though I'm not sure how many of these one or other of us nodded off in the middle of, but enough to make us intrigued to read it. It's the sort of book I would have kept an eye out for in the local library (when it was



still open) had Vikki not seen it at half price in the local supermarket.

And ... Bruce, what I am going to do with almost a kilogram of chocolate, in the form of ten assorted bars in ten different flavours? Did you even know there was such a thing as a dark milk peppermint Aero? There is now, and I'm still undecided whether it's closer to my idea of heaven, or a road to totally indulgent sin. Oh well, it's Easter, and I'm sure I will have some help.

As I will with the new Wasjig jigsaw — really a present to both of us, as we both use birthdays and Xmas as excuses to buy gifts for the both of us (CDs, box sets etc.) that we wouldn't do otherwise.

Not quite a birthday present, as our friend Glenda didn't know about it at the time, but an unexpected gift, was the delivery of five bags of assorted *Fantasy* & *SF* magazines that Chris and Glenda were clearing out in preparation for decamping to their other house in Normandy and putting their house in Kidlington up for sale as soon as lockdown restrictions allow. These are still sitting on the dining room floor, and I really must sort through them and see what I've got. We may not keep all of them, and I'm still undecided what to do with them eventually. We really don't have room for more books or magazines, and the policy (never that strictly maintained) of 'one in, one out'

went out the window last year when the monthly book sales at the village hall stopped.

You mention catching up with friends and their interests on Facebook. I am trying to wean myself off the habit of wasting large parts of slow days scrolling up and down and constantly clicking the Refresh button, so I now try to limit this to a quick five minutes at the start and end of the day. I am also learning which topics I should best avoid even opening, lest I feel vaguely soiled the rest of the day. (I very rarely post outside closed groups where comments are restricted to members. So I may be in a closed and self-reinforcing social media bubble. So what? What else is fandom, for example? Besides I'm too old to define my life through social media comments and likes. I would far rather witter on like this to a handful of friends via email, which still feels to me more like writing a personal letter than broadcasting to the world at large. Your response, on wading through reams of my endless parenthetically tangled screed, may of course vary.)

Which is a good point to congratulate you (if I haven't done so already) on your 2020 Ditmar. Well deserved, in my opinion. And in that of a lot of other people as well.

I still have trouble with Zoom meetings, possibly because my workplace has migrated from Webex to Microsoft Teams (the latter, of course, being anathema to the Apple-centred universe of Alison Scott and the rest of the Plokta cabal (is there still even a Plokta cabal?), and the work laptop I use is so overloaded with security patches that I can no longer send attachments or even pictures in external emails, so I'm not sure if or how well Zoom still works. I did try to drop in on the virtual New Year Round the World Party — apparently I just missed you — to see a few familiar (but by that point very tired or emotional) faces, including Geri Sullivan, Karen Shaffer, and Mike Ward, and, I think, Murray and Mary Ellen Moore. It was almost like being back at Corflu FIAWOL again, and a reminder of good times. But apparently there were people in breakout rooms, and I could not see any option to access any of those. So for the same reason I've largely avoided large online fannish gatherings that rely on Zoom and different spaces, lest I find my self stranded in a virtual lobby wondering where everybody has gone. Which, apparently, seems to have been the fate of a more than a few disgruntled Eastercon members.

There was a hilariously abortive attempt to do something like this at work last year during one of our online All-Employee meeting, by dividing people into small groups so they could spend five minutes getting to know each other, with the result that no one could see anybody, but everyone could hear all the discussions going on in all the other 'rooms'.

Vikki and have not visited anyone since lockdown started in March last year, and any visitors have been limited to doorstep visitors only (for drop-offs of boxes of jigsaws or magazines). We tried one attempt at online takeaway delivery in which we carefully selected a delivery time, to have the food arrive inconveniently an hour and a half early while one of us was still in the bath, so we gave that up as unreliable. We have, however, rediscovered cooking as a pleasure, especially at weekends when we can spend time getting things ready, preparing marinades and not having to rush to get everything ready at the last minute. It means we have also rediscovered the benefit of our slow cooker, especially for curries and stews that we can spread over two or three days. Unfortunately I haven't managed similar success with the breadmaker. The last one came out like a brick, but I am determined to have another go at some point once I have sorted whether it was the yeast that was the problem or whether the breadmaker itself is at fault.

On the upside, my company have been thoroughly supportive though the last year of lockdown and remote working. We have had a stream of little parcels in the post containing masks and bottles of sanitiser, a pair of hats and gloves and penlight torches for winter, and a small hamper of goodies at Christmas. Last week I opened one to find a small box of mini Easter eggs, and the next day another pair of masks. Of course, they work our butts off and expect us to still deliver the goods and hit the deadlines and targets but I don't mind that — I don't think I could have coped with the last year being furloughed with nothing to do — but when we manage it the fact these these little 'thank you's still arrive as if we were still at work are a nice touch. It's just a shame we now have to buy our own biscuits and cakes for online meetings.

I seem to have wittered, largely about myself (again!), and haven't even mentioned the content of *SFC* 105 yet. But I had better send this, with my best wishes to you and Elaine (and from Vikki too), and get on with reading the rest of your letter column and the book reviews section, which I rely on more and more to point me to works of interest.s
(5 April 2021)

Martin Morse Wooster comments on Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, which is a film I find constantly fascinating and problematic, possibly because it took me so long to finally track down a copy, which I eventually found in an obviously home-taped-and-labelled VHS being sold in a charity shop, although I now have a better copy on my Freeview recorder from a season of Tarkovsky films shown on Film 4 a year or two ago.

(I watched *The Sacrifice* as part of that same



season, but I really couldn't understand anything that was going on.)

I've listened to several film podcasts about Tarkovsky and *Stalker*, which has almost passed into legend because of the event surrounding its filming and the fallout afterward, large parts of it having to be re-shot in a disused chemical factory with actors and crew standing sometimes knee deep in contaminated water for hours on end, something that is said to have had tragic consequences for at least one actor and possibly for Tarkovsky himself. As with a lot of these things (for some reason Howard Carter's fateful opening of Tutankamen's tomb springs to mind), it's hard to disentangle the reality from the legend. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2011/apr/08/andrei-tarkovsky-stalker-japan-fukushima-nuclear>

I've now seen *Annihilation* twice, once on a tiny seat-back screen on the flight to Corflu (not ideal) and more rewardingly later on DVD, and I suspect it's another film, both eerily beautiful and enigmatic, that I will return to again.

I like the idea of donating books you've finished with so other people can enjoy them, although in these Covid times I suspect wrapping them in a plastic bag that can be wiped with sanitizer would be better than in newspaper. One of the things I miss is our monthly Saturday morning behind-the-book-stall table, to which we would often donate books we had finished with (although just as often taking as many back home). But the idea was they would be returned at some point and therefore be in constant circulation for someone else to enjoy.) Something of this spirit seems to have sprung up outside various houses around the village, where you will find little gifts set out just outside the gate. Most often the sort of bric a bric you see in jumble sales, but the other day I lifted a stone to find four new packs of gardening seeds —

rocket, lettuce, tomato, and radish — which I thought was a nice touch. (Our own attempts at growing radishes and spring onions last year, in a converted recycling tub, were an abject failure, and in previous years we have probably grown what works out as the most expensive strawberry ever.)

I miss my canal walks (Leigh's letter of 21 November 2019, commenting on Andrew Darlington), which would sometimes take me from the little nature reserve all the way up past several locks to the next village at Thrupp and sometimes back round on the footpath by the Cherwell. There's no reason I shouldn't continue them, although they sometimes meant having to step back into the hedges or an adjoining field to give other people, usually joggers or early morning dog walkers, a safe distance to pass, although I've done something to my ankle which makes walking for any distance, particularly on uneven ground, sometimes painful. But I'm hoping I can resume them nearer summer. It was on one of these last year that I wandered off to explore a new footpath and found myself in a glade that someone (probably several someones) had hung or affixed little fairy doors on a number of trees. I've recently seen this again on someone's Facebook post. Another curious discovery was the tree in one of local churchyards festooned with hanging cutlery, mostly spoons and ladles. I have no idea what that is about.

I don't know whether it is the new strange circumstances we are in, or just the relief of getting out in nicer weather again, but the other day on the way back from the shops I found myself standing still watching two robins bouncing around a tree in someone's front garden for what must have been ten or fifteen minutes, just for the pleasure of watching them.

I am gobsmacked that you have managed to keep a hard disk (the same hard disk?) running for

22 years. I would be severely worried at this point. There's a very good reason (apart from the need to keep up with new Windows versions and patches) that our workplace replaces PCs on a four-year basis. (Theoretically anyway, I have one PC on site that must be over twice that old.)

David Boutland's letter is a prime example of why should perhaps never make your passion your profession lest the reality of the latter (pressure, stress, and deadlines) contaminate the former and tarnish the shine.

Ha — I know just what Robert Day means about the problem of demonstrating a new bit of clever software to a group of stakeholders, and it invariably does something unexpected on the day (usually terminal), despite half a dozen trouble-free rehearsal run-throughs.

Or, as a software tester like him, demonstrating this obscure new bug you've just found to the development team, only for the software to suddenly behave itself and sail through perfectly. It's this that makes life interesting, and why it took me

a whole day and twenty separate test runs on the Thursday before Easter to finally pin down the exact conditions to force a particularly weird crash, and nailing it just as everyone logged off for the Easter break.

I've no idea if I have a special skill set as a tester, apart from an ability to make software do things it shouldn't, using by clicking or changing things at random and seeing what happens. But I started in an environment when we tested products to destruction (by bending, breaking, or setting fire to them) and I seem to have taken that philosophy to software testing (well, maybe not the setting fire part). So a good day starts with a faintly apologetic email to the development team 'Sorry guys, I seem to have broke it again', and then we get into the interesting part of finding out why and how it happened.

(It is snowing. On Easter Monday. Normality has been restored.)

(6 April 2021)

Feature letter: More movie adventures in Canberra

JOHN LITCHEN
Address already given

You may remember that in the photos I sent you from the time Monica and I went to Canberra and filmed John Bangsund, there are one or two photos of John and I think Robin Johnson dumping newspapers into a bin while Sally and Monica are looking on (leaning against a parked car). I mentioned on seeing these again that I had no idea what was going on at that moment, and I think Sally also expressed a similar thought recently. I discovered after downloading a copy of John Bangsund's *Philosophical Gas* 22, about half way through the issue (there are no page numbers) in a column dated 4 June 1973, John mentions Robin Johnson coming up that weekend and in the next paragraph he mentions Monica and I arriving on our honeymoon to spend a day with him shooting some film. Now, after 48 years, I finally know what they were doing when that photo was taken. We would have known at the time, but in the intervening half a century we'd forgotten. I just thought you might like to know if one day you publish that photo in something, you now know what to put in the caption to explain it:

Even though John may have thought so, we were not actually married in secret. It happened quite quickly once we decided to do it: a small wedding with only (mainly) my family there, since Monica's family were all in Chile and unable to attend, apart from one cousin and his wife who had migrated to Sydney after Monica moved to Melbourne. You will read about it in my next volume of memoirs. John only found out we were married after we arrived and told him we were on our honeymoon.

I'm sure the Queen's Birthday weekend was 13 June and not 4 June:

John Bangsund:

Robin Johnson arrived on Saturday morning and didn't lose a thing in Canberra, which, even if it detracts from his image a little, is nevertheless pleasant to report. Monica and John Lichen, more or less secretly married about a fortnight ago, arrived on Sunday, and I feel very honoured that they chose to spend a day of their three-day delayed honeymoon at my place. With Sally, and Helen and Leigh Hyde, we did some weird, fannish and altogether delightful things — such as a short film sequence at the National Library. Readers of *Nation Review* will perhaps be pleased to know that when the short colour film

for Australia in 75 is shown in Toronto this September I may be observed wearing a ferret T-shirt (or is it D-shirt?).

The milk bar at Manuka which sells papers on Sunday happened to have this week's *National Times*. The proprietor was a little bemused when Robin and I bought five copies each, and Sally and John at least one each. If he had seen Robin a few moments later dumping the *Times* in a litter bin and keeping only the colour supplement, he would have been convinced we were quite insane. But that issue has a passable article about sf and fandom by Tony Maiden, with interesting photos of Robin, Mervyn, Paul, Bert Chandler and George Turner. Oh, and Batman, yes. Robin and his *Norstrilian News* were also mentioned in Saturday's *Melbourne Age*.

John couldn't have written that column before we arrived, so he must have written it sometime later and confused the dates, putting it as 4 June. But Robin may have arrived on that day and stayed there a week, although I seem to remember he only got there the day before we did.

That means we arrived in Canberra on Sunday the 10th, shot the film on Monday the 11th, and drove back later that afternoon and evening to Melbourne. I'm sure when Charles becomes King, his birthday will be celebrated in June so we can have a holiday over the same second weekend regardless of when his actual birthday really is.

(10 April 2021)

A comment on Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel, *The Ministry for the Future*, since it's the only one of the books listed in Colin Steele's column of recent releases that I have read.

First, it is well written, as one would expect from such a renowned author.

Second, it's a bit hard to read because it is not a novel about people, but a novel about events and possible political solutions to the effects of those events. In the story a couple of important people, namely the head of the Ministry for the Future, and one person who is the only survivor of a massive heatwave that killed millions in India, appear intermittently throughout the whole novel, and as a reader I was interested how the events they were part of changed them as people over time. Unfortunately, their story line is almost lost among the massive infodumps that Robinson uses build a picture of a planet rapidly changing for the worse.

Someone suggested that Robinson is emulating the style of storytelling John Dos Passos used in his massive, definitive novels of the evolution of the USA (collected in a volume called *USA*), a style later copied by John Brunner in his fantastic *Stand on Zanzibar*. I think it only vaguely adopts this style.

Over the years Robinson has graduated towards this kind of distant omniscient viewpoint of storytelling, quite noticeable in his Washington trilogy, also about climate change and its effects — *Forty Signs of Rain*, *Fifty Degrees Below*, and *Sixty Days and Counting*, later revised and collected in one volume called *Green Earth*. These three novels, however, focused on people for the most part.

What is disconcerting about *The Ministry for the Future* is there are too many changes of viewpoint: third person, first person, omniscient, third person up close, often with characters who only appear once or at best twice, so there is no connection or continuity between them other than the first two people, who appear at the start and remain interacting from time to time with each other throughout the novel. In between these small segments about people are the infodumps about climate change science, imagined effects of massive changes, banking and monetary systems, and how they can be changed for the better, global climate restoration undertaken by India, one of the worst affected countries by heat waves, and so much of it that one loses the thread of humanity affected by the changes occurring. Before long, the reader is aware that this is not a novel about people, but a 'novel', if you could call it that, about climate change itself, and the things needed to ameliorate it if at all possible. It's interesting, but hard to read. It's fragmented, disjointed, with some parts quite sleep inducing, and other parts filled with tension and suspense. Overall, the infodumps dominate to such an extent that the continuity of the characters' lives are lost.

It is ultimately a hopeful novel even though parts of it are rather depressing, or even boring. I sincerely hope it isn't the last book that Robinson writes.

(19 April 2021)

[*brg* Your comments about Ministry of the Future would apply, for me, to most of his novels since the 'Mars' trilogy. But I well remember the pleasure of reading Robinson's early short fiction and novels.*]

I've just finished reading *SFC 106* while sitting quietly in the sun coming through a large window in our lounge room. While Monica was sleeping, I was up early and had the place to myself, which I quite enjoy.

It's sad that people we know, or know of, or have known in some form or another for many years are disappearing from this Earth. It brings home the realisation that we are all getting older, but inevitably our turn to disappear from this earth will also happen. I met Yvonne Rousseau on a couple of occasions, maybe even more than that, but she is

[*brg* I won't reprint the long discussion I had with John Litchen as we tried to work out the date of the Fannish Football Match that took place at what we in the early 1970s called the 'Foyster Farm', although in fact it was a farm owned by Mr and Mrs Pike, parents of Elizabeth, who was then married to John Foyster. Elizabeth and John and daughter Jillian Miranda often spent the weekend there, although their own home was in South Yarra. Collective Fandom was invited to the farm several times during the 1970s before Elizabeth and John split up.

John had found a large number of photos taken at the legendary football match. Several years ago I printed some of them in the OBO of ANZAPA. John wants to date the photos for when he writes about that period for his ongoing memoirs. After much discussion, John Litchen and I still had not worked out a date — until I found a folder of photos dated 'Litchen Football Photos Sep 73'. That's a date the works. It also explains why I could find no reference to the football match in my own diary. Like about 30 other Australian fans, I had fled Australia at the end of August 1973 to attend Torcon II, the world convention held in Toronto on the first weekend of September. It was our bidding year, and with a lot of help from various overseas fans and pro writers, Australia won the bid to hold the world convention in Melbourne in 1975.

But lots of fans stayed behind. Robin Johnson and Bill Wright had attended the world convention on Los Angeles the year before, and Leigh Edmonds and Valma Brown became our DUFF winners and Aussiecon representatives in 1974.

So John and I still don't know the exact date of the football match. We had hoped that Leigh Edmonds might have winkled it out when looking through newszines of the period. Not so.

And I had asked Tony Thomas, who was there.*]



A few of John Litchen's photos from the Fannish Football Match, Kyneton, September 1973: Above l: Merv's team: Stephen Campbell, Michael Creaney, Peter Millar (sitting), Ken Ford, Merv Binns, Tony Thomas.





**Bill Wright
being
umpired by
John
Foyster.
(Photo:
John
Litchen.)**

more familiar to me through what she has written, especially in your various magazines.

I remember her story about your garden party (in *Metaphysical Review* 18), but as you say, most people there thought that she had attended the party, because of what she had written regarding those who were there, even though they couldn't actually recall seeing her there. I was one of those who thought she was there when I first read the article.

I went back to the copy of *The Metaphysical Review* in which the article appeared and read it again. It clearly states at the start that she hadn't attended the party and that she recreated the event based on what she heard from many who were there. Knowing that, I read it again and found it to be remarkable. What a great writer she was. That's

easily one of the most fascinating articles you have published over the years. I am going to have to reread those early issues to see what other remarkable stuff I can discover.

She did spell Monica's name with a k instead of a c, but people often do that. And she did report that John Foyster said I'd shaved off my beard because of the appearance of grey hairs, but while that may have been true, the real reason I shaved it off for a while was that my father who was in his late eighties at the time said it made him feel old to see grey hair in my beard. I shaved it off for that reason. I didn't want him to feel older than he was. After he died, five years after, I grew it back and it was full of grey and white hair, as it still is today. It doesn't make me feel old, or any older than when it wasn't there. I am now the oldest of my brothers and sisters, at 81, and I'm okay for the moment. But Monica hasn't fared so well (she's also 81), nor has my sister Zara, who is beginning to suffer short-term memory loss and other effects associated with Alzheimer's. Her husband Fred is 84, and he has had a few skin cancers removed, but is okay and looking after her as best he can. My other brothers and sisters are all fine, although ageing at various rates.

It seems many of the letters in recent *SFCs* are replete with discussions of health problems.

(7 May 2021)

[*brg* And these discussions extend to the Tributes section at the beginning of this issue. Thanks very much, John, for your powerful account of the last days of Monica.*]

Tony Thomas looks further into memory and books

**TONY THOMAS
PO Box 1215, Elwood VIC 3184**

My memory of the Fannish Football Match is that it was a cool day and probably in winter, so your guess at January does seem unlikely.

My only memory of the day is my running with the football, rugby style, no bouncing, and John Foyster commenting that this must have been because I was from the rugby state of NSW. This was wrong, as I had never played rugby, despite it being the only football game at my school, Knox Grammar. Instead I played hockey for a year or two, before piking out of all sport, which was my usual inclination. Nor have I ever again played Australian Rules, from that day to this, though I've watched

quite a lot of matches, including when my son played. He was probably at the fan match in a carry basket, but this doesn't help much either.

Unlike you, I have kept no diaries of any sort, except for the last decade or so. But I do have a record of my reading going back to the 1960s, and can sometimes remember where I was when I was reading a particular book — for instance, I recall finishing Conrad's *Victory* on my back lawn in Fern-tree Gully in January 1977 before doing English I at Melbourne University that year.

But I'd be no help with dating any events precisely — my memories are almost all visual and never time precise, what there are of them. I can hardly remember anything of my primary school days, for instance.

Sorry for taking time to reply, and so uselessly. Going into hospital today, just for a test, but it

involves an overnight stay. Thanks for the latest *SFC*, where you have done Jenny and me proud. Still reading the rest of it.

(3 May 2021)

[*brg* Thanks for your nice little essay about memory. I also remember incidents tied to events that have had great emotional importance to me. If I can tie those visualised events to a dated event, then I can usually work out the source of the memory.

The 1970s was my decade of memories, starting from when I 'joined fandom' at the end of 1967. Most of those events can be tied to events I've written about in fanzines. The 1980s became much more difficult to remember, and the last 20 years seem to have slipped by without many date markers in my mind.

What my discovery of the September 1973 date does not explain is that I *remember being there* — which must be a false memory prompted by looking at the photos themselves.

You mention 'having tests', and I was wondering whether the both of you had seemingly disappeared because of some health problem. I trust everything is going okay.

Our Affliction of the Year is the building of a double-storey house next door — not so much the building noises, but the very loud radios that every building crew seems obliged to play during the working day.

Any remarkable books read recently? I must admit I'm struggling to find books that get me excited. I did like M. John Harrison's *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*, not so much for the dour viewpoint as for some very fine sentences on most pages. Before that, I enjoyed *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro, again not so much for the story, which has been done before, but for the dazzling use of verbal viewpoint. The best novel of the year so far is Sumner Locke Elliott's *Going* (1975), which I pulled off the shelf after 45 years or more. A familiar story (enforced murder of those in the population reaching a certain age, in this case 70), but transformed by a wonderful main character and almost Dischian writing style. I still have a few Sumner Locke Elliott books unread. Perhaps I'll read them by the end of the year.*]

Thanks for *your* thoughts about memory, a subject which I've been contemplating for some time as Jenny and I continue to see films where failing memory due to dementia plays a big part. Such as *Still Alice* with Julianne Moore of a few years ago, and *Blackbird* with Susan Sarandon, which we saw visiting Portland earlier this year, and *The Father* with Oscar winner Anthony Hopkins, which we saw just a few weeks ago (as I tried to type this, Anthony

Hopkins' name escaped me ...)

Talking to family and others, and Jenny especially, who remembers a few things very well from a very early age, it appears that I am unusual in having very few memories of life before about the age of 12. For instance, of the house I lived in till I was 10 in Northbridge, Sydney, I remember only a few snapshots: the old valve radio I sat in front of to listen to serials from about 5 p.m. each day (but nothing of the rest of the room), the black-tiled bath with a lion's head tap (but nothing of the rest of the bathroom), nothing at all of my bedroom, the old-fashioned washing machine with wringer attached in the laundry downstairs, no-thing of the backyard, nothing of the journey to school and back (a mile or so which I walked a couple of times a day), nothing of the primary school except a bit of playground with (poisonous) azalea bushes, none of my teachers or fellow students (no names or faces), some shelving in the commercial lending library on the way home where I used to borrow Biggles books (but none of the books really). There are a few more memories assisted by photographs, e.g. of the front of the house. And sometimes, if I see an old Biggles book, I can remember from the cover or title having read it. Or when I was reading a Golden Book to my children, I could remember having read it or having it read to me. All the children's books I had owned, Biggles, Enid Blyton, Golden Books, were disposed of later by my mother, so I had no visual cues around me to spark memories.

But things changed dramatically once we moved to West Pennant Hills in 1957. I remember the house we lived in very well, and could draw a plan of it. And our animals and neighbours. And the teachers, names and faces of many school acquaintances/friends, even though I was last in contact with any of them in 1964, except for the fan Kevin Dillon, whom I must have met in 1964 and saw a bit of as a fan when he visited Melbourne (he even stayed with us once). Even my aunts, uncles, and cousins I've had almost no contact with, and seen only rarely at funerals, though I can visualise a number of them (once again though, photographs can easily lead to false memories).

And it was now books (and magazines) that became the equivalent for me of 'emotional significance' for you and which my memories are attached to more than anything else. I can remember, for instance, first coming across anything like modern sf, with the writer still living. This was on a visit from West Pennant Hills to Sydney, I think, with my mother driving us (or maybe we caught the train), to visit a 'Dr' Judge with a practice on Macquarie St. This supposed doctor had helped my father with his back, damaged in the war, using chiropractic manipulation, but had now turned to

an apparently more lucrative charlatanry in the form of very expensive pills to cure allergies, (correctly) supposed to be a cause of asthma, of which I was a sufferer. Walking around Sydney before or after this consultation, I spied on a corner newsstand some tentacled beings on the cover of a Penguin paperback. This was *The Day of the Triffids* by Wyndham, and I quickly convinced my mother to make the purchase. I think I had already come across other tentacled beings in Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and other strange creatures thanks to Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars books, but hadn't imagined that anybody was still writing such stuff — and getting published in the famous Penguins. I'd soon devoured all the Wyndham then published, and it wasn't long before I discovered *Amazing* and *Fantastic* (October 1960 issues to be precise) at my local newsagent, and many more sf books and magazines when I could convince my mother to visit Parramatta.

I didn't start writing down the books I'd read until 1968 after I'd come to Melbourne with my family, who then left me here at my insistence when they moved on to Brisbane. But it's the books that I best remember and which provide my best chance of dating events of significance, along with a few other important events like lovers, marriage, children, offices, the first Aussiecon, universities, and plays I was in or directed.

Last year, after reading about Christopher Priest's 100 best books, from my own reading lists and memories of the years before, I created my own best books, along with the decades of my life in which I first read them, to come up with the only sort of autobiography I'm ever likely to want to produce. Since then, of course, quite a large number of these have appeared in SFC.

But here's mine (attached), for better or worse. I couldn't keep to 100 as you might have expected.

[*brg* Sorry I don't have room to include the list, or time to reformat your file into one I can use in Ventura. Your list is an item for a near-future SF Commentary.*]

Remarkable books this year? Not so many yet. M. John Harrison's *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* is sitting waiting on my shelves, right on top of Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*. I didn't much like Harrison's *Nova Swing*, up for the Clarke a decade or so ago, but the current novel has garnered quite a bit of praise, including from some who rarely praise sf. One who liked it was Adam Roberts, whose new novel *Purgatory Mount* similarly awaits. On top of it is his friend Francis Spufford's new *Light Perpetual*, also well reviewed.

One I've actually read is the second novel by Fiona Mozley, *Hot Stew*, set mainly in a brothel in

London, and as different as one could imagine from her first novel *Elmet*, that I thought might well have won the Booker in 2017. This isn't quite as good, but Mozley is one to watch.

I've also been reading a stack of novels by Australian thriller writer Michael Robotham (whose name I think David Grigg first mentioned to me), all of which I liked a lot, together with Stephen King and other notables — but probably not your cup of tea.

I also caught up with an old short novel by Philip Roth, *The Breast*, in which one of Roth's academics turns into the titular breast. Perhaps this was short for a reason. I also liked Australian Candice Fox's *The Chase*, about a massive prison break set in the US. Robotham and Fox both choose to reinvent themselves from time to time, rather than pursuing the same formula novel after novel (which even those like Raymond Chandler were fairly comfortable with), and this seems to give them added strength.

[*brg* Probably I was the person who mentioned Michael Robotham to you — I've included his books in my own Best Books of the Year lists recently. His 'serial killer' novels can become a bit interchangeable, but I agree that every now and again he tries something quite new.*]

Of the four books I'm reading at the moment, the new book by A. C. Grayling, *The Frontiers of Knowledge: What We Now Know about Science, History and the Mind*, at 80 of 400 pages in is a masterwork — the term polymath might have been invented for Grayling. Even cutting-edge scientists (such as Laurence Krauss) praise his authoritative account of modern science. I'm also reading a recent Michael Robotham, *The Secrets She Keeps*. Once again the author has departed from his standard formula to write in the voices of two women in alternating chapters, who may be keeping criminal secrets — we are yet to find out. Also on the go is Anna Beer's *Sounds and Sweet Airs: the Forgotten Women of Classical Music*, with a chapter of Elizabeth Maconchy, whose thirteen string quartets I'm in the middle of presenting on *Contemporary Visions* on 3MBS. And another book I'm dipping into is a Martin and Dozois anthology of a decade ago, *Songs of the Dying Earth*, with stories by a lot of good authors paying tribute to Jack Vance's creation. So far the Matthew Hughes story is fine.

Another recent discovery is the novels of John Bayley, the renowned critic who was the husband of Iris Murdoch and wrote memorably about her descent into dementia. He had an early novel, which I haven't yet read, and a series of three related novels and a further one written very late in life. I've read the first two of these, *Alice* and *The*

Queer Captain, strange mixtures of semi-thriller plots with characters often associated with academia (which Bayley of course knows much about), and written in an old-fashioned but beguiling prose. ‘Slightly fogeyish wisdom’ comments one of the people quoted on the covers, and this captures something of these unusual books — hard to recommend, but worth a look at if you’ve got nothing else to do on a rainy weekend and can find them in a library.

What have we been doing? I don’t know exactly. I don’t think we’ll be going to Nova Mobs that are only on line. Otherwise we were away on tour to southern Victoria (substituting for our usual visit to Adelaide for Writer’s Week, which was stymied by a lockdown). And a couple of other times we had a concert to go to, or I hadn’t read the Nova Mob guest. But we’ll turn up again soon.

Health of both is okay. I had what turned out to be a routine test in hospital, but had to stay overnight for it. A few minor heart events earlier in the year, but they are well controlled by medication. Jenny is amazingly well for someone who had the lengthiest operation that is carried out at Cabrini.

Hope you and Elaine are both well. I know just what you mean about workmen’s radios. I’ve complained about this happening right outside my window, and sometimes they are willing to turn the noise down, but reluctantly.

(13 May 2021)

[*brg* Happy birthday, Tony!

You’re not on Facebook, where I am reminded every day of people’s birthdays. I happened to look at our home birthday list on the wall, and there was your name. I hope you’ve celebrated appropriately tonight, or perhaps at the weekend.*]

Thanks Bruce and Elaine. Jenny and I had dinner and a concert. Next weekend, lunch with children for two birthdays, Lyndal’s and mine.

Plus plenty of concerts.

(25 May 2021)

[*brg* I did see mention somewhere of a new Adam Roberts book, but not in an SF review source. What should I know about it? (Most Adam Roberts books I’ve missed because I haven’t known about them, so I haven’t ordered them from Justin. They rarely appear in general bookshops.)

On the other hand, I liked the new M. John Harrison novel. All those wonderful sentences. Otherwise, much of my reading recently has been disappointing, e.g. the new Elizabeth Knox novel, which I gave up reading after 50 pages.*]

We’ve had a lot of vaccinations. Me: 1st Covid, flu and shingles (preventative, apparently recommended for oldies). Only reaction was a day or so of arm soreness after Covid. Jenny: flu and 1st Covid after, which she had arm soreness for several days, but none of the other reported symptoms, which a couple of friends have had: headaches, fluey feelings.

I’m currently reading the newest memoir (third of a set which came out over a decade or so) by Deborah Levy, *Real Estate*, which is good, even very good. Levy was shortlisted (I think) for a Booker a few years ago for *Hot Milk*, which I liked. Before that I read a late Barbara Vine from the library, *The Child’s Child*, a novel within a novel, set in 2011 for the modern one, but the bulk devoted to a 1930 novel written by an ancestor and read by one of the contemporary characters. All very intricately worked out, with many resonances between the two stories — but rather precipitously finished perhaps. All very satisfying though. I find I like Barbara Vine much more than Ruth Rendell.

The recent Adam Roberts books that I’m aware of, mostly from his blog *Morphosis*, are:

- *Purgatory Mount*, an sf novel out from Gollancz in hc a few months ago, sitting on my shelves waiting to be read, next to the M. John Harrison.
- *It’s the End of the World: But What Are We Really Afraid of?*, non-fiction, out from Elliott and Thompson last November, but missed by me till recently. This won the BSFA award for non-fiction this year, over a book by Paul Kincaid about Chris Priest. Have you seen or heard of the Kincaid? The Roberts is winging its way to me now.

[*brg* Paul Kincaid was the actual editor of the first three issues of our collaborative *Steam Engine Time* fanzine of long reviews about SF (2000–2001). However, the hard work of producing a fanzine got to him, and he dropped the bundle back to me. *SET* lasted from 2000 to 2013.

Paul decided to become a critic as well known as John Clute. He hasn’t succeeded in that, but he had done a huge amount of work on several authors I like, include many reviews, review-articles, etc. He’s the SF critic I most trust (other than myself), but seems reluctant to publish in fanzines these days. His main monographs/books are those on Iain Banks (for which he did win awards, I seem to recall) and now Christopher Priest, which is his real specialty. Paul and Chris lived nearby in Hastings in England for many years before Chris disappeared to live on an island off the south coast of England. I would like to see Paul complete his work on Keith Roberts. I still have

in my files a couple of early chapters (1990s) of the proposed book, which has still not materialised.*]

- *Middlemarch: Epigraphs and Mirrors*, out from Open Book 31 March this year. An academic book about the George Eliot novel in his capacity as Professor of Nineteenth-century Literature. Also on the way to me from Book Depository. I borrowed Eliot's *Middlemarch* from the library, never having read it, though I'm pretty sure there's a copy floating around at Ferntree Gully, but I think I need to demolish the house-high rose tree to get access to the library again after a year of Covid neglect.
- *The This*, an sf novel, publication announced for 3 February 2022 from Orion, and pre-ordered by me, which should mean that I get a first edition (of a book which I can be pretty confident will never be valuable, judging by the lack of regard shown to Roberts in the 20 years up to now). There was about a year up to November last when Roberts published no books, very unusual for him, but seems to be making up for it now.

Got to get on with an abbreviated *Contemporary Visions* now, reduced to about half an hour tonight due to a live broadcast of a concert.

(26 May 2021)

Thanks very much, Bruce, for your awards article (SFC 102). I'm very impressed that you can actually find your rankings of things you've read or own in all categories. My books, other than read ones, are in no decent state at all. Many are languishing at Fern Tree Gully, often away in boxes.

I haven't Ian Mond's email address. I think we've communicated in the past via his blog. But here is a list of his recommendations of sf books not marketed as such, from his Nova Mob talk in late 2020, with a few added comments from notes of Ian's talk or of my own.

