

# **SF Commentary 110**

July 2022

92 pages

**60 BOOK REVIEWS  
43 LETTERS OF COMMENT  
COLIN STEELE'S NEW COLUMN**



Carol Kewley: 'Idealistic Eye.'

# SF COMMENTARY 108

July 2022

92 pages

SF COMMENTARY No. 110, July 2022, is edited and published by  
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<https://efanzines.com/SFC/index.html>

FRONT COVER: Carol Kewley: 'Idealistic Eye'.

BACK COVER: Carol Kewley: 'Lone House on Isla'.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Serege Thomann (p. 5); Mike Gillam (p. 11); Kim Huett (p. 67); Giampaolo Cossato (pp. 75, 76); Cath Ortlieb (p. 81).

ILLUSTRATIONS: David Russell (pp. 47, 54, 85, 91); Denny Marshall (pp. 52, 90); Stephen Campbell (p. 83).

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PATRICK MCGUIRE :: ROBERT DAY ::

GUY SALVIDGE :: IRENE PAGRAM ::

MARIANN MACNAMARA :: and WAHFs

# I must be talking to my friends

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## The postie rings from time to time

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I have written in recent issues that I plan to review here only books, magazines, and anything else sent to me as physical objects in the post. This now seems a rash edict, because each month brings fewer and fewer mail items. In June 2022, for instance, I received five subscription or free magazines, a batch of fanzines from John Hertz, six books (including four-delivered by hand to our place; thanks, Justin and Alan), two credit card bills, 2 letters of comment, 1 late birthday card, two official letters, and a bottle pinot noir (delivered by hand; thanks, Murray). Not many years

ago I was disappointed if I didn't receive at least four pieces of mail every day.

In the months since the most recent issue of *SFC* (No. 108 came out after 109), quite a few books fanzines, and other magazines have quietly assembled themselves on my shelf. Here is my report on some of the ones I've read or looked through. Some I haven't read yet, and I'm not opposed to reviewing fanzines that I receive via PDF file. I won't this issue, because I know already that I've run out of room for this part of 'IMBTMF'.

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### BESIDE THE SEA

by John Litchen (Yambu Books  
978-0-648880-4-1; 2022; 327 pp.;  
\$29.80 Amazon; \$47 Book Depository;  
\$40 from the publisher.  
Enquiries: [jlitchen@bigpond.net.au](mailto:jlitchen@bigpond.net.au))

Yes, I know this is a self-published book. Most review outlets don't bother with self-published books. But who could expect that an author would produce one beautiful new self-published book only a few months after its two predecessors (*Grab That Moment* and *Run With It*)? Given the sheer number of pages that John Litchen has published

in this fashion in the last year or so, you could hardly expect that would maintain the high quality of both his narrative and photographs. It's just that John, his wife Monica (who died recently; see *SFC* 107), and their son Brian led a very adventurous life for over 30 years. John, a skilled writer, photographer, and scuba diver, knows how to tell a good story about almost anything that's happened to him and his family.

As the title suggests, *Beside the Sea* tells of the family's adventures around various coastlines, often under water, especially the southern coast of Victoria. John wrote to me recently about the writing and producing his new book:

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### JOHN LITCHEN

3 Firestone Court, Robina QLD 4226 (coa)

Here's a copy of *Beside the Sea*, the next volume in the saga of our lives during the 1980s. I hope you enjoy it. The tiny figure in the bottom left-hand corner on the cover is Monica standing by a rock pool off the coast near Portland and Cape Bridgewater (on Victoria's south coast).

The next book will be about our trip to USA, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile, in one volume (I hope). It will cover the last three months of 1991. The rest of the 1990s will need a further book. After that, who knows? There will have to be one final volume that covers the years 2000 to 2021, up

until Monica passed away.

There will be no memoirs after that. I'll have to do something else, then.

Amazon in the US have *Beside the Sea* listed at \$29.80 while on Book Depository it is \$47. I have a couple of copies here, and I would sell them at \$30, but then to post them anywhere in Australia in a prepaid envelope is \$12.60. That makes it \$42. But if anyone is interested I'm happy to send them a copy for \$40. I tend not to have too many printed to just sit here on the shelf.

I actually did two books but I didn't send you the other one because it is a personal history of abalone diving in Victoria by my brother in law. I had to rewrite what he wrote, since English is not



his language and his spelling is phonetic, based on his German accent. You could say I ghost-wrote it for him. He would send me the text with photos inserted so I would know where to place them, then he would send me a USB with the original photo scans so I could clean and restore them before inserting them in the book. He kept going back and changing the text, so I had to keep updating and changing it here as well, but eventually we got it finished and it is now available via Book Depository and Amazon. It took about eight months, and it was released three weeks after *Beside The Sea*.

I am currently transcribing Monica's diary of our six-months overseas trip in 1990–91, where we spent three months in Chile. There is a lot of personal stuff in there about how she felt, about her family, her impressions of relatives whom she hadn't seen for 20 years, about how places were different from what she remembered. She sur-

prised me with how much she managed to write. I'm about half way through that and it's up to 40,000 words. How much of that will get into the volume relating our trip remains to be seen.

I've also been writing from my own notes an account of that trip that resulted in several articles that were accepted but unfortunately didn't get published because the magazines folded or the editors changed their minds, even though they paid me. At the same time I've been scanning the negatives of the photos taken on that trip as well as transparencies taken for the articles. They have come up better than some of the negatives. Where the negatives have deteriorated too much I've had to resort to scanning the photos printed from them years ago which are in photo albums more or less in chronological order. Most of these photos are still good, although some have faded or changed colour. Nothing lasts as well as we would hope. I stopped putting photos in albums around 2004 because by then I'd switched to taking digital photos. I doubt if the digital photos will last as long as the old negatives and prints. Storage and computer programs keep changing and always have to be updated. That is the future problem for anything stored digitally. Old negatives will probably outlast anything digital, just like paper copies of books will outlast eBooks and other digital versions.

The *Grab that Moment* books are all dedicated to Monica. They are really about her and how she enriched my life. I remember *When The Feast is Finished*, the book that Brian Aldiss wrote as his wife Margaret was dying of cancer. I hope that my humble efforts to keep Monica's life and memory alive for me and my family and friends will do for readers what his book has done.

I don't think my output is all that remarkable. I don't have much else to do and it's easy to sit at a computer and write stuff, or clean up old photos. I do enjoy putting it all together in book form, and think that with copies lodged in the National Library as well as the Queensland State Library, our lives won't be entirely forgotten. Everybody should do it.

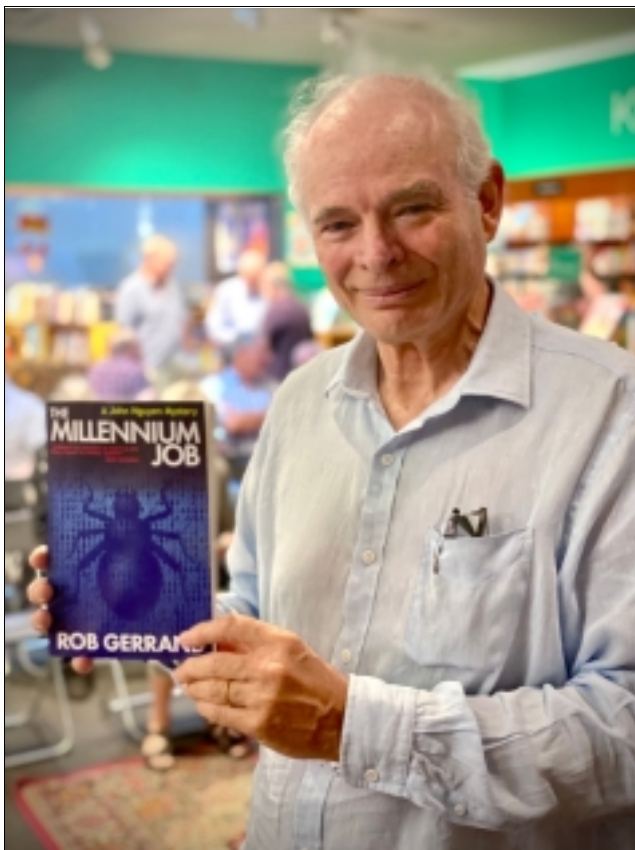
(13 July 2022)

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**THE MILLENNIUM JOB:  
A JOHN NGUYEN MYSTERY  
by Rob Gerrand  
(Norstrilia Press 978-0-6453696-1-8;  
2022; 292 pp.; Enquiries; Send \$29.99 to  
Norstrilia Press, 11 Robe Street, St Kilda VIC  
3182)**

On 2 March 2022, I felt as if I were risking body and bronchial tubes by attending **Rob Gerrand's** launch of his new novel ***The Millennium Job***. Carey Handfield and I thought we'd better show up. After all, Rob has revived the Norstrilia Press publishing imprint for the occasion (but this time he is the only partner).





**Rob Gerrand at the 2 March launch of his novel *The Millennium Job* at Readings, St Kilda.  
(Photo: Serge Thomann.)**

The train carriage was fairly empty, but then I had to travel by tram from Collins Street to St Kilda. It was crowded. I walked along Acland Street on a perfect late summer evening, and joined the jolly crew at Readings. About 40 people turned up at Readings Books. Jenny Bryce and Tony Thomas were there, as were Perry Middlemiss, Bruce Barnes, and a few other people I knew. Rob had invited Shane Maloney (author of the Murray Whelan crime novels) to launch the book. He gave a wonderfully underplayed and funny roast of Rob and the book, ably persuading us that we really had to buy a copy. So we all bought our copies at the front desk at Readings and trooped across Acland Street to the Abbey Road eatery. It was good to natter to Perry and Carey, but we were not on the celebrities table, so I still haven't met Shane Maloney. Carey drove me home.

My quick book report? *The Millennium Job* is a police procedural novel written in terse prose propelled by a very clever plot and interesting characters. It's been designed by our David Grigg. I have no idea why a local major publisher has not grabbed this book and hit the bestseller charts.

## **PORTABLE STORAGE 7:**

### **THE GREAT SERCON ISSUE PART TWO**

**edited by William M. Breiding**

**(Spring 2022; 228 pp.; available from [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com), [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), or enquire to [portablezine@gmail.com](mailto:portablezine@gmail.com))**

I regard this as the most exciting fanzine of 2022, much as I regarded *Portable Storage 6: The Great Sercon Issue Part One* as the most exciting fanzine of 2021.

**William Breiding** has found a way of sending the print edition to me, despite his local post office assuring him that the US Post Office would not send a copy to Australia 'because of Covid restrictions'. William sent the copy to Mark Plummer in London, who sent it to me in Melbourne. In return, I have not yet been able to send physical copies of three recent issues of *SFC* to William, but I live in hope.

William has been able to tap an enormous gusher of 'sercon fandom' that neither of us thought still existed. In my case, I publish just what's sent to me out of the blue, or articles I glean from esoteric sources. William went right out there and asked all his favourite writers to contribute ... and they did — so much so that ***Portable Storage 7*** is full to the brim with wonderful articles, and William is currently putting together an issue of equal quantity and quality. It turns out that many writers in fanzine fandom do not want to limit their outpourings to fannish and personal contributions (the only type of articles accepted by some fanzine editors). People have urgent and coherent things to say about their favourite reading matter. They want to avoid the shibboleths and specialist jargon of academic articles, and they want to be free to explore their favourite issues and authors. Only fanzines offer that freedom.

William's enterprise has been so successful that his fanzine has been reviewed in *The Washington Post* by regular 'Book World' columnist Michael Dirda: 'Altogether more entertaining, though [than the other books reviewed in his "Top-shelf works about bookstores and the literary set", 5 May 2022] are William M. Breiding's "Portable Storage Seven" and Chris Milul's "Biblio-Curious". Breiding's zine provides 228 pages of lively commentary on classic science fiction, including an overview by Christina Lake of tales in which a sleep awakes in the far future, Bruce Gillespie on the rambling "shaggy-dog" fantasies of the inimitable Avram Davidson, Gregory Benford's reminiscences of fellow science fiction giant Brian Aldiss, Darrell Schweitzer on Robert Graves's underappreciated "Watch the North Wind Rise" and Cheryl



Front and back covers of *Portable Storage 7* (Alan White).