Ian Mond's List (in reverse order of favouritism, if this is a word)

- 10 Hilary Leichter: *Temporary*
Literary novel dealing with lots of temp jobs of unnamed narrator, with absurdist, funny episodes, plus gods, pirates and assassins. Short. Available from Book Depository.
- 9 Sophie Ward: *Love and Other Thought Experiments*
SF novel on Booker long list. English author. In shops here, I think. See my review in SFC 106.
- 8 James Bradley: *Ghost Species*
Australian climate change sf novel. Ian wrote

a *Locus* review. Available locally, and I just bought a copy.

- 7 Sayaka Murata: *Earthlings*
Second novel (after *Convenience Store Women* — somewhat of a cult item), translated from Japanese. Narrator might be a witch, or an alien. Not twee, says Ian, but includes stuffed animals! Very dark in last 45 pages, says Ian, where narrator appears to take on an alien life style. Available locally, and I just bought it.
- 6 Megan Hunter: *The Harpy*
British novel, dark fairy tale with mythological underpinnings. Previous apocalyptic novella: *The End We Start From*. A woman with an unfaithful husband takes dark revenge. Just bought locally and read. 'One long beautiful scream' and 'Dazzling. musical prose' say people on the cover, and these are fair comments.
- 5 Stephen Graham Jones: *The Only Good Indians*
Prolific native American author b 1972. Genuinely horrific novel when deer takes revenge on kids who have abused it one they are grown. Larger themes re natural world.
- 4 Alex Pheby: *Mordew*
Reviewed by Ian in *Locus* and recommended by Adam Roberts in the *Guardian*: 'brilliant, haunting'. Previous novel is *Lucia*, about James Joyce's daughter, is also recommended. This is a *Gormenghast*-style story, hard-core genre fantasy, with a Dickensian flavour, and first of a trilogy (which I imagine will turn you right off). Funny. Includes extensive dramatis personae and glossary as well, including detail (and spoilers) not in the novel itself, à la Tolkien. (Just received the hc from Book Depository. Runs to 500 pp. plus another 100-plus of the addenda. Looks beautiful.)
- 3 Adam Levin: *Bubblegum*
Reviewed by Ian in *Locus*. 900 pp. The internet has been replaced by 'curio', a toy, alive and so cute you want to destroy it, torture it. Heartwarming, says Ian. Not for me, I think.
- 2 Daisy Johnson: *Sisters*
Reviewed by Ian in *Locus*. Second novel by the Booker short-listed (last year) author of *Everything Under*, which Ian liked much more than me. Impressionistic prose, says Ian, but his example seemed to me a bit trite. About sisters, named July and September, dealing with trauma. I'm giving it a miss.
- 1 Robert Shearman: *We Are for the Dark* (unsure about this title)
Three volumes of 101 somewhat inter-connected short stories, including horror,

which readers can read in any order to make their own adventure book. I really dislike this sort of game-thing, which goes against all ideas I have of novels having an author-created structure, so won't be buying it, despite Ian's extremely positive recom-

mendation. Author appears to have *Doctor Who* and *Weird Fiction* connections, which are also turnoffs for me. Can't find any recent books by Shearman on Book Depository. It's also very expensive.

(23 December 2020)

Feature letter: Casey Wolf living the good life

CASEY WOLF
Vancouver, BC V5M 4PS, Canada

I am currently immersed in the John Bangsund issue (*SFC* 103) and I am loving it. I don't know if I ever met him; if I did it was very long ago. But reading about him and what he means to other people, you especially, is making me sad that he's gone, too, and really glad that he was here. He sounds like a wonderful human.

(14 May 2021)

I love that it's the music you'd be leaving behind that you would miss the most. For me, it might be the natural world or it might be my beloveds. They're pretty much neck and neck. I once worked as a homemaker (cute word for low-paid worker who does chores for elderly and disabled people). I had one client who I was 99 years old and I asked her one day if she'd had a good life. Might not have been in those words. She wasn't fazed by it, and she answered, 'Oh, yes. I've seen all the great opera singers.'

I am sort of well. Apart from a nasty and stubborn cough, I am up to my usual level of sort of healthy while chronically ill. My back, on the other hand, is gradually improving. I am getting my gardening done in dribs and drabs, and for the first time I bought bedding plants instead of growing everything from seed. I'm so late in the garden but I can't carry the soil in, so I've been waiting for weeks for someone to do it for me. Or rather I can carry it, but I really shouldn't.

I received my first dose of the AstraZeneca jab in April, and I am placidly awaiting my second dose. I'm glad that you have got yours now, and I hope that you suffered no ill effects. It didn't bother me at all. My mother was so sick after her first shot, which was not AstraZeneca, that she swore she would never get another one. I hope she has forgotten that vow.

I also hope that I never produce another book.

The marketing stuff is so against the grain, although I do enjoy a lot about it. I get to talk to some lovely people, and make pretty designs for social media, and occasionally spout my accumulated wisdom, which is generally fun. But it's knowing that I have to keep this up that is difficult when the fatigue is so great. I would much rather be using my limited energy writing letters to friends and going for walks.

One friendship is developing in an unexpected way. There is a young grey squirrel who comes to my garden to eat. S/he's been doing so since last summer when his/her mother brought him and his sister here. (I change their pronouns all the time because I have no idea what sex they are. But for your sake I'm going to start doing the his/her stuff now.) She basically led them up to the food dish and then took off and they remained, continuing eating here throughout the summer and the winter. I talk to them and they usually run away when they first see me, but this grey-brown one is braver, like his mother was, and will continue to go about his business once he knows I'm not going to run over and kill him.

I have a lot of starlings coming around here currently — about five adults and five juveniles, although before the juveniles came themselves the adults were carrying the food to them. So for a couple or three weeks the food in the dish has been disappearing almost instantly. It doesn't matter how many times I replace it, they take it. So the squirrel and the other birds have been coming to an empty feeder. Yesterday, when I was standing in the door chatting with a friend on the phone, the grey squirrel — I may as well tell you his name: it's Iora Donn, which means brown squirrel in Irish — suddenly erupted out of the garden and ran toward me. Run, stop. Run, stop. All the while with his eyes fixed upon my face. It seemed pretty obvious to me he was asking for food. So I dipped down and quickly grabbed some peanuts to put into the dish. His face was 4 or 5 inches from my hand when I dropped the peanuts in. He gobbled them up pretty quickly, so I opened the sliding screen door

and put some more out. He was a little more wary once he had the first lot of peanuts in him, but he came back for more, nevertheless. Today he arrived again, with a black squirrel in tow, who could've been his mother or his sister, but I suspect more likely is his wife. Or husband.

(24 May 2021)

I read your eulogy for Yvonne. Definitely feeling grief now, although of course the source of my personal grief is not Yvonne. Still, I am moved by your writing about her life, and your caring for her is plain to see.

It was lovely to read Yvonne Rousseau's piece about meeting the Nova Mob. I have felt that social anxiety all of my life, and for much of it would've done exactly what she did, even without the politely tense letter exchange with Damien, so it brought a tiny mist to the eyes. I'm glad that things worked out for her and all of you in knowing her.

I can't recall if I mentioned that my grandfather died of Parkinson's — actually, of the pneumonia that came in the late stage of his Parkinson's. It was such a sad decline. I would visit him and he couldn't talk, so I would just natter away, or in later times I would show him the pictures in a *National Geographic* and do my homework by his bed. I remember that when he first went in to Extended Care he was heartbroken to be detained there, pleading with us to take him with us when we left. Absolutely heartbreaking.

We are such fragile things, in heart and body. We are lucky to be alive, however difficult it feels, and we are so lucky to have each other, no matter how rarely we might meet.

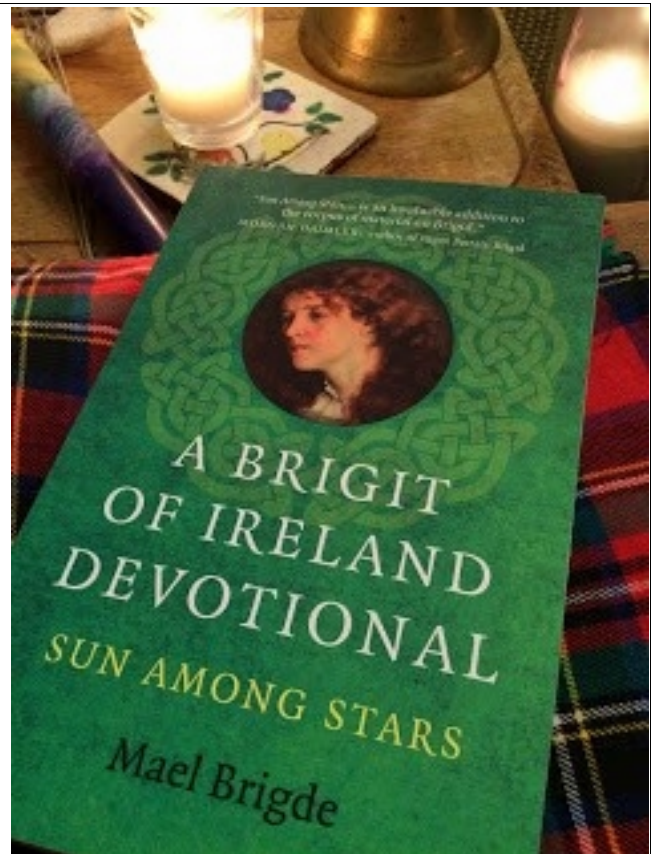
(26 June 2021)

[*brg* Yvonne also died of pneumonia right at the end, and also wanted most to be allowed to go home. But that was an impossible request because of the accident and fire at her home that caused her to be put in hospital.*]

Perry Middlemiss's piece on the Hugo awards of 1961: I always enjoy reading other people's takes on books. In fact, I was moved to order from the library one of the Best Novel nominees. I've been reading semi-serious books, and it seemed like a lark: that is, of course, *The High Crusade* by Poul Anderson.

Every time I am reminded of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, I feel a kind of almost sad joy. What a wonderful book it was. Is. Totally deserved the Hugo. I say this from the vantage point of not having read the rest of the books. Completely unbiased.

Andrew Darlington's article on John Brunner's *Earth Is But a Star* took me a little while to get into



it; I was having a bit of trouble following what he was saying from time to time. Brunner was one of the writers I enjoyed in the olden days, so it was interesting to read this dissection of the evolution of one story. I always enjoy seeing the old book covers as well, especially when a Richard Powers sneaks in.

I'm always glad when I am warned off a book that I think I would really not enjoy, or told of a book I might really like. *Snuggie Bain* sounds like one that I will not want to read, however wonderful it is. I cannot handle unleavened misery anymore. I read *His Bloody Secret*, about the brutal murders in Scotland and the unfortunate man who (I hoped he hadn't for the longest time) perpetrated them. It was very well written, it was very interesting, and it was very interesting in how it was written. But I would have been far happier if I had just read somebody else's review of it. Talk about unleavened misery! On the other hand Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* is one that I may well dig up. (Bless you, praise you, O Public Library!)

I am so completely filled with the disgust of four years (or five or whatever it's been) of hearing about the evils of Donald Trump, of hearing his horrible voice on the radio almost every day, that I was very nearly unable to read the review of Mary Trump's book. However, like a good citizen, I made myself do it. And it was interesting. And I will never read it, not if it was the last book on earth. I just can't bear to spend any more time with that family.

The same with Woody Allen's memoir. Shudder. I have never liked that guy. So, yes. It was really interesting to read Jennifer's favourite books of 2020, and then Tony and Jennifer's thoughts on the Booker prize nominees. Like dining out on somebody else's tab.

(5 July 2021)

Things are moving along toward the launch of my book (as Mael Brigde), *A Brigit of Ireland Devotional: Sun Among Stars*. (Take note: If I ever write another book, it is going to have a way shorter name!) Using my devotional name, I have done a few online events — a panel, guest blog posts, some interviews — and will be having a launch in just over two months (28 August, in between the European and North American releases).

In the meanwhile, the book is now available for pre-order in a number of places, and the e-book will be available closer to the release date.

Almost all of these events have been aimed at people who are already comfortable with the idea of goddesses and saints, mostly members of the larger Neo-Pagan community. At the suggestion of two friends from my speculative fiction and writers communities, I'm going to be doing a couple of online events that are aimed more specifically at family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who are more familiar with me from daily life, fandom, and writing.

(19 June 2021)

Well! It has been three weeks since my book launch, which was also the date of my planned, if unconsciously so, retirement. The first thing I did was collapse for ten or twelve days. It was a happy collapse, though. For one thing, I knew I didn't have anything I absolutely must get done. Actually that's not quite true. I had agreed to present at a conference in October and I realised that if I kept that agreement my much-needed collapse would have to wait another two months. So I contacted the organiser and asked for a stay in the proceedings, that I might come back and present at another conference instead. She was quickly able to replace me and I could get on with representing a jellyfish on a damp rock.

It is awful to be that tired.

Anyway, it was a happy collapse because, to my delight, people were excited about my book. My commitment to myself had been to work like a bugger to get it off the ground, and once launched to hope that it could pick up its own momentum to some degree, and I see signs that that might be happening. Obviously, this is a very niche book, and the wider world will never be interested in it, but within the niche I think it will do okay.

It actually brought up a little anxiety after a few

days, how enthusiastic people were being. I am used to being pretty much in the shadows. I'm not quite sure why I felt anxious, although at the time I think I was able to figure it out. But I just stepped away from the social media, just popping in for a few minutes of maintenance here and there, and things have quieted down as people's pre-ordered books have been rolling in.

Occasionally people have asked me, 'So what's next?' Absolutely nothing, is my hope and prayer. This book took me just over a decade to write and re-form and edit and perfect, and then to go through the monumentally work and stress heavy learning curve of dancing through the hoops that the publisher laid out ahead of me. I am not sorry for all that I learned and the ways that I stretched myself and the people I met, but I was way outside my comfort zone for over a year and a half as I did these things — building a website, learning how to design graphics from scratch, hyping up the social media in a way that is very uncomfortable for me, seeking out interviews and book reviews and — I can't even remember what else.

The expectation of the publisher is that I am going to continue this level of book promotion until the day I die, I think, but as a chronically ill and progressively ageing human, I just don't have it in me. I haven't even ordered my own copies of the finished book, or figured out how many I want. I just had to focus on everything that needed to be done to get me to and through the launch. I have no more interviews scheduled, although I have a couple of articles I am meant to write, and slowly the idea is forming in my mind that I no longer have to say to myself, every time I see something I'd like to do, 'No, I can't. I need to save my energy for the book.'

A week or so before the launch I took my pencil and wrote a line through the week after it and in big letters wrote BODY. I would've loved it if I had had no appointments during that week, but that was not the case. Nevertheless, every day I was able to, I did all of my physio exercises, I did a yoga class (online), I soaked in the tub reading a book, I sat in the yard reading a book, I gardened, I went for walks — all the things that help my poor pain-wracked corpus to feel better. I even (drum roll) accepted the September sugar-free challenge. I am now 18 days since having any sugar or sugar substitutes or alcohol, which itself is sugar, apparently. I can't deny that I feel better when not eating sugar, although the difference isn't dramatic. It may even be more enjoying knowing that I am safe from my compulsion to eat more than one cookie, more than one piece of pie, when I come around them, even though I don't normally have them here. It's a bit like when I quit smoking. The important thing for me, I discovered after a while, was to not have

to keep making the decision over and over again. If I had the idea that I could smoke a cigarette now and then, every time there was a cigarette in reach I had to ask myself, 'Is this that time?' It may not seem like much, but when you have any kind of addictive pull towards something having to make that decision over and over is a strain on the nerves and a drain on the energy. Once I realised I just could never have another cigarette it got a lot easier.

I adore Indian sweets. And anytime I go to another country or visit someone I haven't met before and food is offered there is always sugar on the menu. Do I truly want to say no to the next gulaab jaman that comes my way? *Can I?*

All of this remains to be seen. I don't need to think about it for another 12 days.

One thing that I have really been enjoying is reading. I've had a run of books that I quite enjoyed, some more than others, some for different reasons than others.

The book *The Secret Scripture* by Irish writer Sebastian Barry was beautifully written, and although I knew I was going to suffer in the end, the protagonist's almost joyful approach to the world despite her awful circumstances was just wonderful to be around.

Hild by Nicola Griffith was a real treat. It imagines the young life of the woman who was to become Saint Hilda of Whitby. The time was one of great change, and the way she was navigated and then began to navigate herself through that world was fascinating and beautifully depicted.

The Widows of Malabar Hill by Sujata Massey really took me by surprise. From the dust jacket I expected a typical American murder mystery, but what I got was a blend of a serious Indian novel with the somehow lighter air of an American genre book. For almost the entire book this was a perfect blend. There was a moment at one point where it didn't completely work for me, but to read a book where there is only one point that doesn't work for me is pretty amazing. (One difficult part was her

tendency to mention Indian sweets. Get thee behind me, Satan!)

And finally, the only speculative book on the menu, *All the Murmuring Bones* by A. G. Slatter, is another beautifully written book, although it's been long enough now that I don't remember the details anymore, and I may even have already told you about it.

Oh! I shouldn't forget the book I'm reading right now, *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* by Seán Ó Tuama (editor) and Thomas Kinsella (translator). It is completely bilingual, with the Irish on one page and the English on the next. A very interesting book, and one that I am enjoying a lot, both the poems themselves and the insight it gives into the changing fortunes of the poet in mediaeval Ireland.

Some of the reading I do is more in chunks, such as a book I'm reading on the history of an order of Catholic nuns that I have a connection to, and the always entertaining *Revelations of Divine Love* recorded by Julian, anchoress at Norwich anno domini 1373.

This is also how I read fanzines. I actually finished reading *SF Commentary* 106 a month or two ago, but because I was embroiled in my efforts to promote my book, and because my daily allotment of energy is very small, I forced myself not to LoC it till I was out of the chute. So. Will I actually remember what I thought when I read it? I hope so. At least a little of it.

I was sorry to hear that Doug Barbour's cancer had returned. It's strange to read these letters by people I have never met, and yet because of your fanzines many of them have been in my life for decades.

So a hearty hello to you and Elaine and the whole company of *SFC* readers. And of course, cats and other important people attached to these.

Be well, my friend. May your summer be a good one. Ours was Hell, and I have never been so glad to see the rains.

(19 September 2021)

Feature letter: Lloyd's year

LLOYD PENNEY
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Outworlds 71/*Afterworlds* is a wonderful fanzine, a huge slab of fannishness, and it sits on my reference

shelf beside my copy of *Warhoon* 28. I wanted to keep it as pristine as possible, so once I'd given the paper copy a good eyescan, I downloaded the .pdfd version with which to write a lengthy loc. It is good to see that fans can still assemble to put together such a project. I met Bill only once, probably at Mike Glicksohn's home, otherwise not sure, but I was pleased to receive the final few issues of

Outworlds before he passed away.

The lockdown continues here — as I type, Yvonne is beside me, working on various sewing projects, and swearing quietly at her sewing machine. Living in the province of Ontario means a near-total lockdown, the result of a provincial government that failed to listen to its scientific advisers. Reports this morning: 4250 Covid-19 cases in the province, with 29 deaths. We have each caught Covid-19 (in February) and recovered, and we have each received our first AstraZeneca shots. The premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, is largely incompetent, and this current lockdown, since November 2020, and continuing to the middle of next month, is displaying that incompetence to all. Not being able to act decisively for the best interests of the people seems to be a hallmark for right-wing governments. (The premier issued a warning to all citizens of the province that to stop the pandemic, he would order the police forces of the provinces to stop people on the street or pull over cars at random, and demand to know ID, address, and reason for being outside. The premier then retracted this part of his warning when he was told that such an action was totalitarian, and very much illegal by reason of the country's constitution.)

Yet, for us, things haven't changed much. Yvonne is busy with sewing, and may be taking on some interesting administrative projects with friends. I am looking for a steady source of earring hooks, but editing and a little voicework has kept me busy. I doubt we will run out of things to do any time soon. Our federal government has been issuing emergency funds to keep us going, and that's what's been paying our bills. I think most progressive governments have been doing that. Still, I have a couple of lines open for possible employment, and a telephone interview for a job tomorrow afternoon.

Tomorrow is the third Monday of the month, which is when we usually have our own fannish pubnight, but we haven't been able to do that since March of 2020. We will call Orwell's (that's the name of the pub; gotta love it), and go down to pick up something from their kitchen — good food, and supporting our monthly hangout. I think I will have the chicken curry again.

I have seen online several times people saying they really don't appreciate living through a seriously historical event like this pandemic. But I see that John Bangsund's death was linked to Covid-19. Recently, a good friend of ours in Montréal, Sylvain St-Pierre, one of the pillars of Montréal fandom and the local club, the Montréal SF&F Association, died of Covid-19. It is estimated that he had caught it a mere few days beforehand. He was trying to help his mother avoid Covid, but he caught it himself. His mother died a few days

after her son. We are all irrevocably changed by this virus.

I quite enjoyed Philip Pullman's initial trilogy, 'His Dark Materials', and I did like the movie made from the first book. I had hoped for a second movie, but I think most people will admit that Pullman ran out of story with which to fill the third book of the trilogy. A second movie could have combined the final two books, IMHO. Now comes the 'Dust' trilogy, with *La Belle Sauvage* and *The Hidden Commonwealth* read and enjoyed. I am afraid that Pullman will run out of story again with the third book, which I gather is a little overdue. I know there is a *His Dark Materials* remake, but we cannot afford to stream it. I am pleased with the books.

I am pleased to report that since my letter on page 48 I have worked on further books from Allen Steele, David Gerrold, John E. Stith, Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, Paula Johanson, James Beamon, and Prudence Priest. In some of them, I am credited inside as an associate editor. I hope to go further, and there may be more Amazing Selects books to work on. But even if there is no further to go, I have felt useful and needed, and a part of SF the way I haven't felt in a very long time. If there is no further to go, I will look back at what I've done with pride.

I appreciate your offer on my Quark 5 files, but I suspect they are quite old, and while I am sure there some graphics there I could use, I think I'd rather get my hands on an inexpensive graphics package that would allow me to create graphics like convention badges and signage.

I do try to respond to all fanzines I get, but I have noticed that there are some I simply can't compose anything for; the contents are so out of my own experience. Some of the ones I don't respond to have editors who cry the loudest, or shame me in print so I will respond. One or two might not like the response I am tempted to give them. For a Corflu a few years ago, I did indeed give the convention chairman a long list of zines I had received or downloaded, for the FAAN Awards, but I marked the list as probably incomplete. A few never saw that word incomplete, and the cries of outrage and complaints piled up.

Colin Steele's review of *Burning the Books* reminded me of a past Canadian right-wing government, under the so-called leadership of one Stephen Harper, who attempted to direct the re-writing of Canadian history books so there would be more emphasis on the historical list of Canadian prime ministers who were members of his Conservative Party. Well, that trick didn't work. Also, the same Harper government decided to deal with the environment by clearing out all archives from the Department of Fisheries. They were saved only

through the efforts of department employees who saw their entire archives being through into a dumpster, and went dumpster-diving.

(18 April 2021)

I know time, money, and opportunity only go so far, but there are many interesting people I wish I had wanted to meet, and Yvonne Rousseau is one of them. Sometimes, this earth is so small, and at other times, it's too big. Maybe it's just the fandom that is spread all over the world, when I wish it was a little closer. May we all receive such effusive tributes when it is our time to go.

Yvonne was a Lifetime Member of the Victorian Society of Editors. Well done. I have been a member of the Editors' Association of Canada, but now its membership rates have risen until they are totally unaffordable for most editors, certainly including me. I even checked — it has a Lifetime Member position, given at members' discretion, but nowhere do I see a list of those names.

I have been applying for and getting federal funding to help pay the bills — started in early 2020, and is still going, but may be reducing and phasing out in five months or so. The best nibble at employment I've had has been today's interest in me from Harlequin Publishing as a mat-leave proofreader. Fingers crossed on this one.

The province of Alberta has the top Covid-19 numbers of any provincial or state

jurisdiction in North America, and the province of Ontario has set a record for lockdown. We've been down for coming up on 300 days, and we have all been warned it may go on well into June. Proof of all this is the fact my hair is probably longer now than it has ever been in my life. I'm getting close to having a ponytail. Many jurisdictions have had to deal with anti-mask or anti-vaccine factions who simply will not wear masks or self-isolate. Alberta and Ontario have far too many of these people. Thanks to them, it looks like Canada will continue to be in some level of lockdown for some time to come, while the US and UK look ready to act as if nothing has happened. I could complain further, but there are always places like India.

Getting close to ten years ago now, I had a cataract surgery of my own. No real problems, in and out, other than having to lie down on my stomach to let the eye refill with vitreous. That was an experience I didn't expect to have for some years, but a separated retina three years earlier accelerated the whole process.

(10 May 2021)



Feature letter: Leigh Edmonds occasionally out and about

LEIGH EDMONDS
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Thanks for sending me my very own copy of *SFC* 105. The only word that I can think of to adequately describe it is 'overwhelming'. In an ideal world I would have the time to sit back and savour it all, but unfortunately that is not going to happen because too much else has to be done. Instead I skipped across the surface like a stone skipping across the surface of a lake. Even then, there was enough for me to think about that I could end up littering more of your pages than I really should. I was appalled to see that I had taken up so much of your space in this issue and I hope not to do so now.

Two letters in particular took my attention, Stephen Campbell's and David Boutland's. Perhaps that is because both of them deal with the problem of being an artist, in the sense of creating art be it visual or written. I bet that David would have liked some of the time for contemplation that Stephen has and I bet that Stephen would have enjoyed some of the loot that David got from his efforts. Both of them seem to have been driven to do what they do by some inward compulsion which, as you suggest somewhere else in this issue, is little regarded even though it is, from our perspective, essential work. I rang with recognition when David talked about the times when, in the midst of all the work, a line shines through as being truth telling. It is a feeling that makes all the hard work seem almost worth while, and we just hope that some editor doesn't delete or mutilate it. David's description of working in shift with Ron Smith to get something written sounded dreadful and something to be avoided. Only a couple of times have I still been up and working when the sun rose after a night's work. It might not have been great work but at least the deadline had been met, and there's a lot of satisfaction in that. On time and on budget is always a good thing.

Colin Steele's book reviews are always a pleasure to read. If nothing else they keep me in touch with things that I would otherwise know nothing about. His 'Books about Books and Readers' is, I think, the books that I would most like to read. *Burning the Books* sounds very appropriate to our modern age,

but perhaps I'd get too depressed reading it because suspecting that it is happening is one thing and knowing the details is another. This reminds me of our government's recent decision to increase the university fees for students doing 'non-employable' courses such as the social sciences and the arts. I dread to think what this will do to our society in coming decades. Then there are Colin's reviews of Australian sf and fantasy books. Who would have thought it possible, even in the 1970s? Then, his review of Cixin Liu's *Hold Up the Sky* makes me think that that is the kind of fiction that I would really like to read. Listening to Perry and David's podcast helps keep me in touch with what's going on a little, and Colin's reviews do even more in that direction. All I need now is the time to read some of it.

I think I'm agreeing with you about Facebook, which I find increasingly uninteresting. Partly it's the ads that have become a significant part of its offerings, and partly it's the way that everything disappears as new material is added. I wonder if this is deliberate, part of the process of detaching us from our pasts so that we are floating free in only the present and therefore less immune to pressures to consume to remain relevant ... You are right that Michael O'Brien's frequent posts are a delight, and it is interesting to keep up with what Jean and Eric are doing, but most posts are inconsequential. I wonder if the Facebook format is deliberately designed to keep me scrolling in the hope of finding something that is actually rewarding to read, the same way that poker machines are designed. However, since I'm not publishing fanzines with much personal information these days Facebook is useful for letting my friends, and 'friends', know what we are doing here in Mount Clear.

I can't help but wonder what your readers who are in other parts of the world still badly affected by Covid-19 make of your description of gradually emerging into the world of light again. As I'm sure I've said before, apart from wearing masks and social distancing when we have to go out shopping, the government restrictions have not had an undue effect on us. For many years health problems and a lack of good old friends close by have reduced our social lives to virtually zero, so we haven't missed any of that. The last film we saw in a picture theatre was *The Matrix*, and that was mainly to see if we could spot Lewis Morley's name in the credits.

Concerts? The Ballarat Philharmonic is not one of the great orchestras, and I seem to be out of the loop in finding out about more acceptable musical offerings in Ballarat since I stopped reading *The Courier*.

As you will have seen on Facebook, I finally got out and about yesterday to give that address at the celebration down at Essendon Airport. If it had been somewhere in central Melbourne I probably wouldn't have gone, because I'm not brave enough to drive in suburban traffic and I wasn't going to take public transport, but getting from here to Essendon is just a matter of driving along freeways until you get there. Originally the attendance was very limited, but as the restrictions were lifted there was some flexibility to the numbers so I was able to ask Robin to come too. As it turned out we went in his car and he did all the driving. With my navigation — which was mainly done using moving maps on mobile phones — we only ended up on the wrong freeways a couple of times. Nothing was irretrievable and, being Sunday, traffic was light, so the journey down and back was quite pleasant. And it is always enjoyable to talk to Robin about fandom, airline scheduling, and other important facets of life.

Covid-19 has made us revise how we do things; you would have noticed the spacing between the chairs at the ceremony. Since you've been out to restaurants in the recent past you would have been familiar with that kind of thing but I haven't, so I thought it looked very strange. I guess that this is the kind of thing that we are going to have to take for granted for a while longer yet — what with the outbreak in Brisbane at the moment. We are, of course, very lucky in that the nation gets agitated very quickly about any case of Covid-19 anywhere in Australia in comparison to conditions in the rest of the world. There were some CEOs and VIPs who flew down from Canberrra to be at the event, and I wonder what their travel plans would have looked like if the ceremony had been in a couple of days from now, given how quickly the plague can spread and that people from Brisbane are now no longer welcome in many parts of the country. So I consider myself lucky to have been invited to address the event and lucky that it took place just when it did. Today I'm back home in my cave safe from the rest of the world, and I'm quite happy to stay here.

I see that you have taken on teleconferencing with Zoom and the like. I'm still having my problems with Zoom, and I really don't like to think that they are caused by the inflexibility of my ageing brain but by technical problems to do with my computer, which was not bought off the shelf but was made to meet my requirements. That's my story anyhow. At the moment I can look but can't get my camera to work properly. One of these days the

problem will be rectified, but by then everyone will have gone back to the old way of doing things.

The event down at Essendon was incorporated into a larger event called *Aviation Cultures*, which was originally planned to be also at Essendon Airport, but had to be held virtually because of Covid. As it turned out, this was not a bad thing, because it allowed what has previously been largely limited to Australia to become a global event with contributors from all the continents except South America and Antarctica (I think). They used different software to Zoom. It worked very well and was more suited to conferences than Zoom with over a hundred people streaming the sessions. (Some North Americans were sure upset about having to stay up very late or get up very early to participate. Now they know how we feel about trying to 'attend' conference sessions that suit their local times.)

The other nice thing about this kind of conferencing is that if somebody starts droning on about something you're not interested in, or is just so boring that you begin to wonder which blood vessel you could open to bleed to death the most quickly, you just go and do something else. In person, getting up and doing something else is very rude but not when you're sitting in your own chair in your own room. I love that. Next year the *Aviation Cultures* conference is going to be in Toowoomba and I'm in two minds about whether I'll go or not if they manage to amalgamate in-person and on-line conferencing. Both have their advantages but the trouble with on-line conferencing is that you have to provide your own grog and clean up afterwards.

I cannot finish this letter without also mentioning your reviews of the Dave Langford and Brian Aldiss books that Dave has published. There's two more books I didn't know about but now have to add to my growing list of things I really should read. Bugger.

(29 March 2021)

Thanks for *SFC 106*. There's not much that I could contribute about Yvonne Rousseau, but I thank you for putting it together. Then there are words and words about books and books, enough to make me feel very uncultured, in that direction at least. Your letter column is a beauty this time, with many of the folks that I remember from decades ago appearing. It's nice to read that they are still operational.

Doug Barbour's letters were enjoyable and entertaining too. It seems that everyone we know is having or has had the cataract operation — a sign that we are starting to outlive our bodies' useful lives, I guess. I must have had that operation over ten years ago now, and it was more or less as Doug wrote. I didn't realise that I'd been slowly going blind until after the operation or that my world had

slowly been going yellow because of the cataracts. The problem I had after the operation was that the surgeon put a magnifying lens in my good eye and I had no short-distance vision at all after that. I had to wait for a couple of weeks for the operation to settle down before I could get my eyes tested for new glasses and then a week or so for the lenses to arrive before I could read again. There's only so much television one can watch in a day before going bonkers.

I don't remember anything special about the cataract operation, but Doug's description did bring back to me the memory of when I had my detaching retina reattached — a rather more interesting operation. That was done under a local anaesthetic, too, but with a rather strong sedative, which I thought was one of the nicest drugs I've ever taken. I thought the operation took about 20 minutes, but later found out that it took over an hour. As they worked the theatre staff chatted about inconsequential things with ABC Classic FM in the background, and what I saw made me think of big fat blimps floating in and out of my vision. It was a really pleasant experience, with the end result that I got my vision back, and I was out of hospital the following morning. And, being good old Australia, it didn't cost me a cent. Talk about a stfnal experience, what would once have been magic had become ordinary every-day medical technology.

It was not clear to me whether Cy Chauvin doesn't like the experience of driving a car or being driven in one. I'm not a great fan of driving myself, because I have to concentrate on the road. However, a recent drive up the highway from here to meet my sister in Great Western was enjoyable because the Western Highway is now a freeway almost to Ararat, so I didn't have to concentrate so much on the road and could take in some of the scenery as well. The other recent road trip was down to Melbourne to give my talk at the civil aviation celebration. Robin did the driving, so I could look at the scenery as we went along. In many ways being a passenger in a car is an improvement over train or bus travel because you can look ahead and to the side, but most roads these days are well separated from the landscape they pass through, while trains are much closer to the landscape and therefore seem more intimate in a way that car or bus travel is not.

Thinking along these lines, you may notice that I've only just got around to publishing on my website my write-up of going down to see Stephen Campbell's paintings. In addition to some of the pictures from the gallery I began with a couple of the photos of the scenery we drove through to get there, doing this because it occurred to me that the experience of travel sets the mood of the experi-

ence when we arrive. I gathered that your experience to get there by train was not as meditative as an experience.

(My train of thought was interrupted by the radio in the background, which began playing Barber's *Knoxville, Summer of 1915* which is one of my 'can't ignore' pieces. So I stopped and listened to a thoroughly professional performance by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, but not a gripping one such as the one the ABC played me a few weeks back. As you will know, I am no great fan of romantic music, so a lot of Barber's music doesn't interest me much, but this piece is endlessly fascinating. Perhaps it is the combination of words, which are not in the least romantic, and a lush but light orchestration that only bursts into full force on rare occasions. I must get myself a copy of the score to see how Barber did that. At one time I went to the trouble of looking up Agee's words that Barber lifted for the piece. They are most unremarkable, buried away in the midst of something else and almost a passing thought. I wonder what made Barber choose them and see the potential in them to create such a multifaceted piece of music? I was a little put off by the singer, who seemed to bring a strange accent to one of the descriptive passage, and did not seem to 'sell' the story very well. If I had my CDs close at hand I could give you the details of my favourite performance, a record I bought in the US, in which the singer seems to declaim rather than sing the words, I thought it very strange after the Dawn Upshaw version that was popular at the time, but the more I listened to it the more I liked that earlier approach. Sorry for the diversion.)

I feel for Lech's storage problems for his model railway obsession. Had my family had the money when I was little, I might have gone in that direction too, but model trains were more than we could afford and so I was stuck with Airfix kits. In those days the *Airfix Magazine* had regular articles on how to build model railway layouts. I enjoyed reading them, but I think that I soon realised that the trouble with model railways was not the model trains, which are fairly small, but the layouts they ran on and take up all the space. I never had any aspirations to be a train driver, but one of the members of our local scale modelling club always wanted to be a train driver and finally gave up his job in IT and is now a driver on Melbourne's tram network, where he is having much fun.

I read that John and Monica Litchen now more or less lead the same lifestyle that we do. Which is hard to believe, but then I recall the hectic social life we used to lead when we lived in St Kilda, Carlton, and Brunswick, when we seemed to eat our most nights and had an endless list of theatre, concert, opera, ballet etc performances to go to. These days a quite night in front of the idiot box is

as much excitement as we can handle. Unlike John, however, I gave in and bought myself a mobile phone, which I am finding more and more useful. Nowadays it is the landline phone that hardly gets used. As well as talking to people on this mobile I use it for other things, such as reminding me to take my morning pills, checking the weather, looking at maps when I'm out and about, entertaining myself watching *Flight Radar* (there's still a lot of flying going on despite Covid), and listening to football matches on the AFL app. It does seem that most of what the phone wants to do is sell me stuff that I don't need, but the ads are not impossible to ignore. At first I tried to ignore the thing, but these days I carry it around with me most of the time, partly so I don't forget to take my pills, but also because what with having moved and now about to get the renovations and additions done to our new place, somebody seems to be ringing me every second day about that process and I don't want to miss them. There's another little bit of stfnal tech-

nology that has crept into our lives without us really noticing it.

Thanks for printing Bill Wright's letter describing his experiences during the Covid business. I got tested once in the wilds of suburban Ballarat. They made me go and sit in my car to wait to be called. I was escorted into the facility where they did the test. Bill used the word 'invasive', which described it fairly. I didn't mind the stick shoved down my throat but was startled by the ones up my nose, which seemed to go so high that I thought it might come out the top of my head. I'm sure that Bill is braver than me to do the test himself; I would not have shoved the stick so far up my nose as the nurse did.

Then it was nice to read that Don Ashby is still alive and in operation too. I'm sure there is a book, or at least a long article, in his experiences in the past year or two.

(7 May 2021)

Feature letter: Robert Day's SF Commentary year

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I sit down to write this at a time when strange is the new normal. The UK has just gone back into lockdown; there is a sense of weariness in the public, though this is beginning to manifest itself through the start of a push-back against COVID deniers and anti-vaxxers. It's harder to judge the political impact; no matter how often contracts for COVID or Brexit-related goods or services seem to go to political friends of the ruling Conservative Party, no matter how high the death toll goes (topping 75,000 just after Christmas), how much the Government appears incompetent, or more concerned with the economy rather than lives (not having yet realised that pandemics destroy economies as well as lives — it's not an 'either/or' choice), the media remains broadly accepting of the status quo. The BBC seems to be the voice of the Conservative Party, newspapers are mainly Tory supporting, and if they are critical, the expectation is that they would prefer a different Tory in control, though that can't carry on for much longer. In the process of forcing Brexit through Parliament, Alexander

Boris dePfeffel Johnson purged the Parliamentary party of so many of his own MPs who failed to follow his line slavishly that the number of people eligible for Ministerial jobs has declined to the point where previously unknown backwoodsmen and women, such as my own MP, who rose without trace in one of the safest of safe Tory seats, have suddenly ended up with a Ministerial job.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party has ended up in the leadership of one Sir Keir Starmer, who for all his socialist credentials (named after Keir Hardie, founder of the party), is actually more like Tony Blair in his repudiation of much to do with trade unions, working people, or socialist ideas. The purge of the Left is almost complete; of the monsterring of the previous leader, Jeremy Corbyn, we shall say little. (I write here not as a member of the Labour Party, which I am not, but as someone who was part of the wider labour movement for twenty years and still have a lot of time for it.)

As for Brexit, the transition period has now ended and the UK has now removed itself from the European Union. The effects of this will take some time to sink in for many people; it will affect everyone differently, and many won't see or understand how they have been impacted by the changes. Everyone had their own reasons for voting the way they did; many who voted to Leave did so to challenge the UK's power elites without ever

understanding just what those elites are and how they will be able to insulate themselves against change (clue: it's a lot to do with money).

And just when things couldn't get any stranger, up pops Donald Trump again.

At least with lockdown, those of us with large book collections can lose ourselves in other worlds. After all, it's not as though there's anywhere else we can go; COVID and Brexit have seen to that. Perhaps the best thing to do, as far as you can, is to hunker down and retreat into our own private realities. Easier for those of us slightly more insulated through circumstance from hardship, of course ... In my case, I've been working my way through the non-sf novels of Iain Banks (apart from *Transitions*, which was published in the UK as an Iain Banks novel and in the US as an Iain M. Banks book); and more recently, Ada Palmer's remarkable 'Terra Ignota' sequence, definitely a series of books that you can lose yourself in — indeed, it may be mandatory to do so, in order to have any chance of understanding what's going on in them. This should not be taken as criticism, you understand.

In a complete contrast, I'm about to pitch myself into a re-read — the first in possibly fifty years! — of E.E. 'Doc' Smith's *Galactic Patrol*. I'm under few illusions as to what I'll find; after all, I find myself sometimes taking a sharp breath at how my reactions have changed to something I last read three, four or five years ago. But for all that Smith's fiction is held up as now representing the worst of science fiction, I'm struck by how often people refer back to him within the context of the history of the genre. We should occasionally go down to the genre's cellars to remind ourselves about what's down there. (Later:) I'm now about a third of the way through it. The plot is fine, though some of the underlying thinking behind the *Galactic Patrol* itself is a little unsettling; the *Patrol* is judge, jury, and executioner, as imitated much later by Judge Dredd. That's something of an authoritarian power trip, though there's little that's overtly fascist about it — that came later, and may have been the product of some of the pulp illustrations. In its own, rather quaint way, the book makes a case for accepting intelligent life in all its shapes and forms (as long as they're the Good Guys), though Smith seems more comfortable accepting the idea of a flying reptilian telepath as an equal than with having, say, a black Lensman. Or a woman. As for the language; as the first outing of the Lensman universe, Smith hadn't developed into full-blown purple prose mode. Rather, it reminded me of the cod-archaic language William Hope Hodgson used in *The Night Land*, which I wonder if he took as a model.

But in parallel with my book reading, I also sometimes plough through a huge TBR pile of

specialist magazines and journals. I've just finished a 1993 issue of the journal of the UK's academic Science Fiction Foundation, *Foundation* 59. Apart from finding some remarkably apposite comments in reviews of books set in the impossibly distant future year of 2021, I came across this in an article by Czech fan/academic Cyril Simsa on the probably little-remembered US author Henry Slesar, and it put me in an interesting frame of mind for tackling one of Doc Smith's galaxy-smashing space operas:

A lot of his [Slesar's] stories are perfectly respectable examples of the way sf was written in the '50s, and may even have seemed well above average for their day. But so much has changed in the genre in the interim: plot-lines which may once have seemed agreeably adventurous now seem trite and melodramatic, ideas which were part of sf's stock-in-trade are now unbearable clichés, the little philosophical homilies with which so many '50s sf writers liked to finish off their stories (the 'moral', if you like) seem dated and prevent the story reaching a proper conclusion. In a world where fascism and civil war have come back to the streets of Europe, where naked manipulation of the political process by the mass media has become the norm, where rival drug gangs regularly shoot at one another with Uzi machine-pistols in the ruins of Los Angeles and computer networks will soon be offering us sex in cyberspace for real, it's difficult to read a story about a mad scientist with a beautiful blond daughter, or a solitary genius who invents a new variety of domestic robot, or indeed any story in which the moral turns out to be (in the words of the '50s B-feature) that 'there are things man isn't meant to know', without disguising a smirk behind the palm of one's hand. (Then again, in fairness to Slesar, one has to ask whether the second-generation cyberpunks like Walter Jon Williams will seem any less ridiculous in 2022, and whether we won't perhaps be just as incapable of taking seriously anything with voguish references to 'ice', 'jacks', designer drugs, artificial intelligence, multinational corporations, computer voodoo, banghra-muffin orbital rave platforms, elephants in mirrorshades and so on, in an age no doubt as unimaginably different from where we are now, as the '80s were to the writers of the '50s.)

One of the oddities I've found about lockdown is that whilst I'm fortunate to be able to work from home, most of my friends are either furloughed (a fine word which I recollect from watching *Sergeant Bilko* reruns but which puzzled a lot of people when it first appeared) or already retired. As a result,

they've been able to crack on with their hobbies, especially the model builders, whereas I find I'm working just as hard at the Day Job because testing IT software is sometimes quite mentally demanding, especially the way we do it — a technique called 'exploratory testing', where we undergo a planned walk-through of the functionality, probing the areas where users might find or trigger faults, all the time looking for conditions where we know errors can arise, such as boundaries (where there are ranges for values, probing minimum and maximum boundaries of those values to see if they conform to the software specifications or not) or looking for special cases within those specifications to see how the application behaves. I attended an online training course last summer, run by a Big Name tester who rejoices in being called Michael Bolton (pause for the obvious joke), and this was really quite mind-expanding.

The upshot of all this is that I finish the day's work often feeling quite overwhelmed, and do not feel very inclined to build models (or wrote locs). I am roughly twice the age of my colleagues (on average), and so keeping up with these guys is quite an effort, though I do find it very rewarding. I learn from them, and they learn from me, and this is the way workplaces ought to be. I hope this old dog has taught them a few new tricks! I actually find it very refreshing working with young people in this way. Too many places sacked all their old staff because they cost too much and knew all the management's tricks and couldn't be fooled all the time; now some are seeing the value in having a diverse workforce. I don't have any IT qualifications, just a 40-year-plus career in a number of different organisations, with only user-level degrees of contact with IT after the first ten years, and all my testing experience was self-taught because I started doing software testing before the industry-standard qualifications were invented. But the reason the company recruited me was that I had business experience that they lacked, and they wanted some diversity of age and experience in the test team. We're creating software products that could be used by anyone, anywhere in the world; so having a test team that looks all alike isn't going to help. I'm pleased to say that the team now doesn't look all alike, and I think our product is the better for it. And I find that despite finding the work quite trying, I actually enjoy it more now than I ever have in my working life. That's quite some achievement, and I recognise how lucky I am; plenty of people can't say that.

When I last wrote, I was working as our company's Technical Author temporarily. Well, I stuck at it for about six months, and realised that I wasn't happy at it; too much waiting around for features to be declared ready to release, requiring a flurry of activity to incorporate text into the live Wiki that

our software product uses instead of Help files. Of course, it was only when I went and had the talk with the manager responsible about returning to the test team did they actually offer me more money! But by then my mind was made up. Perhaps the nicest thing was that when I announced to the other testers in our team that I would be coming back as a tester as soon as the company could recruit a full-time TA, the comments ranged from 'Thank God for that!' to 'That's the best news I've heard all day!', which I was rather touched by. The TA we recruited comes to us from a career in journalism, and even has the odd Radio 4 comedy script to his name.

Lockdown has affected my book and CD buying; many of the charity shops have been affected by our quarantine arrangements, bookshops not being considered 'essential' for some incomprehensible reason. However, over the summer I was able to make a birthday trip to Ashby-de-la-Zouch, a little market town some ten miles to the north of Leicester. As well as having a good model shop, there is a rather excellent charity bookshop. I visited just after I'd received *SFC 104* with Ian Mond's review of Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, and I was boggled to find a copy in the shop! It came home with me, as did a book on the history of aviation in Leicestershire which revealed the fact that the office where I worked in my previous job (described in my 2017 blog post *The Sacred Workplace*) had been built on the site of the first Leicester Aerodrome, which was only in use from 1935 to 1947, after which the encroachment of housing and the increasing size of aircraft meant the site was no longer suitable for aviation and was quickly repurposed as a trading estate.

On the modelling front, since I last wrote, I've completed a Saab J.29 Tunnan (Barrel) in Austrian AF markings, a Heinkel He.111 in Hungarian colours (a model I consider to perhaps be the best thing I've built in 40-odd years!), the Gerry Anderson-esque Bartini VVS-14 (one of the early Soviet excursions into the realm of the surface-skimming Ekranoplan, or 'wingship' designs), the Junkers F13 (a 1920 all metal stressed-skin four-seat airliner), a Petlyakov Pe-2 (a WW2 medium bomber, designed by Petlyakov whilst he was imprisoned because of Stalin's purges), a Douglas Skyraider AEW1, a French Dassault Flamant (twin-engined liaison/navigation trainer, roughly equivalent to the British Avro Anson), a Tupolev Tu-143 reconnaissance drone (a tiny model which took something like four days to apply all the decals on), and a 1965 kit of the Saab Draken (this one for a model club anniversary challenge to find an old kit from the early days of the club and build it with the skills we have now but only using techniques and materials we had way back when). I know that looks

like a lot, but that's nearly two years' worth of building, and my output is pretty slow compared to some of the other guys in the club!

Currently on the workbench is an Alvis Salamander airfield fire tender, a Heinkel He.162 which is being prepared for a themed group build 'Air War 1946' (there is a big interest in alternate history designs which the Germans might have used had the war continued into 1946; though I've done something a bit different and modelled an aircraft of the provisional Austrian government had the Stauffenberg assassination plot against Hitler been successful; I've also rung the changes on the aircraft and given it forward-swept wings and a butterfly tail to make it truly different), a MiG-21 and a Soyuz full stack and transporter vehicle, which I'm thinking is going to end up in a sort of 'Museum of Cosmonautics' diorama. Enough to keep me going there, I think ...

Meanwhile, another big stack of *SFCs* to lose ourselves in (for which, many thanks, Bruce).

SFC 100:

Any enterprise that reaches its century (by whatever enumeration you care to adopt) is worthy of celebration.

I was interested in Jennifer Bryce's perspectives on Protazanov's *Aelita, Queen of Mars*. I possess a copy of this on DVD, put together by a reseller from London who mainly specialised in DVDs of rap videos — how they came by this is a mystery — but who seems to have switched to offering streaming before disappearing from the Net altogether. The interesting thing I found about the film was that the scenes from Moscow were filmed on the streets as *vérité* footage. And the ball scenes occur when the main character, Los, becomes aware that his wife is falling under the spell of a shady character who turns out to be a White Russian recidivist; the ball is a clandestine meeting of other Whites who gather to reminisce about 'the good old days' and dream of things returning to their proper order once the Bolsheviks are ousted. This was all done to set up the moral of the film; that Los should abandon his dreams of building the perfect society on another world and instead concentrate on building the new society here on Earth. The White recidivist is arrested and is taken away to get (we assume) his just desserts (most likely in the back of the neck).

I also noted Jennifer's comments on *The Favourite*. There are two things reviewers tend to miss about this film; first, that the historical events and personages in it are broadly accurate; and second, there is a lot of humour in the film. As Jennifer notes, Lanthimos sets out to depict the times in ways that a modern audience will relate to; but

humour is something that doesn't change much over time, save in the manner of its delivery. When we went to see it, there were times when we were laughing out loud at some of the jokes and situations, even though the rest of the audience seemed quite intent on treating it as a Serious Historical Costume Drama. Perhaps us Brits have gotten too used to historical drama being delivered in a highly po-faced manner. *The Favourite's* Australian co-writer, Tony McNamara, has gone on to write *The Great for Hulu*, dramatising the life of Catherine the Great of Russia in the same way; some people I know have looked at this and decided that whilst a couple of hours of ahistorical tinkering is fine, ten hour-long episodes might just be too much.

I have Robert Harris's *The Second Sleep* on the TBR pile. Early reviews and blurbs intrigued me; were we in the territory of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*? Or something more like Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book*? Alas, the BBC picked it up for serialisation on Radio 4, but gave the plot away in the trailers!!! Harris is an author who I've read occasionally in the past, when the premises of his books have piqued my interest.

On the strength of Colin Steele's review, I went out and got myself a copy of K. J. Parker's *Sixteen Ways to Defend a Walled City* and loved it. I was interested to see that Parker is a nom de plume (in more ways than one!) for Tom Holt. I remember discovering Holt when his first humorous novel, *Expecting Someone Taller*, was published — after all, here was a writer having fun with Wagner's *Ring*. What's not to like? I absorbed his next few novels — *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* and *Flying Dutch* in particular — but as I went on found that I was getting into the realm of diminishing returns. I actually only found every other one of Holt's novels funny (others have noticed this; it's not just me) and eventually I felt that it was too much trouble to keep track of his new books and work out which ones conformed to this rule and so might be worth acquiring. I've made a note to myself to keep an eye open for other K. J. Parker titles, as his fantasy world seems well constructed, and doesn't have too many generic FantasyWorld™ trappings. Indeed, given that in the course of *Sixteen Ways* ... the central character, the Colonel in Chief of the Imperial Corps of Engineers, has had enough cause to direct a lot of digging in executing his duties of seeing to it that bridges get built to have seen ancient ruins that sort of suggest that we may just be looking at a far future world clawing its way back up the ladder of civilisation. In the course of this novel, we find that this world is pretty much like ours was in the seventeenth century (roughly), but without gunpowder. I found that intriguing enough, as I said, to not reject the idea of looking at more K. J. Parker.

As for Holt: I'm sticking to my plan of not really getting involved with those books again, though I might make an exception for *Snow White and the Seven Samurai*, one of those titles which makes me strike my forehead and exclaim in exasperation, 'Why didn't I think of that?'

SFC 101:

Looking at your editorial, I'll just add that between starting this loc and now (end of January), the UK death toll has now topped 100,000 and the EU has cut up rough over the movement of vaccines out of the bloc (i.e. to the UK) in an act that even EU insiders are calling bizarre.

Gerald Smith's loc made me reflect on how things come around, and how much sf tropes are in common usage in a way that they weren't less than 20 years ago. As I said earlier, I've been catching up on reading through piles of old magazines. Some commentary articles in old *Interzones* from the early 2000s look out at a cultural landscape for sf that is wholly different to today's. Whether that landscape is good for sf or not is a whole different matter. On the one hand, a lot of people are open to sfnal ideas, and I have had interesting conversations at various times; the most recent was with a younger colleague who was surprised that I had any knowledge of cyberpunk (which he was thinking of wholly in connection with the computer game) and was rather blown away when I pointed him to William Gibson and Bruce Sterling and recounted the story of how Bill Gibson had gone to see *Blade Runner* while he was writing *Neuromancer* and said that he'd had to leave after twenty minutes 'because it looked too much like the inside of my own head'.

On the other hand, I see a lot of people out there, especially in Facebookland, who are promoting their latest self-published novel as new and exciting when they are anything but. I recollect having an online conversation with someone describing an author I'd never heard of as 'a major award-winning talent', only to find that their awards were all in-website awards for the best out of those novels published on that site.

Gerald, and in the following loc Stephen Campbell, bemoan that way that too much sf now is backward-looking and self-referential. I can understand this: very many retro futures, alternate histories (something I often enjoy), and self-obsessed pieces cannot be a good thing. For instance, I was not hugely impressed with John Scalzi's *Redshirts*, because to me it looked like a one-trick pony and ultimately relied for a lot of its effect on the reader being in on the joke. Highly amusing I'm sure, but did it deserve the Hugo? Was it really the best the genre can produce? Compare and contrast with Ada Palmer's 'Terra Ignota'

novels, which I've mentioned already. Many writers have toyed with the idea of how to replace the nation state and speculated about extending the internet idea of forming groups based around your interests and worldview out into the wider world and actually making allegiances of choice the way the world is run. Ada Palmer has sat down and worked out how that might actually work when people with allegiances to different laws meet and mix and work together. There are some aspects of her world that I find unsettling in their basic assumptions; but her vision of the future is original in many ways and certainly bears thinking about.

Reading William Brieding's and your comments on *Blade Runner 2049*, my impression was that it lacked any sort of humour. When Kay and Deckard meet, I would have given anything, when the dog came in and Kay asks 'Is it real?', and Deckard says, 'Ask it' for Kay to have knelt down and asked the dog, 'Are you real?'. Hopefully, then, the dog would have licked his face. For a film about the essential nature of humanity, it displayed very little itself.

Mark Plummer wrote about attending the 2019 Eastercon in a hotel by Heathrow Airport. We made the journey by car; having had to do a few airport runs in the past few years, I can find my way there without too much trouble. Except that at Easter 2019, Heathrow had been targeted by environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion (ER), and the Thames Valley Police had supposedly established an exclusion zone around the airport to keep undesirables away. Said exclusion zone started at the roundabout at the end of the M4 spur down to the airport, which potentially meant that we might not be able to access the hotel — except that by the time we arrived late in the afternoon of Good Friday, the police presence was down to one van of fairly bored-looking constables. We were actually in an adjoining overflow hotel; the five-minute walk to the con hotel took us past a petrol station where we kept encountering police vans full of officers stocking up on sandwiches and snacks for their shift. Of course, ER's promised 'Siege of Heathrow' turned out to be two teenagers supergluing themselves to the doors of Terminal One, but it kept a large police presence tied up at the airport, which was probably the plan all along. Except that the Thames Valley force countered by drafting in officers from surrounding forces, helping them to manage the protest and doubtless earning some more rural officers handsome overtime payments.

Of course, that was the last convention I went to. For various reasons, I missed Novacon in 2019, and then COVID intervened. I've now registered to go to Octocon in Dublin in October (assuming it actually happens and we are able to travel again by

the autumn), mainly because I enjoyed Dublin so much that I'm keen to go again and a convention seems like the perfect excuse. This time, though, I plan on having some tourist time; and as registration has only cost me 20 Euros, I consider that to be a small price to pay and easily written off if plans go awry.

On Stanley Kubrick: At one time or another, many of the UK sf community worked with him on *A.I.*; we add Aldiss to a list that (to the best of my knowledge) includes Bob Shaw, Ian Watson, and artists Chris Foss and Chris Baker ('Fangorn').

One of the things many people are reporting about during lockdown is an increase in vivid dreams. I thought I was immune to that, but the other night I had a long and extremely vivid dream, which basically consisted on my rummaging around a flea market and picking up a large number of secondhand books. Oh for a return to such simple pleasures ... It's like that Robert Sheckley story ('The Store of the Worlds') where the magic shop in the post-holocaust wasteland sells you your heart's desire, and for so many people it just turns out to be living life the way it used to be.

(13 February 2021)

Patrick McGuire commented on alternate histories. It's a sub-genre I enjoy, and a little while ago I picked up S. M. Stirling's *Marching through Georgia*, set in an alternate history where the loyalists who lost out when the American War of Independence went Washington's way went into exile in South Africa and established a state there, a sort of Anglophone Sparta, with added apartheid. Stirling then rolls the history forward to the 1940s and has this state, the Draka (supposedly because they were led by descendents of Sir Francis Drake) being the major combatant nation opposing the rise of Nazi Germany. One of the many problems I had with this book was that the alternate history was so detached from our own that there were almost no familiar points or people in it. A good alternate history has to make its readers think about how the world of the story differs from our own; but take that difference too far and the reader cannot relate to the alternate world. About the only characters that *Marching through Georgia* had in common with our own world were Adolf Hitler and General von Paulus, the German commander at Stalingrad (and he only got namechecked). Not a universe I identified with.

SFC 102:

I wonder if William Gibson had Heinlein in mind when he referred to the unspecified disaster that sweeps away the old world in his novels *The Peripheral* and *Agency* as 'The Jackpot'?

Of *SFC 103*, there is little I can say. I only knew John Bangsund through the medium of your fan writing. But looking over it again, I'm struck by the picture that the ish builds up of Melbourne in the 1960s and 70s. I was reminded of Pete Weston's *With Stars in my Eyes*, which was ostensibly billed as Pete's life in British fandom in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, but which coincidentally painted a picture of Birmingham in that time. Fandom is a microcosm of the society that hosts it; and your tribute to John showed that all life can be found in fanzines.

SFC 104:

And so we come up to date, even though *SFC 104* came out four months ago. Nothing has changed. The UK death toll is somewhere in the 106,000 region; I've settled into a routine for working from home, and most days resemble most other days.

My sister and her husband had her first COVID vaccination two days ago. The next day, it was announced that all those aged 70 or over had received or been offered their first vaccination. Today, the NHS has started calling those aged 65 or over, plus those over 60 with 'underlying health conditions' that make them vulnerable. If my Type 2 diabetes is considered severe enough, I shall get called in this tranche. If not, I should be in the next tranche. The Government has said that they aim to have all over-50s vaccinated by the end of April.

Meanwhile, Franz Kafka had it right.

I think I have that 1959 recording of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, conducted by Karajan, on a budget DG Privilege vinyl disc. Getting my vinyl collection playable again is a long-term ambition of mine. Oddly, that was a recording I never took to, mainly because at the climax of The Hero's Battle with his Critics I got the strange impression that Karajan has just kicked the entire percussion section down a flight of stairs. My go-to recording of *Heldenleben* has always been Rudolf Kempe with the Dresden Staatskapelle on HMV, dating from 1974.

[*brg* I have both versions, on CD box sets. I was staggered at the technical quality of Karajan's version, but perhaps the digital remasterers might have had something to do with it. Thanks for the reminder to play Kempe's version. Perhaps the percussion division survives the fall down the stairs in that version.*]

I was so pleased you were able to be reunited with *The Australian Book of Trains*. I still have the railway books that I was given from around age 12; but since these have become part of a very much larger collection, they don't get looked at in the same way. Actually picking one up and leafing through it can be as much a sudden trip back in



Churnet Valley Railway, Staffordshire: Class S160 of the US Army Transportation Corps.

time as if I'd not had a copy of the book at all in the intervening years since it was last opened. My equivalent was a big thick book called *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Railways*, 580 pages of photographs from railways around the world. Yes, at the age of 12, I knew about Flinders Street station and the Zig-Zag Railway! I also acquired some 1950s editions of the *Meccano Magazine*, and 'railways of the Commonwealth' were often a subject of news items or even an article or two. My father worked on the railways — at least, up until I was 10 — and he did once entertain a senior engineer from Indian Railways who was on an information-gathering tour of the UK. And it was said that my great-grandfather (who I never knew) had been an engineer supervising work on the building of the East African Railways. So world railways have always been lurking in the back of my mind, unlike most British enthusiasts who are as tribal over their railways as football fans (if not more so).

Just to illustrate this, I attach a couple of pictures from the one railway visit I managed in 2020; a class S160 of the US Army Transportation Corps on the Churnet Valley Railway in Staffordshire. These American engines were built for war service in Europe, and I have come across examples in Poland; but in recent years a few have found their way to the UK.

Ah, all this travelling! The tales of journeys in *SFC 104* may come to seem like fantasy if the more gloomy predictions over the future we will share with viruses come true. All too much now, we seem to rely on our memories for lives to live; Jenny Bryce's memories of teaching at the turn of the 1960s remind me that those were the years I moved into secondary school, to a grammar school in an English mill town that had been created by the mill owner to educate the children of his workers, and which aped the habits and styles of a minor public

(private) school. And Guy Salvidge's account of Supernova Books reminds me of Roger Peyton's Andromeda Bookshop in Birmingham, which I frequented from 1978 through to its final closure in 2003. That closure was precipitated by first the 9/11 attacks, which brought the trans-Atlantic small package business to a juddering halt with the grounding of all North American air traffic and which Rog relied upon to get the US imports that he was the major source for in the UK and Europe; and just as that was recovering, killed off entirely by the postal anthrax attacks in the US that compounded the disruption. Once I moved to work in Birmingham city centre from 1989, I had to ration my visits, as Roger's second shop was about ten minutes up the road; his third, biggest shop was just around the corner from my office, and I could be out of one and into the other in less than five minutes.

Once again, Bruce, that brings me up to date with your publications. I see from your online posting that some more work has come your way. I'm realising now that I'm on a countdown to retirement in two years' time, though I shall be telling my employers that consultancy work might be welcome, assuming that I don't delay my retirement to build up some more savings. The slightly irritating thing is that, as I said earlier it's taken me until the end of my working life to find a job that I genuinely enjoy and where the working environment and the people I work with are both interesting and seem to value what I bring to the job. If working from home becomes the new normal, I might well continue to take work on, even though that will delay various writing projects I have in mind for my retirement. We'll see. After all, who would have anticipated how our lives would be changed at the beginning of 2020?

(19 February 2021)

Feature letter:

Pete Rogan to Cy Chauvin and SFC: 2001, Benford's Berlin Project, and Wargames

PETE ROGAN

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Hello Cy Chauvin

And thank you for the copy of *SF Commentary* 104. I did enjoy reading your remembrance of the making of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, including the now almost-lost original vision of Kubrick, that the film was to be about a transformative journey like the original *Odyssey*. I admit I'm a little disappointed that more has not been made of the journey that in fact made up the last third of the movie. I think the problem is that the journey is itself done in a nearly incomprehensible visual milieu, itself in the process of invention. Interpreting its intention gets tangled in the means by which the illusion of voyage was projected, including as it did solarised images of Scottish highlands and the now-famous slit-screen projection of two-dimensional images in an exaggerated perspective adding a third dimension. You can't discuss these images without stumbling over the physical means by which they were produced, and that undermines the central sense of a journey that Kubrick intended. Artistically this was the greatest failure of the movie, and it awaits an era with a more sophisticated perception of the illusions provided before we can discuss the elements of that journey and its meaning. By which time, I expect, we'll all be laughing up our sleeves at the crudity of production values and reminding each other that this film was made between 1964 and 1968, skirting the era of psychedelicism while not being actually a part of it. As it was, the film was perceived as a spiritual message, itself a kind of transcendental voyage. On its release, Clarke would later be interviewed to note how the first freakout was in Los Angeles, with a young man running up to the screen in a theatre screaming 'It's GOD! It's GOD!' And later a divinity student would write to the filmmakers that he saw the sign of the Cross made three times in the film, which amused Clarke greatly considering that he himself was an atheist and Stanley Kubrick a Jew. I

admit I am awaiting the age when we turn our senses to considering what the voyage of Dave Bowman and his transformation really mean.

I suppose it's not a surprise to you that a good many hard science fiction writers, Clarke and Heinlein among them, had remarkable encounters, literary and otherwise, with spiritual matters and even nonrational unearthly encounters with things and perhaps even people and civilisations beyond our ability to comprehend. Surely this was a major theme in Clarke's *Childhood's End*, which Kubrick found more than compelling, and it is an element in some of the Martian societies Heinlein provided, the most famous of course being the Martian transcendence of death in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. For people with exacting sensibilities about the physical and the imagined physical, these encounters with the fundamentally unknowable come across as startling and, I admit, more than a little mawkish. One is left wondering if this is an inevitable creative concern of authors who put a high value on making sure their physics work, that their grasp of the metaphysical is loose so much that it rattles when shaken. We lack any sort of spiritual context to make sense of these approaches — and our perception is doomed to be coloured by the creation and promotion of Scientology by L. Ron Hubbard, who quite cynically set out to create a religion and did so, to our continuing pain and torment. What can we make of Heinlein's notion of Martian society being conducted by 'ghosts' when we have the blunt tool of 'Operating Thetans' held over us like a mace? I look forward again to an era where we can make suitable sense of these odd journeys without it becoming a kind of irreducible spiritual contest where one view must not just dominate but destroy all others. I expect to wait a good deal longer for such an age. Ah, well.

But I admit I found your earlier article on Gregory Benford's *The Berlin Project* a more mesmerising concept to tackle. While I can agree to the idea that science fiction can serve as a means of allegorically expanding on the decisions we have made to use and even to destroy with technology, I found myself at odds with your approach to the idea that science and the way we use it in warfare to be an issue for politicians, not scientists. Bear me out here; my approach to the issue of atomic weaponry

is different from yours, and indeed from most peoples's.

My sophomore year in college found me confronting a world suddenly without Nixon and trying to make sense of how we should consider interventions like Vietnam and the potential use of atomic and nuclear arms in any future conflict. I was buried in such amounts of well-meaning but antididactic reasoning on why A-bombs had been built at all that I was compelled to find an answer of my own, outside the charged atmosphere of an almost militant pacifism. Besides the tools and sources my University provided, I also had the benefit of my wargaming background, which relied extensive on the practical mechanical aspects of weaponry and their use. So I was able to discard the argument that atomic bombs were the secret heart of military organisation rivalry to see who could deliver the most bang best; these turned out to rely on a single author, a noted anti-war activist (whose name escapes me now) who seems to have re-interpreted American military history in the light of what Vietnam revealed, turning the entire history into a kind of theatrical production best compared to *Oh What A Lovely War*. When I went into the reason why atomic bombs were used against Japan, and the result, I found another entirely different mystical false history about as devastating and wrong as the notion of atomic arms being fundamentally racist and inhuman.

At its base, the development of the atomic bomb by the US was in response to the possibility, famously voiced by Einstein, that Hitler could already be developing such a weapon. (They were, but they were so hopelessly on the wrong course they would not have developed working nuclear arms for a decade more.) The Trinity test yields confirmed the great power of such explosives, at which point began the high-level Cabinet discussion as to how to use the arms to end the war sooner. Germany was already prostrate and occupied; the issue then became how to use them so that Japan would be compelled to surrender and accept the Potsdam Declaration calling for total surrender. And here is where history gets distorted.

Most Americans believe that the US military stood ready to deliver the bomb to end the war. Truman made up his mind like that (snapping fingers — something he admitted in an interview later) and in short order we bombed Hiroshima and, when Japan hemmed and hawed, Nagasaki got it. At which point they realised the war was lost and the Emperor surrendered.

First of all, it was a bluff. The centrifuge production of U-235 and plutonium had, by the fall of 1945, only produced enough material for three weapons after Trinity. We could threaten the utter destruction of Japanese cities but couldn't deliver.