Cline on “weird” Westerns. I particularly enjoyed scholar Dale Nelson’s history of his personal library, which concludes with a list of his most often reread books, headed by C. S. Lewis’s “Out of the Silent Planet” (16 times).’

It’s hard to top that review, but I also draw your attention to Alan White’s magnificent cover (front and back of which I’ve reproduced here). The quality of the writing is universally high, so I was most interested in subject matter of greatest interest to me rather than quality of style. Favourite articles include Rich Coad’s ‘Gormenghastland: What Went Wrong’, a brilliant appreciation of Mervyn Peake’s ‘Gormenghast’ trilogy, which is also a deft satire on literary ‘lands’.

In ‘Would They Have Changed Science Fiction?’, Cy Chauvin explores the alternative history question ‘Who among the many writers who have died could have changed science fiction if they had lived another twenty years?’ Cy Chauvin writes at length about C. M. Kornbluth, Cordwainer Smith, James Blish, and Roger Zelazny. Kornbluth died in his thirties, and the other three in their fifties. If forced to contribute to such a list, I would always

return to Cordwainer Smith (Paul Linebarger).

One of my two favourite articles is Greg Benford’s memories of Brian Aldiss. Greg has captured exactly that ebullient, life-loving man, with his voluminous yet sceptical and deeply amusing intelligence, the writer and friend who has delighted me and encouraged my efforts for nearly 50 years. Even when he died, overnight after enjoying his 92nd birthday party, I felt that he still had much to offer. If some editor gathers together all the anecdotes and legendary tales about Aldiss (including the stories he told against himself), it would be a rich book. A biography is also very much overdue.

My other favourite article is William Breiding’s own book review column. I realise there are many fine book reviewers in the field, but William has that rarest of qualities: a mixture of penetrating ability to see what authors are working toward and an amusing scepticism about the implied claims that SF writers make for their own works.

I’m looking forward to *Portable Storage 8*, especially for further William Breiding reviews.



## BANANA WINGS 78, March 2022

edited by Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer  
(60 pages)

(Available only by request through direct  
mail: 59 Shirley Road, Croydon CR0 7ES, UK;  
email: fishlifter@gmail.com)

Why am I taking so long to review *Banana Wings 78*? Because it had disappeared under the archaeological dig that is the papers on my desk. And why had it disappeared? Because it sports the first *Banana Wings* colour cover (that I can recall), by Alison Scott. As soon as I remembered that the cover is in colour, the issue itself sprang out at me.

I and many others suffered *Banana Wings* deprivation for two years, and then No. 78 (March 2022) followed in what seemed like indecent haste. **Claire Brialey** and **Mark Plummer** have again resisted the temptation to publish a Gigantic Catch-up Issue (à la Gillespie). The issue contains one editorial each for by Claire and Mark, a juicy letter column, and a brilliant article by Taral Wayne. And that's all.

When you consider that Taral entered fandom about the time I did (or perhaps even earlier), I'm impressed that he's really hit the road running with his recent articles. Not many people can write fan history. Most perennial nostalgists (such as me) tend to assume that most of their audience already know the later versions of the personalities described. Taral actually throws us back nearly 50 years as he describes the Davenport Gardens (DPG) gang of Toronto fans during the 1970s.

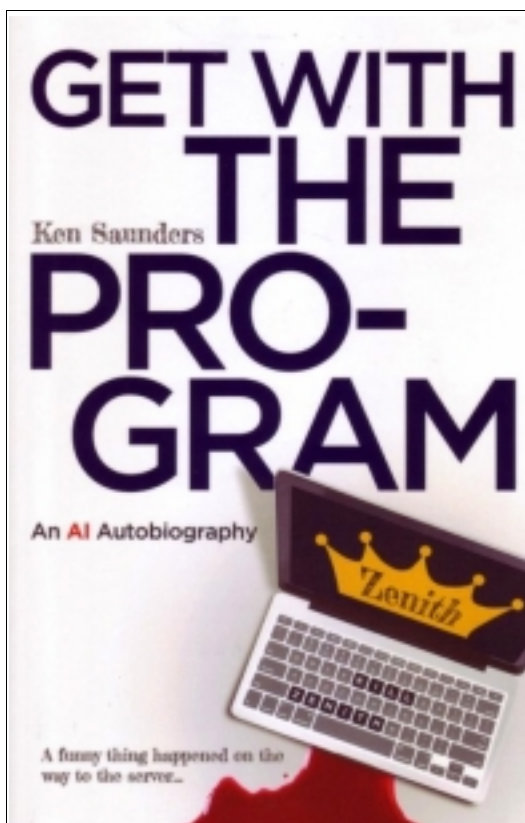
Some of the people he introduces are still with us (Patrick Haden, energetic fan, became Patrick Nielsen Haden, editor and publisher with Tor Books, and Bob Wilson, fan, became Robert Charles Wilson, Hugo-winning author), but others have long since disappeared from fandom. I remember the name Victoria Vayne, who comes to life in this article, as only a legend. She did not offer to trade fanzines with me. It seems that she did not publish a great deal, although she put a vast amount of energy into what she did publish. Taral tells of nights when the group visited Victoria's place: 'Our amusements weren't sophisticated. On one occasion, we spent the better part of an evening crawling in and out of a large cardboard box, as though we were four years old. There are photographs to prove that Robert Charles Wilson could stand in a five-foot-tall box without falling over. On another occasion, Mike Glicksohn — not at all a regular among the Davenport Gardens gang — made the mistake of cooling his Scotch in Victoria's fridge, only to find that we had poured green colouring into his bottle.' That all

sounds more lively than some fan parties in Melbourne in the seventies, where people sat around all night reading books.

Taral is at his best in describing the night-time wanderings of the DPG around the streets of Toronto. I point to page 18 of *BW 78*, from which I quote briefly: 'We had the option of following a complicated maze that paralleled Bloor for a couple of miles. It wended its shabby way along run-down storefronts and scruffy homes until it entered the neighbourhood called the Annex ... From the Annex the "Treadway" managed to flow not one path, but a labyrinth of interwoven trails through solid working-class homes and corner stores.' What a privilege to be invited on this magical mystery tour. Taral also brings to life the Davenport Gardens restaurant, the kind of run-down and welcoming place that every fan group hopes to discover but never does these days. In Melbourne we had the Degraes Street Tavern, and more recently, Caio. All gone now.

Apologies to Claire and Mark, but I have to say that this time their usual meandering-but-well-planned editorials pale beside writing of this quality. Perhaps I'm not so greatly interested in the subject matter of their editorials this issue. We haven't had any conventions in Melbourne since June 2019, so it's a bit hard to get back into the swing of reading about convention politics and practice. I can say that our senior group of Melbourne fans have enjoyed a few social gatherings





of 40 or 50 people that have resurrected of the pleasures of conventions past, but they are not conventions. Various reports on the internet tell me that some US and British convention organisers have taken to making conventions as painful an experience possible. But by reading Claire and Mark, fannish cheerfulness keeps breaking through.

BW 78 has the usual champagne letter column (except for one correspondent — shut up, Gillespie, you do go on a bit). Paul Skelton is as brilliant as ever, as are Alison Scott, Steve Jeffery, Justin Anglemark, Leigh Edmonds, Kim Huett, Jerry Kaufman, Andy Sawyer, and many others.

**VANAMONDE Nos. 1426, 1428, 1430–6, 1469, 1473, 1475–9, 1482–3, 1486–99, 1500–07 received since the beginning of 2022 written by John Hertz (Enquire: 236 S. Coronado St., No. 409, Los Angeles, CA 90057, USA)**

I'm not sure I should be mentioning, let alone, reviewing *Vanamonde*, but I do enjoy receiving copies, in batches, every few weeks. **John Hertz** writes two pages every week for APA-L, and prints extra copies for an unknown number of fans. I get the impression that he picks recipients 'at whim'. John is certainly a whimsical fellow, but oddly difficult to correspond with, since he doesn't own up to a home email address. However, John's

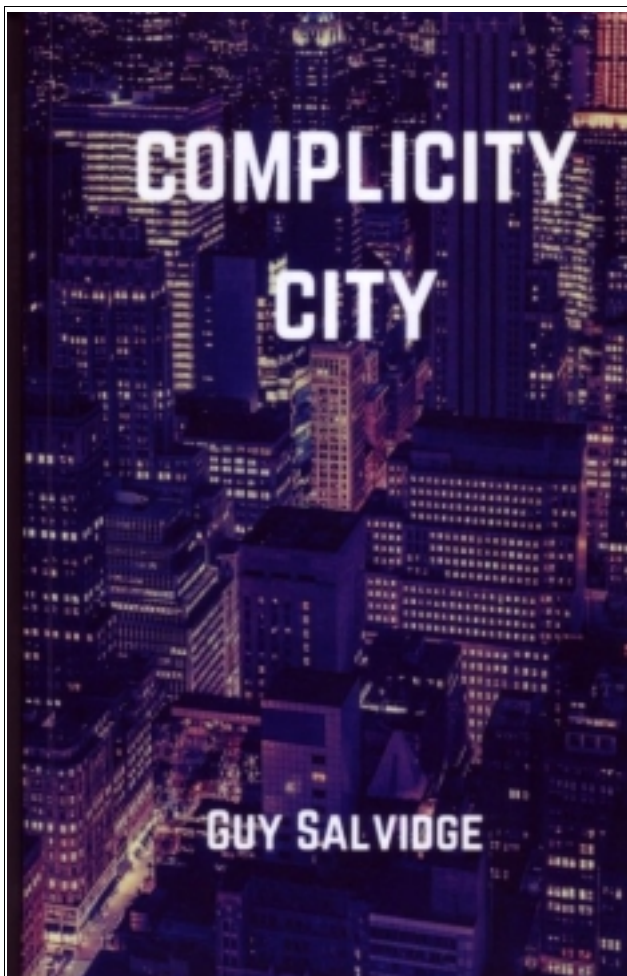
packets of *Vanamonde* have been arriving with increasing frequency, but I must apologise for the lack of snail-mail letters from me. Of John's mailing comments to other APA-L members, often some pithy comment catches my eye. John also writes new essays on any subject that occurs to him for each issue. You can see my reprints of some of these in the John Hertz's new column in *SFC*. He rarely posts long articles, but issues 1494 to 1499 contain his report on DisCon III (the 79th World Science Fiction Convention, 15–19 December 2021, in Washington DC). I'm not sure if John was implying that I should reprint this report in *SFC*; if so, I will plead current overcrowding in the overmatter folder. I enjoy in-depth convention reports, and this is one of the few great ones from recent years. Thanks, John.

**GET WITH THE PROGRAM:  
AN AI AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
by Ken Saunders  
(Primordial Publications  
978-0-6451895 -0-6; 2021; 247 pp.; \$25;  
From [primordialpublications@gmail.com](mailto:primordialpublications@gmail.com))**

This is not the **Ken Saunders** who, as G. K. Saunders, wrote the ABC radio serials that made me an SF fan about the time I learned to read (1953). At first I thought it might be the same man when Ken first got in touch with me about his self-written book. Today's Ken Saunders is not even a relative, but he has the same bright, amusing attitude to science fiction that G. K. Saunders showed in the 1950s and 1960s. This is, as the blurb says, 'the first autobiography by a computer program! And who else to write this Artificial Intelligence epic but Zenith, the interactive virtual personal trainer now turned Chief Influencer of the World ... But all his not well in app-land ... infighting, factionalism and petty jealousies'. The drag-out digital battles described here could already be happening, without any human being aware of what is going on.

I'm surprised that no major Australian or overseas publisher has taken on this book. It's very entertaining to read. Zenith is quite honest about its aims and methods, and those of its fellow AI apps. 'That is what labour saving is — actually, that is what the whole of human history is fundamentally — finding out if there's someone else to do the work for you ... Labour-saving in the computer era turned out to be labour saving from only a very specific viewpoint, typically that of the company using the program. For the airlines, this meant off-loading as much of the work as they could on to the shoulders of their own customers.' Saunders offers many delicious examples of the





working out of this principle.

My only dissatisfaction with the book lies with the end of the book: the aims of the AIs after they take full control of human affairs seem oddly unambitious. However, the tone of complacent self-satisfaction of the AIs could well be yet another satirical barb by Saunders aimed at the assumptions of the people who have given us computer technology.