Second, we had been bombing Japanese cities at low altitude at night with tons of napalm; wooden and paper dwellings, the vast majority of Japanese homes, went up by the millions, with death tolls per incendiary raid equal to that of Dresden every few days. We could make the A-bomb sound terrible, but there was concern in the Army Air Forces that after one or two A-bombings, the Japanese would realise they could withstand them and ignore them in considering how to keep the war going.

Third ... and completely unknown to anybody in the West at the time ... there was a clandestine peace group among the Japanese government ministers who had realised continued resistance was going to lead to continued destruction, until the same fate fell to Japan as to Germany — physical invasion of the homeland, the destruction of every organ of civil and military government, and the imposition of foreign rule with the concomitant obliteration of all resistance. It would be the death of Japanese culture. And the ministers could do nothing because to counsel surrender was itself treason, punishable by hauling the minister out and shooting him immediately. I won't bore you with the details of what happened within the Japanese government with Hiroshima, but the peace party ultimately got what they wanted — an end to the destruction of Japan. And it was a closer thing than anybody realised. Because the military had already decided they would fight to the bloody end of every Japanese, and elements planned to kidnap the Emperor and hold him incommunicado until the end. We were never asked to envision what that would look like, but ... I did.

I found references to the planned invasion of the Home Islands, in two stages, Operation Olympic to seize Kyushu and use it as a staging point for the larger Operation Coronet, to land on the Kanto Plain and seize Tokyo. And I found Operation Ketsu-Go, the defence of the Home Islands. I also had access to the estimated casualties on both sides. One million Allied casualties, wounded and dead. And ten million Japanese, most dead. Had the military had their way, we'd still be remembering the three D-Days today: 6 June 1944, 1 November 1945 and 1 April 1946. By which time, by the way, the Russians would have Hokkaido under their guns. They had begun the invasion 8 August 1945, exactly three months after Germany surrendered. You can ponder what the world would have looked like with a divided Japan as well as a divided Germany. But that's not my point.

As a result of my studies, I realised that the American fantasy that dropping A-bombs made the Japanese surrender was utterly false. The Japanese were already being punished harder, and the A-bombs would not have made any difference, even if we had used the third weapon, which was still in

development. But dropping the A-bombs gave the peace ministers and Hirohito the excuse to end the war and prevent the destruction of Japan. They deliberately bought into the fantasy because the war would not end otherwise. Not from atomic destruction ... but from the willingness of the military to sacrifice every Japanese in the struggle. If they could not live, everybody died. Simple as that. And so the American fantasy became what the world knew of the use of A-bombs to end wars.

Including Gregory Benford. And he would be wrong. Is wrong.

Threatening Hitler and the Wehrmacht with atomic destruction wouldn't move Hitler one bit. The Nazis understood they were already in a genocidal war that they had to win, or the unfit races would annihilate them. This they could not and would not allow. The Nazis had spent years destroying anything that looked like a peace movement in Germany; you should read what they did with the White Rose organization and its personnel. The Fuehrerbunker had already been built as the Eighth Air Force and the RAF continued their punishing raids, night by night; these structures, plus the Berlin flak towers, would shelter a good many people from an A-bomb attack. And the Nazis would have decried the inhumanity of the Allies as they had done in February when Dresden had their fire tornado and they would not surrender. The end result would have been much like the one we saw, with the Soviets taking Berlin, radioactive though it might have been, and the Allies halting at the lines devised for them at the Yalta conference. As all three great powers had agreed. As the landings in Normandy had been planned around, and the advance into Germany. The A-bombing would be a black mark against the Allies, a little darker maybe than Dresden, but it would not have produced the magic end of the war as happened in our timeline.

But Benford didn't have the advantage of my studies. He didn't know the 'magic lantern' of the atomic bomb would not have produced what it had in Japan. Hell, I have to wonder if he knows that when Hitler was elected Chancellor in 1933, Berlin voted against him. The city despised this showy Austrian and his cancerous anti-Semitism. It didn't make any difference to the Nazis and their tactics. It would take street-to-street, building-by-building, room-by-room clearing to defeat the Nazis and get them out of power. And in the process obliterate Germany utterly as a political, economic, and war-waging power.

So I read your review with this knowledge jarring me as I went along, realising Benford was following the American fantasy line that Hirohito had used to let him surrender Japan without seeing it torn to pieces in blood and fire as Germany already had

been. And that he had no concept of how the war would have ended any earlier, or neater, than seemed to happen in Japan in 1945. And I sat there thinking, Oh you poor fool. What if the Soviets, realising the Western Allies had such weapons, decided to take all of Germany to ready it for the next war, in a year or so? Had Benford any idea how stressed to breaking Britain was? How tired of the war the Americans were? Instead of a faster end to the war, A-bombing Berlin could have made the Cold War scorching from the start. Could he have made himself write that book? I doubt it highly. And so your analysis of his reasoning came to me late and on the wrong topic. Bombing Berlin would have altered history, but to my mind it would have made what came after darker. And far bloodier and more radioactive than we could stand today.

Politicians decided the fate of Japan. Not the weapons. But I knew this before I ever heard of *The Berlin Project*. It reads to me as failed science fiction — kind of like the game universe of GDW's *2300AD*, where starships travel by quantum tunnelling, making jumps of three millimetres or so several hundred thousand times a second, producing a supraluminal apparent velocity. But in practice, we have found quantum tunnelling itself is bounded by c , so we could not develop starships that could make Alpha Centauri in a week. But if we could build such drives, we could get there in four years. It's not the postulate of the game, so I pretend this technology would work and go gallivanting off to Arcturus to kill some bugs.

On your similar question, about enforced confinement increasing creativity ... I'm afraid I've got nothing to show for Bruce Gillespie. Since my move in 2016 to an apartment cater-corner to Beaumont Hospital, populated by medical and other professionals, and located some 200 metres from the road, I normally exist in a kind of private library where the noise of children playing outside is typically the only interruption of the day. And since Covid-19 came here, even little of that. Occasional sirens and the arrival of medevac helicopters brings some variety, but otherwise I normally exist in a sort of isolation more perfect than what many people today are experiencing. I can't say it's done anything to make me more creative. In fact, the loss of most human contact has been a real drag on my ability to imagine characters, as well as cut down on the observations I may make on human folly and quibbling. Never mind technology and the future of political alignments; I exist in the realm of Story, which needs to resemble real people and their quirks and habits to be believable at all, never mind how I can invoke the scent in just-doffed combat armour. The way people stand when they're bored, or the way they gesture to their invisible communicant on another phone, the lip-twitch of somebody

hearing news they've already heard and don't like ... These are things best left not to the imagination, but the idle observations of people being people. The exegesis of Heinlein and Asimov has its place, not too far from *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics*, but the real meat of any fiction, science or not, is bringing to life the people within it. This is more than simple alchemy or imagination; people are inexplicable and unpredictable in many tiny ways they don't even realise. Being able to present those means the difference between a reader saying, 'Oh yeah, I understand how that tech works' and 'Geeze, the guy down the hall does the same thing. Doesn't he wash?' And that's the difference between a narrative and a human connection.

Which reminds me: Got some more research to do before I delve back into the way my fourth book is shaping up. I have the nagging feeling I'm missing something, but can't put a finger on what. Like many such problems, it doesn't actually manifest until I come across a text that exposes a different approach, or, really, somebody experiencing something they don't feel comfortable with and what they say to that. I'll find a solution. It's just a matter of continuing to sample, from whatever reality I can get my hands on.

(26 January 2021)

Hello, Bruce:

Cy Chauvin was so kind as to send me your note et alia below, and I was startled and pleased to receive it.

By all means, if you find my incidental punditry publishable, you have my permission to make it so. You flatter me saying that such writing is rare in this internet-soaked age, even though I tend to agree. If there is value in my words to be found by other readers, I have no reason not to share them.

That said, I must admit I'm concentrating on my book series, and do not often delve into criticism or literary observation. I can't say when or even if I might produce similar commentary in the future. But I admit I am vulnerable to flattery and even more to exposure. Having said that, I hope you will forgive me if I include a link to my first book in my series, *Mission: La Glacière*, published by Game Designers Workshop on DriveThruRPG.com. I must say, a book about US Space Marines fighting aliens they call the Bugs wasn't the way I thought I'd break into print, but there it is. Long and weird story involved in that, which I am not including here. Patience is a non-renewable resource, after all.

Link: *Mission: La Glacière* — Game Designers' Workshop (GDW) | 2300 AD | DriveThruRPG.com

And thank you for finding my contribution useful. It is a real possession in the changing fortunes of Time. More so than Bitcoin. I wish you well with

it.

(3 February 2021)

I am well aware of the piles of game-based fiction out there, from the 'Dragonworld' series based on *Dungeons & Dragons* to the 'BattleTech' novels of a future dominated by war waged by gigantic anthropomorphic armoured fighting suits. These are designed to meet a limited niche market, much like the 'Perry Rhodan' series out of Germany. That's not my purpose here.

I admit I am using the background material from GDW's *2300AD* game, first published 30 years ago. That's because the aliens who are conducting war against humans on a remote French colony world are, to my mind, unique in science fiction — not just science-fiction gaming. The Vah, as they call themselves, are very different from Earthly life. Though they are bipedal, they possess a distinguishing biology I haven't found in any other work. The Vah are ordinarily mentally dull, perhaps borderline functional in human terms, equivalent to possessing an IQ of about 60 ... until they are frightened or hurt. At which point their bodies produce an adrenaline analogue that boosts their mental capacity to an extremely high level — they become not just highly intelligent but are able to integrate memory, sensation, and training to make them highly competent soldiers individually, but in concert with their unit an extremely flexible, inventive, aggressive, and typically successful fighting force. Their intelligence in fact increases the more they are hurt, which makes them unpredictable indeed to any human force unaccustomed to seeing a wounded enemy actually fight smarter and harder.

The background for these aliens includes a history wherein they discover that if they are to survive beginning civilisation — which typically means lowering their pain input from many sources, making them vulnerable to barbarian tribes who are thus 'smarter' than settled Vah — they must adopt institutionalised violence to keep their intelligence and their nascent civilisation. When this eventually causes them to form a world government, with no more 'smart barbarians' to fight and the only other option being civil war, a gifted leader guides the Vah civilisation to go into space and seek out new foes to fight. A foe perhaps even tougher and more intelligent than the Vah. This imparts to Vah civilisation a sense of racial purpose I have not seen depicted elsewhere. The Vah conquered space to find other aliens to fight, and in fighting, become better warriors than they were, until they either vanquish their opponents ... or die trying.

The Vah are thus on a sort of permanent jihad, one that is truer to the Islamic concept than it might appear. Jihad is a personal struggle to

vanquish weakness and immorality in Islam, and the Vah are doing that. But they also accept the possibility that they may not win. They are hoping to learn much from the races they oppose, and especially so from those who are nearly their equals ... but if they cannot be victors they intend to make their last stand memorable. And it is in this frame of mind, as a culture, that they discovered humans and invaded one colony world to test us for our suitability as combatants.

That's one side of the equation. Here's the kicker: I mentioned that this game was published 30 years ago. It has a sizable player base worldwide — when I edited *Stardate* magazine in the mid 1980s, we had fan mail from every corner of the English-speaking world except South Africa — the embargo, you understand. All the facts I gave above are in published background volumes. Every player of this game should know the racial goal of the Vah and build upon it with adventures that challenge players with the danger of an alien race that not just fights hard, but gets harder to beat every time they clash.

But no one has. In 30 years. I've run across player groups online who have no interest in the Vah and wish them simply gone from the background. When, as I see it, the potential is here for the story of clash of civilisations that is singular in history and in scope. Because humanity has no idea what impels the Vah except the things that would impel humans: land, entire planets, and the wealth upon them, and room to grow their population. The Vah, for their part, only know, and just barely, that humans are a tough race that might give them a challenge. From what I've seen of living *2300AD* players, they have no concept of what sort of menace they are facing, and discount the Bugs as dullards and no challenge at all. The game background has quite outstripped its intended audience. Which, to me, is a golden opportunity to tell a longer tale about what it's like to face an enemy whose only desire is not just to fight, but if they cannot beat you, to learn from you to beat you the next time. And that if you use more lethal weapons, the enemy will learn those from you and use them against you next time. The danger only grows until humans learn to master their impulse to slaughter and find a way to live with the Vah ... however that may happen. There is no single way forward, and decidedly no limit to the ways people will try.

Where the game hasn't engaged its public properly — not their fault, I hasten to add — I intend to tell a tale of just what kind of clash of civilisations humanity has had forced upon it. What's important here to me is not the fighting, but how humanity comes to discern what drives the Vah and how to overcome it. That won't be by

military means; neither race has the strength to hunt down and murder the other on dozens of worlds. What I am seeking to explore, however, is how humanity comes to grip with the realisation of what it is that they are facing. And this journey will be neither simple nor simplistic. Where the story starts, humanity has no idea of what they are facing, and only beginning to effectively resist. But neither side knows what the other really wants. I'm starting with a voyage of discovery to reveal to the characters in my books that the enemy is more complicated and more cultured than they first thought. Where it will end — if it ends — is not where the longer story I wish to tell is ending. I am going to need a readership that gets into arguments about what is actually going on, and who the Vah are and what they want. They might find an answer. I don't know, and I don't worry about it. What I tell people today is that I'm working on a story that asks the question, 'When your first contact with an alien race is by automatic weapons ... what's the next step?' I don't tell them that that's only the first question, or how many more they will need to find answers to.

Pardon me for my excess here, but I did not want my books with their Space Marines and Bugs to be misunderstood. I intend to take readers on a trip to places they didn't expect to go, and have them deal with questions they never considered until they were sitting across the fire from them, needing answers. Anybody can write a book about firefights with aliens. I'm creating a story where no one even knows there are questions until they're facing them, and can't decide what to do. If I can inspire even just one fistfight per book on what to do with the Vah, I'll be happy. My books are written to seem to appeal to one audience ... but the readers who wonder why the decisions in the books were taken are my second, and larger audience.

And thanks for reminding me that some of my larger audience aren't going to be so eager to read about firefights with the aliens. They'll need a different kind of draw. Maybe making clear that not understanding what the aliens are after is only the start to a greater, if somewhat alien (sic) understanding of what's really going on. I'll need to work on it. I appreciate the challenge, and I thank you for it.

Hope people like my writing. It's what I'm really after, you know. Heinlein beer money and all that. Thanks for the opportunity.

(9 February 2021)

CY CHAUVIN

You don't need to send a hard copy of *SFC* 106 with my loc; I can manage to read the issue after I

download it. I already started reading *SFC* 105, having found it by accident at e-fanzines by accident! I thought perhaps my e-mail reminder of it went astray. No. 105 has another unusual cover; you don't expect to see fanzine covers inspired by 'The Machine Stops.' But it does rather fit in with the times, doesn't it?

(15 May 2021)

I started reading Yvonne Rousseau's article about first meeting you, and I suddenly realised I had just read the article recently, somewhere. I glanced at the end, where you acknowledged that it was published in *First Contact*, edited Dick & Leah Smith. Just a month or two previously, I found that fanzine on my bookshelf, glanced at it (which I read long ago), saw Yvonne's article, and thought 'one by an Australian, not many by them here,' and re-read it. It seems so uncanny that I should have picked up *First Contact*, and reread Yvonne's article alone of all in it, just as she was leaving life on earth.

I did really enjoy reading her article 'The Garden Party' many years ago; in fact, I wanted to have my own garden party after reading it, but still haven't. The way she worked in the reference to 'The Ones Who Walked Away from Melbourne' in the article especially amused me. I will have to find her article and reread it after all these years.

I'm sorry your last visit with Yvonne should have turned out so poorly. It is so hard to visit someone in a nursing home or hospital. My worst experience was visiting someone who turned out to be hooked to a breathing machine; unable to talk, and probably unconscious. As I fled from this horror, I was fortunate enough to run into his wife, and so I could say a few kind words to her. I also, unlike yourself, had found a friend to accompany me for the visit, so I never had to face the worse alone.

Perry Middlemiss just happens to discuss in his Hugo Awards article *Rogue Moon* by Algis Budrys, which I just recently reread. I didn't have fond memories of the book; in fact, I remembered nothing about it, except that it had a strange ending on the moon. Most of the novel is about the interactions of the people involved, and some philosophical ramifications of matter-transmission, as Budrys describes it; it's not really about the moon artifact. And all the people are crazy, in a very 1950s way (they drink too much).

The problem with reading it today might be that you have to believe so many impossible or unlikely facts: (a) an alien artifact on the moon; (b) matter transmission; (c) telepathy between twined people. No matter is actually transmitted; the person or devices are scanned on earth, then reconstructed on the moon — and a twin made on earth. The 'twin' made on earth is kept in his suit and cut off from all sensory perceptions, and so, for a limited

time, takes on the perceptions of his twin on the moon. Hawk (the protagonist) feels he is a murderer, since he sends all these men to the moon who are then killed, although their 'twins' remain on earth. He tries to remain a scientist, detached, but cannot, not entirely. It's very compellingly written. But (I just have to say it again) all the people in it are crazy.

I also recently read for the first time the Theodore Sturgeon novella, 'Need', that Perry writes about. It's excellent! I urge everyone to read it! Pay no attention to Perry's tepid comment that it's just 'competent'! Sturgeon stories largely don't fit into any category, or do the kind of thing perhaps that science fiction should do, but many are still interesting. I often think that a new collection of 'alternate' stories by Sturgeon should be published, because many that have been thought traditionally as his 'best' aren't as interesting as some of these others. New readers should discover him. I'm happy to find out that 'Need' at least was nominated for a Hugo.

I like your comment that you wish Angela Carter had written *Piranesi* because she has such a lush style — it does seem that the book is the sort Carter might write. Yet as I take my copy of *The Bloody Chamber & Other Stories* by Angela Carter down from its bedside shelf (her collection of reinvented fairy tales), it's quite violent. That was one of the remarkable things about *Piranesi*: how Clarke manages to tell an absorbing story without any violence.

While writing an article for William Breiding, I stumbled across the fact that this year is the 100th anniversary of James Blish's birth! It led me to reread some of his books, and also David Ketterer's *Imprisoned in a Tesseract: The Life & Work of James Blish*. And it led me to wonder, did you get a chance to see James Blish, when you visited England in 1973, at a convention or otherwise?

(20 August 2021)

[*brg* I did write about my British visit in 1974, but that account appeared many years ago.

Thanks to Mark Olson, it can now be read on fanac.org, but I don't expect people to read vast amounts of old fanzines on screen. Chris Priest took me to one of the classes he ran at the East London Polytechnic. James Blish was the guest lecturer/teacher. Not only did he send his greetings to George Turner, but his careful manner reminded me of George's. It was an odd night, because proceedings were interrupted by a person who was very upset by some aspect of the class. It looked as if he would have to be restrained by some of the stronger twenty-year-old blokes who were also there, but he went away after some minutes. James Blish remained calm.

I'm surprised at your comments about 'Rogue Moon'. Recently I got around to reading several volumes of *The SF Hall of Fame* (the novellas), bought nearly 50 years ago, but unread until now. The most impressive story was the novella version of 'Rogue Moon', which has much the same idea as several other matter transmitter stories (most notably Chris Priest's *The Prestige*), that in sending someone by matter transmitter, one would leave the old body behind by recreating it at the other end, therefore creating two people, not really transmitting one to the

other site. This in turn creates two different realities, as in 'Rogue Moon'. It's many years since I've read the novel version, though. I'm told it's not nearly as effective as the novella version.

I'm glad you like the Yvonne Rousseau material. Your earlier reading of Yvonne's article was in *SFC* itself, last year, in one of my Fiftieth Anniversary Issues. At that time the purpose was to show an aspect of the history of the Nova Mob. Very sad that it's become an epitaph for Yvonne herself.*]

DON ASHBY
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The Antifan/Aussiefan film came to me rough cut and I did the final edit. I then, with Carey Handfield, recorded off various records and did a sync edit.

It then went to the processors and came back on the same day Robin Johnson was leaving for the USA. We had to rush it to the airport and gave it to him as he was boarding. I only received the rough cut less than a week before it had to leave the country. Those were the days.

The rough cut went up in the recent bushfires, along with my house.

(13 November 2020)

I find myself in an armchair in front of a wood heater, snug in my Sett, 'Ground Zero', 8 Stanley Ave, Mallacoota. Eccles is on my lap and Dusty wishes she was, but is too damn big. It is pouring outside, which it often is in this time after the fires. The wind is not howling, which is a relief, for the wind has been constant this year. This experiment in climate modification, in which we are participating, is not turning out well.

My camp is my 6M x 6M Sett: lounge, dining, study, and workshop (converted, very comfortably, from a burnt-out carport by my friend Phil and myself); a very secondhand tiny house is bedroom and kitchen; a shipping container houses timber and my large machine tools.

Inside the Sett is an antique Victorian desk, a couple of Edwardian armchairs (post-fire splurge from a sensational antique shop in Bega), a wood heater, a collection of spindly arachnoid bentwood chairs, surplus from the Victorian State Opera mega production of *Carmen* (provided by my friend, late last year, who took over my job at the VSO after I broke my back in far-off 1994), and a trestle table. There is also a Chinese apothecary cabinet doing duty as a dresser. My work bench is a converted old upright piano, diverted from a final

ignominious journey to the tip, discarded by our local kindergarten. Pride of place is a bookcase, the contents of which has largely been provided by the sainted Justin Ackroyd who, after the conflagration, asked me to provide a list of my favorite SF authors and in due time (dodging lockdowns) turned up with a car full of boxes. They, along with the dogs, building and restoring the garden, have been my anchors amidst the chaos. Thank you Justin. I hope you are not missing hockey and choir too much.

Max and I, as a result of our attempts to house ourselves, the boys, and extended family seem now to 'own' two houses that have had to be renovated, a rural camp and a block of land (that once cupped our family home) with plans in hand for a new build. Our bucolic prefire existence has been stirred up with a big stick.

The rain is pouring down. I have been trying to backfill the block, replacing the huge quantity of topsoil removed by the contractors cleaning up the ruins. It is becoming a quagmire once again, pushing our building plans further into the future.

We have been watching Covid inching closer to Mallacoota thanks to the lunatic antics of the NSW Paraddledumb government and the Canberra Clown Car. It is only a matter of time. The average age of our town's inhabitants is around 65. We are incredibly fortunate to have a genius GP. She has been beaver away getting everyone vaccinated. We seem to be ahead of the game at this moment. The tourrats may be our undoing.

In 2020 I penned a series of poems charting my post-fire milestones, epiphanies, and abreactions. I showed some to Yolanda Oakley (an artist friend), who requested the rest and has created over 50 responses to my words. She is now hot on the trail of publication, and it seems that the book will be out in the early new year. I have been a writer all my life, but rarely sought publication except in the polemic pages of the odd magazine. Getting poetry published in Australia has always been problematic.

Since the fires I have had a number of requested memoir/commentaries published: contributing to

the various enquiries and witness anthologies.

Thank you, Bruce, for keeping me on your mailing list of print copies. I never get around to reading online magazines. My interest was piqued by your Yvonne Rousseau article on the *Hanging Rock* thing. More please! I never got to know her, which was my loss.

Newish books that have grabbed me this year have included the extraordinary works of Susanna Clarke, Robbie Arnott, and the debut of Alice Robinson. I have also reread Paul Voermans' *The White Library* (a copy of which I will include with this letter). I read it originally in manuscript. Paul's

writing is deceptively simple and idiosyncratic. I have found his work compelling. I won't go into the contents because to do so creates too many spoilers. It is a counterfactual alternative Australia with the weirdest and disturbingly erotic scene, I think, I have ever read. You should read it!

I am no longer a dedicated, up-to-date SF fan. My forays into the contemporary genre leave me often disappointed and frustrated. Much good 'SF' seems to be happening outside the genre. Exceptions include Cixin Liu, Kim Stanley Robinson, and China Miéville.

(20 August 2021)

Martin Morse Wooster: Six SFCs in three letters of comment

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
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SFCs 101, 102: I know this train is probably not very exotic, but for an American, 'the country train to Warrnambool' sounds very exotic. What do you mean that the train has a 'somewhat primitive catering facility?' The 'catering facility' on the Scotrail train I took in the north of Scotland in 2005 was someone pushing a cart twice an hour down the aisles, but the cart had hot tea and sodas, the scenery of northern Scotland was magnificent, and the Robert Louis Stevenson novels I was reading were very appropriate. I'm sure the 'primitive catering facility' was better than what I had in Scotland.

So you don't have con suites at Australian conventions? Surely there are at least places for fans to sit and talk? These hotel restrictions remind me of the restrictions I saw at the 2001 and 2008 Bouchercons, the American national mystery convention. In 2001 there was at least a room with a tea and coffee service. There was also one writer who donated Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, with a little sticker on back. These were appreciated, while the writer who put stickers in the urinals saying, 'Who the hell is (redacted)?' did a bad job at promotion. In 2008, there was a more normal con suite at Bouchercon, sponsored by Sisters in Crime.

I only knew Earl Kemp from Fictionmags, but he always had interesting things to say and was a significant figure in the field. He also had one of the more unusual day jobs of any fan, in that in the 1950s he was hired by The Pullman Company to

make sure that celebrities coming to Chicago on overnight trains had the services they needed. He was a sort of super-concierge. I thought this was a wonderfully antique occupation.

Jennifer Bryce's year-best film choices: I saw *Vice* at an 11 a.m. screening on a weekday at the American Film Institute with three other diehards. At the time the federal government was furloughed because of a budget dispute, so I heard a woman say, 'This is the furloughed federal workers' screening.' 'No', I replied, 'this is the freelance writers' screening.' I thought the film was very well acted but I didn't believe anything in the story. I thought the film slimed Dick Cheney — and I don't like Dick Cheney!

(Fun fact: Christian Bale and Olivia Colman were born on the same day in 1974.)

(18 October 18 2021)

SFCs 103, 104: Your cat story reminds me of the craziest cat I know, Smokey, The Animal With Issues, the cat of Philadelphia fans Lee and Diane Weinstein. Smokey was a biter, and her modus operandi was to come up to you, sit next to you, purr, and let you pet her five times. Then she bit you. She tried to get me to write her memoirs, called 'Bite Me: Everyone I Have Bitten.' Sample chapter: 'Lee and Diane wanted to take me to the vet, but I said, "Bite me, and".' I explained to her that such a book would be of very limited interest. She kept biting up until the end, and the last time I saw her, when she was 16, she not only bit me but she then gave me the evil eye after I explained that she was a bad cat.

Here's one more Smokey story: I saw her one year and she started rubbing my leg. 'I know what you're up to,' I said. 'You're not going to get away

with it. Go bother somebody else.' She understood and left.

Kevin Brownlow's *The Parade's Gone By* is the definitive book about silent movies. It was first published in 1968, and Brownlow went on to a career restoring silent films and commenting on them. (I recommend his 1981 series *Hollywood*, which is on YouTube and offers generous samples of silent films.).

[*brg* *Hollywood* was one of the few series I watched in the early 1980s after we had a TV set in the house for the first time. It does not appear to be on DVD and/or Blu-ray, so I can't watch it again. I do own the book *The Parade's Gone By*.*]

The Parade's Gone By has extensive interviews with silent film directors and stars of the era, and Brownlow did everyone a service by getting these stars to tell their stories. This is a significant book of film history and is a lot of fun to read.

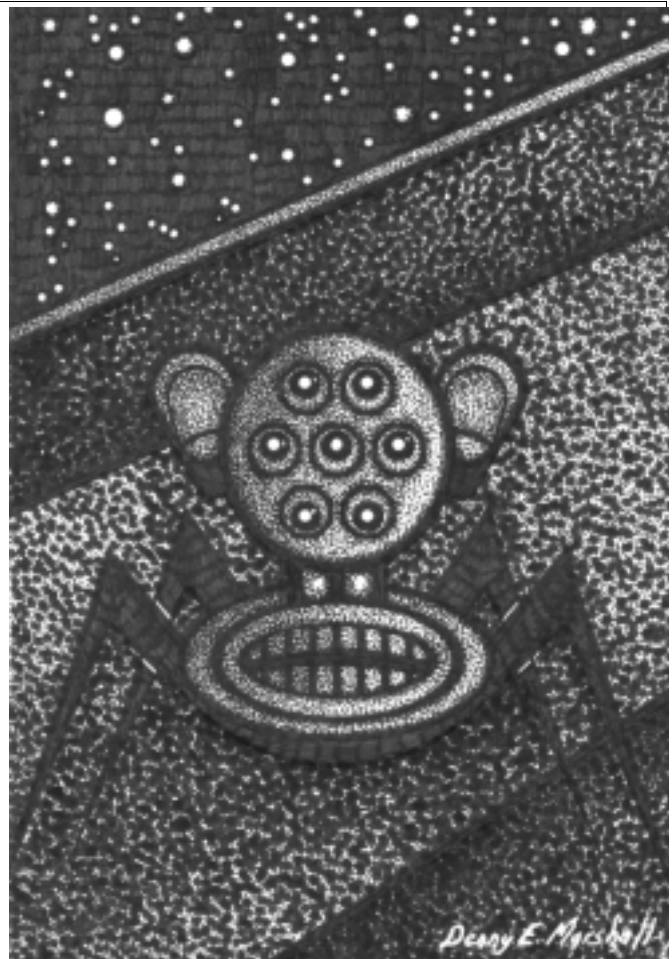
Charles Platt's *The Silicon Man* ends up being a cyber novel about a megalomaniac, but is more interesting because of Platt's attempt in the 1980s to guess what the world of 2030 might be like. There has been a war and a global depression; as a result malls still exist but they have been hollowed out to sell generic stuff. I think Platt describes a limited use of email, but newspapers are delivered by fax. So as a prognosticator Platt gets a C, but this is still a suspenseful story that held my interest.

Of your favorite TV shows, I did see all but one series of *Vera*, which was shown on my local public television station. This is Brenda Blethyn's finest role and she is as much a symbol of a woman in charge as Dame Helen Mirren was in *Prime Suspect*. I thought the series had concluded, but Wikipedia tells me that an eleventh series of *Vera* has been filmed, and will air in 2021 and 2022.

Knives Out: did you know that a sequel has been filmed and will probably appear later this year? Daniel Craig's accent is ridiculous, but the film is entertaining.

(2 November 2021)

I enjoyed reading about John Bangsund, but I don't have very much to say about him. He sounds like an interesting person, and perhaps someone can compile a 'best of' publication for the collection of free ebooks Dave Langford offers for TAFF. But what struck me was Bangsund's work for the Victorian Railways Libraries. The idea of libraries attached to railway systems is so wonderfully antique (and well, Victorian) that. I'm surprised that they survived to the late 1960s. I can't find anything online about when these libraries closed and. I remain amazed they survived until 1970.



Guy Salvidge's memories of his bookselling experiences in Perth led me to rack my brain for memories of Washington's sf and mystery bookstore, Moonstone Bookcellars, which was in the basement of a brownstone in downtown, Washington and was on the same block as the Circle Theatre, which offered double bills of old movies for \$2. I can't find a notice as to when Moonstone closed but it opened in 1975 and closed around 1990. The block it is on is now home to generic expensive office buildings.

Mr. Google offers the usual kaleidoscope of memories. Suzy McKee Charnas lived in Washington in the late 1970s and would go to Moonstone and buy all the books she could find by women. The WSFA Journal reported in 1983 that the store's owner, Phil Grossfield, had broken several bones in a fall.

The store had a substantial amount of sf and mysteries, including plenty of British editions, and the clerks were very knowledgeable and loved to talk about sf and other things; one clerk was an expert chess player and told me chess stories. But when owner Phil Grossfield was in the store, if you didn't buy anything he stared at you until you either bought something or left. Of course it's gone now, as are most bookstores.

It took me a while to recognize that the 'Dennis

Callegari column' was by you and not by Mr. Callegari. But this is a good idea and I encourage you to continue it.

You review two books by Harold Bloom about canons of literature, and mention Sam Moskowitz's effort to establish a canon in sf. I think the idea of establishing an sf canon is one of the many ideas destroyed by the Sad Puppies because of their ham-handed and clumsy efforts to defend traditional sf. The anti-Puppy forces love to engage in a shadow play where they determine that everyone before them are sexist white males who need to be cancelled. They hope to get into angry feuds with oldpharts so they can signal their own virtue. But the result, after Jeanette Ng's two Hugos (and the one Natalie Luhrs will almost certainly win this year) is that most people realised there was no point engaging with these perpetually angry young people. I am cheered that Jeanette Ng's effort to find 'problematic' sf to cancel went nowhere and Alexandra Erin's efforts to critique Isaac Asimov began with a claim that she did not want to cancel Asimov. I think there is a way to get younger people to read older sf, but the way not to do it is to say that older authors are part of a canon that have to be read.

Edwina Harvey discusses CoNZealand. I avoided it as I avoided all virtual events; I don't want synthetic substitutes for activities I enjoy. But I was happy to see that Capclave, our local sf convention, was not virtual and was in fact very much like the Capclave of 2019 except that attendance was about half that of two years ago because people were freaked out about the Delta variant. (Covid cases have fallen nationally by about 60 per cent since their peak on the first week of September.). I am also glad that Discon III will mostly be a real convention.

Edwina Harvey's comment about sf panels about librarians reminds me of how in 2003 I faunched after a Secret Librarians of Fandom ribbon. I explained that I was the son and grandson of librarians, and my great-grandfather ran a library above a store he ran, and that I spend a lot of time in libraries doing research. I did meet one woman at the librarians' party who called herself an 'information broker', which meant she did research on contract for law firms.

I very much enjoyed your review of *The Australian Book of Trains*. I very much enjoy trains, and am happy I went on the Puffing Billy twice, and in 1985 went on the big circuit of Melbourne-Adelaide-Alice Springs, Greyhound between Alice Springs and Mt. Isa, Cairns, Brisbane, and Melbourne. I would very much like to ride the Indian Pacific and the Ghan extension to Darwin. And I am old enough that for my first job in downtown Washington in 1978 I commuted on Budd streamlined

railway cars that were considered historic by 1990. I've ridden on all the overnight cross-country routes in the US and about half in Canada, although I've never taken a train across Canada. I agree that trains are the best way to travel and I'm looking forward to taking the Capitol Limited to Chicago for the 2022 worldcon.

Your comment, in your Josephine Tey reviews, about how much the ABC has cut back on radio drama leads me to ask: how much radio drama is still broadcast on Australian radio? In the US, commercial 'old time radio' ended in 1962, and the last radio serial on Canadian Broadcasting was in 2012. But I know very little about the current state of Australian radio drama.

[*brg* The very last play on ABC radio was broadcast within the last 20 years, followed by poetry readings in the program *The Poet's Tongue*. I don't listen to podcasts, but I get the impression that radio plays and poetry readings began on line within the last 10 years. Now there are many of them. The difference is that the ABC still had the funds to pay radio actors for their skills. In the days of commercial radio serials, which ended in 1964, Australian actors earned a valuable stream of income to add to money earned in theatre and on TV.*]

(1 November 2021)

SFCs 105, 106: Everyone in your letter columns are talking about lockdowns. I gather in Melbourne you are in the middle of your sixth lockdown. Here in Maryland we had two: one that lasted roughly from April to July 2020, and a second that lasted from November to February 2021. The first lockdown had a state of near-collapse. I pick up my mail from a post office that is about a mile away. In normal times, it takes me an hour to get my mail, mail my packages, and come home. In April it would take two hours. It now takes an hour to an hour and a half, because the local bus system has restored about 80 per cent of its routes.

The single dumbest instruction I've received during the pandemic came out in January. Some bureaucrat declared that people doing laundry should put their laundry in the machines, go to their cars, hide, run in as soon as the wash is done, throw your clothes in the dryer, and then run out to your car again. I did not see anyone doing this.

Right now we are all frightened of the Delta Variant. I'm not worried; I received my first dose of Pfizer in March, five days after I was eligible, and my second in April. We have an indoor mask mandate and a requirement that you prove you are vaccinated if you want to see a show. The shows have mostly not been cancelled, and I am looking forward to going to Capclave in October and

Discon III in December.

Leigh Edmonds says he received a ‘strange’ suggestion that he leave a book wrapped up in a newspaper at a local community centre and then pick up another book wrapped up in newspaper the following week. So you don’t have Little Free Libraries in Australia? Boxes that look like birdhouses with space for about 25 books? I am the steward of the Maya Angelou Little Free Library, which was built on my block in July 2020, which means I keep the box full and let people know if the door is broken. I am very impressed by the range of books people in my neighborhood are interested in reading. Everything put in the box is taken by someone eventually, including the official Narcotics Anonymous manual, prize-winning children’s novels from the 1950s discarded by the local library, and a surprising number of books on religion. I think when summarizing the pluses and minuses of the pandemic taking care of a little free library is at least a +1.

I haven’t read as much as in normal times, because I read on public transportation. But I did read *The High Crusade*, and I disagree with Perry Middlemiss’s calling it Young Adult. Young adult novels have young adult protagonists, and everyone in *The High Crusade* is an adult. I think it’s a very

good adventure novel, and very much directed towards John W. Campbell’s prejudices, since it shows that a bunch of medieval warriors, thanks to pluck, daring, and a tremendous amount of hand-waving, can conquer an alien empire. I’m not sure it’s in the top five Anderson novels, but it’s definitely in the top third, and I’m glad that I read it.

Lech Keller-Krawczyk’s claim that homelessness is ‘a permanent feature of the real free market capitalism’ should come here. We had a woman who spent a year and a half living in four bus stops and three locations on the street in my block. She at one point had her stuff in the sidewalk and yelled at people who ‘walked through my living room.’ I was told by one bus driver that she was banned from buses for ‘doing the nasty’ on the seats. She spent many cold winter nights (25-30 degrees Fahrenheit) sleeping in the bus shelters because she wanted to. There was room for her in the shelters and possibly an apartment, but she preferred rough sleeping.

Jennifer Bryce: *The Financial Times* reported that the ‘tie’ in the 2019 Booker Prize was that chair Peter Florence wanted Atwood to win and the jury preferred Evaristo, so the compromise was that both won. Bryce’s top ten list was very informative. (14 August 2021)

Dennis Callegari and Bruce Gillespie: The Callegari books column

Dennis Callegari

Bruce and Elaine:

Since we haven’t been able to bounce ideas around in person during the current unpleasantness, I’ve chosen you guys to annoy with my thoughts on *Klara and the Sun*. I know Bruce has read it already, but I don’t know if Elaine has. Elaine, if you haven’t and you’re going to — Spoilers Ahead!

First, let me admit that I have only read a couple of books by **Kazuo Ishiguro**. I appreciate his skill, but for some reason his writing doesn’t engage me on an emotional level. So I don’t know if he thinks that his writing needs to respect logical consistency, and I don’t know if he puts puzzles into his work.

1 So, my first question is ‘Is Klara an unreliable narrator?’. Since she’s an android I guess we’re supposed to think she’s not. But if she *is*, anything in the narrative is permitted — logically consistent or not. If we’re going that way, ignore the rest of my comments, because Ishiguro is simply not interested.

2 If Klara *is* a reliable narrator, I have a couple of real problems with the story.

(a) Klara seems extremely good at understanding human behaviour, but lousy at understanding the natural world. She thinks the Sun is God and that it goes to sleep in a barn at night. She thinks one machine emits *all* the pollution in the world. But you could argue that that’s because she has been *designed* to understand people but not much else. Mmm, OK.

(b) At least *two* apparent miracles occur in the story: the Beggar Man and his dog miraculously being restored to life by the Sun; and Josie’s miraculous Sun-powered recovery from the illness caused by the effort to ‘lift’ her. This I can accept if Ishiguro wants us to believe (for the purposes of the story) that the Sun actually *is* God, or if Klara is some kind of miracle-worker whose belief in the Sun helps her perform miracles.

Those would be interesting themes, but if either of those is the case, Ishiguro has

3 refused to follow through on his ideas.
The only way that I can see that the story is logically consistent is if the following is the case.

(a) We have been assuming that the ‘lifting’ of the lifted kids like Josie is some kind of genetic manipulation. But what if it’s done by turning them into some kind of cyborgs? (Via nanomachines or some other mechanism.) It *might* be used to explain Josie’s miraculous recovery from illness — she can be healed by the sun because, like Klara, she gets some of her strength from the sun.

(b) The Beggar Man and his dog may indeed have died, but been replaced by androids in the night. Or, alternatively, like Josie, they also get their power from the sun because they have been ‘lifted’.

(c) There are a couple of times when Klara gets Josie’s friend Rick, and Josie’s father to help her in wild schemes (trying to visit the Sun at home, and destroying the polluting machine) without explaining to them what she’s doing. Totally unbelievable — unless she can mentally influence both these guys because they also have been somehow ‘lifted’ in secret. That might also be used to explain why these supposedly un-lifted guys are so good, respectively, at drone technology and sabotaging robots.

What do you think? Am I over-analysing the plot? Is Ishiguro just not very interested in logical consistency? Or is there some other explanation that has escaped me altogether?

(24 July 2021)

Bruce Gillespie

I see Klara as a totally unreliable narrator, since we see everything only through her eyes, and she is learning to be (a) a sentient creature and then (b) a human substitute during the course of the book. But that’s the reason why I love the style of the book, where no concessions are given to an outside viewpoint.

I wish I could find again an article that I did not copy from the internet. It gives explanations for the way Kara sees the world. Frinstance, she is totally dependent on solar power, which explains her jockeying for position in the store window and her belief that everything depends on a Sun god. I’m very annoyed with myself for not having retrieved that article.

But it’s the pleasure of reading the prose that makes me a fan, as it does for most of the books I really like.

I was thinking the other day that it’s not worth me writing a ‘Dennis Callegari Book Column’ because I haven’t heard from you about what you have been reading during the year. But then, I reached a certain point last year with my mini-book reviews then found that I had too much material for *SF Commentary*. This began the panic-stricken project of trying to publish enough 80-page issues to use the material sitting there. I thought I had solved the problem, but I’ve just done a count-up of pages sitting there for the next issue — and they come to about 200.

Worse, my printer in town, Copy Place, has had to close its doors as for 30 June because there is simply no printing being done in town. I’ll investigate local printers as soon as lockdown ends, but *SFC* will not look the same in future. However, another printer might be able to print a 200-page issue, which Copy Place never could. They could only go to 108 pages within the folded-A3 format I’ve always used.

But if I go all-PDF, it’s hard to send it to anyone, except as an attachment to an email. I can’t send the real thing. But if it does come to that, perhaps I could vary my page length more flexibly.

I hope we can resume swapping notes about books read. I worked out the other day that of the books I’ve read this year, the contenders so far for the Top 10 are:

- Trent Dalton: *Boy Swallows Universe* (but I do need to re-read it) (2018)
- John Banville: *Snow* (2020)
- Mike Ashley (ed.): *The Mammoth Book of Apocalyptic SF* (2010)
- Sumner Locke Elliott: *Going* (1975)
- Wilmar Shiras: *Children of the Atom* (1950s)
- Kazuo Ishiguro: *Klara and the Sun* (2021)
- Billy Thorpe: *Sex and Thugs and Rock ‘R’ Roll: A Year in Kings Cross 1963-1964* (1996)
- M. John Harrison: *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* (2020)
- P. Djeli Clark: *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* (2019)
- M. John Harrison: *Climbers* (1989)
- Gwen Harwood: *Blessed City: Letters to Thomas Riddell 1943* (1990)
- Karen Joy Fowler: *The Sweetheart Season* (1996)
- Andy Weir: *Project Hail Mary* (2021)
- Richard Powers: *Galatea 2.2* (1995)
- Peter Ustinov: *Dear Me* (1977)
- Carlo Rovelli: *Seven Brief Lessons On Physics* (2014)

The can’t-put-down book is Andy Weir’s third novel, *Project Hail Mary*. That’s what I call a great hard SF novel.

(24 July 2021)

[*brg* The article I sent to Dennis is 'The Radiant Inner Life of a Robot' by Judith Shulevitz (*Atlantic Monthly*, April 2021).*]

DC

Sorry, Bruce. I read the review but I don't buy it. I'm not arguing with the social and technological developments that the article points out are important to the plot. I'm arguing about the mechanics of the plot — which the review mostly ignores.

Maybe Klara is an unreliable narrator. But that simply lets the author get away with not bothering about consistency. It makes the story so much weaker.

- 1 If Klara is a totally unreliable narrator, her analysis of everything around her is delusional. Which means that *you* get to pick and choose what is unreliable. You can explain *everything* away that way.
- 2 I don't think Rick is shown to be inferior to the 'lifted' children — unless you count being a jerk as a sign of high intelligence. In fact, Rick's talent for drone technology is more impressive than anything that even the 'lifted' Josie does, apart from her drawing.
- 3 There's no explanation of the apparent miracle of the Beggar Man and his dog — unless Klara is simply wrong about them being dead.
- 4 Josie suddenly begins her recovery after exposure to the brilliant sun. Even Josie's mother says that that extraordinary event was when Josie started getting better. You can only explain that away by saying Klara's experience was delusional. Maybe Josie was never ill at all.
- 5 Klara gets Rick to carry her to 'visit' the sun — twice. How does she convince him? By telling him that it's important for helping Josie. Her explanation: she's not allowed to tell him.
- 6 Klara gets Josie's father to help her sabotage a valuable machine. How does she convince him? By telling him that it's important for helping Josie. Her explanation: she's not allowed to tell him.

Having said all that, I quite enjoyed reading the book. But less, because of the plot holes.

(24 July 2021)

I can't match your reading list but luckily — because I can rely on the library to keep track of my recent reads — I can tell you that the books I've read recently include:

- two books about viruses, pandemics, and mRNA vaccines

- a book about dumb logical mistakes that smart people make
- a book about owls
- a couple of fantasy novels
- a couple of mysteries
- three books by George Saunders.

And I've just started William Gibson's *Agency*, which seems to be a story about AI and time travel.

Here are those books, probably in more detail than you'd want ...

- Walter Isaacson: *The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna: Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race*.

Isaacson wrote a biography of Leonardo da Vinci that I really enjoyed, so I asked the library to buy his latest book (thanks, Boroondara!). I now know more about the backstabbing that happens when scientists are striving to win a Nobel Prize. But the science of gene editing and people who do it is a fascinating subject. Maybe this book was a bit too long. Scientists aren't always interesting people.

- Michael Lewis: *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*

Michael Lewis is the guy who wrote *Moneyball* and *The Big Short*, both non-fiction works that were turned into fictional movies. His books are usually entertaining, but he does tend to portray some people as heroes and others as villains. This one is about the people in the USA who were sure we were about to have a pandemic, how they prepared for the pandemic, and how they handled it. Without these guys, the US would have been even *worse* off than it has been during 2020.

- Daniel Kahneman and others: *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*

Kahneman is a Nobel prizewinner and the author of — among others — *Thinking Fast and Slow*. This book, about how human beings are seldom consistent in their decision-making, is not as interesting as that book, but it provides some scary observations on things like how judges make sentencing decisions and businessmen make business decisions.

- Jonathan C. Slaght: *Owls of the Eastern Ice: The Quest to Find and Save the World's Largest Owl*

Slaght is one of the few people studying Blakiston's fish owl (the largest existing species of owl) and that's because it lives mostly in the eastern wastes of Russia. An insight into just how haphazard a lot of conservation work really is.

- Genevieve Cogman: *The Dark Archive*

The latest in Cogman's 'Invisible Library' series. Recent volumes have become a little

formulaic, but I still enjoy them.

- Ben Aaronovitch: *What Abigail Did That Summer*

The latest in the 'Rivers of London' series. This one is maybe aimed at a younger audience, but it includes English-speaking foxes who think they're secret agents out of *The Man from UNCLE*. Still fun, but Aaronovitch's 'Rivers' series now has *way* too many important characters to keep track of.

- Lindsey Davis: *A Comedy of Terrors*
The latest in the series of 'Flavia Alba' novels, which are themselves a sequel of the 'Falco mysteries' set in ancient Rome. I really don't know how Lindsey Davis keeps finding new aspects of Roman life to write mysteries about.
- Simon Scarrow: *Blackout*
A detective story set in Nazi Germany in the early days of WW2. Competent without being exceptional.

George Saunders

- The George Saunders book that set me reading a couple of others was *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, in which four Russians give a master class on writing, reading, and life. I didn't really know what to expect: it's a book based on a lecture course Saunders gives on Russian short fiction. Here's what I learned: Chekhov is a surprisingly modern writer; Gogol is a hoot; Turgenev is ... OK; and Tolstoy should concentrate on novels. If I were Saunders' student, I wouldn't find his analyses of the stories compelling. The best part of the book occurs when he applies his ideas to his own writing — that, and the writing exercises in the Appendix.
- Then I re-read *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*. Still my favourite Saunders work. It was written something like 15 years ago and describes quite presciently what the Trump presidency would be like ten years later.
- Which led me to the essays in *The Brain-Dead Megaphone*. The title essay explains a lot of where Phil came from. The rest of the essays range from very good to absolutely pedestrian — and includes an embarrassing fanboy essay about a Buddhist boy wonder.

As you can see, not as long a list as yours!

(24 July 2021)

The next two weeks of Olympics *would* be my son Dom's idea of heaven, except that he's just got a part-time gig as a teacher's aide in Hawthorn (when lockdown ends), and the possibility of a longer-term position at a school in Malvern. I think he'll be happy to watch the Games only at night. Jo and I are currently feeling sorry for ourselves because of a variety of (hopefully temporary) ailments

related to just getting old. Jo said as much to her doctor, and was miffed when the doctor laughed as if to say 'well, of course you're old'.

Movie-watching has been woefully under-utilised. Someday soon, I'm going to see if *Mank* has made it into JB HiFi yet.

Did I tell you that I had watched a DVD of *The Green Book* a while back? I can't remember. And before that, *Logan Lucky*? If I did, you're about to hear about both of them again. Probably in the same words. (See what I mean about getting old?) Both very enjoyable.

- *Logan Lucky* is a heist movie by Steven Soderbergh set in West Virginia, apparently written (pseudonymously) by his wife. Main actors Channing Tatum and Adam Driver. Excellent performances from both of them. Daniel Craig plays a demolition expert named 'Joe Bang'. Other famous names in the cast, in supporting roles, include Hilary Swank, Katherine Waterston, Katie Holmes, and Elvis Presley's granddaughter, Riley Keough. I wish they made more American movies like this: fast-moving without being bash-crash; sentimental without being mawkish; a bit of light and shade; and intelligent.
- *Green Book* won the Academy Award (which originally put me off), and is based on a true story of a black musician and his white minder travelling through the American South in the 1960s. Bound to be dismal, I thought. Not at all. There is some serious social commentary of course, but overall it's a funny *and* uplifting road movie. Mahershala Ali plays the stitched-up black musician, which allows Viggo Mortensen to run away with the movie as his Italian-American minder from New York. Directed by Peter Farrelly ... who I knew before this only as the director of *Dumb and Dumber*. Yep.

Other than that, I haven't been doing much movie-watching except on TV (and not much of that).

(24 July 2021)

BRG

I can only watch movies on DVD/Blu-ray, so haven't seen *Mank* yet. And I take it that *Logan Lucky* has only been on Netflix or whatever. No sign of it at cinemas or on disk. I have *Green Book* on DVD, but haven't got around to it yet.

I've been watching two quaint British TV series that have turned up on DVD at PlayMusic, my Blu-ray/DVD shop in town:

- Season 1 of *Campion* is based on the Margery Allingham novels. No sign of Season 2 on disk,

the only other season to have been shown in Australia (I'm told). There were six series in UK. Late 1970s, I think.

- The other is *The Mind of J. G. Reeder*, very quaint series, black and white, every series in one DVD box, from 1969–70. The stories were written by Edgar Wallace, but I've never read any Edgar Wallace.

Best movies have included:

- Ronald Neame's take on Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* (1964), with Deborah Kerr, Hayley Mills, John Mills, and Edith Evans. Very good, despite being made in widescreen colour, whereas it should have been made in black and white. Lots of extras on the Blu-ray.
- I finally caught up with *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1947), first time seen in 40 years. It's a much better Danny Kaye film than I had remembered. The fantasy sequences are excellent. The framing story also seems very enjoyable these days, whereas it was just boring 'filler' to me when I first saw the film in late childhood.
- Two great films noirs: *The Sniper* (1952), by Edward Dmytryk; and *The Dark Past* (1949) Rudolf Maté, with Lee J. Cobb and William Holden. Both are from a boxed set *Columbia Noir 3*. I doubt if I can afford boxed sets 1, 2, or 4 (\$159 each at PlayMusic).
- The second season of *His Dark Materials*, just released on Blu-ray, but no sign of Season 3 yet on disk. Infinitely better than the film *The Golden Compass*. Must read the three books again soon.

Sorry about your medical problems. I've had a few minor things myself, mainly asked about because I've been sleeping badly. Lockdown must be getting to me — even me — although I'm busy enough during the day.

(25 July 2021)

DC

Logan Lucky is certainly available on DVD, because I have a copy. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* is another

of my favourites.

I haven't seen any *Campion* episodes. I've often wondered about how hard it is for modern filmmakers to adapt old novels for the screen while retaining their 'period charm' ... which sometimes isn't particularly charming. I think it was a Margery Allingham novel where a major female character laments the lack of romance in her life by looking forward to the day when some considerate chap will rape her ... Yeah, I had to read that twice, too. I suppose it was meant to be a joke.

I get regular posts from a film noir group on Facebook. They keep mentioning movies I've never heard of as classics, but I've managed to catch a few over the years. One I've been looking for on DVD is *Murder, My Sweet*, which I saw on late-night TV decades ago and thought was pretty good. As far as I recall, it's basically an adaptation of Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* ... and why they changed the name completely escapes me.

Oh, well. back to the Olympics....

(25 July 2021)

BRG

Thanks for the tip about *Logan Lucky*. I probably just glanced at it and didn't consider it for buying. All depends what the cover looked like. I had no idea Steve Soderbergh had gone back to movie-length features.

Both series I mention do their best to place them in their own time. The main thing to notice is snobbishness, of which is also plenty in Dorothy Sayers. The Edgar Wallace stories have plenty of incidental racism, which places the series firmly in 1924. Still, from time to time there is a definite updating to account for the rather different prejudices of the intended audience of late 60s (*Mr J. G. Reeder*) or late eighties (*Campion*). Both series have some very amusing dialogue, and the mysteries for each can be as intriguing as any I've seen in Agatha Christie. (And it's the current updates of *Marple* that are really repellent. Sticking to the originals always seems more satisfactory than trying to update in a careless way.)

(25 July 2021)

We also heard from ...

GILLIAN POLACK, Canberra, ACT

'Thank you for the new *SF Commentaries*. This letter is short because I'm not operating on all fingers. I

spent much of last week undergoing medical tests to find out what's wrong with my sore finger and have still more ahead.' They're trying to rule out a bone infection. This limits my email to the thank you and to my new dream and to my new project.

My new project is another PhD. I'm looking at cultural transmission in fantasy novels and I'm having so much fun with it.' (1 June 2021)

Most of Gillian's letter is a message she wanted me to convey to one of my reviewers. I sent the message, but have no idea how the exchange of opinions worked out.

**RUSSELL BLACKFORD, Wallsend,
NSW**

'I was amused by your diary entries and Yvonne's little piece about meeting a whole bunch of us.' Thanks, Russell. (20 April 2021)

**WERNER KOOPMANN, Buchholz,
Germany**

Werner has been keeping me up to date with the life he's been leading in Germany with his wife Ulla, and also sent photos of their wonderful house. He also rings me from time to time.

NIC FAREY, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Nic sent a preview of his capsule review in *This Here...*42:

'*SF Commentary* 106 — There's a sad conclusion that every other zine seems to feature an obituary, in this case for Yvonne Rousseau. More good stuff within, and a typically honkin' loccol ... "everybody who is anybody".' (16 May 2021)

ALEX SKOVRON, Caulfield North, VIC

Just a note to thank you for *SFC Commentary* 106 ... It's good to see Ray Wood back in circulation. (9 May 2021)

ANDY SAWYER, Chester, UK

'No change from the last time I loced ... I'm in a

frantic week of various online (mostly Zoom) lectures and courses we have signed up for. Monday evening is German, Tuesday afternoon is "Bronze Age Britain", last night was a public lecture by a former colleague at Liverpool University, and ... at last the uke group is now meeting in the park (in the cold).' (14 May 2021)

**JULIAN D'AUBONNETT,
julian.daubbonnett@gmail.com**

'Thank you for sending the *SFC* to me. I'm hoping someone has some inkling of information about Margot D'Aubonnett, and reaches out to me. Thank you very much for your help.' (15 May 2021)

SIMON BROWN, Vientiane, Laos

'Thanks for the heads-up. Enjoyed *SFC* 106; sad to read about Yvonne Rousseau's passing. I'm sorry I never met her, or really got to know anyone in Melbourne fandom. Canberra was just too far away, I guess. Currently living in Johannesburg, where my wife teaches, but will be moving to Laos in mid 2021.' (24 May 2021)

PATRICK MCGUIRE

Good to receive an email from one of my most faithful correspondents over the years. 2020 and 2021 have been a bit wearying for him, as for us all:

'Issues 105 and 106 arrived safely late yesterday (24 May). The date on the postage label is 3 May, so not a terrible passage of time these days. They will get locced sooner or later. I now have both my vax shots and am past the wait for the second to take full effect, but since indoor public places are only gradually opening up again, life has not drastically changed since. Martin Wooster's sf group is meeting tomorrow after more than a year, but I will likely hold off for a month since I am now so unused to driving in congested areas and want to get more practice in.' (25 May 2021)

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 31 October 2021

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

Colin Steele

The field

BOOKS ABOUT BOOKS AND READERS

THE BOOKSELLER'S TALE

by Martin Latham (Particular Books; \$35)

SEVEN KINDS OF PEOPLE YOU FIND IN BOOKSHOPS

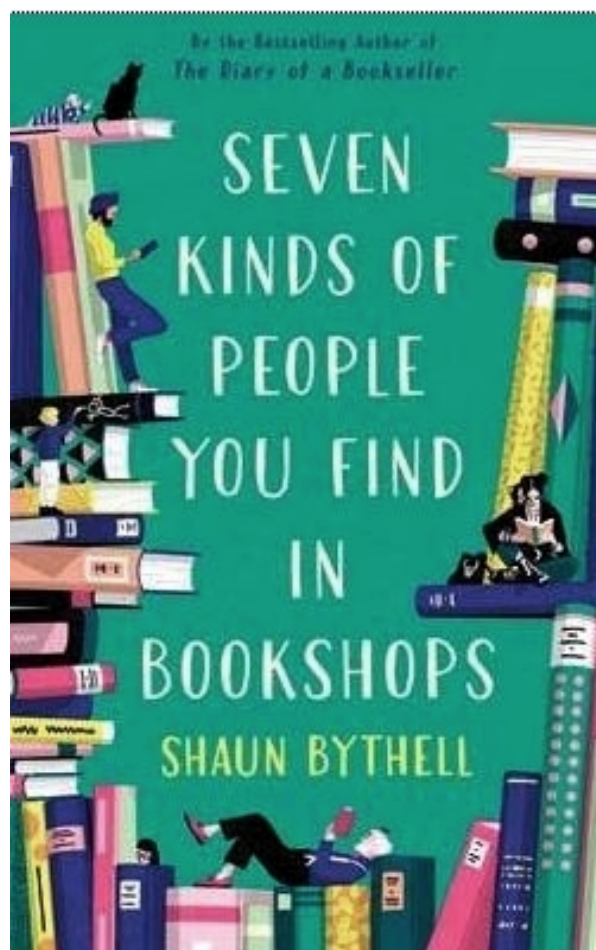
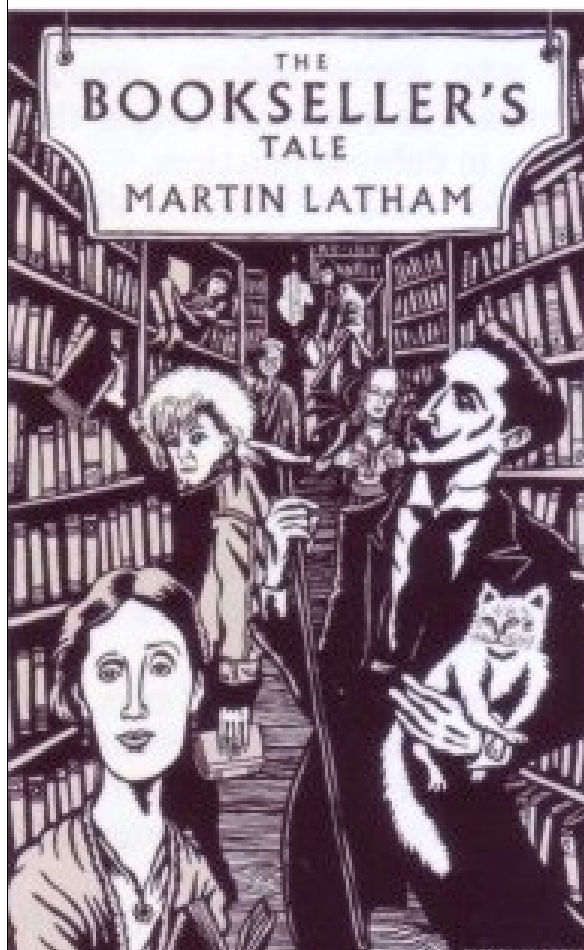
by Shaun Bythell (Profile; \$14.99)

Vincent van Gogh once wrote, 'so often ... a visit to

a bookshop has cheered me and reminded me that there are good things in the world'. Reading books, whether print or digital, soared when people were locked down due to the Covid pandemic.

In the UK, the Publishers Association reported that 2020 UK book sales, notably fiction and audiobooks, rose significantly, with consumer sales up 7 per cent on 2019, despite bookshop closures.

And it wasn't just new books. Penguin Classics sales of *War and Peace* went up by 69 per cent, *Don Quixote* by 53 per cent, *Anna Karenina* by 52 per cent, *Crime and Punishment* by 35 per cent, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which was seen as 'locked



down readers empathising with the most famous locked up figure in fiction', by 24 per cent.

'Plague' books were popular. *The Plague* by Albert Camus went up by 1500 per cent and Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* by 4000 per cent. Unfortunately, these classic titles were usually bought online, as bookshops were closed. In 2020, in France bookshops were seen as 'essential' and remained open, but in Britain they closed. The British Booksellers Association appealed in vain to the Government, arguing that in the time of a pandemic, 'bookshops were lanterns of civilisation and, for many, beacons of hope'.

Trade sources have estimated that before lockdown nearly 50 per cent of British book sales were through Amazon. Shaun Bythell, who owns Scotland's largest second-hand bookstore, The Bookshop in Wigtown, 'Scotland's National Book Town', prominently displays a Kindle that he shot in his shop.

Both he and Dr Martin Latham (*The Bookseller's Tale*) reaffirm the values of books and bookshops. Latham, manager of the Waterstones bookshop in Canterbury, writes about a woman having a heart attack in the shop and as she was wheeled out to the ambulance, she remarked, 'I do love it here — it would have been a great place to go.'

Martin Latham's *The Bookseller's Tale* is an entertaining collection of stories about books, bookshops, libraries and literary, and personal reflections. Latham begins by referencing the 800-year-old tomb of Eleanor of Aquitaine in Fontevraud Abbey, near Poitiers in which she is portrayed reading an open Bible, from which Latham extrapolates 'the story of humanity's love affair with books'.

His chapter headings are eclectic, including 'Booksellers of the Seine', 'The Mysteries of Mediaeval Marginalia', 'Organised Funkiness. New York Bookshops', 'Book Pedlars', and 'The Strange Emotional Power of Cheap Books'.

The book is chock full of bibliophilic anecdotes, some old, some new. During World War II, the W. H. Smith bookshop in Paris was staffed by the Gestapo. Latham comments, 'Imagine the customer service.' When at Waterstones, High Street, Kensington bookshop, he recalls Princess Diana browsing alone among fiction and books on psychology and spirituality.

He remembers with affection his time at a bookshop in London's Kings Road run by Sally Slaney and Leslie McKay, the latter well known for her Woollahra bookshops in Sydney. McKay's father's ashes, 'in a nice heavy box', propped up the art books in the window. Francis Bacon and Anthony Hopkins were regular customers; their conversations, Latham notes, 'unlocked the valves of

feeling'.

At Waterstones in Canterbury he was delighted to unearth a Roman bath under the bookshop floor and persuade Umberto Eco to spend a day selling books in the shop, including some of Eco's own without ever revealing his identity.

The Bookseller's Tale, with its shifting subject focus, replicates the meandering structure of second-hand bookshops. **Shaun Bythell**, who calls himself 'Scotland's grumpiest bookseller', has provided in *Seven Kinds of People You Find in Bookshops* a short addendum to his two bestselling books, *Diary of a Bookseller* and *Confessions of a Bookseller*.

In fact, it turns out to document nine kinds of people: Peritus (The Expert), Familia Juvenis (Young Family), Homo qui maleficas amat (Occultist), Senex cum barba (Bearded Pensioner), Viator non tacitus (The Not-So-Silent Traveller), Parentum historiae studiosus (Family Historian), Operarii (Staff) and Cliens perfectus (Perfect Customer).

He detests customers who whistle, sniff, tutter, haggle, fart, hum, expect to drop their children off as if it were a childcare centre, and deposit erotica books in the railway section.

Bythell, more often than not, seems to like the people he buys books from over the ones he sells to, or, as revealed in his earlier books, the people he works with. In the chapter on staff, he highlights student intern Mary who is doing an MA on 'The impact of male death on William Faulkner's female characters 1929 to 1936', which, he believes, means she will never have 'a lucrative career'.

Bythell concludes, however: 'without lovers of books I would have no business'. Lesley McKay also reflects on her experience in Sydney: 'People want bookshops ... A suburb is very impoverished without its bookstore'.

THINGS I LEARNED ON THE 6.28: A GUIDE TO DAILY READING by Stig Abell (John Murray; \$46)

Stig Abell was editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* from 2016 to 2020, before moving to the breakfast slot on the Times Radio. *Things I Learned on the 6.28* is a fascinating and insightful commentary, interspersed with reflections on life, both personal and literary, on the 500 books he read in 2019, the year he calls 1 BC (Before Coronavirus).

While Abell acknowledges his 'overall list is skewed towards European males, because they have dominated much of literary discourse over the centuries', he ends up with a 50–50 split of male–female authors.

His 12 chapters, January to December, have

STIG ABELL THINGS I LEARNED ON THE 6.28

A GUIDE TO DAILY READING



'Beyond splendid ... a brilliant idea, beautifully realised'
BILL BRYSON

specific book themes, such as English classics, comic fiction, historical novels, poems, and Shakespeare. Each chapter ends with a further reading list.

Abell's reading is varied and eclectic, following no discernible pattern, alternating between the famous and the relatively unknown. He admires the breadth of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*, thinks P. G. Woodhouse is 'the greatest comic writer', loves *Moby Dick*, and feels a little guilty for liking George Macdonald Fraser's 'Flashman' novels.

His favourite American novels include Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich*, and James Ellroy's *American Tabloid*, 'the book that comes closest to literature as narcotic jolt'. He notes that Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, by using the present tense, 'sees the Tudor period being rendered as part of a 24 hour news cycle'.

He doesn't eat breakfast before commuting, so the food described in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, described in the January crime chapter, takes the reader on a side journey of food in literature. While he admires the cleverness of Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen*, he realises how 'unvisual' his brain is. After reading to his children, he reflects on the 'current trend towards instant gratification, rather than the steady accumulation of knowledge'.

The last chapter, December's 'Lucky Dip', brings together his comments on the unlikely trio of Alexandra Dumas, J. K. Rowling, and Angela Carter. Abell sees Carter as 'a fitting figure to ... end my year of reading', terming her 'a high priestess of the Ovidian Imagination: the creator of constant metamorphoses'.

He concludes, 'the main thing I learned on the 6.28 is that I need reading to escape, to balance my mental state, to extend my horizon even when I feel circumstance is closing in around me'. Many in Britain, during the various lockdowns, would have seen reading in that context. Abell's book will certainly help in stimulating choices for reading and discussion.