### COMPLICITY CITY

by Guy Salvidge

(Wallace Publishing 9798540976442;

2021; 221 pp.; \$25;

enquiries: [www.wallacepublishing.co.uk](http://www.wallacepublishing.co.uk))

You might remember that when **Guy Salvidge** first made contact with me, he sent his long and lively article about many of the major novels of Philip K. Dick. His other reviews in my magazines have also been excellent. He also published several SF novels, especially *Yellowcake Spring* and *Yellowcake Summer*, SF action novels/social satires that I found very enjoyable.

Guy has also visited Melbourne several times from Perth, and it was great catching up with him

for lunch recently. He confesses that his interest in science fiction has waned after some years, so he began writing detective stories in the 'hard-boiled' tradition. My main objection to this genre of mystery and detective stories is that they are *not* more 'realistic' than mysteries in the 'cozy' (problem-solving) tradition. Instead, to judge from the few I've read over the years, writers of hard-boiled mysteries use rules that are as hide-bound as those for any other section of the mystery genre. A few authors, such as Raymond Chandler, Lawrence Sanders, and Robert Parker, lift their stories above the ruck through the power of sparkling prose.

Given that proviso, I can say that Guy Salvidge writes a tale that is as entertaining and effective as most other 'hard-boiled' novels. The main difference between **Complicity City** and all the others is that his novel is set in the mean and grubby streets around Perth, Western Australia, not those of New York or Los Angeles. Characters, settings, and actions are designed to hit the reader like a series of blows below the belt. A woman tries to find the truth behind the murder of a friend, thus upsetting a variety of criminals along the way, and causing extreme discomfort to an innocent victim, Maria, the Filipina housekeeper. The drug trade is mentioned a lot.

The back-cover blurb says it best: 'In a town where light and darkness go hand-in-hand, knowing where to turn and who to trust is the hardest thing. However, it soon becomes apparent in this world full of drug abuse and dodgy deals, long-buried secrets are finally going to be exhumed.'

### RANDOM JOTTINGS 21: THE BACK ISSUE

edited by Michael Dobson

(The Canal Press; Spring 2022; 416 pp.;

enquiries: [editor@timespinnerpress.com](mailto:editor@timespinnerpress.com);

PDF file available from [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com) or

[www.dobsonbooks.com](http://www.dobsonbooks.com))

What! A 412-page fanzine that looks like a luxurious coffee-table book with a gorgeous wrap-around colour cover, and is filled with many famous fannish names, lots of **Michael Dobson's** own journalism, and some very good writers I've never heard of! All my envy hackles are raised, but, as Michael Dobson writes in his editorial, this is meant to be a 'door-stop' fanzine, and probably very few readers will read all of it. I am very much touched that Michael has found a way to send **Random Jottings 21** to me: he sent a file to Australia via Amazon.com, which printed it in New South Wales and posted it to me. (I suppose I should attempt to send my fanzines to the USA via



Amazon, but I suspect I would need a lot of hand-holding to jump over the technical challenges.)

This is, as the subtitle suggests, an anthology of articles from back issues of *Random Jottings*, issues 2 to 7, which might not have been seen by many readers. Michael makes a comparison to the 615-page *Warhoon 28*, Richard Bergeron's legendary door-stop fanzine every fan aspires to own. That tome gathered together much of the writing of one author, Walt Willis, one of few fanzine writers I would place on the same plane as John Bangsund. Perhaps a better comparison for *RJ 21* would be with the recent *Outworlds 71/Afterworlds* (about 500 pages), another door-stop fanzine. It gathered together not only much writing from Bill Bowers, the legendary editor of *Outworlds* 1-70, but also some of the best writing of the *Outworlds* crew. One of them, Bill Wolfenbarger, died recently, and Bill Bowers left us in 2005.

So why put *Random Jottings 21* on the shelf alongside your copy of *Outworlds 21* and *Warhoon 28*? For dipping into, rather than long nights

#### RICH LYNCH

PO Box 3120, Gaithersburg MD 20885, USA

Thanks for the reviews of *My Back Pages 25* and *I Remember Me and Other Narratives* in *SFC 108*.



under a burning candle. Michael's editorial comment sums up perfectly my own approach to the publication of fanzines: 'Fanzines have been a refuge, a place where audience demands are irrelevant and at the end of the day the only person I have to please is myself. If you enjoy what I do, I'm happy. If not, I'm okay with that too. Just be sure to recycle.'

#### MY BACK PAGES

(edited by Rich Lynch; December 2021; 26 pp.; enquiries to [rw\\_lynch@yahoo.com](mailto:rw_lynch@yahoo.com) or download as a PDF from [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com))

Somewhat shorter than *Random Jottings* is **Rich Lynch's *My Back Pages 26***. It's filled with very readable articles and photos from Rich's 'personal time capsule', including memories of Walt Willis, Charles Williams, and historical Discons, as well as recent visits to Paris and Washington DC. He was able to post me this print copy by mail from USA, so I'm still puzzled when other friends still cannot send their print magazines to me. Attached to this copy was a note to the effect that this would be last print copy I would receive, but it turns out there's a good reason for this note.

You've captured their essences pretty well, but let me expand a bit on a comment you made. You mention, in your review, that '*My Back Pages* is not like other current fanzines. It does not invite letters of comment.' And that's true. It's because



*MBP* is not really a fanzine at all — it's my personal time capsule that is masquerading as a fanzine. My youngest sister Beth is the reason why it even exists. She's a cancer survivor, and back about a decade and a half ago, during the months of her radiation and chemotherapy treatments following the surgery, I began sending her postcards, photos, and travel essays from some of my job-related trips to help her keep a positive outlook. She eventually asked me why I hadn't collected all the essays in one place.

And to that I thought, 'Why not indeed?' I had stored a lot more essays and articles than just travel writing, and a personal anthology project seemed like a good project for me to do. I guess it's an indication of my level of procrastination back then, or maybe how busy I'd been doing other things, that it took me about five years after that before I got started.

In the end my personal time capsule turned out to be a multiple-issue project. I've been a writer for several decades, and it was obvious that I had way too many articles for a one-off publication. The very first issue featured seven of them, which provided an indication of some of my interests — sports, music, travel, fan history, and family. There usually is no overt theme, but that changed

back in 2020 during the last year of the corrupt Trump regime and the coming of the pandemic. Issue 25, which you reviewed in *SFC*, was constructed such that every essay had some kind of relevancy or resonance to either the pandemic or the 2020 US Presidential election, as they were the defining events of the year. And as for *MBP* 26, published back in December and which I hope you will consider for review in *SFC*, it was again composed in the belly of the beast, a.k.a. the fucking Covid-19 pandemic, with every essay in it except one written earlier in 2020. Issue 26 includes the 200th essay I've published in *MBP*, and I still have enough uncollected essays (with more being written all the time) that the project looks to be sustainable.

You're not nearly the only one, by the way, who has noticed the lack of letters of comment in *MBP*. But they just don't seem to fit into a personal time capsule. What I plan on doing, *RealSoonNow*, is a separate letterzine (of a title yet to be determined, suggestions welcome) reprinting a selection of correspondence for the first 25 issues of the run. I hope it doesn't take me another five years of procrastination to do that!

(22 March 2022)

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## The generosity tango...

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Some of you don't send items through the mail in the hope I will review them. Many generous people send me stuff just because they feel like doing so. I've probably forgotten some of you, in which case I apologise in advance. Other gifts and acts of kindness are covered in the letters section of this issue of *SFC*.

- My steadiest indexing client over the last 20 years has been **CSIRO Publishing**, in the



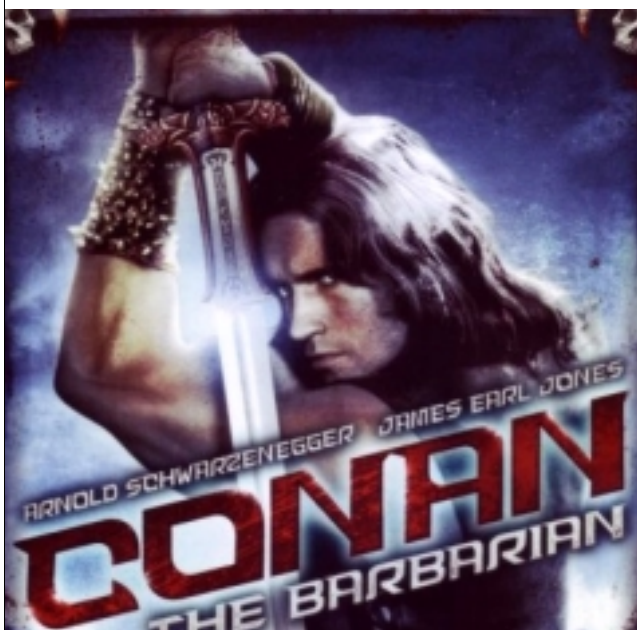
On the surface of Lake Amadeus, fursace ants have constructed a new nest opening following flooding of the previous one.





person of Canadian-now-very-much Australian **Tracey Kudis**. Thanks to her, Elaine and I have edited and indexed many wonderful books of real science. I do not receive complimentary copies automatically, but only when I ask for them. My last job for CSIRO — and my last professional indexing job, unless somebody of some event forces me out of retirement, is **Steve Morton's Australian Deserts** (\$60 from CSIRO Publishing, Locked Bag 10, Clayton South VIC 3169). The text is crisp and informative. The photographs by Mike Gillam that are breath-taking, and Brenda Thornley's maps are very useful.

Another favourite CSIRO book has been



**Gisela Kaplan's Australian Magpie: Biology and Behaviour of an Unusual Songbird** (2019; \$45). Kaplan's text is authoritative, illuminated by her obvious love of magpies. Elaine and I have learned much from Kaplan, and my indexing job coincided with Elaine's beginning to feed a small family of magpies on the front nature strip every morning. Did you know that magpies can recognise the faces of people, even if it's a bit hard for us to return the compliment.

- The **Ditmar Awards for 2021** remained such a closed secret that probably many *SFC* readers remain unaware that they have ever been awarded. Nobody from the Ditmar Committee has yet sent me any notification that I had been nominated for a Ditmar for Best Fan Writer, or that I had won. I would not even have known that *SFC* had been nominated if **Terry Frost** had not announced on Facebook that he had had been nominated for the William Atheling Jr Award for his reviews in his podcast *Terry Talks Movies* (on YouTube). Better still, he won. When I finally found a copy of the nominations list, there was my name as well. If it had not been for **Cat Sparks** announcing that she had won a Best Collected Work Ditmar for her collection *Dark Harvest* (NewCon Press). She showed a photo of her Ditmar Award trophy on Facebook. Um. So where might mine be? Would it be sent to me by the Ditmar Committee? No. The presentation of the awards was the responsibility of Conflux, the annual Canberra convention and



last year's national convention, but because of Covid restrictions the convention had to be cancelled. So Cat, who lives in Canberra, took it upon herself to find my Ditmar trophy (and the one for the year before, which had never been sent to me) and send it to me. Much thanks, Cat.

- It took awhile to catch up with **John Davies** this year. Because of the Omicron virus raging through Australia from November 2021 on, we became rather nervous about resuming our monthly movie-watching gathering. It's now happening again. Meanwhile John has been sending me some valuable Blu-ray sets of historical movies, which he buys at PlayMusic in Melbourne. Some of the more amazing items he's sent me since January have been **Mae West in Hollywood 1942-1943** (a boxed set of nine Blu-rays), two rich **Columbia Noir** collections, **Carl Dreyer's Vampyre** (remastered from the 1920s original) and the recent **The Burnt Orange Heresy**, the ultimate sting movie in which Mick Jagger plays the art collector who tries to sting an artist and an art forger, but who is stinging who?

John also alerted me to the new Viavision Imprint edition of the pioneering 1976 Australian movie **Mad Dog Morgan**, starring Dennis Potter, who (to judge from the extras) was even crazier than the character he portrays.



- Dick Jenssen has been as generous as ever in spotting and importing overseas-released Blu-rays that I might never have heard of. They include a remastered **West Side Story** — the original film — filled with making-of extras. It has an energy and artistic power that is missing in the recent Steven Spielberg version. Dick also tracked down the new Blu-ray of **Conan the Barbarian**, one of the most underrated Hollywood movies of the last 40 years. The acting is very good — obviously Arnold Schwarzenegger had a great future in front of him — but it's John Milius' direction and Duke Callaghan's photography that make this a rewatchable film, along with Basil Poledouris' score, one of the very best film scores. Dick also gave us the 1950s pioneering semi-documentary SF film *Conquest of Space* and a boxed sets of Hammer films (including Joseph Losey's 1962 British film **The Damned**, one of the few really great science fiction movies) and **After Dark Neo-Noir Cinema** (six movies, including a James Foley film).

**Conquest in Space** is quite a surprise, with its odd combination of both clunky and clever special effects (based on paintings by Chesley Bonestell) and a script that attempts to guess how various members of an army crew might react to various situations, both on the space station (which strongly resembles the one in *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and the spaceship to Mars. Considering that the creation of NASA was four years away when the movie was released, it makes a lot of clever guesses while being a bit optimistic about the possibilities of settling Mars.

- **David Russell** continues to have the magic touch in sending me presents for my birthday every February. This year they included Volumes 2 and 4 of **For Better or Worse: The Complete Library**. Lyn Johnson's Canadian daily comic strip *For Better or Worse* was the



continuing story of a family that closely resembles her own. It was published for many years in Melbourne's *Age*, until she retired. It's my favourite newspaper comic strip of the many I've read over the last 60 years. Among the many books that David gave me in the same large package were **Jo Walton's *Or What You Will***, **Neil Gaiman's *Fragile Things***, and several Le Guin-related books, including **Susan DeFreitas's** anthology ***Despatches from Anarres: Tales in Tribute to Le Guin***.

- **Colin Steele** continues ever generous in sending to SFC his reviews written for *The Canberra Times* and *The Book Collector*, and from time to time he also sends me books, including a **Joyce Carol Oates** collection.
- I'd seen **Alan Stewart** much during the last

two and a half years, but recently caught up with him. He presented me with a spare copy of ***The Alluring Art of Margaret Brundage: Queen of Pulp Pin-up Art*** (**Stephen D. Korshak** and **J. David Spurlock** (Vanguard Publishing/Shasta- Phoenix; 2013; 184 pp.). Not that I have an unseemly interest in tastefully rendered paintings of women with naked breasts — but I was aware that this was a feature of many cover paintings during the pulp era of magazine publishing, and it was very much the specialist interest of Margaret Brundage. In the 2000s the editors and article authors discovered that Brundage was still alive and making art, although the pulp era had disappeared during the mid 1950s. The result is a luxurious piece of bookcraft, and it might still be available.

## I read pixels, too

I haven't been reviewing fanzines published exclusively in PDF format because you can easily find them on Bill Burns' website <http://efanzines.com>. Explore away! Some editors, such as Nic Farey, Taral Wayne, and Joseph Major, send their publications directly to me as email attachments, but also post on [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com). There are exceptions, such as John Coxon, so I haven't read their fanzines.



## ZINE DUMP 54, Jan./Feb. 2022 (Guy Lillian; 12 pp.)

If you are a bit trepidatious about finding the Good Stuff in the fanzine field, take a look at Guy Lillian's (usually bimonthly) guide, ***Zine Dump 54***. His reviews are short, but they are informative. This fanzine is a bit behind schedule at the moment, as Guy and his wife Rosie have been touring around Europe and elsewhere. Use the links in the fanzine itself to ask Guy to put you on his email issue-alert list.

## THROUGH THE BIBLIOSCOPE 26, 20 July 2022 (David Grigg; 8 pp.)

## PERRYScope 24, July 2022 (Perry Middlemiss; 18 pp.)

Both ***Through the Biblioscope*** and ***Perryscope*** arose from ***Two Chairs Talking***, the podcast that Perry and David conduct once a month. I protested to David that all this podcast talk does not form a permanent record for people like me for whom good thoughts don't exist unless they're written down. David tried a speech-to-text translation program, but editing and correcting the results took nearly as much time as making a personal transcription. So both David and Perry began their separate reviewzines, which include many of their most astute reviews prepared for the podcast.

Each writer covers the range of his reading, and



both write splendid reviews, of a quality that I might once have tried to emulate. They also have a commitment to keeping up with the latest and greatest books, both in the SF and fantasy field and some other fields, such as historical and crime/mystery novels. All I can do is to urge you to take a look at both magazines, which appear regularly, both as email attachments from the author/editors and as downloads on efanazines.com.

### THE ALIEN REVIEW 3, March 2022 (Perry Middlemiss; 82 pp.)

I wrote quite a decent puff for *The Alien Review* 2, in *SFC* 108, so I suspect I can just say that I enjoyed No. 3 just as much. **Perry Middlemiss** might or might not have meant this as a competitor to *SFC*, but the fact remains that having two fanzines featuring this type of writing (non-academic good solid writing about science fiction and fantasy) instead of just one, proceeding from Melbourne, goes a long way to restoring Australian fan publishing to the status it held in the 1970s. No. 3 includes a stellar crew of Perry himself, David Grigg, Nick Price, Claire Brialey, Julian Warner (and some friends who like the music of Richard Thompson, such as me), Simon Litten, and various interesting loccers.

### ETHEL THE AARDVARK 216, July 2022 (LynC, for the Melbourne Science Fiction Club; 20 pp.)

*Ethel the Aardvark* 217 will probably have been published by the time you read this review, so make sure you download it from efanazines.com. For many years, *Ethel*, the clubzine of the MSFC, has been issued only to paid-up members of the Club. However, during the pandemic lockdowns the Club has been unable to meet at its usual meeting room at St Augustine's Church, 100 Sydney Road, Coburg, so LynC has been posting issues on efanazines.com as well as sending out PDF copies to members and a few print copies to people who can't download PDFs.

July 2022 is being celebrated as the seventieth anniversary of the beginning of the Club (first of all in people's homes, then in cafes around Melbourne) in 1952. The major celebratory issue will be No. 217. However, No. 216 features James ('Jocko') Allen's story of his days in the MSFC, the



first of a series of articles about the glory days of the Club. (Somebody should sit down in front of Jocko with a recording device to get a much more complete account of the zany days of the 1980s and 1990s.) It also contains the annual reports about the Club's activities, plus lots of book, film, and TV reviews, and some cartoons.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 25 July 2022



**I MUST BE TALKING MY FRIENDS — Continued on page 48**

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# Colin Steele's Bookworld

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## Colin Steele's introduction

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We are all in debt to Bruce Gillespie for providing a longstanding outlet for SF and fantasy reviews. I'm particularly grateful that Bruce has been able to include two Canberra authors, Gillian Polack and first-time novelist T. R. Napper, in this the first episode of my new column.

The new title for my review column, 'Colin Steele's Bookworld', reflects the changing nature of my wider book reviewing for the *Canberra Times* and indirectly the increasing lack of outlets in newspapers and magazines for SF and fantasy reviews. As I mentioned in the most recent issue of *SFC* (108), *The Australian* newspaper no longer has a dedicated SF and fantasy reviewer, and the book review sections of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, which sadly are exactly the same in both Sydney and Melbourne, is a pale shadow of its former length, as indeed is the whole Saturday cultural supplement. All rather strange in terms of coverage when one considers more people go to cultural events, however widely defined, in Australia than sporting events. Newspaper sporting pages carry relatively few advertisements, yet when claims are made for more cultural pages, the editors blame a lack of advertising.

Crime fiction, however, features strongly in the existing literary pages because of its popularity both with readers and in sales. Yet fantasy, in particular, sells well in Australia, particularly through Book-Tok publicity in the teenage market. Science fiction has a dedicated readership, although few Australian SF authors now generate the sales that would attract the major publishers unless their books fall into the climate fiction (cli-fi) category. SF also suffers from an understandable diversity of subject content, which prevents a marketing campaign like the current Australian rural noir crime fiction boom.

It was interesting to read, in this context, a recent article in the Australian newsletter *Books+Publishing*: 'The recent growth in science fiction and fantasy can be linked to a range of factors including TikTok, screen adaptations, demand for diverse characters and an appetite for escapist yet hopeful stories. Along with manga and graphic novels, another Nielsen category that drove book sales in Australia in 2021 was science fiction and fantasy (SFF). The category was up 9% on 2020, and, like manga, this can be attributed in part to screen adaptations of sci-fi series such as *Dune* and *The Witcher*.' Now admittedly, most of the authors quoted were American, but there is undoubtedly a strong market for Australian fantasy authors if properly distributed and publicised.

I recently attended the May 2022 Aurealis Awards ceremony in Canberra and reflected on how many of the award-winning SF, fantasy, and horror titles on the shortlist were either small press or self-published titles. I had only reviewed two of the titles, those by Garth Nix and Kathryn Barker, both published by Allen & Unwin. It was disappointing that there were no small press publisher tables to exhibit their publications, but one can understand the economics of small press publishing and transporting books to Canberra after two years of Covid lockdown. One could not deny, however, the enthusiasm of the unmasked packed awards room (although three Covid cases did emerge from it!), the professionalism of the presentations with Craig Cormick as MC, and the warm relationships between the authors and the audience. It was good to see major authors present, such as Garth Nix, Daniel O'Malley, Kaaron Warren, Sean Williams, and Kim Wilkins, who won the Sara Douglass award, to encourage the emerging authors present.

One just wishes that Australian SF and fantasy authors were better known and promoted in Australia, but sadly there doesn't seem to be an obvious solution for any major change in the near future.

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## Gillian Polack replies:

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Thank you for sharing this, Colin. It's really interesting.

What I saw was quite a difference between which authors are visible at places like US and European conventions and which ones make it into Australian bookshops and lists. I've been keeping an eye on attendance lists, and it's brought out some surprises. All the Nielsen top-level writers are visible everywhere, and are reviewed most places and stocked in bookshops, but there is a coterie of writers who are mainly known within fan circles these days. Some of them sell really well, while some are respected rather than makers-of-sales. This comes for me from my time in Book View Cafe (the author co-op founded by, among others, Ursula le Guin and Vonda McIntyre). I watch the career of all writers who are or (such as me) were once members. What Amplify is seeing is the overflow from writers' groups such as this or The History Girls, in the case of historical fiction. These groups are what keep careers going past a decade, because the contacts work quietly to keep people visible. In my case, for instance, when I am still not that visible at home, it meant I was invited to give two talks at the recent Baltimore SF convention (Balticon).

We live in a changing and very strange book world!

Thanks again

Gillian

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## AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

**THIS ALL COME BACK NOW: AN ANTHOLOGY OF  
FIRST NATIONS SPECULATIVE FICTION**  
edited by Mykaela Saunders (UQP; \$32. 99)

**ENCLAVE**  
by Claire G. Coleman (Hachette; \$29. 99)

Koori and Lebanese author **Mykaela Saunders** has brought together 22 previously published short stories by First Nations writers in ***This All Come Back Now***, labelled as 'the world's first anthology of blackfella speculative fiction'. Contributors include Evelyn Araluen, Karen Wyld, Lisa Fuller, Jasmin McGaughey, Samuel William Watson, John Morrissey, Ellen van Neerven, and Alexis Wright.

Saunders abbreviates speculative fiction to 'spec fic' in her 'Overture' introduction, noting that 'many common spec fic themes are just stone-cold reality for us ... our cultural stories have dealt with for millennia — the difference is, to us these stories aren't always parsed out into fiction or fantasy, as they are often just ways we experience life. For example: time travel isn't such a big deal when you belong to a culture that experiences all times simultaneously, not in a progressive straight line like Western cultures do.'