BIOGRAPHY

DEVILS, LUSTS AND STRANGE DESIRES: THE LIFE OF PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

by Richard Bradford (Bloomsbury, \$45.75)

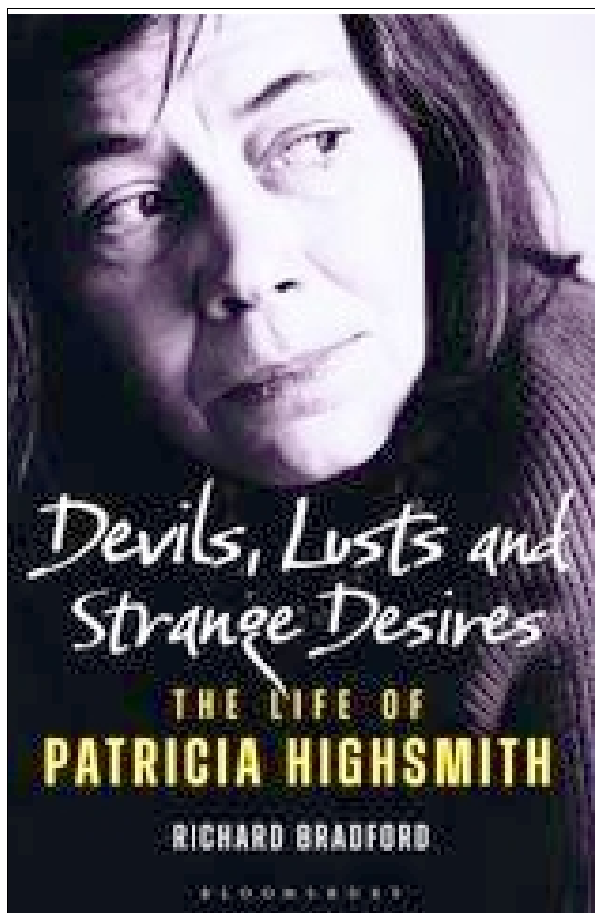
Great writers are often not very nice people. Think Charles Dickens, Jean-Paul Sartre, Philip Roth and Philip Larkin, while Lady Caroline Lamb famously labelled Byron, 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'.

Patricia Highsmith certainly falls into that category. **Richard Bradford**, Research Professor at Ulster University, titles his biography *Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires*. He takes this from Highsmith's 1947 New Year's Eve toast 'to all the devils, lusts, passions, greeds, envies, loves, hates, strange desires, enemies ghostly and real ... with which I do battle — may they never give me peace.' Highsmith never found that peace before her death in Switzerland in 1995.

Highsmith spent a number of years living in Europe, where her books had a huge following. The publication of her extensive diaries later this year will stimulate more interest in a writer now regarded as being in the pantheon of leading American writers of the twentieth century.

Professor Terry Castle called Highsmith 'the doyenne of the psychological suspense novel ... And one of the greatest, darkest American storytellers since Poe', while Graham Greene termed her 'the poet of apprehension'. Highsmith's literary career spanned nearly 50 years, with 22 novels and nine short story collections. In 1991, Highsmith was a nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

There have already been two significant bio-graphies of Highsmith; Andrew Wilson's *Beautiful Shadow* (2003) and Joan Schenkar's *The Talented Miss Ripley* (2009). Bradford thus covers a lot of already familiar ground, but benefits from producing a book in the centenary of Highsmith's



birth as well as a more concise biography.

Born Mary Patricia Plangman in Fort Worth, Texas in 1921, Highsmith had an unhappy and turbulent childhood which she remembers as ‘a little hell’. Her mother, who divorced her father nine days before she was born, had tried to abort Highsmith through drinking turpentine.

Highsmith was kissed by her biological father in a way, she said, was ‘not exactly paternal’, profoundly hated her stepfather, and was molested as a young girl by two males at her grandmother’s house. As a teenager she was anorexic but, according to her biographers, was a strikingly beautiful young woman.

By the time, however, she entered Barnard College she was a heavy drinker, starting at breakfast with a large gin. Her subsequent excessive consumption of cigarettes, gin, and whisky would lead to significant health problems and ultimately an appearance, in the words of Terry Castles, resembling ‘a sullen gargoyle’.

Her first novel, published when she was 29, *Strangers on a Train* (1950), which follows two men who agree to ‘exchange murders’, became a best-seller and filmed in 1951 by Alfred Hitchcock. It foreshadowed some of the themes that became a standard part of the psychological, homoerotic Ripley novels, where normal standards of good and evil are turned on their head.

Highsmith is probably best known today for the

five Ripley novels, the ‘Ripliad’, which have spawned five films and a soon-to-be Netflix series. The first of the Ripley novels, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, was published in 1955. Bradford writes that in *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr Ripley* Highsmith eroded ‘the boundaries between crime writing and literature as a high art’.

Highsmith portrayed Ripley as ‘suave, agreeable and utterly amoral’. She once wrote that ‘murder is a kind of making love, a kind of possessing’, traits amply demonstrated in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, where Tom loves Dickie Greenleaf but then kills him and assumes his identity. Highsmith, who could be termed Ripley without the charm, wondered in her diary, ‘Am I a psychopath?’ and answered to herself, ‘Yes, but why not?’

Highsmith’s lesbian love story *The Price of Salt* (1952), published pseudonymously as by ‘Claire Morgan’, was filmed as *Carol* (2015), starring Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara. Highsmith was sexually very active, mostly with women.

She was a lesbian, however, who despised women, commenting, ‘I like most men better than I like women, but not in bed’. Her sex with Arthur Koestler, another ‘tormented soul’, she described as ‘a miserable joyless episode’.

Bradford terms her ‘an emotional vandal’, exemplified in her treatment of two of her long-term female lovers, one attempting suicide in 1953. The fact they were both Jewish didn’t help, given Highsmith publicly called herself a ‘Jew-hater’. Her numerous racial hatreds also included Hispanics and Afro-Americans.

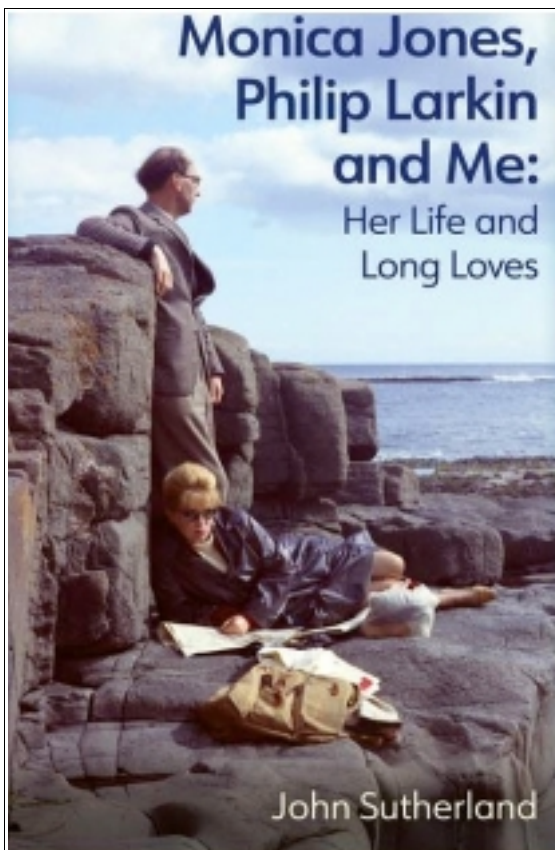
In that context, it is perhaps no wonder she preferred the company of snails, seeing them as ‘self-sufficient’ and indistinguishable in gender. Bizarrely, she often carried several snails around in her bra.

Bradford argues that Highsmith’s novels constitute ‘a lifelong autobiography’, although it was not a life to admire. Her final publisher, Otto Penzler, labelled her ‘a mean, cruel, hard, unlovable, unloving human being’, yet an author who wrote ‘brilliant’ books that transcended genres.

Overall, Highsmith operated in life’s shadows, and her novels seductively invite the reader to join her in the shadows of ‘Highsmith Country’.

MONICA JONES, PHILIP LARKIN AND ME: HER LIFE AND LONG LOVES by John Sutherland (Weidenfeld; \$32.99)

Philip Larkin has been termed by some as Britain’s greatest poet of the twentieth century. For nearly 40 years **Monica Jones** was his on-off lover. When Larkin died in 1983, Jones became his literary executor but many have not forgiven her, as literary



trustee, for authorising the destruction of 30 volumes of his diaries, an act that has been compared to the destruction of the Lord Byron diaries.

John Sutherland, Emeritus Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London, mining 'the last unclimbed peak in the Larkin range', the previously embargoed 2000 letters that Jones wrote to Larkin, seeks, ahead of Larkin's centenary in 2022, to reassess their relationship.

Sutherland says, 'my larger aim has been to salvage Monica Jones from the versions of Monica Jones circulated in her life and still circulate'. These begun when Kingsley Amis, in cahoots with Larkin, viciously caricatured Margaret Monica Beale Jones as Margaret Peel, a needy, dowdy, academic spinster in Amis's bestselling novel *Lucky Jim* (1954), dedicated to Larkin and which has never been out of print. Sutherland says this depiction made her 'a lifelong figure of fun'.

Sutherland terms this 'double-dyed' treachery, and reflects this was a time 'when she could/should have broken with Philip, and sued the backside off [the publisher] Gollancz, rendering Amis an untouchable author'. From then on it got worse, with Christopher Hitchens calling her 'frigid, drab and hysterical', while to Maureen Paton she was 'built like a scary Brunhilde'.

Monica Jones and Philip Larkin met at Leicester University in 1945. They had both been at Oxford University but never met. Jones, who gained a first-class Oxford degree, was, at the age of 21, 'a woman



Monica Jones in the late 1940s © Estate of Philip Larkin/Monica Jones Collection/Hull University Archives

of promise'. At Leicester she was a charismatic lecturer, wearing tartan when lecturing on *Macbeth* and swinging pearls for *Antony and Cleopatra*, occasionally revealing a glimpse of bright red suspenders under her dress.

Jones's academic career never progressed because she adamantly refused to publish and accept the rules of a male-dominated English department. She never escaped Leicester, 'locked like Rapunzel in her (red brick) tower with no release until retirement'. This led to Jones developing what Sutherland calls a 'depressed passivity', a condition that was exacerbated by her long relationship with Larkin.

Sutherland, who was Jones's student at the University of Leicester and then supervised by her, became one of 'her boys'. He interweaves his personal memories and interactions with her, including regular drinking sessions, into the narrative. Sutherland writes, 'I am in two minds: which is the more real? The Monica I knew as a young man in the 1960s? Or the Monica Jones from thousands of pages of manuscript documentation sixty years on? The book turns on that pivot.'

Sutherland acknowledges that he was shocked with 'the Monica Jones I didn't know', particularly her racism and 'acidic streams of downright nastiness', which she shared with Larkin. According to Sutherland, Jones was Larkin's intellectual equal, a sounding board of 'high literary sensibility', who 'helped erect around Larkin the scaffolding which let his poetry happen'. Ultimately they needed each other.

Larkin was the only man that Jones slept with in her 78 years, while he was unfaithful throughout their 40-year relationship, notably with Maeve

Brennan and Betty Mackereth, Larkin's colleagues in Hull University Library, where Larkin was University Librarian. This reviewer met Larkin several times, including in the Bodleian Library, but with his lugubrious demeanour, balding hair, dark-rimmed glasses, and long raincoat, he hardly struck one as a poetic Don Juan.

Jones had few female friends; she was too private. She was, Sutherland comments, 'a one-woman *huis clos*, writing desperate, often drunken, letters to the only man she could love'. Jones could, however, be said to have had the last laugh over Larkin's other loves.

Larkin, in later life, took her as his companion to important public and ceremonial occasions and she moved in with him before his death in 1985, both by then being heavy drinkers. Larkin bequeathed most of his substantial estate to Jones, who became increasingly reclusive before her death in 2001.

She may not have known that Larkin, on his deathbed, said that he only wanted to see Monica, 'to tell her that I loved her'. Sutherland notes, this was 'an act of confession and conscious of the hardship that loving Philip Larkin meant, an act of contrition'.

Sutherland, as a male biographer of a female, asked Jane Miller, Rosie Boycott, and Rachel Cooke to comment on his manuscript. Cooke thought that his book should have been called 'A Clever Woman: The Unhappy Life of Monica Jones', which might have been a better title, but clearly not as salesworthy.

Sutherland concludes, 'her letters confirm Andrew Motion's judgement that Monica was the most important relationship of Philip's life ... Lovers of his poetry should reserve an appreciative nod for Margaret Monica Beale Jones'.

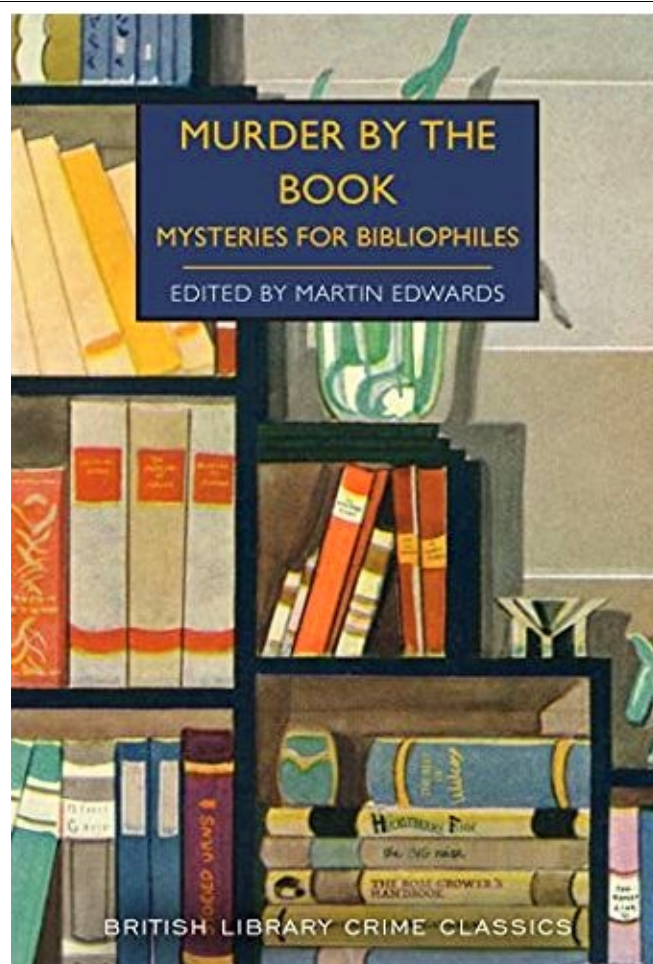
CRIME AND MYSTERY FICTION

MURDER BY THE BOOK: MYSTERIES FOR BIBLIOPHILES

edited by Martin Edwards (British Library; \$25.99)

Martin Edwards, who is series consultant for the British Library Crime Classics, was awarded the British Crime Writers Association Diamond Dagger in 2020 for his 'continued dedication and contribution to crime writing'. *The Golden Age of Murder*, his 2015 book, won the Edgar, Agatha, H. R. F. Keating, and Macavity awards.

In *Murder by the Book*, Edwards brings together 16 short biblio-mysteries covering authors, libraries, and books and bookshops. The short stories, which date from 1933 to 1973, are republished by



Edwards in the original order of publication. Many British golden age crime fiction authors feature, such as Gladys Mitchell, Michael Innes, E. C. Bentley, Christianna Brand, Edmund Crispin, and Ngaio Marsh.

Edwards has unearthed several stories by authors not usually associated with the genre. A. A. Milne is, of course, best known for *Winnie the Pooh*, but in 1922 he did publish one crime novel, *The Red House Mystery*, which gained him membership of the famous Detection Club. His 1950 short story 'A Savage Game' is, however, a slight criminal puzzle with an author solving a bungalow murder.

Prominent socialists, G. D. H. and Margaret Cole, according to Edwards, 'wrote detective fiction as a money-making sideline'. Their 1933 short story 'A Lesson In Crime' sees a bestselling author, allegedly based on Edgar Wallace, murdered on the Cornish Riviera express, the perpetrator hoping to prove that 'the essence of a really good murder is simplicity'.

Ngaio Marsh's famous detective Superintendent Roderick Alleyn makes a late entry in 'Chapter and Verse', as his wife Agatha Troy becomes involved in a New Zealand bookseller's quest that links deaths from the past to the present.

John Creasey was one of the bestselling crime fiction authors of the 1950s and 1960s, notably with

his 'Inspector West' and 'Gideon of the Yard' series. 'Book of Honour', set in Bombay, follows a young Indian who establishes a national book-selling chain. Father-son loyalties come into dramatic conflict when eldest son Krishna sells drugs as well as books in the firm's travelling libraries.

Victor Canning was another bestselling author of the Creasey era. 'A Question of Character' intriguingly begins, 'The real reason why Geoffrey Gilroy decided to murder his wife was not just that he wished to marry another woman with whom he had fallen in love', but more because his novels had been eclipsed in sales and critical acclaim by those of his wife. But, will he also be bettered by her when it comes to murder?

Murder by the Book may not be a book to kill for but it certainly contains a number of characters who have no such compunction!

BILLY SUMMERS

by Stephen King (Hodder; \$32.99)

Stephen King has been favouring American crime fiction noir recently with his 'Mr. Mercedes' trilogy, *The Outsider* and *Later*. *Billy Summers* continues that trend, but it is a much more complex novel, as King weaves reflections from his long writing career into the plot line.

Billy Summers, a 44-year-old decorated ex-Iraq war sniper, has become a contract hit man, but only kills 'bad guys'. For a \$2 million payout he takes on one last job, which will entail going undercover for months.

King sees last-job scenarios as an American cultural touchstone. 'Everybody roots for the guy to get out of it. There are always jobs that go wrong, but you always hope that the guy at the center of it, who has a good heart, will get out.'

King sets the novel in pre-Covid 2019 Trump America, because 'the story I was telling and all the movement, I had to move it back in time'. King realistically, as ever, describes the lives of the 'ordinary Joes and Jills' in the small Southern town in which Billy assumes his new identity.

Billy poses as a writer, having always been an avid reader, especially of Zola, Hemingway, and Hardy, but deliberately assumes a 'dumb' persona for his middleman contract employer, reflected by only reading *Archie Comics*.

Billy, who begins writing a novel incorporating his troubled childhood and his time as a 'garbage-man with a gun', uses his fiction to ponder whether 'someone who ends the lives of others, even bad people, can be considered good'.

King has said in an interview, 'What he [Billy] writes about are the things he's held in his mind



and in his heart, and they're very important parts of what he became, which is a hitman. Of course, Billy's not stupid at all. In fact, he's really smart. Little by little as he writes his story, his defense mechanisms start to crumble'.

Billy's self-examination increases after he takes in Alice, a young woman dumped outside his apartment after a brutal rape, with Billy exacting revenge on the perpetrators. Alice becomes a part of his life, although he realises, 'If you stay with me and if you live this life, you'll be ruined'.

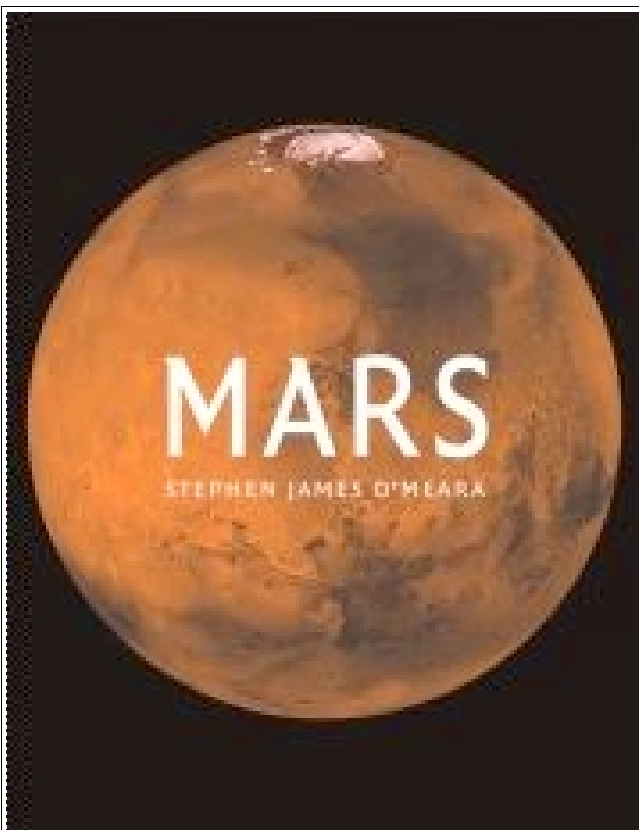
Events accelerate in the second half of the book, after the hit takes place. Billy realises that he has been used, and is next in line to be killed. Billy and Alice flee together while, at the same time, working up the contract chain to find the very big media name behind Billy's assignment and double cross. The ending involves loss, hope, and redemption on several levels. *Billy Summers* is one of King's best novels.

SCIENCE

MARS

by Stephen James O'Meara (Reaktion Books; \$49.99)

Stephen James O'Meara is an award-winning



astronomer and co-editor of Oxford's *A Dictionary of Space Exploration* (2018). This background ensures the text of *Mars*, a profusely illustrated hardback, is authoritative and insightful. After O'Meara covers the 'prehistory' and the fictional 'romancing' of Mars, the bulk of the book is devoted to Martian exploration from 1960 onwards and plans for piloted missions.

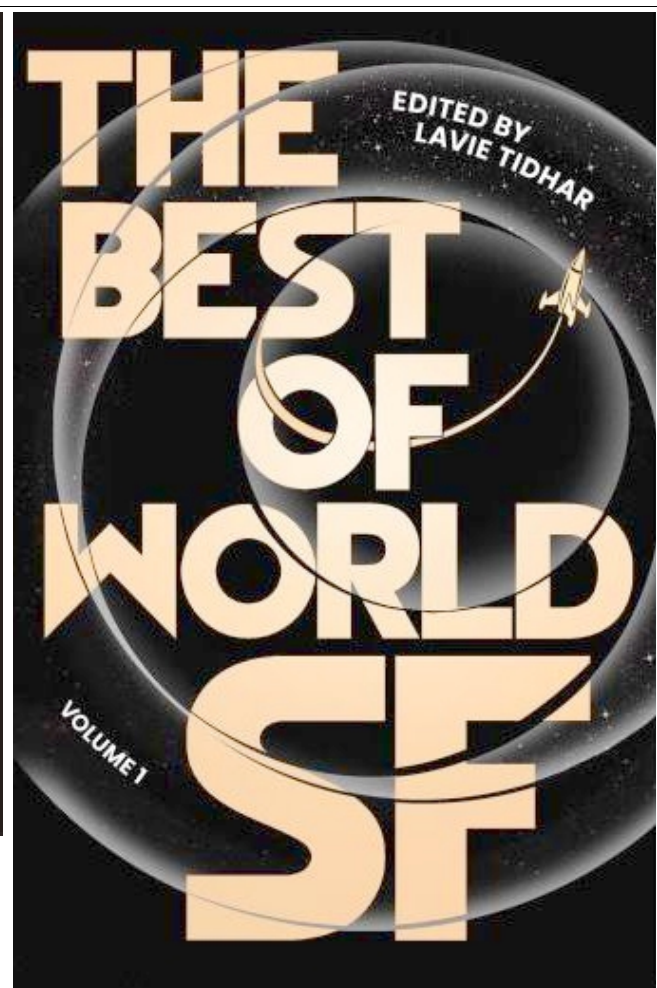
INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION

THE BEST OF WORLD SF: VOLUME 1 edited by Lavie Tidhar (Head of Zeus; \$35)

The Best of World SF: Volume 1, edited, with an introduction, by award-winning Israeli author **Lavie Tidhar**, containing 26 short stories, mostly reprints, amply proves that SF is no longer an Anglo-American preserve. The authors, who come from 21 countries, include Tlotlo Tsamaase from Botswana, Fabio Fernandes from Brazil, and Gerardo Horacio Porcayo from Mexico.

SF reflects contemporary issues such as the suppression of cultures and the plight of refugees. French author Aliette de Bodard's award-winning story 'Immersion' examines the implications of Quay's minority culture, with a Chinese Vietnamese background on Longevity Station, dominated by the algorithmic culture of the 'Galactics'.

'The Green Ship', by Italian author and



publisher Francesco Verso, reflects his vision for a better future. A boatload of refugees crossing the Mediterranean are saved by 'The Green Ship,' a self-sustaining solar powered former aircraft carrier, converted to carry 7000 refugees to the neutral 'No-Mad Land'.

PHILOSOPHY THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION STORIES: EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE POSSIBLE

edited by **Helen De Cruz, Johan De Smedt, and Eric Schwitzgebel** (Bloomsbury Academic; \$44.99)

Philosophy Through Science Fiction Stories, edited by **Helen De Cruz, Johan De Smedt, and Eric Schwitzgebel**, is an intriguing collection. It brings together 11 stories written by philosophers and SF authors examining issues such as 'What does it mean to be human?', 'Is neural enhancement a good thing?', and 'Belief in the afterlife'. The combination of award-winning SF authors, such as Ken Liu, Ted Chiang, and Aliette de Bodard, and leading academics ensures that a wide range of philosophical issues is covered.

WE ROBOTS

edited by Simon Ings (Head of Zeus; \$55)

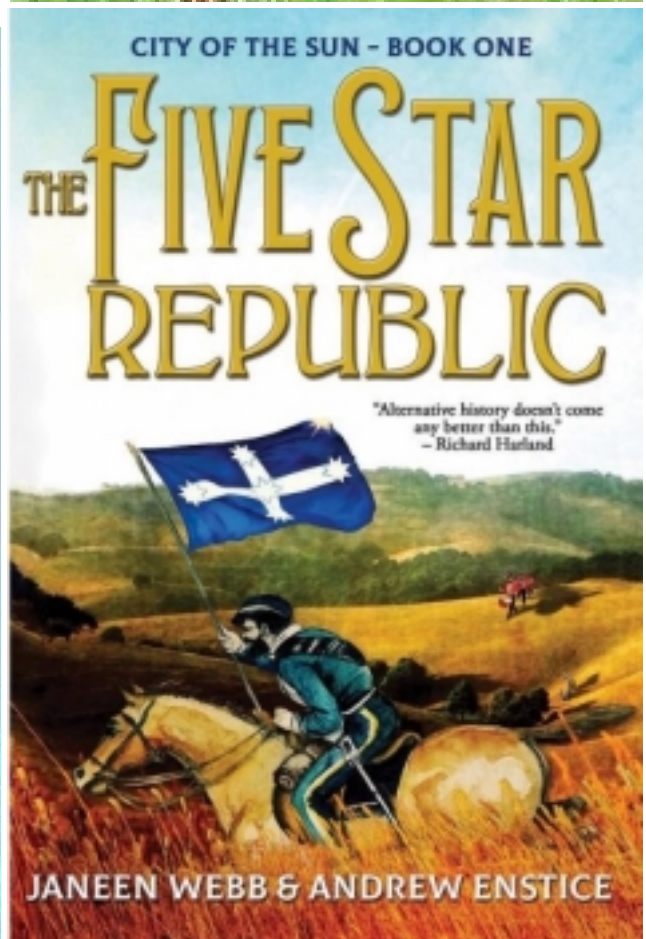
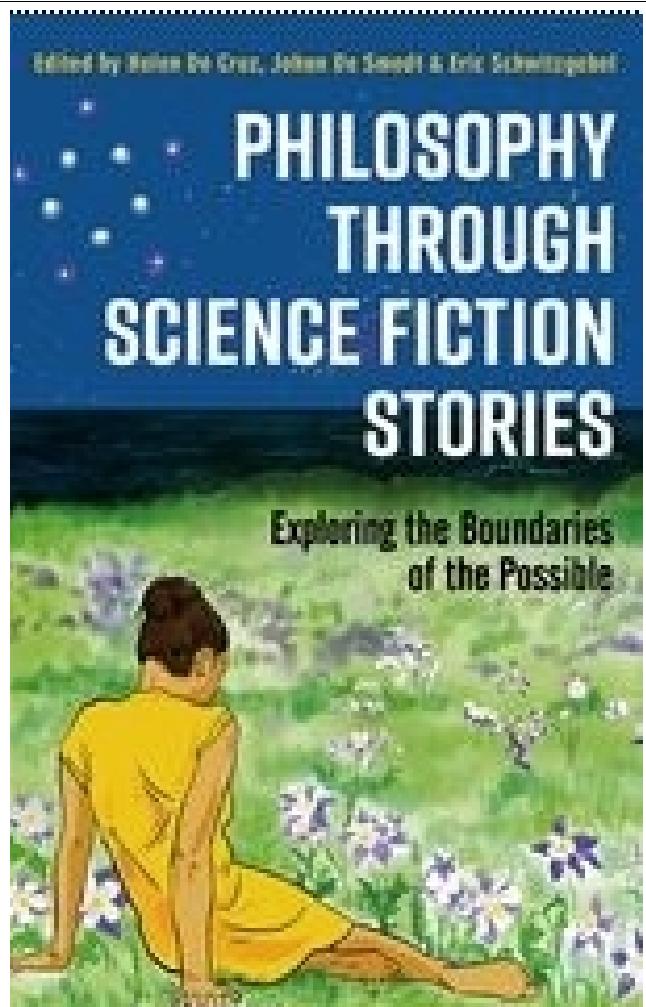
The 100 AI stories, dating from 1837 to the present, in an excellent anthology, *We Robots*, edited by **Simon Ings**, the Arts Editor of the *New Scientist*, confirm that these are not new fictional themes. In over 1000 pages, authors who include Stanislaw Lem, Ray Bradbury, Australia's Greg Egan, and Cory Doctorow, examine the increasingly blurred interface between human and AI.

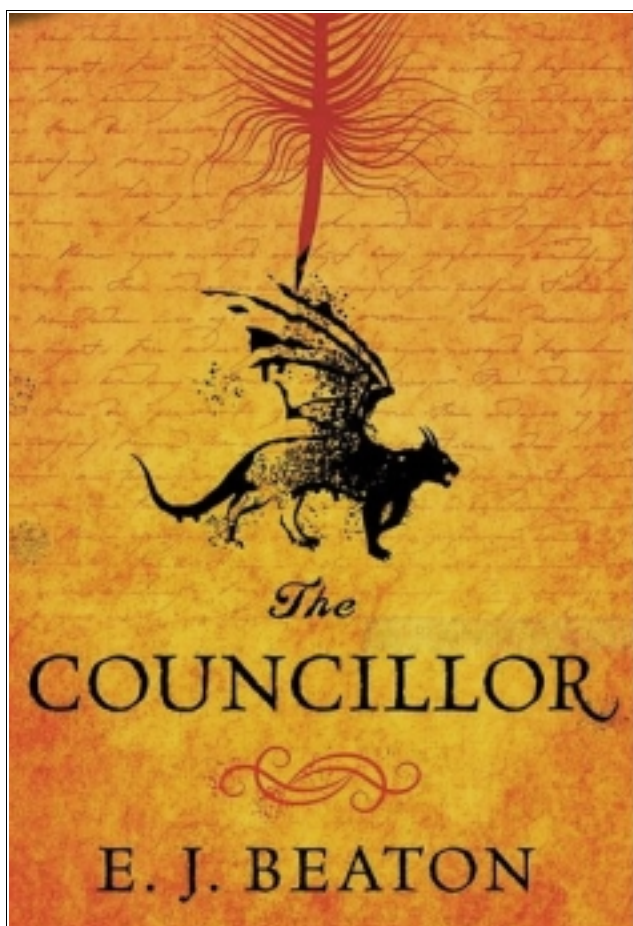
AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

THE FIVE STAR REPUBLIC: CITY OF THE SUN: BOOK ONE

by Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice (IFGW Publishing; \$29.99)

Alternate history can be found in *The Five Star Republic: City of the Sun Book One*, the first in a trilogy from Melbourne authors, **Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice**. The book spins off the 1854 Eureka Stockade rebellion, into a new independence movement for Victoria, one in which the Californian Rangers Revolver Brigade will play an important part. Webb has said, 'This is a nine-





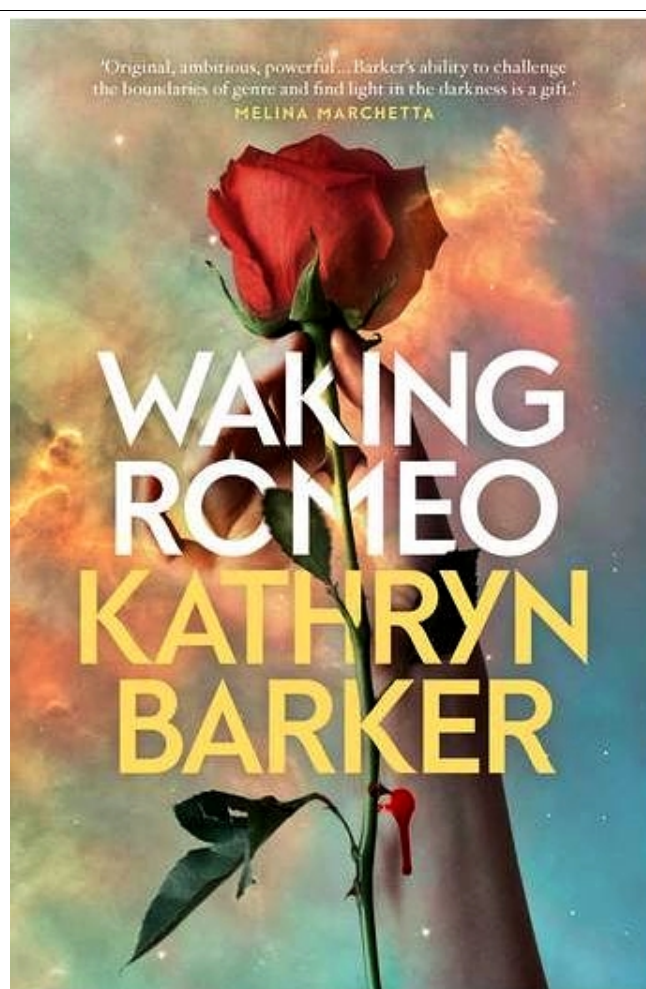
teenth-century Australian history you wish we'd had', with solar power innovations powering Victoria's independence. Webb and Enstice cleverly weave real historical characters, such as Disraeli, Redmond Barry, and Lola Montez, into a narrative that will appeal to both history and fantasy fans.

THE COUNCILLOR

by E. J. Beaton (DAW; \$39.99)

The Councillor, a debut novel by Melbourne-based author **E. J. Beaton**, spins off her ANU PhD on Machiavellian politics in Shakespearean drama and fantasy literature. Political intrigue is the key, as Beaton follows orphan commoner Lysande Prior who, as Councillor, has to choose the next ruler after her closest friend, Queen Sarelin, is murdered.

This is a world where women are rulers and warriors but ambition in politics is not restricted by gender. Bisexual Lysande struggles with her identity, her magical drug addiction, and her own ambition in regard to the Crown. Beaton's characterisation of Lysande, allied to a complex plot line, makes *The Councillor* an impressive fantasy debut.