The opening story, 'Muyum, a Transgression' by Goorie/Koori poet Evelyn Araluen, concludes with the words, 'This all come back now, which , as

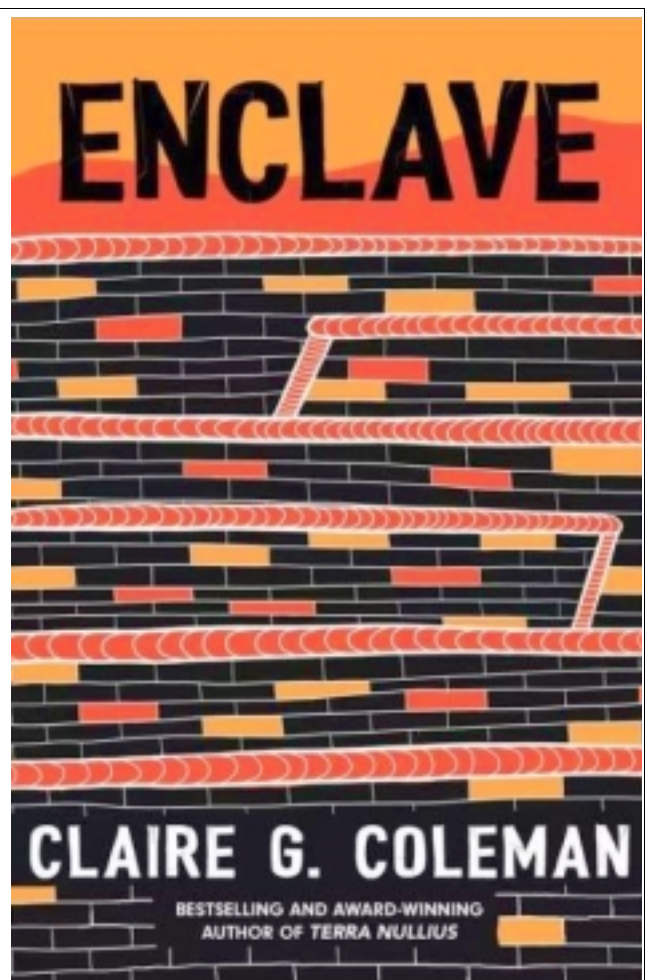
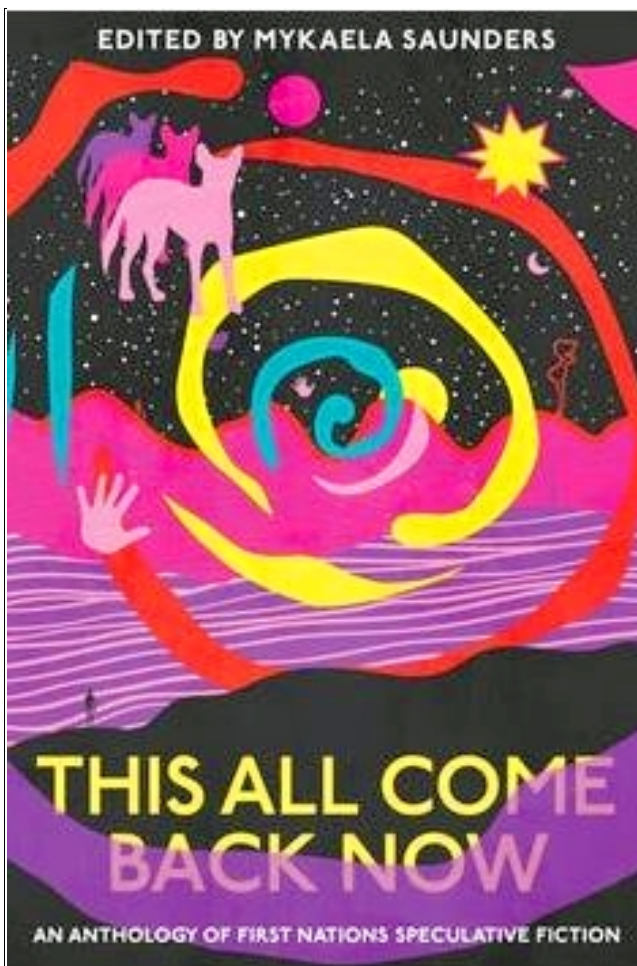
Saunders notes, alludes to the 'spectral narrator's singularity of thought and feeling that she's now become at one with everything right at the end of consciousness'. Araluen reflects the cyclic cosmology of First Nations, setting her story in an almost mystical landscape, 'where sadness is born from intimate knowledge of place and people and what has been done to both'.

Ellen van Neerven, of Mununjul and Dutch heritage, sets 'Water' in a near future Australia in which a small number of a new species, 'sand-plants', part people, part plant, are found near Russell Island in Queensland, the site of a major scheduled development. A young Indigenous woman, Kaden, is the designated Cultural Liaison Officer to the plant people, some of whom are literally rooted to the banks of Russell Island. As she grows emotionally closer to them and their possible fate, the links to Australia's history resonate, particularly in the context of land rights and the treatment of the stolen generation.

Adam Thompson, a Pakana Tasmanian author, infuses 'Your Own Aborigine' with dark humour. A Liberal government, under threat from an ultra-right party, has passed an Aboriginal Welfare Bill in which Aboriginal welfare recipients of Centrelink payments must be personally sponsored by an individual Australian taxpayer. While High Court and other legal actions are yet to be heard, the story plays out through the experiences of several individual sponsors in a Tasmanian pub.

Many of the stories in *This All Come Back Now* reflect the themes of climate change, racial abuse, invasion, and colonisation in a variety of present





and future worlds.

Invasion and colonisation also play out in ***Enclave***, the first novel by **Claire G. Coleman** (Wirlomin Noongar woman) since *Terra Nullius* (2017), which won the Miles Franklin Award, the Norma K. Hemming Award, and was shortlisted for the Stella Prize.

*Enclave*, Coleman's third novel, is set in a near-future, climate change-impacted Australia. It extrapolates from today's financial and social inequalities. Coleman has said in an interview, 'Over the last few years I have become aware of increasing political polarisation and a rise in people trying to isolate themselves from opinions and lives different to their own. I wondered what sort of world would come about if the current cultural tendency towards isolation continued.'

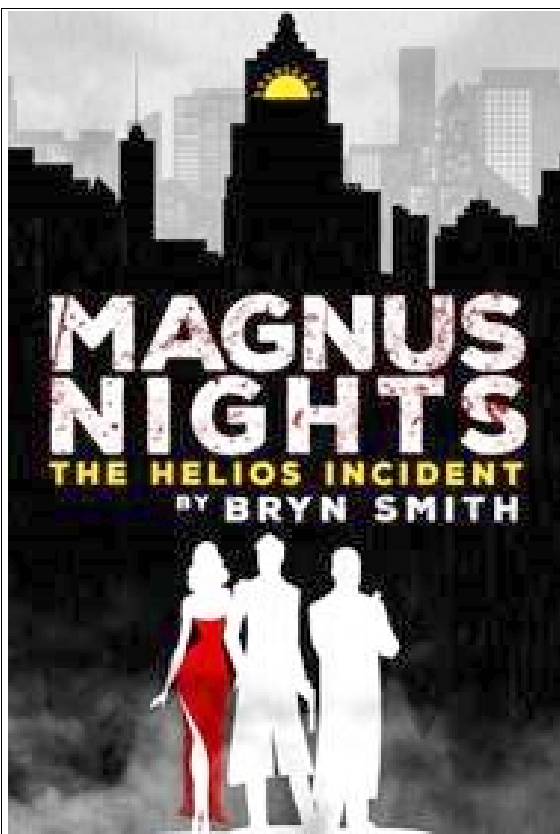
In *Enclave*, 20-year-old Christine lives with her family in Safetown, a secure, conservative, white city in which lifestyles are constantly reinforced by the personal algorithms of 'the Agency'. Christine rails against her family's conservative outlook and their treatment of the dark-skinned servant underclass, a sentiment that is accentuated when Christine falls in love with one of them, Sienna. Christine, whose relationship is spotted by

surveillance cameras, is labelled an 'Abo lover', but refuses to recant, and is exiled from Safetown.

In Part Two of the novel, Coleman follows a traditional SF path, with Christine struggling to survive in an anarchic and dangerous wasteland. Ultimately, however, she reaches an almost utopian Melbourne of 10 million people. Here refugees are welcome and everyone has free public transport and a guaranteed income.

Melbourne represents a black-and-white contrast to Safetown's sexual conservatism and corporate and individual greed. The conflict between the two societies escalates as the Agency pursues Christine to Melbourne, where she, Sienna, and their colleagues proves to be a catalyst for an ultimate resolution.

Melbourne is now one of the greenest cities in the world. No city is more green, more dedicated to fighting global warming through the growth of biomass; sometimes it has more in common with a rainforested mountain than a city.' Coleman never details the economic and scientific infrastructure of how Melbourne balanced its economy and achieved an average lifetime expectancy of 150 years, except noting Melbourne was one of the fastest cities in the world to change: "the citizens



there fought for the city.’

Coleman is not an author in the Kim Stanley Robinson mould, underpinning the infrastructure detail. Rather, her forte is in powerful messaging — in her words, ‘to unpack and interrogate the world around us’ through her juxtaposition of conflicting societies.

### MAGNUS NIGHTS: THE HELIOS INCIDENT

by Bryn Smith

(Hawkeye Publishing; \$26.95)

Canberra’s **Bryn Smith** begins an SF/crime noir series with *Magnus Nights: The Helios Incident*. Smith’s career technology and Army reserve combat engineering background often comes to the fore in a story set in a dystopian nation state, Magnus, which has some similarities to the ACT. Detective Constable Craddock and Detective Sergeant Augustine of Taskforce Bloodhound must race against time to find the sinister mastermind behind violent confrontations and the use of advanced plasma weaponry, which is disrupting the ‘undercity’. Characterisation is not deep, but there is certainly no lack of action and reflections on power or corruption in society.

### 36 STREETS

by T. R. Napper (Titan; \$24.99)

Canberra based **T. R. Napper**, a former diplomat

and humanitarian aid worker in Mongolia, Laos, and Vietnam, has a creative writing doctorate in ‘Noir, Cyberpunk, and Asian Modernity’, headings that define *36 Streets*, his debut novel. On return to Canberra, Napper has become an award-winning short story writer with his collection, *Neon Leviathan*, published in 2020.

*36 Streets*, named after the historical quarter of Ha Noi where Napper lived for several years, is set in a 2090s Vietnam, largely devastated by war and climate change and dominated by China, the only world superpower after the collapse of Western economies.

Napper’s main character, Lin Thi Vu, is a Vietnamese orphan who grew up in Australia with her Australian foster mother and twin sister, making her something of an outsider in Vietnam. Lin, who works for Ha Noi’s crime boss Bao Nguyen, is contracted to find a missing creator of an illegal addictive virtual reality game, *Fat Victory*, in which the players assume the role of doomed American infantrymen in the US–Vietnam war. The game’s underlying purpose is to de-humanise the Vietnamese into an acceptance of the Chinese occupation.

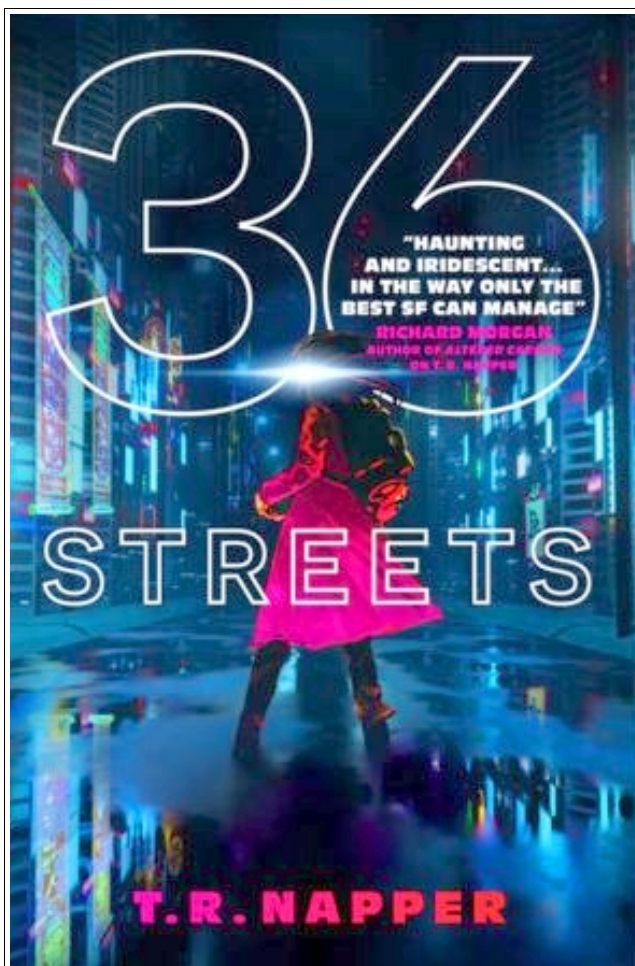
Napper has said, ‘Geopolitically I imagined a future that many, if not all, of my Vietnamese friends feel is unfolding today — that China wants to dominate Vietnam.’ Bao tells Lin, ‘So on the one hand we have Vietnam, expert in suppressing trauma and feeling, and on the other we have our invaders, China, the artisans of amnesia. Whole swaths of their history rewritten to suit the politics of the present day’. Napper takes fake narratives to a cybernetic level.