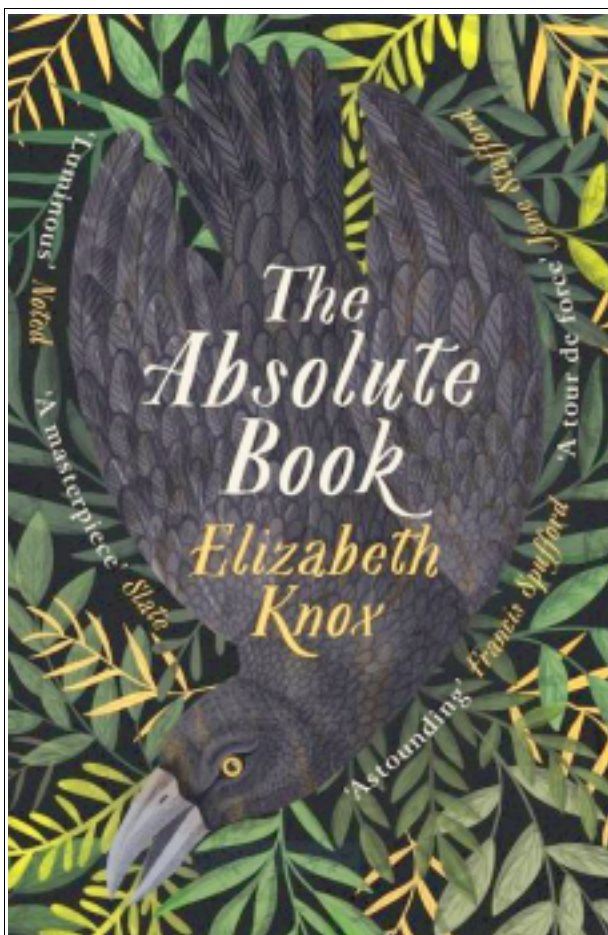


AUSTRALIAN YOUNG ADULT SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

WAKING ROMEO

by Kathryn Barker (Allen & Unwin; \$19.99)

Canberra-born **Kathryn Barker**'s first novel, *In The Skin of a Monster*, won the Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Novel in 2016. Now comes another impressive YA novel *Waking Romeo* (Allen & Unwin, \$19.99). Barker takes *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights* as her plot-line inspiration. In a bleak future world of 2083, in which most of humanity has time travelled to the future, Jules has survived her suicide pact with Romeo, but he remains in a coma. When handsome time traveller Ellis arrives (the Brontë reference), one of only a few who can travel back in time, Jules and Romeo's future will be changed forever.



NEW ZEALAND FANTASY

THE ABSOLUTE BOOK

by Elizabeth Knox (Michael Joseph; \$32.99)

The *Absolute Book*, New Zealand award-winning author **Elizabeth Knox**'s thirteenth novel, is a stunning mixture of genre invention, as might be expected from an author who won the New Zealand Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in 2019 and was appointed Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for Services to Literature in 2020.

Elizabeth Knox's brother-in-law was killed in a road accident, leaving behind a wife and four children. The driver was convicted of manslaughter. Knox subsequently commented, 'he wasn't tried for murder but in effect, the spite and carelessness of the act was murderous'.

In *The Absolute Book*, the main character, 19-year-old, Taryn Cornick is devastated when her older sister Beatrice is killed in a hit-and-run. The driver, Timothy Webber, is convicted of manslaughter but Taryn is convinced that Beatrice was murdered. Six years later, after Webber's release from prison, he is found dead in suspicious circumstances. Years

later, Taryn is deemed the main cold case suspect by London detective Jacob Berger.

Now 33, Taryn has written an international best-seller, *The Feverish Library*, emphasising the importance of and the threats to libraries, with a last chapter on the history of book burning. The book's success brings unwelcome attention to Taryn by those searching for an ancient scroll box, the mysterious and powerful 'Firestarter', which has survived numerous library fires over the centuries.

A strange young man, called Shift, informs Taryn that the worlds of humans and the 'Sidhe', Gaelic supernaturals, are in a trans-dimensional battle in which the search for the Firestarter is crucial, and that the death of her sister might have been collateral damage. Taryn becomes both the hunter of the 'Absolute Book' and the hunted.

Knox has said that she wanted to write 'an arcane thriller that didn't just hint at the magical and mystical'. In a narrative of over 600 pages, full of literary allusions, blending history, myth, and magic, Knox echoes the juxtaposition of reality and unreality in time streams of the novels of Alan Garner and Philip Pullman.

The stories of Taryn, Jacob, and Shift begin within the contemporary settings of extremist populism, government surveillance, and climate change. Then it becomes multidimensional as they interact with mythological figures, especially the Celtic, with a crucial setting in Purgatory, where it 'wasn't forever living with your mistakes; it was forever defending your decisions'.

The *Absolute Book* is an ambitious book of hope, loss, and ultimately redemption, played out on a cosmic scale.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

KLARA AND THE SUN

by Kazuo Ishiguro (Faber; \$32.99)

Klara and the Sun is **Kazuo Ishiguro**'s eighth novel and his first since he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. Once more he delves into the speculative fiction genre, as he did in his 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, in which he examined the implications of human cloning. In *Klara and the Sun*, artificial intelligence, the nature of consciousness, and what it is to be human are the key themes.

Ishiguro must have been aware of Brian Aldiss's 1969 story 'Super-Toys Last All Summer Long', with its similar depiction of human/AI family relationships, filmed by Steven Spielberg as *AI: Artificial Intelligence*.

Ishiguro's novel begins with, Klara, 'an Artificial Friend', a solar-powered android, waiting in a shop window, 'hopeful a customer will soon choose her'. Klara is ultimately chosen as a companion by 14-year-old Josie, who has become seriously ill after being 'lifted', i.e. after undergoing gene editing surgery, a process intended to improve her intelligence to get into university.

The super-elite have their children 'lifted' in order to maintain economic and social supremacy in a polluted near-future America. Josie's sister Sal has died after undergoing the gene-editing process, while her father and mother have divorced after Josie's father loses his job i.e. has been 'substituted' and becomes part of societal 'economic serfdom'.

Ishiguro has voiced his concerns that because of 'AI, gene-editing, big data ... I worry we are not in control of these things anymore ... and their implications for equality and democracy'.

Klara's nonlinear view of the world, initially a tabula rasa, slowly fills as she tries to take in a wider world than one seen from the shop window. She is 'Terminator-like in her determination to look after Josie'. Klara turns out to be more human and more empathetic than most humans.

The humans she encounters don't quite know where to place Klara. Ishiguro says, 'Is she like a vacuum cleaner? Is she like a servant? Is she like a guest? Is she like another child in the family or another adult in the family? So there are these competing versions of hierarchy and class that have come into play in this world, a world in flux'.

Ishiguro has often examined the nature of service and duty in his novels, as exemplified by the troubled butler, Stevens, played by Anthony Hopkins in the film of *The Remains of the Day*.

Ishiguro wonders, 'What is the nature of faith and love for an android? ... What happens to things like love in an age when we are changing our views about the human individual and the individual's uniqueness?'

Josie's lawyer mother sees Klara as a possible Josie surrogate should Josie remain ill or even die. Ishiguro here ponders if AI will expose 'love as a delusion'. Klara reflects, however, 'I don't think it would have worked out so well. Not because I wouldn't have achieved accuracy ... I'd never have reached what they felt for Josie in their hearts'.

Ishiguro's beguilingly simple narrative echoes Klara's slow appreciation of the issues that affect her relationship with Josie. Solar-powered Klara wonders if she makes a pact with her God, the 'Sun', she might be able to cure Josie. Since Klara has 'solar absorption problems', and weakens if there are 'four continuous days of Pollution', she believes that the Sun dislikes 'Pollution'. She asks her Sun, 'Supposing I were able somehow to find

this machine (a single polluting factory) and destroy it ... Would you then consider, in return, giving your special help to Josie?'

Klara sees Josie's recovery as reward for the pact with her God. She then faces an inevitable machine 'slow fade' and relocation to 'the Yard'. Klara takes solace in that 'I have my memories to go through and place in the right order'. Comparisons here with the slow fade of a human life.

A number of Ishiguro's novels have despair or denial at their core. Ishiguro has said that, at the emotional level, *Klara and the Sun* was 'a reply to *Never Let Me Go* or at least to the overriding sadness of the novel'.

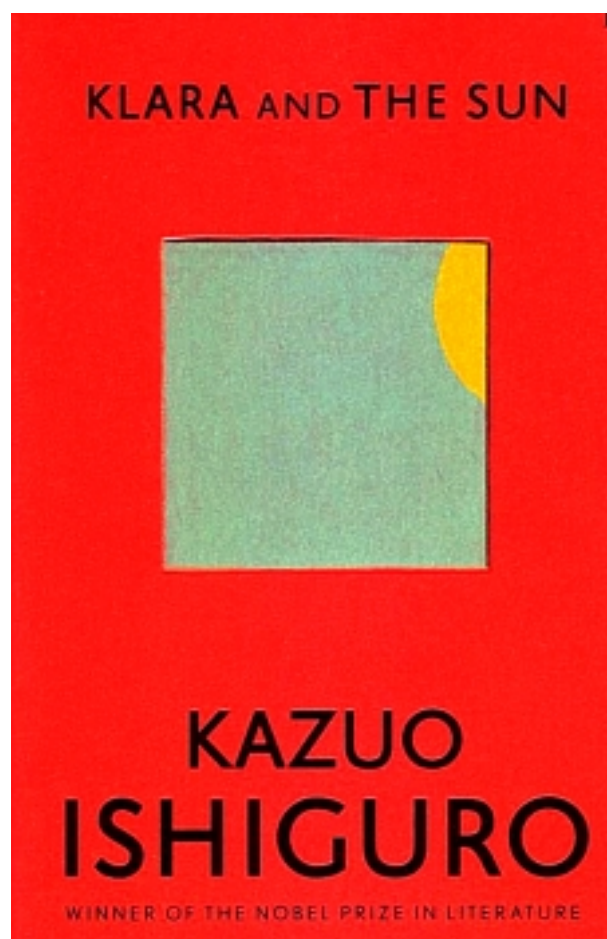
Klara and the Sun has a slightly more optimistic, albeit stoic, tone. Ishiguro concludes, 'By presenting a very difficult world you can show the brightness, you can show the sunniness'.

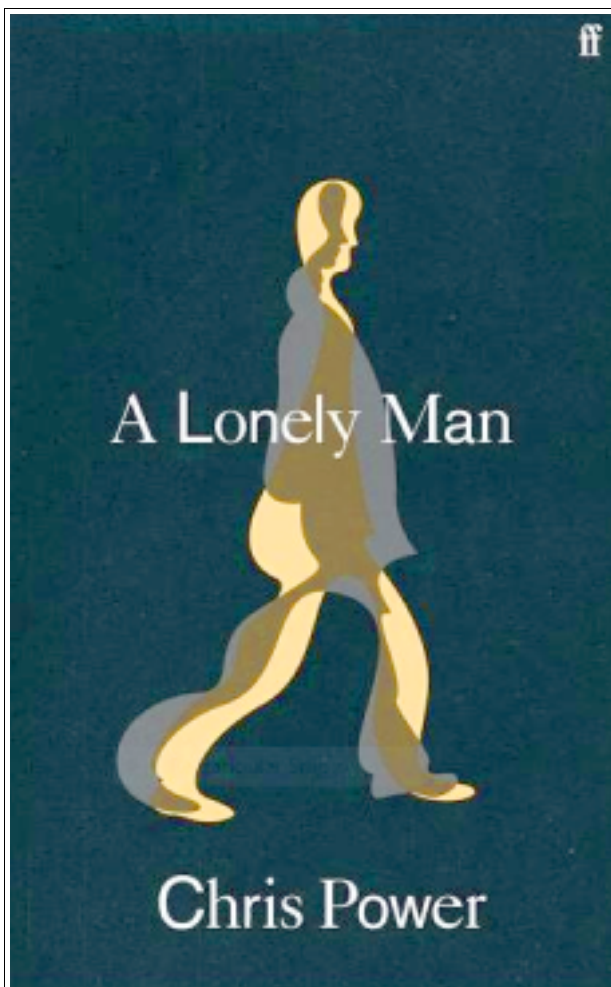
A LONELY MAN

by Chris Power (Faber; \$29.99)

Chris Power, who has been a columnist for *The Guardian* since 2007, had his short story collection *Mothers* longlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize in 2018. His debut novel, *A Lonely Man*, is largely set in Berlin, where middle-aged English writer Robert Prowe is long overdue finishing a novel.

At a book launch in Berlin, Robert meets Patrick





Unsworth, a drunken English ghostwriter, who tells Robert that his latest book was to be about a dissident Russian oligarch, Sergei Vanyashin. It was abandoned after the oligarch was found hanging 'from an oak tree in the woods outside his Buckinghamshire estate', but Patrick still has the tape recordings of his conversations with Vanyashin.

While Vanyashin's death was officially pronounced as suicide, Patrick suspects it was a murder authorised by Vladimir Putin. Vanyashin had believed his book would be 'a blade, and I want it in Putin's arse right up to the hilt'.

Patrick believes that he being now is being followed by Russian agents seeking the tape recordings, but Robert initially thinks him paranoid. Robert believes he can cure his writer's block by assimilating Patrick's story into a novel. After all, 'Stories are like coins, Robert thought, passed from one hand to another'. And, 'if Patrick's story about being on the run was a fantasy, he had chosen a credible enough villain'.

Gradually Robert and Patrick's lives merge. Power has said, 'I liked the idea of someone getting entangled in something without really knowing what they were getting involved in.' By appropriating Patrick's material, Power has said that 'some of the choices Robert makes in the book are very

much about the ethical entanglements of that'.

Fiction and reality become merged in what Power has called intertextual 'stacked realities'. In this context, Powers has referenced the autofiction of Karl Ove Knausgaard and the tensions between two writers in Roberto Bolaño's short story 'Enrique Martin'. Power is, through his two main characters, commenting on the loneliness and struggles of the creative process.

Robert's faith in the novelist's cloak of invisibility disappears when he thinks that he is being followed and especially after a call, which turns out to be false, that his wife has been badly injured in a car crash.

Now that Patrick has fled Berlin, will Robert's ownership of the Vanyashin story become too dangerous to tell, even fictionally? The world of shadows close in at the end of a clever, and structurally intriguing, debut novel.

WIDOWLAND

by C.J. Carey (Quercus; \$32.99)

It's 1953, Coronation year for Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. King George VI and his family 'disappeared', after a Vichy style 'Grand Alliance' between Great Britain and Germany was established in 1940. Now, 13 years later, Britain is a German protectorate under Alfred Rosenberg, who actually had a prominent role in Nazi Germany.

Readers have been here before, notably in Len Deighton's *SS GB*, Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, and C. J. Sansom's *Dominion*. **C. J. Carey**, the pseudonym of novelist Jane Thynne, does not quite reach their alternative history heights but provides a decidedly different female perspective.

Thynne researched Nazi Germany for her 1930s spy series. The relatively recent death of her husband, bestselling author Philip Kerr, provides a personal background to *Widowland*, as well as her examination of the treatment of older German 'Cemetery Women' in World War II.

It was Hermann Goering who said that the role of German women was to 'take a pot, a dustpan and a broom and marry a man'. British women under Nazi rule are subjected to a rigid caste system largely determined by physical appearance and childbearing capability. Widows, known as 'Friedas', who can no longer have children, have been ghettoised in rundown dormitory suburbs around the country. Most British able-bodied men have been shipped off to hard labour in Europe.

Rose Ransom, the main character, who works at the Culture Ministry, answers ultimately to Rosenberg. She is in a relationship with her boss, but given her age, is being urged to get married and



have a child. Her daily task is bowdlerising classic female authors, such as Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, to remove textual signs of female independence.

After graffiti from female authors, such as 'Strengthen the female mind ... and there will be an end to blind obedience', is posted on the walls of major public buildings, public insurgencies begin to break out. Rose is ordered to infiltrate the Oxford widows ghetto, which is seen as the source of the graffiti.

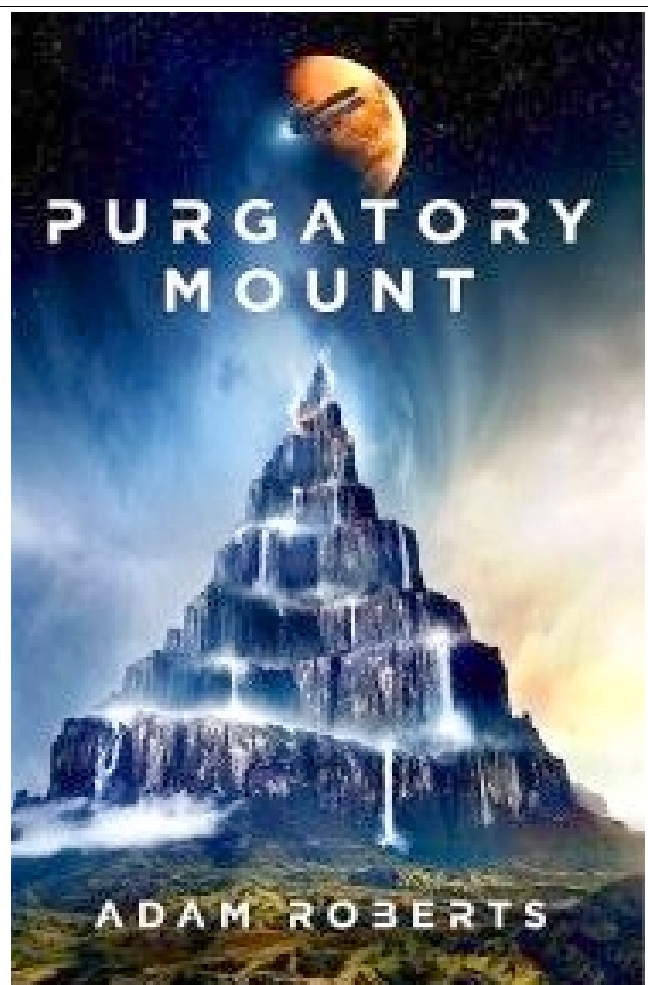
Hitler, only referred to in the text as the Leader, is coming to England for the Coronation and intends visiting his English capital, Oxford. It is therefore particularly important for Rose to learn of any plans by the widows for an attack on Hitler.

What she learns leads to a dramatic conclusion in Oxford University's Bodleian Library, in which one of the Bodleian's most precious items, the manuscript of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, will play an important role. *Widowland* effectively emphasises the subversive nature of literature.

PURGATORY MOUNT

by Adam Roberts (Gollancz; \$45)

Adam Roberts' *Purgatory Mount* is divided into the



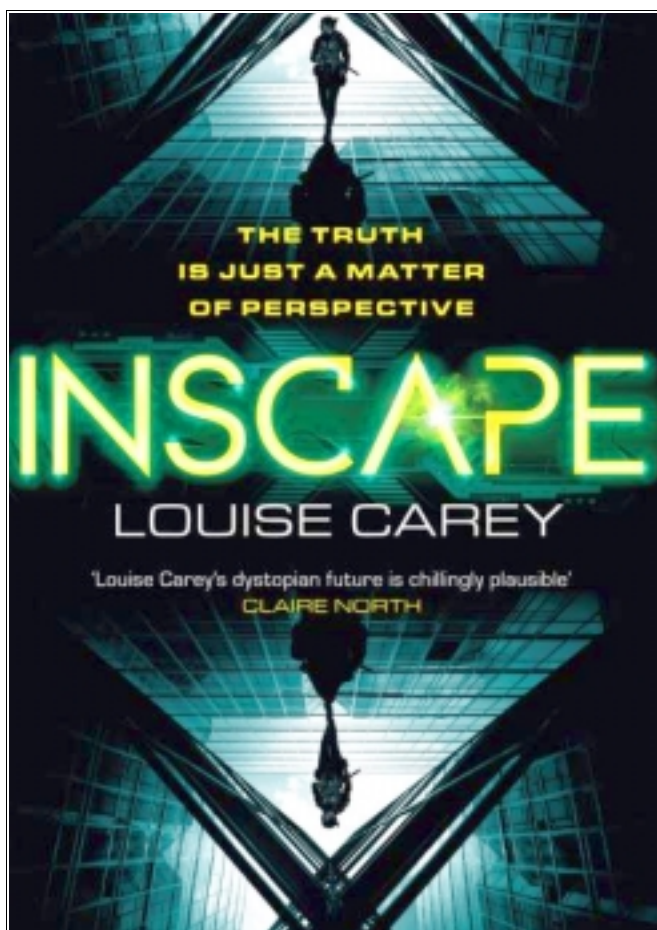
three Dantean sections of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. It begins and ends with the 'framing' story of a small post human starship crew, with a cargo of slightly altered humans, investigating a huge mysterious alien structure on a planet that they name Dante.

The main narrative is set in a near future, 'United States of Amnesia', in which a neurotoxin has damaged memories, so people, 'buckleheads', can only access their memories through smart phones. 'Otty' and her four teenage friends are in a form of purgatory, fleeing for their lives, as their private internet network threatens the dominating military industrial complex. Roberts, in an afterword, reveals that Dante's *Divine Comedy* was his inspiration, but the end result is less a fictional paradise than a somewhat unconvincing hybrid novel of atonement.

INSCAPE

by Louise Carey (Gollancz, \$32.99)

Louise Carey's debut novel *Inscape* is the first of a trilogy. A future London, recovering after the global 'Meltdown Wars', is the focal point of a rivalry between two huge tech corporations,

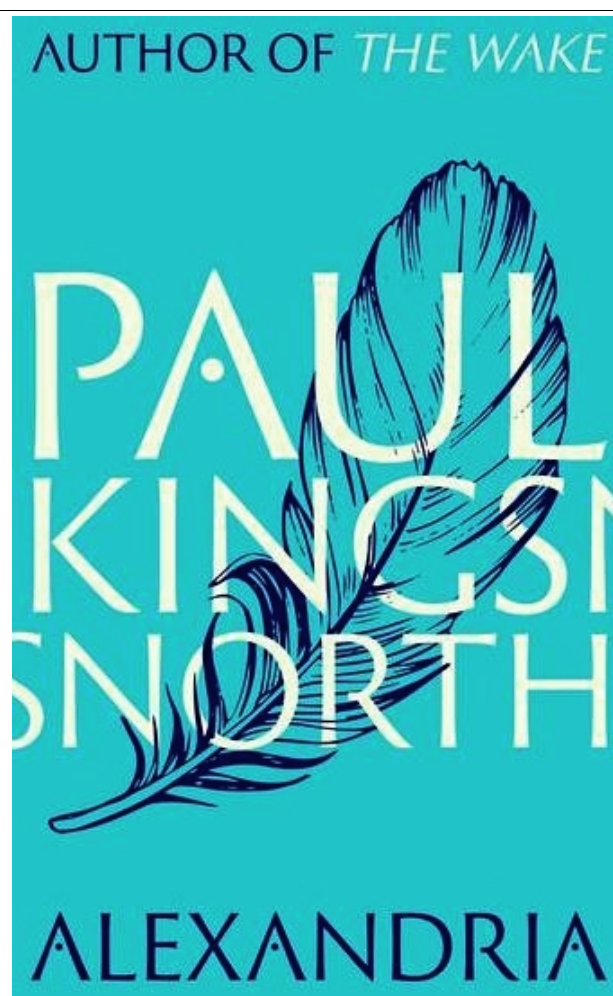


InTech and Thoughtfront. Tanta, Carey's main character, has been trained as a field agent. She is augmented by 'inscape', a neural facility. Her initial assignment against Thoughtfront fails badly, and Tanta realises that the real danger may come from inside her own organisation. *Inscape* is a well constructed cyberpunk thriller.

ALEXANDRIA

by Paul Kinsnorth (Faber; \$34.99)

Paul Kingsnorth began his ambitious Buckmaster trilogy with *The Wake* (2014), set just after the Norman Conquest. The book was long listed for the Booker prize. *The Beast* (2016) was set in the present, while *Alexandria* is set 900 years in the future. Nearly all of humanity has uploaded into an AI utopia, Alexandria, created by a machine intelligence 'Wayland'. Only a small pagan religious group, hiding in the East Anglia fens, resists Wayland's meta-human Stalkers, believing that when the 'lost gods', the 'Swans', return, Alexandria will fall. Written in a combination of Anglo-Saxon and contemporary slang, *Alexandria* is a challenging read in more ways than one.



THE EVIDENCE

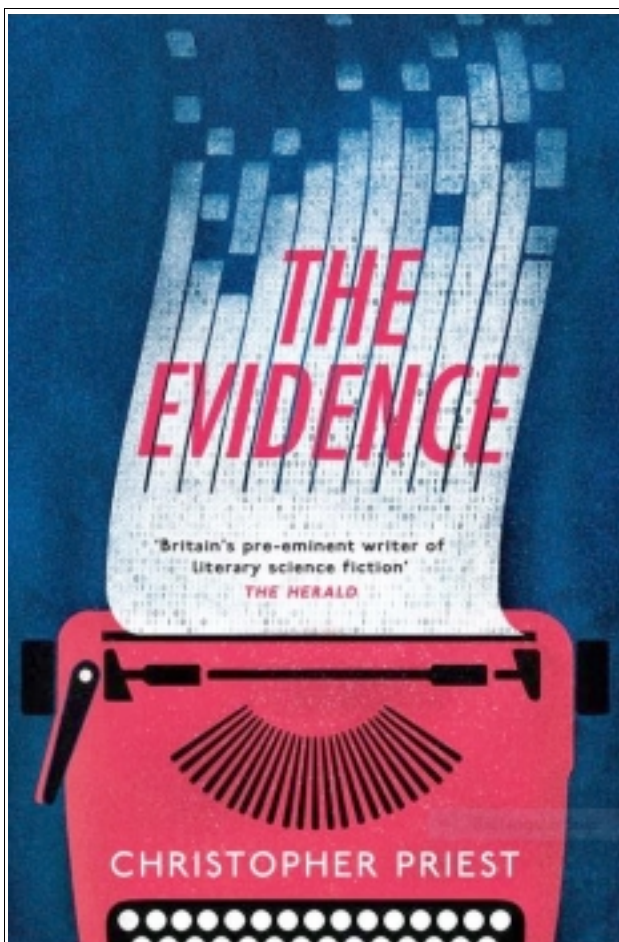
by Christopher Priest (Gollancz; \$49.99)

Christopher Priest has been setting stories and books in his Dream Archipelago since 1974. The series continues with *The Evidence*. The archipelago has hundreds of islands that have temporal and gravitational quirks. Crime writer Todd Fremde, travelling to the 'mutable', subpolar, island of Dearth finds himself caught up in a cold-case murder mystery that extends back to his home island. Priest juggles alternative versions of reality in a Kafkaesque mirror world novel that effectively blends the crime and SF genres.

THE LAST GOOD MAN

by Thomas McMullan (Bloomsbury; \$29.99)

Thomas McMullan's debut novel, *The Last Good Man*, set in a near future of ecological and social collapse, has deliberate echoes of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Scarlet Letter*. Duncan Peck arrives in a village on the edge of Dartmoor where alleged crimes are posted on a communal wall, with harsh justice subsequently meted out. How can Peck live as 'a good man' when legal and moral standards have collapsed? McMullan extrapolates from



today's toxic social media into the dangers of mob rule.

LAST ONE AT THE PARTY

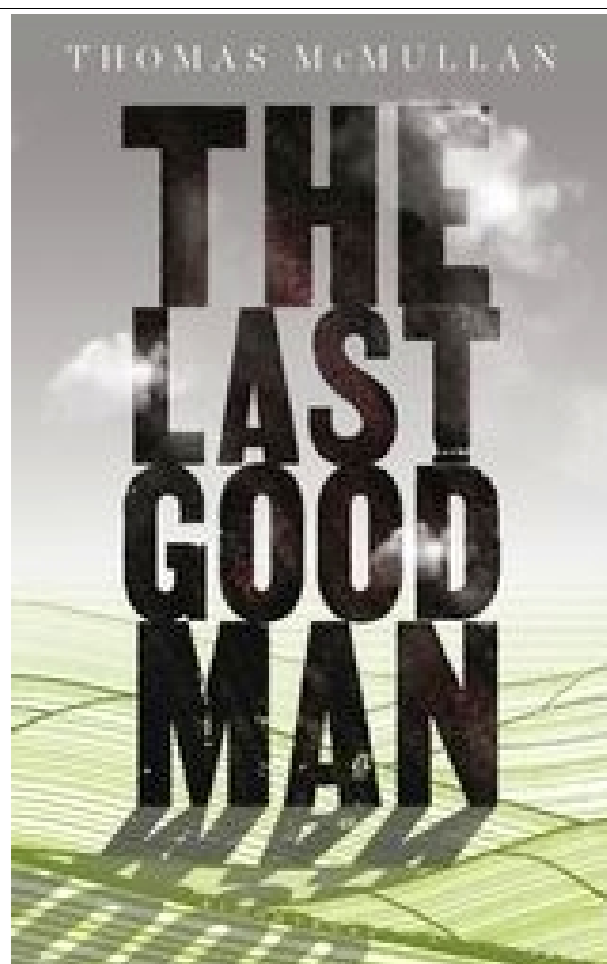
by Bethany Clif (Hachette; \$32.99)

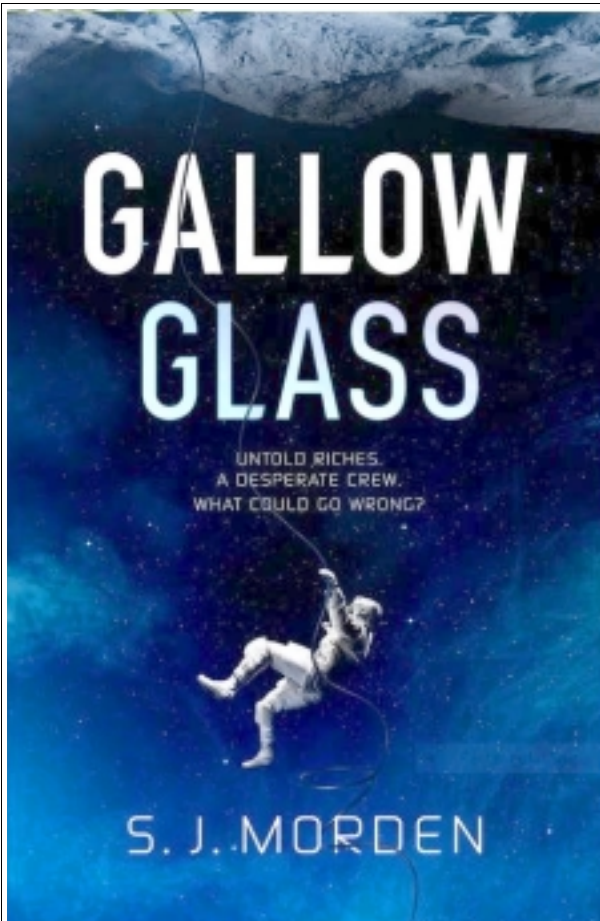
Another debut novel, *Last One at the Party* by **Bethany Clif** has been described as 'Fleabag meets *I Am Legend*'. In November 2023, the human race has been wiped out by the 6DM virus (Six Days Maximum life). The unnamed thirtysomething narrator is the last woman standing in Britain. Clif, often with dark humour, follows her drug-and-alcohol binge in a deserted London, before a retrospective self-discovery road trip around Britain. 'The end of everything was her beginning', but to what end? The reader finds out in a 2042 Afterword.

GALLOWGLASS

by S. J. Morden (Gollancz; \$32.99)

Planetary geologist **Dr S. J. Morden** says that *Gallowglass* could be described as 'Treasure Island in space'. In a 2069 Earth devastated by climate change, Jaap van der Veerden, Morden's main character, escapes from his stifling superrich family by joining a ship of gallowglass, a.k.a. mercenaries, heading to capture an asteroid for mining.





Morden's background ensures lots of science data and world building but at the expense of the narrative flow.

UNCONQUERABLE SUN

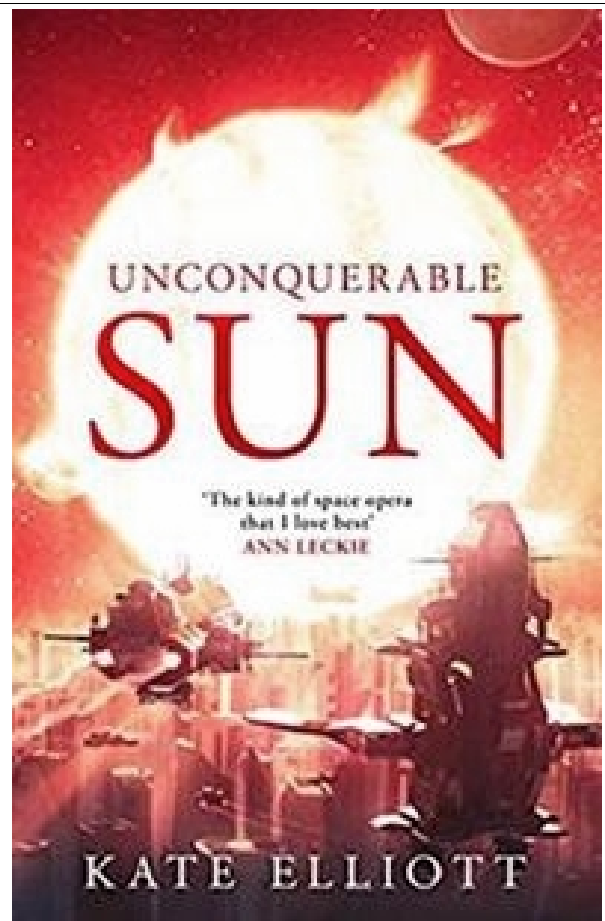
Kate Elliott (Head of Zeus; \$32.99)

Kate Elliott has described *Unconquerable Sun* (Head of Zeus, \$32.99), the first book in a trilogy, as 'gender-swapped Alexander the Great on an interstellar scale'. Set in an Hellenic/East Asian universe of warring and commercially competing worlds, Princess Sun, denigrated by her powerful and ruthless mother, Queen-Marshal Eirene, faces Machiavellian court rivalries while using her proven military prowess to save her world. The fast-moving, multiple-viewpoint narrative, is underpinned by explorations of gender equality and social inequality

RADIO LIFE

by Derek B. Miller (Jo Fletcher; \$32.95)

British bestselling author **Derek B. Miller** fully acknowledges that the 1959 post-apocalyptic classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter J. Miller was the direct inspiration for *Radio Life*. Set in the US 400 years after an apocalypse, 'The Commonwealth' searches for fragments of the knowledge of the old

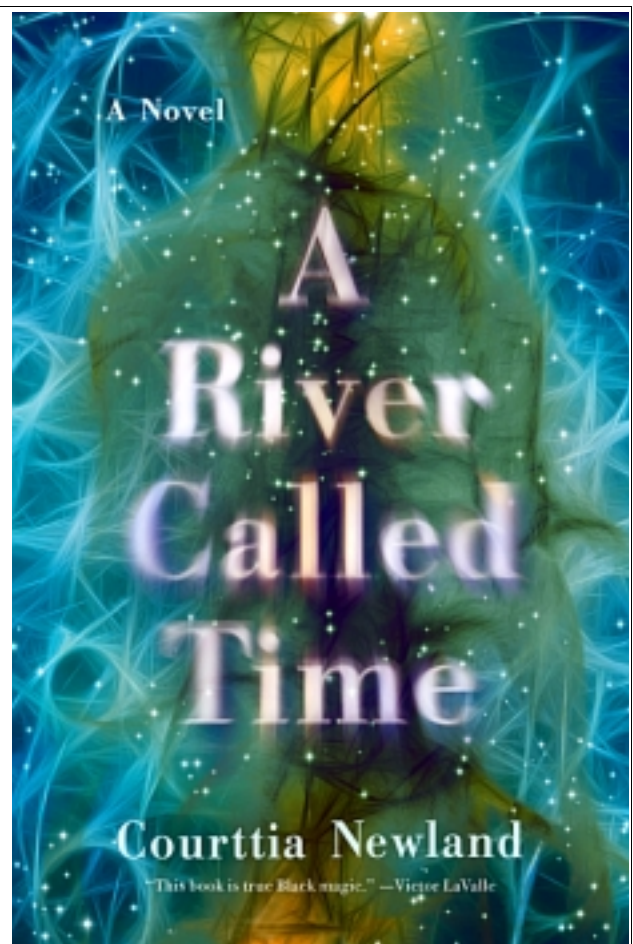
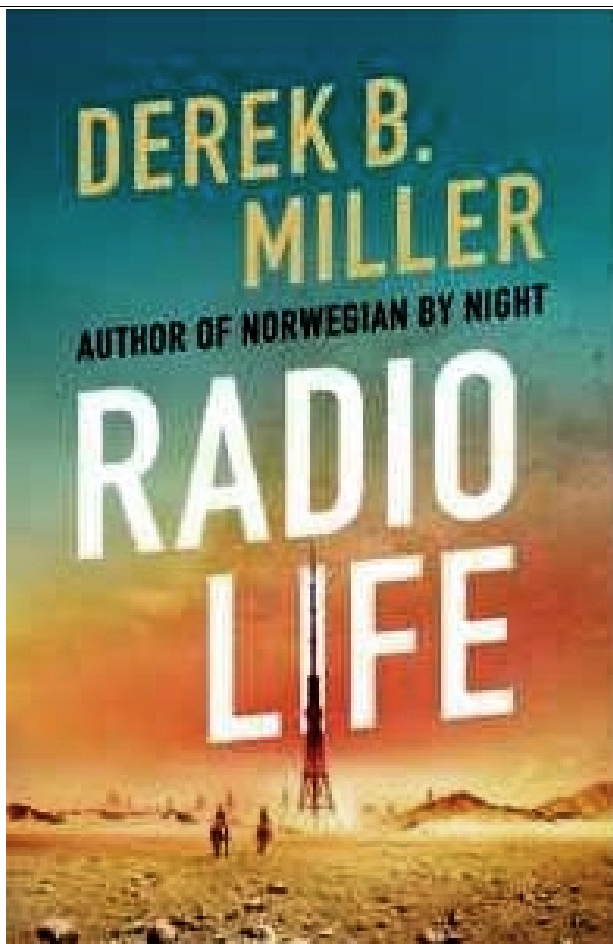


world in order to rebuild, only to be resisted by the 'The Keepers', who fear another apocalypse will result. Miller uses his experience at the United Nations to explore what makes civilisations rise and fall.

A RIVER CALLED TIME

by Courttia Newland (Canongate; \$32.99)

Courtia Newland has labelled *A River Called Time* (Canongate, \$32.99), 'a work of African futurism'. Set in a polluted world, where colonialism and slavery never occurred, but class stratification still remains, Newland's main character Markriss is working as a propagandist in the elite 'Ark' in Dinium City a.k.a. London. Markriss has the power of astral projection, which allows him to become in a multiverse, 'a dark spirit', organising resistance against the Ark. Newland's imaginative and complex narrative, in which African cosmologies play an important part, sees a remix of history to explore class and power in society, irrespective of race.



12 BYTES: HOW WE GOT HERE, WHERE WE MIGHT GO NEXT
by Jeanette Winterson (Cape; \$32.99)

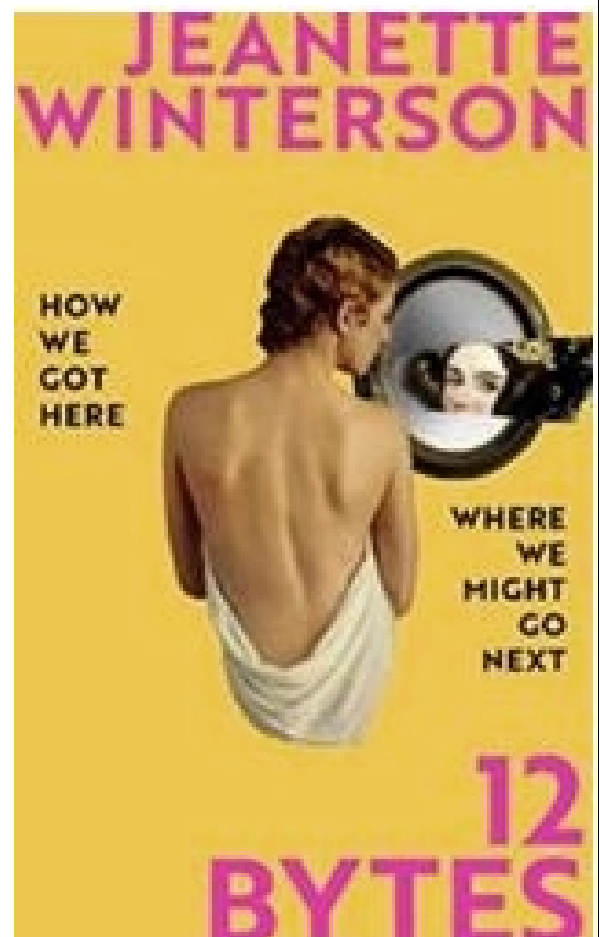
ATLAS OF A.I.
by Kate Crawford (Yale University Press; \$US30)

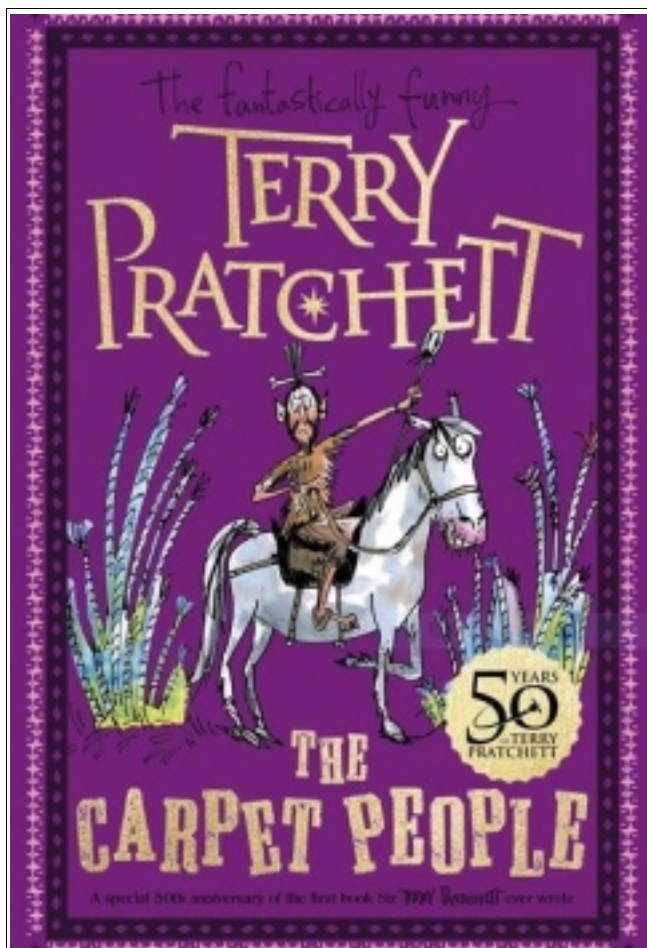
Jeanette Winterson's *12 Bytes* spins off her Booker-longlisted 2019 novel *Frankissstein*, which, in turn, had Mary Shelley's classic as its inspiration.

In the 12 chapters of *Bytes*, which Winterson freely admits includes some repetition, she examines, through a feminist perspective, the scientific and social impact of computing/AI from Ada Lovelace to the present day and beyond.

Winterson writes, 'My aim is modest, I want readers who are not much interested in AI, or biotech, or Big Tech, or data-tech ... to know what is going on as humans advance towards a trans-human, or even post-human future'.

The early years of the internet were full of hope for many that it would transform humanity for the better. Remember Google's 'don't be evil' motto. But now Big Tech dominates, with firms headed, as Winterson writes, by 'men who believe themselves to be chosen/superior/the new directors of humanity's future'.





She also queries the value of increased processing speeds on our devices if we only end up communicating misinformation faster, watching net trivia, and playing computer games. ‘We’re smart but we’re still apes. Pass the banana.’

Nonetheless, after writing segments covering the industrial ‘machine’ revolution, sex-bots, cryogenics, robotic pets, 3D printers, and transhumanism, Winterson remains an AI optimist, providing we can stop being ‘violent, greedy, intolerant, racist, sexist, patriarchal, and generally vile’. A big if.

Winterson believes that the next decade will see ‘the forced evolution and gradual dissolution of Homo sapiens as we know it’. AI will be less flawed than Homo sapiens, ‘a nonmaterial entity, not subject to our frailties’.

Winterson’s realistic litany of human faults and Big Tech dominance of our lives doesn’t quite compute with her optimistic conclusion, echoing the Beatles that all we need is love, ‘love is the totality’, and the evolution of a Buddhist AI ‘God-figure much smarter than we are’.

12 Bytes is ultimately an eclectic and passionate exploration of AI futures, rather than a realistic AI primer. For that, seek out Canberra-raised, US-based Professor **Kate Crawford**’s recent *Atlas of AI*

(Yale UP).

Crawford, who believes that ‘AI is neither artificial nor intelligent’, argues that global networks underpinning AI technology are damaging the environment, increasing inequality, and providing unregulated platforms to undermine democracy. ‘What we see time and again, from facial recognition to tracking and surveillance in workplaces, is these systems are empowering already powerful institutions — corporations, militaries and police’. In that concern, Winterson and Crawford are in lock step.

BRITISH FANTASY

THE CARPET PEOPLE

by Terry Pratchett (Corgi; \$14.99)

The Carpet People, **Terry Pratchett**’s first book, was published in 1971, and is now a collector’s item. To celebrate its fiftieth anniversary comes a special paperback edition, with illustrations by Mark Beech and a 1991 author’s note from Pratchett, who died in 2017.

The Carpet People was written when Pratchett was 17, published when he was 23, and partially rewritten when he was 43, when Pratchett thought, ‘Hang on. I wrote that in the days when I thought fantasy was all battles and kings. Now I’m inclined to think that the real concerns of fantasy ought to be about not having battles, and doing without kings.’

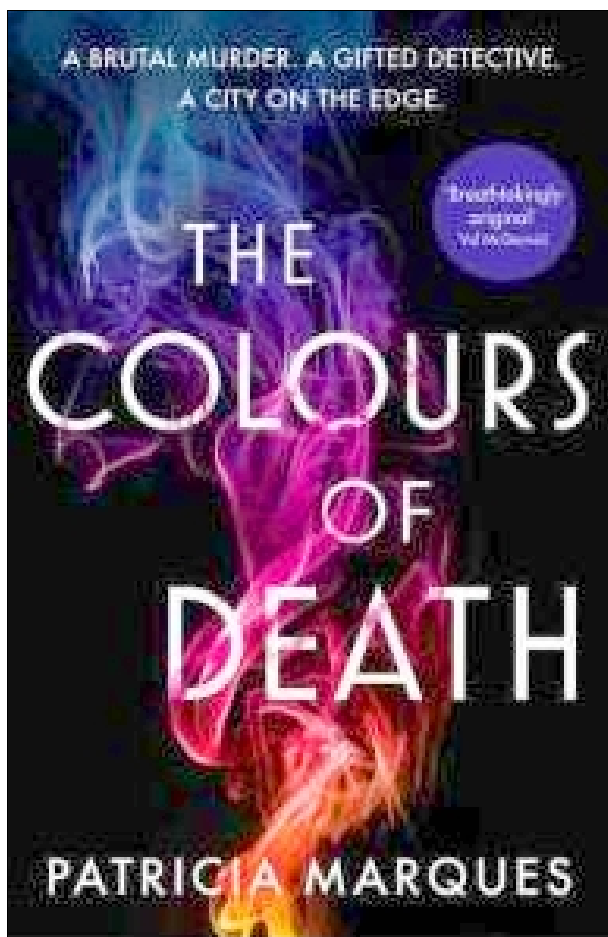
The Carpet People, set in a nano world of tiny people, with their own societies and mythologies, living in the fibres of a carpet facing the threat of the evil Fray, amply demonstrates early evidence of Pratchett’s trademark imagination and humour.

THE COLOUR OF DEATH

by Patricia Marques (Hodder; \$32.99)

An impressive debut novel comes in **Patricia Marques**’ *The Colour of Death*. Marques’ Angolan–Portuguese background is put to good use, with the setting of the novel being Lisbon. Marques mixes a strong crime fiction procedural with a fantasy element, that a small number of ‘gifted’ people have telepathic or telekinetic powers.

Inspector Isabel Reis, who has telepathic skills that she has to control through an illegal drug, is put in charge of solving the murder of a leading gifted researcher. She is only too well aware of the mistrust of the gifted, especially by the right-wing political party with whom she and her new partner Voronov, a non-gifted detective, have to liaise. As more murders occur, so do the stakes rise for Isabel,



both politically and personally.

THE DESERT PRINCE

by Peter Brett (HarperVoyager; \$32.99)

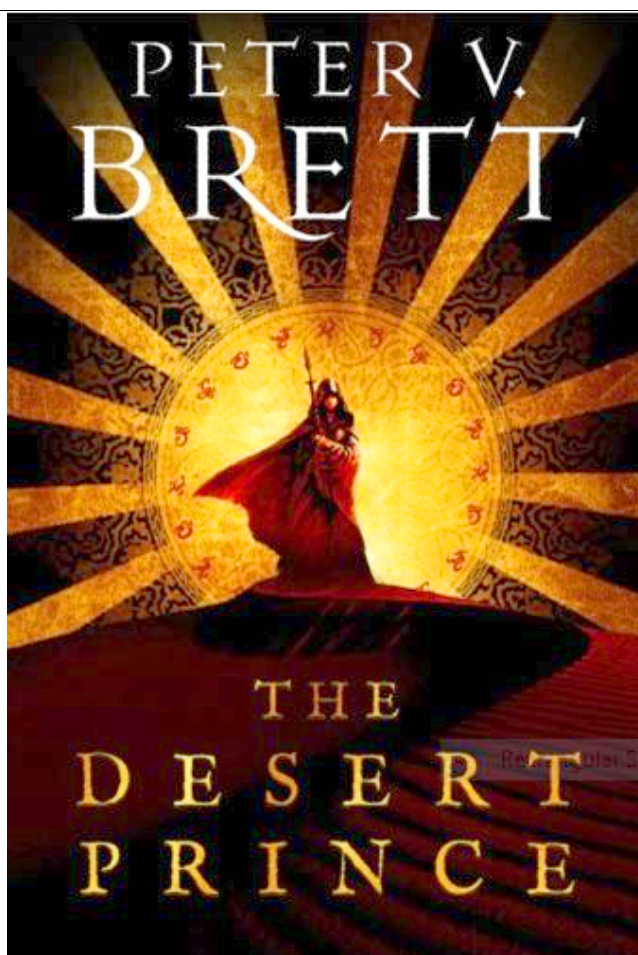
Peter Brett returns to the world of his best-selling 'Demon Cycle' series in *The Desert Prince*, which is set 15 years after mankind defeated the demonic 'corelings'.

The two main characters are Olive, the intersex Princess of Hollow, and Darin Bales, the Son of the Deliverer. Both, as children of heroes, have to live up to the expectations of greatness when danger again threatens. They will need to define their place in the world in order to save it. New readers would benefit from knowledge of previous books in the series to fully appreciate the plot line. Members of Brett's numerous fan base will have no such problems.

MEET ME IN ANOTHER LIFE

Catriona Silvey (HarperCollins; \$29.99)

Catriona Silvey's debut novel *Meet Me in Another Life*, which is projected to be filmed with Gal Gadot, follows, through multiple timelines, the two main characters, Thora and Santiago, who meet initially at Cologne University.



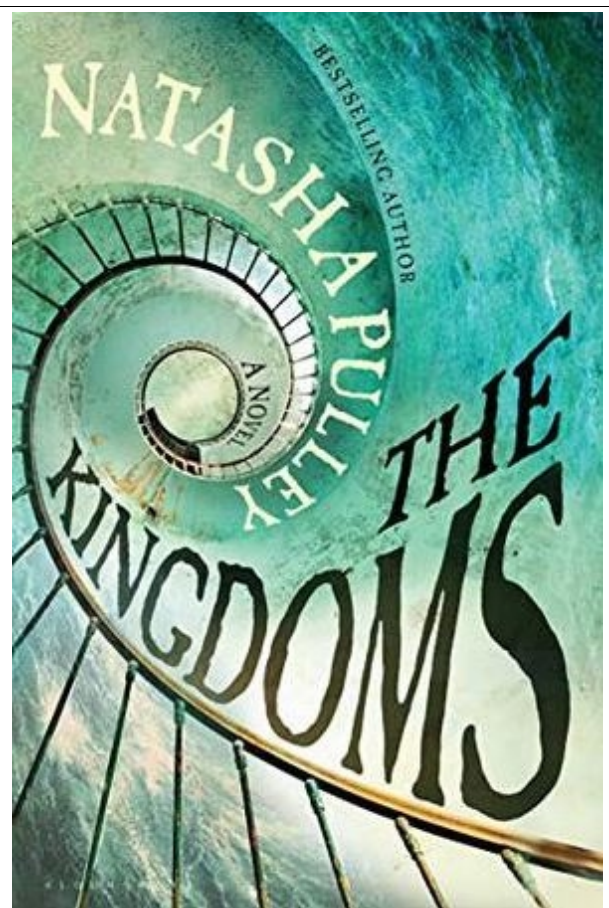
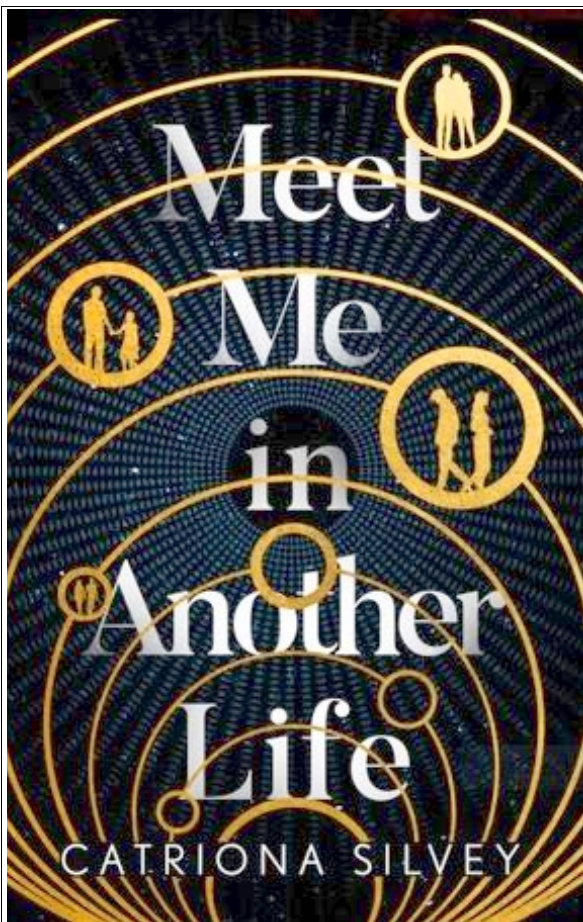
The couple become locked in a sort of temporal Groundhog Day as they reappear, without any previous memories, in different professions and relationships. Sometimes they are lovers, sometimes married, and sometimes estranged. Silvey provides an intriguing and heartbreaking exploration of life and how we choose to live it.

THE KINGDOMS

by Natasha Pulley (Bloomsbury; \$32.99)

Natasha Pulley's *The Kingdoms* begins in late Victorian Britain, which has been ruled by France since Napoleon won. Joe Tournier, the main character, is a slave, who arrives in Londres with memory loss before reuniting with his wife and daughter. A mysterious postcard leads him to a portal that takes him back in time to the Napoleonic Wars, with an opportunity to change history.

Pulley cleverly recreates historical settings, as Joe has to choose between a life in the past, his previous life, and a life that might be totally different to both. Pulley evokes the power of memory and love in a novel that challenges and intrigues the reader.



U.S. SCIENCE FICTION

PROJECT HAIL MARY

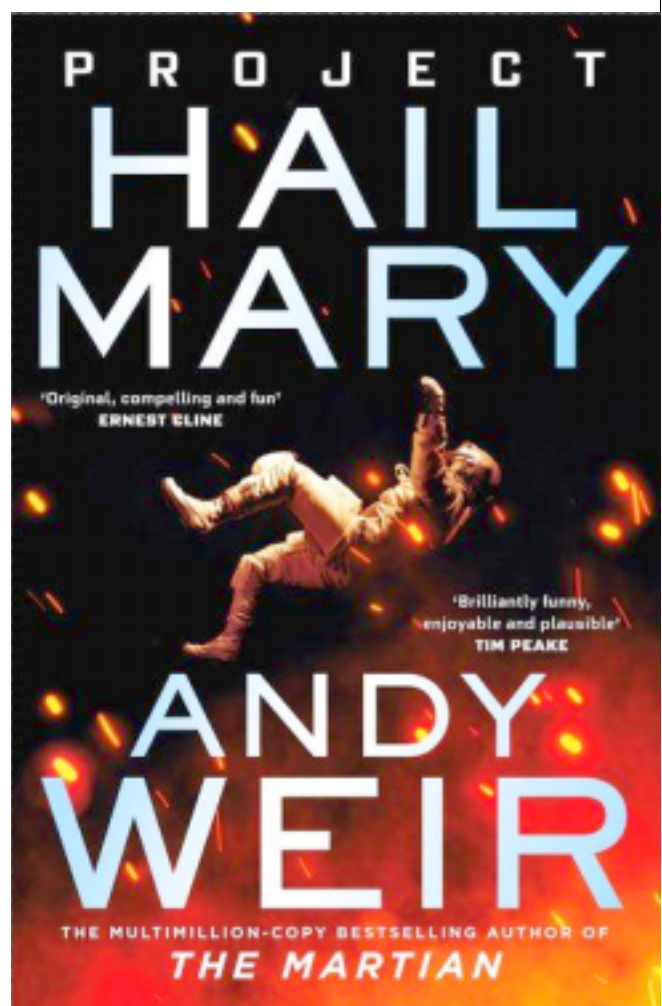
by Andy Weir (Del Rey, \$32.99)

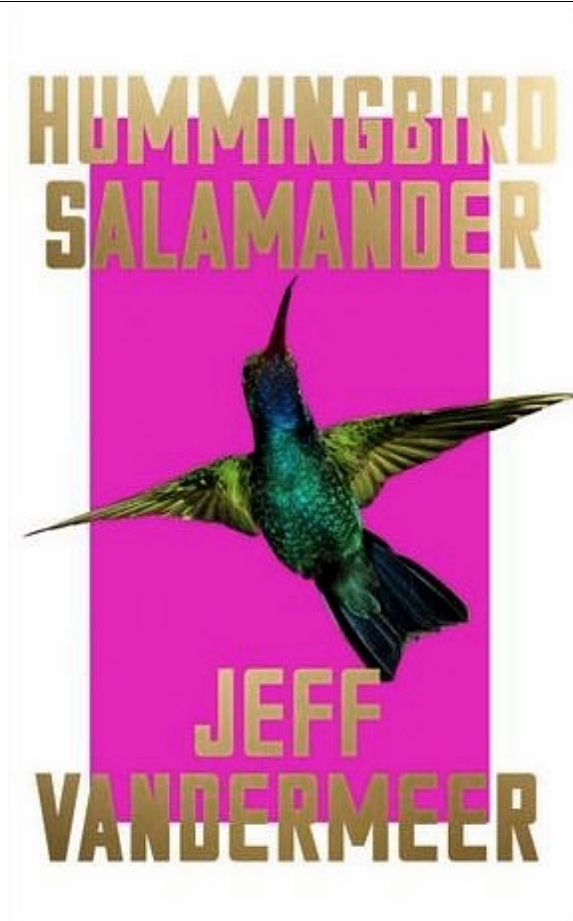
The Martian, **Andy Weir**'s commercial book debut in 2014, sold five million copies in North America alone. Matt Damon was nominated for an Oscar for his performance in the 2015 film adaptation.

Project Hail Mary, Weir's third novel, seems to be heading for the same sort of success. Ryan Gosling has been signed to play the main character, Dr Ryland Grace, who wakes up from a cryogenic sleep on a spaceship to find his two colleagues are dead and with no memory of why he is in a different solar system or what he is meant to do.

Grace gradually learns, with the help of the ship's computer and the slow return of his memory, that the fate of the human race depends on his finding a solution to a neutrino-driven alien microorganism that is destroying the sun's energy and thus threatening life on earth.

Weir's hard science background provides authentic detail without holding back the narrative pace of Grace's race against time to save Earth. Weir wrote the novel before Covid-19 struck, but he does feature 'a rampaging pestilence, forced isolation and a global effort among scientists to develop new lifesaving technology'.





HUMMINGBIRD SALAMANDER

by Jeff VanderMeer (Fourth Estate; \$29.99)

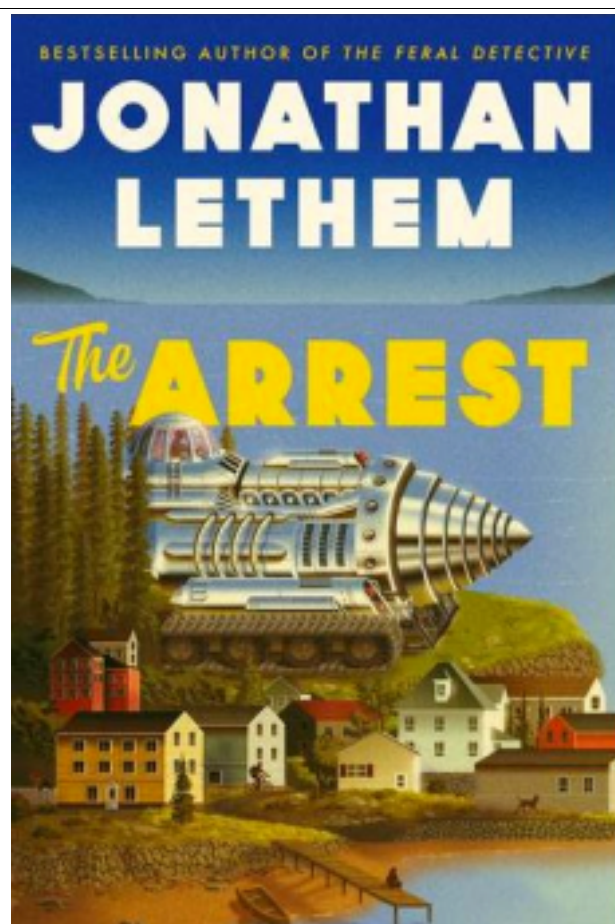
Hummingbird Salamander by Jeff VanderMeer - conveys an urgent fictional message about preventing the destruction of the earth. Its near-future narrator 'Jane Smith', a systems security consultant, is given a key to a storage unit containing a taxidermied extinct hummingbird. This leads her to Silvana, a wealthy bio-terrorist, and unfolds a narrative that dramatically expands from wildlife smuggling to a potential climate and social apocalypse. Earth becomes the scene of the crime.

THE ARREST

by Jonathan Lethem (Atlantic; \$29.99)

Have Trump and Covid-19 caused a dystopian futures overdose? Echoing Don DeLillo's recent novel *The Silence*, now another leading American author, Jonathan Lethem, imagines in, his twelfth novel *The Arrest*, the world coming to an abrupt technological shutdown without any apparent reason.

DeLillo's novel was simply a backdrop for a short contrived reflection on the human condition. Lethem, the author of critically acclaimed novels *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Fortress of Solitude*, has always been expert at mixing and subverting form



and genre. Here he seeds his inventive narrative with numerous references to SF novels and cinema. *The Arrest* becomes a surreal riff on dystopias.

Lethem places his characters in coastal Maine, which, presumably like the rest of the world, has experienced 'the Arrest, the collapse and partition and relocalization of everything, the familiar world ... Gmail, the texts and swipes and FaceTimes, the tweets and likes, these suffered colony collapse disorder'.

Yet times could be worse for former Hollywood scriptwriter, Sandy Duplessis, the 'Journeyman', who works part-time at a butcher and delivers food grown on an organic farm by his sister Maddy to the local village. Their life is 'a pin stuck through a tattered portion of reality when all the rest of it flew away'. So far, this seems to be a rural 'cosy catastrophe' novel.

But then Sandy's former writing partner and Hollywood power broker, the charismatic and devious, Peter Todbaum, turns up in a supercar, *Blue Streak*, 'powered by a self-contained nuclear reactor ... retrofitted into the exoskeletal structure of a machine that had earlier been used to bore tunnels under the ocean'.

Todbaum had taken 10 months to literally smash his way across America, but what are his motives in arriving? Mandy is suspicious, given a previous disturbing encounter with him in Los

Angeles, possibly a sexual assault. She says, however, 'He didn't do anything to me that he doesn't do to you.'

Todbaum charms the local community with tales of his trip across America, while dishing out espresso coffee from his coffee machine. Lethem says that he's a Trumpian figure, 'who uses stories and his gift for performance to malevolent ends'.

Blue Streak proves to be a Trojan horse as Todbaum's charm wears thin. Sandy must renounce his 'middling' existence and confront Todbaum's 'ripple in the field', so that 'new stories' can be told.

Ultimately, *The Arrest* is a stylish post-apocalyptic satire that reflects on today's societal inequalities and our overreliance on technology.

BEWILDERMENT

by Richard Powers (Heinemann; \$32.99)

Richard Powers won the Pulitzer Prize for his last novel, *The Overstory* (2018), which was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Bewilderment, which is short listed for the 2021 Booker, opens with 45-year-old University of Wisconsin astrobiologist Theo Byrne still struggling to come to terms with the death of Alyssa, his lawyer wife, from a car accident two years previously.

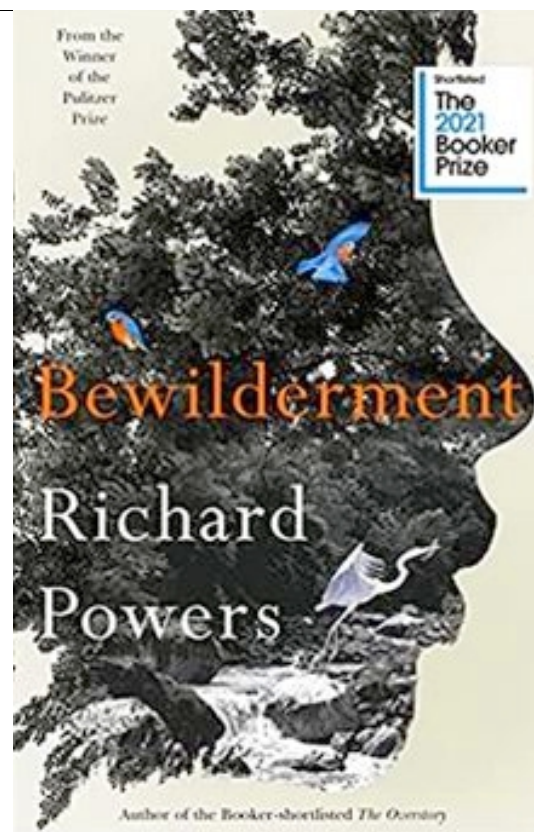
His nine-year-old son, Robin, with an undiagnosed condition, which may be Asperger's, has suffered an even greater impact. He has become unstable, and is facing school expulsion through a violent attack on a friend. Robin's words are printed throughout the novel in italics, as though he's not of this world.

Alyssa's love of the natural world has had a strong influence on Robin, who increasingly reflects 'the world's basic brokenness'. We are in a world of political upheaval, devastating climate change, and an anti-science US President, who is more Trumpian than Trump. Robin fears, 'Everything will be dead, before I get to tenth grade.'

Theo turns to a university colleague, who is researching neurological therapy, to try to stabilise Robin's emotional trauma. This treatment will involve transmitting recorded brain waves of his mother to Robin through an 'empathy machine'.

Robin's 'well-being' treatment works beyond expectation. Robin, who 'entered the trials a bundle of rage and graduated as a junior Buddha?', feels 'like he is inside everything'.

The experiment's success begins to leak beyond the scientific community. TV and social media



ensure Robin's treatment goes viral, 'Boy learns bliss from his dead mother ... Boy lives again, inside his dead mother's brain'. Robin has become a rare and endangered species himself.

The neuroscience research, however, becomes a victim of both the President's savage science research cuts and the lobbying of the Human Sanctity Brigade. As a result, Robin dramatically relapses. Theo must watch, as his son regresses, 'in small steps from color back to black-and-white'.

SF aficionados will recall here a similar theme of AI advancement and regression in Daniel Keyes' classic novel *Flowers for Algernon* (1966), a book that Powers clearly knows, as Theo and Robin listen to the Keyes audiobook on a twelve-hour car journey.

Powers has said that *Bewilderment* 'is in part, a novel about the anxiety of family life on a damaged planet ... but there's another kind of drama — between the humans and the non-humans ... how do we live coherently ... on this planet?'

At times, Powers's depiction of current environmental and societal concerns is overly black and white, but there is no denying his passion in a novel with a heart-rending conclusion.

— Colin Steele, June–October 2021

SF Commentary 107

November 2021

100 pages