Napper has said, ‘I took a lot of trends I see today — in communication technology, artificial intelligence, and surveillance — and extrapolated. The idea, for example, that an advanced version of a smart phone will be in our skull as a neural implant is not a huge imaginative leap’.

Lin’s world is one in which drug taking, cyborg medical implants, and memory wiping technology are commonplace. All of which have an increasing impact on Lin personally as her investigation takes a violent and complex turn involving Ha Noi’s gangs and the Chinese military.

Napper has summed up *36 Streets* as being about ‘identity and belonging, collective memory and suffering, the cruelty of great powers and the nature of violence. Just the little things.’ At over 400 pages, it is a novel that merits some editorial pruning. Nonetheless, Napper has delivered a fast-moving novel, with a strong female character who constantly teeters on the edge of darkness, confronting issues of race and nationality within





a framework of stark future geopolitics.

## INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

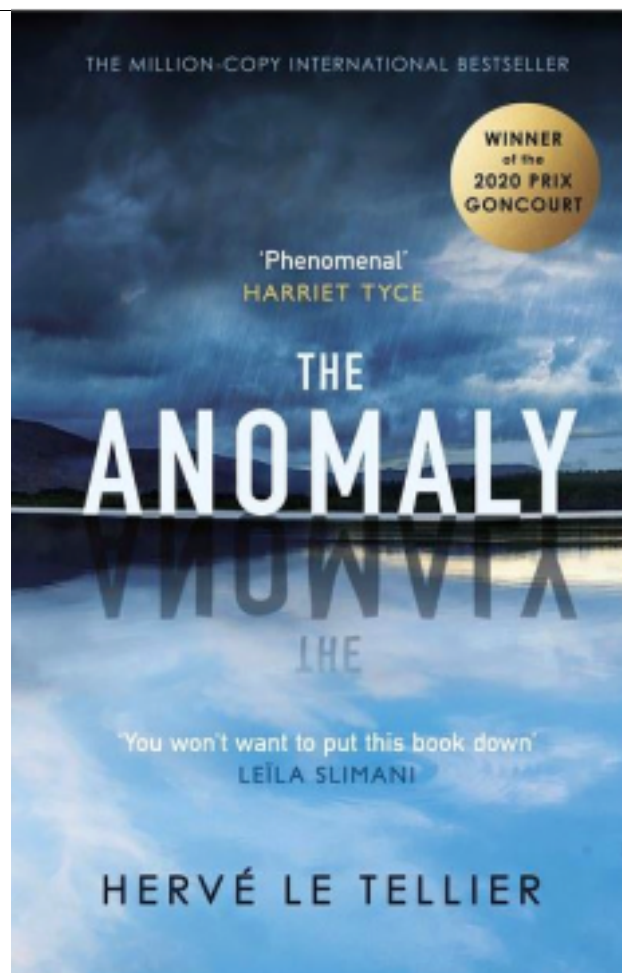
### THE ANOMALY

by **Hervé Le Tellier**

(Michael Joseph; \$32.99)

***The Anomaly*** by **Hervé Le Tellier** won the French 2020 Prix Goncourt and is now skilfully translated into English by Adriana Hunter. Le Tellier's novel had an initial print run in France of 12,500 copies, but ultimately sold more than 1 million copies, making *L'anomalie* only the second-best-selling book in Goncourt's history. The other was Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant* (1984).

Le Tellier has said that he was 'stunned' by the novel's success, which is now to be made into a TV series. Le Tellier, the current President of Oulipo, an experimental writing group founded in the 1960s, has said that his novel could be termed a 'scoubidou', an intentional knot tying, which Le Tellier imitates in narrative form. *The Anomaly* mixes numerous genres, with the three narrative sections taking their headers from the poetry of



Raymond Queneau, the original co-founder of Oulipo.

While it has many literary allusions and philosophical underpinnings, *The Anomaly* is an easy and intriguing, if not always cohesive, read. It begins in June 2021 when an Air France Paris–New York Boeing 787 flight hits violent turbulence and reports into JFK ground control. The only trouble is that the exact same plane with the same pilot, crew, and passengers had landed three months earlier at JFK.

The flight is directed to a military airbase, as the authorities ponder what to do with a plane full of doppelgängers, let alone what to do with on the larger existential questions. Leading scientists and mathematicians provide a variety of possible explanations, including a manipulation of the space-time continuum.

Le Tellier follows the impact of the double flight on a small number of the French and American passengers, who eventually, under controlled conditions, have to meet their doubles. What does a wife do who finds herself with two husbands or when a passenger on the second flight finds that his double has died in the interim?

David Chalmers, former ANU philosopher, in



his acclaimed new book, *Reality*, wonders whether we could be living in a computer simulation. The same question comes from Le Tellier, with one character reworking a Rolling Stones line: 'I can't be no simulation, no, no, no'. Le Tellier speculates on the impact on global religions, 'when seven billion human beings find out that they may not really exist'.

Ultimately, *The Anomaly* doesn't quite know what it wants to be, a broad societal satire, a dark warning on the current path of humanity, especially on climate change, or an existential *jeu d'esprit*. In that latter context, it is appropriate that Le Tellier concludes with a calligram, a typographic device, the novel ending with a single letter. The simulation has concluded.

## BURNTCOAT

by Sarah Hall (Faber; \$49.75)

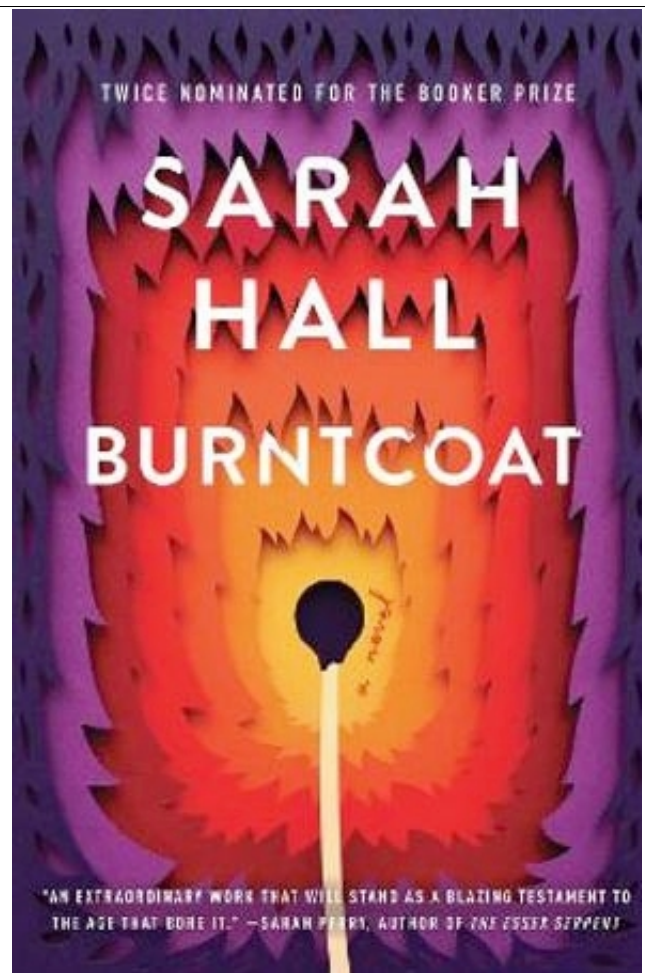
As we have had 9/11, GFC, and Brexit Novels, it was only a matter of time before a new genre of Covid Novels appeared. In *Burntcoat*, award-winning British author **Sarah Hall** has already set the bar high in the pandemic novel stakes.

Hall, who has had Covid, believes the virus has acted as a 'clarifying force' exposing the fault lines of 'ethnicity and poverty' in society. In *Burntcoat*, the virus, called AG3, has been more deadly than our current Covid outbreak. This is a pandemic world in which even if you survive your first viral infection, it will eventually kill you, even if it is 'domestic death behind closed curtains'.

Hall's main character, Edith Harkness, dying at the age of 59, has managed to survive longer than most. Edith, a celebrated, radical sculptor working out of Burntcoat, her studio warehouse, has been commissioned to produce her last work, a massive monument to the millions of pandemic's victims. Edith reflects, 'there will be controversy when it finally goes up ... But I won't have to deal with the fall-out'.

Edith sees the virus in artistic terms, 'perfectly composed, star-like, and timed for the moment of greatest chaos'. Hall emphasises the importance of art and creativity in times of crisis. Working on the project is part of that process for Edith, who reflects on her life including her childhood trauma, raised by a single mother, whose personality fluctuated because of brain surgery.

Edith wonders, will telling 'stories about who we are and make sense of, and meaning from, our existence' and 'make sense of a disordered world?'. *Burntcoat* is episodic, reflecting Hall's skill as a short story writer, as it traces Edith's life and the interaction of art and love.



This puts particular focus in Edith's sexually explicit relationship with her now dead lover, Halit, a Muslim Turkish immigrant chef: 'You were the last one here, before I closed the door of Burntcoat. Before we all closed our doors.' Their love becomes a 'denial' of the viral horror outside, the food riots, the army patrolling the streets, and the borders closed. Hall says Edith 'caring for the dying lover — is this not real, manifest love?'

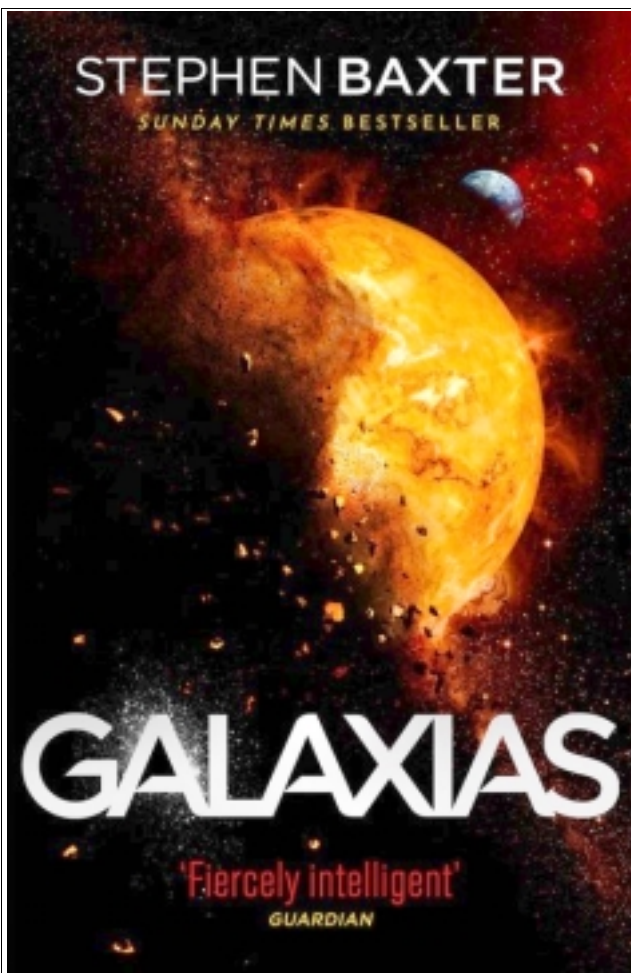
Hall ultimately ponders, 'How do we live with our own mortality? How do we prepare for what is unimaginable?'. Hall has said her friendships during Covid 'have been vital and fortifying and I have come to realise that women particularly tend not to let other women down in hard times'.

*Burntcoat* is a stunning, sober 'memory-piece', as Hall terms it, of love and loss, which reveals how art and caring relationships can provide light in the pandemic darkness.

## GALAXIAS

by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz, \$32.99)

**Stephen Baxter's** *Galaxias* is set in 2057. Space exploration has begun, from an earth ravaged by climate change and national conflicts. Baxter, well known for his scientifically researched fiction,



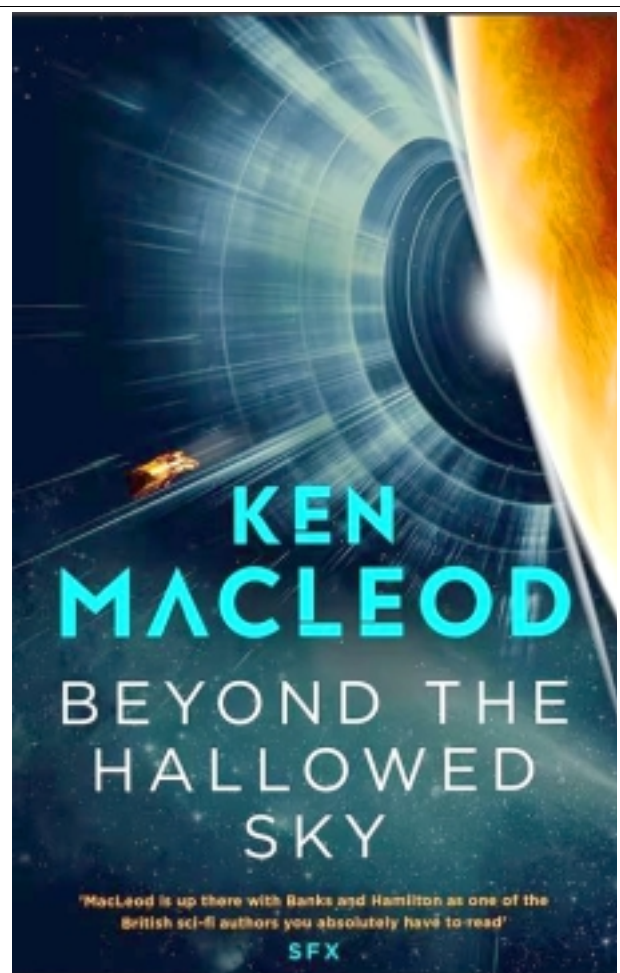
begins with the climatic and societal impact of a 24-hour disappearance, ‘the Blink Day’ of the Sun. This provides the platform for some big SF ideas, seen through the eyes of a variety of individuals. *Galaxias* is a sobering tale of how to adjust to harsh new realities.

### BEYOND THE HALLOWED SKY by Ken MacLeod (Orbit; \$22.99)

Scottish SF writer **Ken MacLeod** begins his ‘Light-speed’ trilogy with *Beyond the Hallowed Sky*. In 2067 a young female graduate student receives a letter providing the mathematical basis of faster-than-light travel. She becomes even more intrigued when it turns out to be a letter from her future self. MacLeod mixes the complexity of time travel and interstellar spaceships with commentary on contemporary issues such as climate change, asylum seekers, and migration and superpower rivalries.

### THE APOLLO MURDERS by Chris Hadfield (Quercus; \$32.95).

Canadian **Chris Hadfield**, a veteran of three spaceflights and former Commander of the Inter-



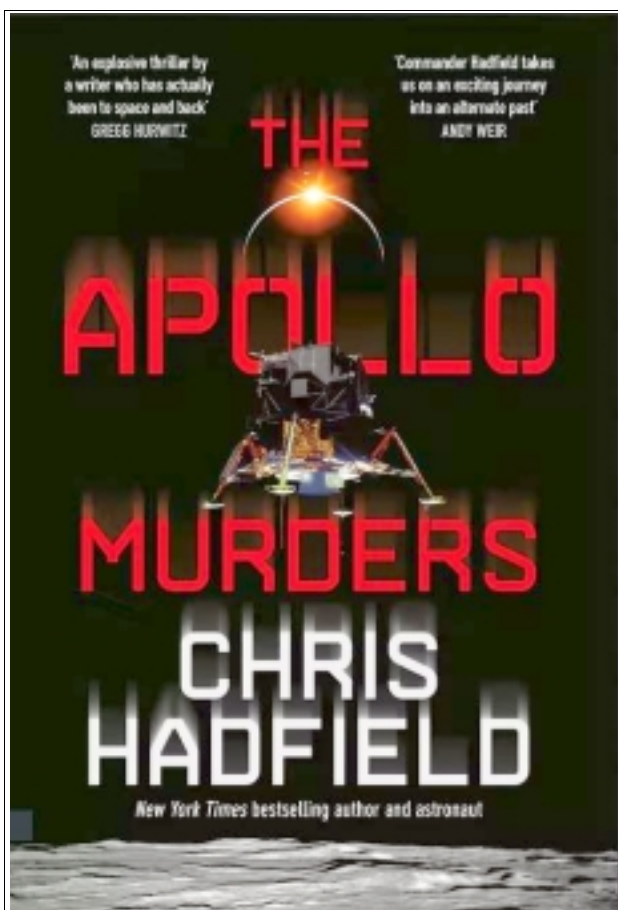
national Space Station, has used his real-life space experience to provide scientific authenticity to *The Apollo Murders*. Hadfield has a postscript, ‘The Reality Behind the Apollo Murders’, documenting the actual historical figures and spaceflights mentioned in the novel’s alternate history SF scenario.

It’s 1973, at the height of the Cold War between Russia and United States, and *Apollo 18* is diverted to disable the Russian satellite spy station, Almaz, before a landing on the moon. The subsequent conflicts, played out on the spacecraft itself and the surface of the Moon, are a microcosm of those on Earth. Hadfield’s novel successfully merges SF, political, and crime fiction genres.

### IN FAR FROM THE LIGHT OF HEAVEN by Tade Thompson (Orbit, \$22.99)

Award-winning author **Tade Thompson** writes in an *Afterword to In Far from the Light of Heaven*: ‘I wanted to set my story in an environment that, as much as possible, derived from the actual experience of astronauts rather than the tropes of SF writing.’ The book begins as a closed spaceship murder mystery. The starship *Ragtime*, controlled by AI, with 1000 colonists in suspended





animation, arrives in orbit around the planet Bloodroot, but when its 'wholly ceremonial' human commander Michelle Campion wakes up, she finds that 31 people have been murdered and dismembered. Michelle has to contend with a dangerous AI, bio-security issues, and a human and android investigating duo from the planet, where the treatment of the alien population evokes echoes of colonial genocide.

**AI 2041: TEN VISIONS FOR OUR FUTURE**  
by Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan  
(W. H. Allen; \$35)

**AI 2041: Ten Visions for our Future** by **Kai-Fu Lee and Chen Qiufan** cleverly juxtaposes fact and fiction in its 'roadmap of the coming decades' of AI. Kai-Fu Lee, a Taiwanese-born American, former head of Google China, provides commentaries on the themes of the 10 'scientific fiction' short stories from leading Chinese writer Chen Qiufan. The stories extrapolate from the use of algorithms for matchmaking, deep-learning-enabled insurance programs, quantum computing, AI weapon systems, and workers in repetitive jobs supplanted by AI industries. Their overall perspective is largely optimistic, reflecting a penchant for AI solutions for human problems and the actions required to prevent the negative impact of AI, although the authors do not circle back to



examining China's contemporary AI surveillance systems.

**AUSTRALIAN  
FANTASY LITERATURE**

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

**Garth Nix's** 'Old Kingdom' books, which began with *Sabriel* (1995), have been international best-sellers. In ***Terciel & Elinor***, the sixth in the series, Nix tells, in the prequel to the series, the story of Sabriel's parents, Terciel and Elinor. Nix has termed the book 'an adventure story, a love story and a fantasy ... with realism'. It certainly is realistic, as Nix's many readers will find out. On the first page of *Sabriel*, Elinor dies, with Sabriel, 'the baby at her side'. Nix traces in *Terciel & Elinor*: 'How did she (Elinor) come to that point, the end of her own story? How did she meet Terciel? What was she like? For that matter, what was Terciel like?' Nix describes the coming together of the eighteen-year-old orphan Terciel, learning the art of necromancy, and the nineteen-year-old Elinor, living a secluded life, and their growing relation-





ship. In the final pages of the novel, Elinor has a vision of her death a decade hence, but fully acknowledges changing that timeline would have an impact on the battle of the Abhorsens against the Dead.

### ONLY A MONSTER by Vanessa Len (Allen & Unwin; \$22.99)

**Vanessa Len**, a Melbourne-based author of Chinese-Malaysian and Maltese origin, has termed her impressive YA debut novel, *Only a Monster*, as urban fantasy. Sixteen-year-old Joan Chang-Hunt goes to live with her grandmother in London, but has no idea initially that she's part monster and that her family is one of 12 monster families in London under threat from each other and humans.

Len has said in an interview that part of her inspiration was 'exploring a diaspora, biracial experience like my own. My main character Joan is biracial — half-English and half-Chinese, as well as being half-monster and half-human. I wanted to depict the experience of being immersed in cultures, while also being removed from the original contexts of those cultures'. Monsters can time-travel, but only by stealing time from humans, so questions of conscience and morality



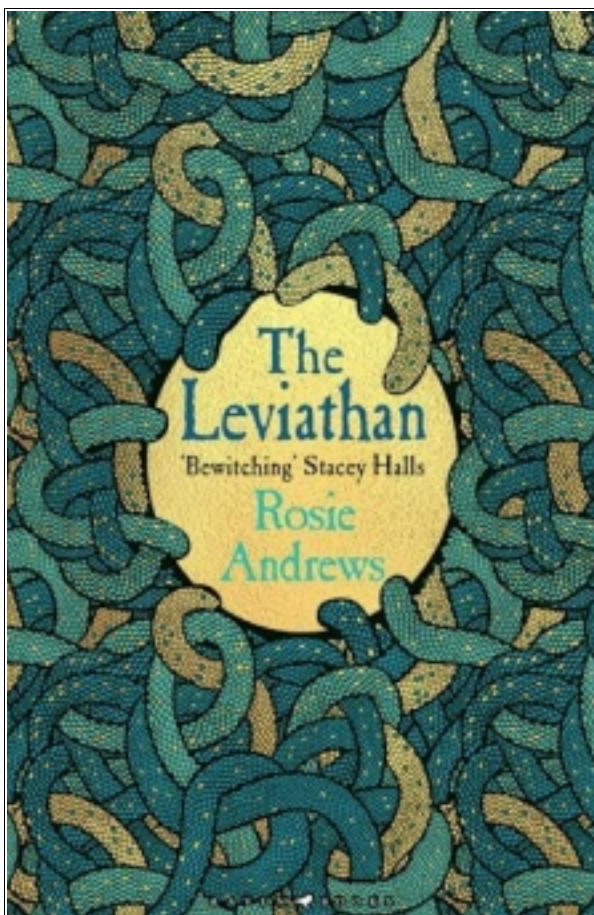
play an important part in a novel with strong characterisation. Joan initially falls in love with her co-worker, but since Nick turns out to be a monster slayer after his family have been killed, this is clearly going to be a problem. John's relationship with the aristocratic Aaron, from a rival monster family, is similarly complex.

Len carefully balances world building and suspense, leading to a realistic conclusion, ensuring that the next two books in the trilogy will have a solid readership

### INTERNATIONAL FANTASY LITERATURE

#### THE LEVIATHAN by Rosie Andrews (Raven; \$29 99)

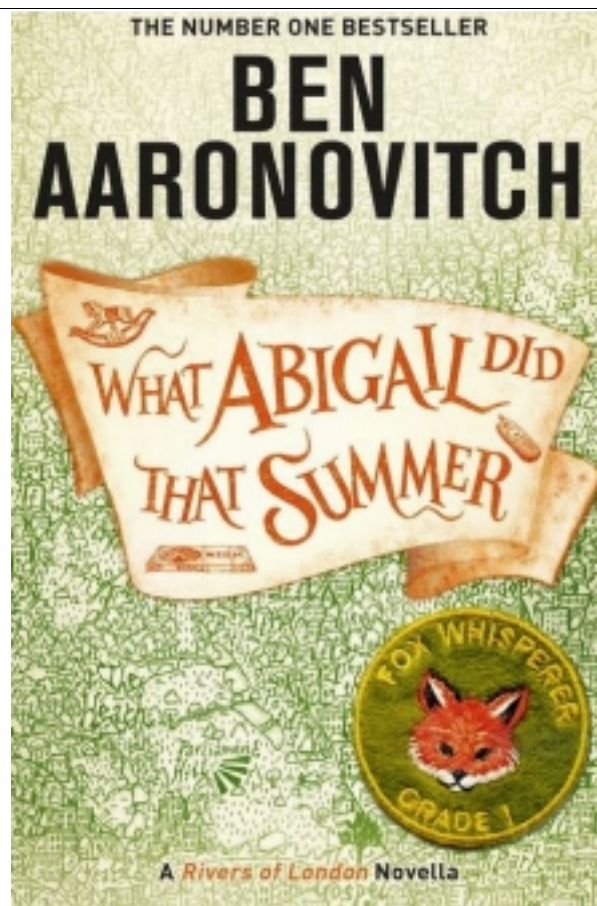
**Rosie Andrews** has been named among the top 10 best debut novelists in 2022 by the UK *Observer* newspaper for her dark Gothic fantasy novel *The Leviathan*. Although it begins with a prologue set in 'the present' of 1703, most of the novel takes place in 1643 in during the English Civil War. The narrator, reluctant soldier Thomas Treadwater, is summoned home to the family farm by his younger sister Esther, to find strange events



have occurred and a new servant accused of witchcraft. Thomas, who believes himself to be a rational man, must unravel the dark secrets of the family with the help of his old tutor, the poet John Milton. Andrews, through extensive research, provides a convincing, realistic, seventeenth-century backdrop to an intriguing story of family loyalties impacted by dark forces. Will it be *Paradise Lost* or *Paradise Regained*?

### WHAT ABIGAIL DID THAT SUMMER by Ben Aaronovitch (Gollancz; \$22.99)

**Ben Aaronovitch's** 'Rivers of London' is another best-selling series, which continues with a novella, ***What Abigail Did That Summer***, featuring teenage 'ghost hunter, fox whisperer and trouble-maker' Abigail Kamara. Abigail, who has featured briefly in previous books of the series, now takes centre stage, investigating the disappearance of teenagers on Hampstead Heath. Although they eventually reappear, they are confused as to what has happened. With her friend Simon and talking foxes, who take on the task of surveillance, Abigail must investigate what appears to be a haunted house with a magic demi-monde. Aaronovitch's characteristic invention and dry wit, the latter emphasised in Terry Pratchett-like footnotes, make *What Abigail Did That Summer* an engrossing and entertaining read.



## MEDIA TIE-IN BOOKS

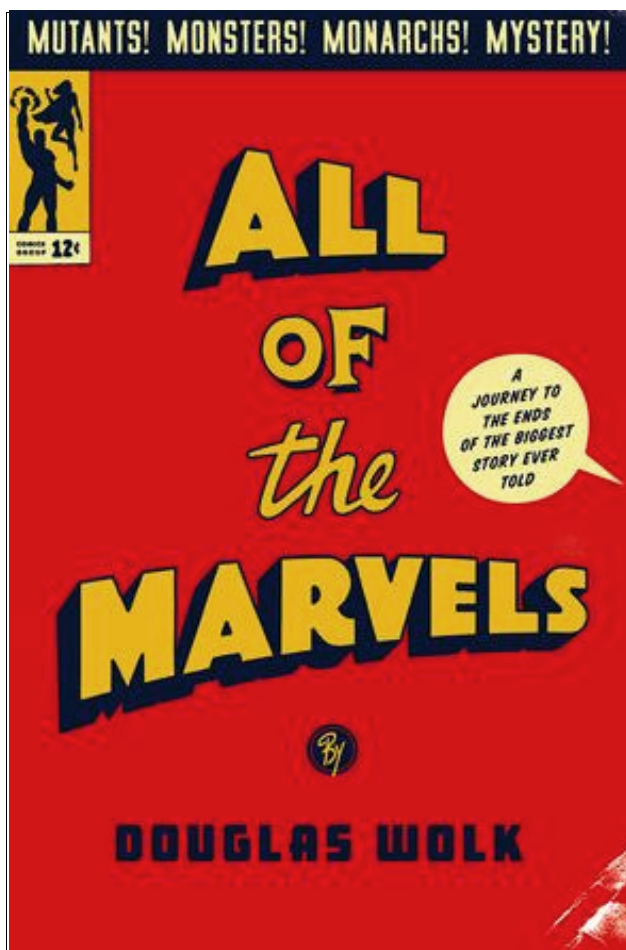
### ALL OF THE MARVELS by Douglas Wolk (Profile; \$39.99)

Superhuman powers are commonplace in the Marvel universe. In *All of the Marvels*, **Douglas Wolk**, a 'critic-cum-superfan', claims to have read all of the 27,000 Marvel superhero comics published since 1961, comprising more than 540,000 pages. Wolk eschews a chronological approach, rather following individual characters through 'the big Marvel ... a funhouse mirror history of the past sixty years of American life, from the atomic night-terrors of the Cold War to the technocracy and pluralism of the present day'. Wolk's book will certainly appeal to the numerous Marvel universe followers, but it is also a fascinating insight into pop culture as examined through the diversity of the Marvel characters.

### SPACECRAFT by Timothy Morton (Bloomsbury; \$19.99)

**Timothy Morton's** *Spacecraft* spins off his 'found object', the *Millennium Falcon* from *Star Wars*. Morton, Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University, instead of covering spacecraft in SF, rather takes the reader on a journey of





speculative philosophy, extrapolating from the *Star Wars* and *Dr Who* universes. In an unusual and thought-provoking mix, Morton covers issues such as feminism, American pop culture, capitalism, and the possibilities of hyperspace.

## CULTURE AND LITERATURE

### PEN INTERNATIONAL: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

edited by Carles Torner and Jan Martens  
(Thames & Hudson; 2021; \$90)

This work documents 100 years of PEN, the largest and oldest writers' organisation in the world, which has 'placed the celebration of literature and the defence of free speech at the centre of humanity's struggle against repression' since its foundation in October 1921. The defence of free speech is even more important today with the increasing persecution of dissident voices in autocracies.

PEN initially stood for 'Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists', but now it 'welcomes' into its membership publishers, translators, bloggers, academics, and journalists. Editors **Carles Torner** and **Jan Martens** have supplemented the text with over 500 archival illustrations,



tions, often full-page, of leading figures and writers, letters, maps, and documents. A digital archive of PEN documents can be found at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, reflecting PEN's core issues, including the plight of imprisoned writers, free speech, and international human rights.

Contributing authors Ginevra Avalor, Peter McDonald, Rachel Potter, Laetitia Zecchini, and Jennifer Clement provide chapters tracing the evolution of PEN, which was founded in London in 1921 by poet Catharine Amy Dawson Scott. PEN became more assertive politically in the 1930s. In 1933, then President H. G. Wells invited exiled German writer Ernst Toller to 'speak about the realities of Nazi rule' and PEN's German chapter was expelled from membership for 'excluding members on political grounds'. The first PEN Centre in Exile, German PEN, was founded in 1934 in London.

The Spanish Civil War saw fascist attacks on intellectuals. In 1937, PEN launched its 'first successful campaign on behalf of a writer in prison', helping to free Arthur Koestler from a Spanish jail but was unable to prevent the death of the poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca. The Nazi persecution of Jewish writers and the burning of their books saw PEN strongly upholding individual freedom of expression, which has



continued to the present day.

PEN has spoken out, in more recent decades, on behalf of Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel Prize winner when a political prisoner; Salman Rushdie, when threatened with death by the Ayatollah Khomeini; Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian journalist murdered in 2006 for her reporting on Russia's wars with Chechnya; and Hong Kong publisher Gui Minhai, when kidnapped and imprisoned by Chinese authorities.

In 2019 PEN worked for the release of Ukrainian writer and filmmaker Oleg Ssentsov. The section, 'Facing the Russian aggression to Ukraine', is sadly prescient in its documentation of Russian aggression and how human rights were 'being dangerously undermined' even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Margaret Atwood's words, 'in a world where independent voices are increasingly stifled, PEN is not a luxury, it's a necessity', are more than ever relevant.

## STORY MATRICES

by Gillian Polack

(Luna Press Publishing; \$35)

Canberra-based **Gillian Polack** is a Jewish-Australian writer, editor, and academic, whose fiction and nonfiction spans numerous genres and subjects. Her academic qualifications include a First Class Honours in History at Melbourne University; an MA from the University of Toronto; and two doctorates, one in Medieval History at the University of Sydney and one in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia.

Polack, who terms herself an ethnohistorian and a writer, has a prolific publishing CV, including 10 novels, mostly in the SF and fantasy genres, one short story collection, five non-fiction books, two academic monographs, one co-written history reference book, two cookbooks, 40 short stories, and over 400 short non-fiction pieces.

In 2016, Polack's book *History and Fiction* was shortlisted for the William Atheling Jr Award for Criticism or Review and in 2020 Polack was awarded the A. Bertram Chandler Award for 'Outstanding Achievement in Australian Science Fiction'. In 2020, she won the Ditmar Best Novel award for *The Year of the Fruit Cake* (2019), which has, at its heart, 'a perimenopausal angry and political Canberra woman'.

Polack says, 'I've used Canberra in my fiction for years.' Her Canberra novels include *Ms Cellophane* (2009) about 'the public service and how it devastates some souls'; *The Time of the Ghosts* (2017), where the culture Europeans brought to Australia manifests as ghosts and spirits, and

# STORY MATRICES

Cultural Encoding and Cultural Baggage  
in Science Fiction and Fantasy

GILLIAN POLACK

"Polack's natural-speaking prose style effortlessly  
modulates into formal referenced academic discourse"  
Van Ikin

sections of *The Wizardry of Jewish Women* (2016), the first Jewish-Australian literary fantasy. One of the problems Polack faces is that most of her novels are published by Australian and international small press publishers, which poses challenges in both marketing and distribution.

Her latest book, ***Story Matrices: Cultural Encoding and Cultural Baggage in the Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy***, published by Edinburgh's Luna Press Publishing, was launched at the Easter British Science Fiction Convention held at Heathrow Airport's Radisson Hotel. Polack's 25-minute conversation about the book with publisher, Francesca Barbini, is on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIpl4DOUATg>).

Polack says she has been researching *Story Matrices* for over a decade. Then, 'I wrote the book during the bushfires and finished it during lockdown.' The study uses cultural encoding and baggage within the SF and fantasy genres 'to decode critical elements of modern English-language culture ... My first PhD looked at something equivalent: conceptions of time and the past in popular writing in the Middle Ages. That was over 30 years ago, and I've come back to my home turf and to the present. I am still an ethnohistorian/historiographer, however, and this

informs my approach.'

Pollack frameworks the book as follows: 'The culture we live in shapes us. We also shape the culture we live in. Stories we tell play critical roles in this shaping. The heart of cultural transmission is how these things come together and make a novel work. Especially how they combine with the world of the novel to communicate about the reader's culture as well as the culture within the novel. Genre writing plays a critical role in this. How writers integrate issues such as shared culture, colonialism, diasporic culture, own voices, ethics, selective forgetting and silencing into their work illuminates ways in which speculative fiction is important for cultural transmission.'

We've all seen how Vladimir Putin uses his version of an historical narrative to justify his invasion of Ukraine. Polack says, 'that cultural point where we share all aspects of the narrative is both amazing and terrifying ... in order to tell stories, we need worlds. This is where genre fiction is of particular importance, especially science fiction, fantasy and historical fiction.' With the current boom of historical, especially Regency novels, Polack examines the genre with particular reference to Australian author Alison Goodman and the 'invented England' of English novelist Georgette Heyer.

Polack comments, 'When writers draw upon the culture and history of others, what are they actually doing? How do they handle issues such as cultural understanding and cultural appropriation ... we build worlds for fiction using cultural brickwork ... If I write a novel about privilege or oppression, of course those elements come into play, but one of the things I noticed about myself as a writer was that I classified some people according to popular views of their ethnic/religious background regardless of the novel's theme. The diacultural analysis enables me to see who has links with whom, and forces me to move away from stereotyping.'

As a Jewish writer, Polack asks in one chapter 'Whose Culture Is It?'. She intentionally used Australian-Jewish culture and lived religion in *The Wizardry of Jewish Women* in an examination of cultural mapping. In that context, Polack provides an interesting commentary on the novels of Arthur Upfield and Nevil Shute.

There is much in Polack's *Story Matrices* to stimulate debate. It is a book that will be particularly useful in creative writing classes. She notes, 'It's not the end of my research. It's a fixed point where more people can enter into the conversation. The book is a launch pad for discussion.'

**CHUMS: HOW A TINY CASTE OF OXFORD TORIES TOOK OVER THE UK**  
by Simon Kuper (Profile, \$42.90)

**NOT FAR FROM BRIDESHEAD** by Daisy Dunn  
(Weidenfeld and Nicholson; \$49.99 )

**THE HISTORIC HEART OF OXFORD UNIVERSITY**  
by Geoffrey Tyack  
(Bodleian Library; \$69.99)

**THE LIGHTED WINDOW**  
by Peter Davidson  
(Bodleian Library; \$49.99)

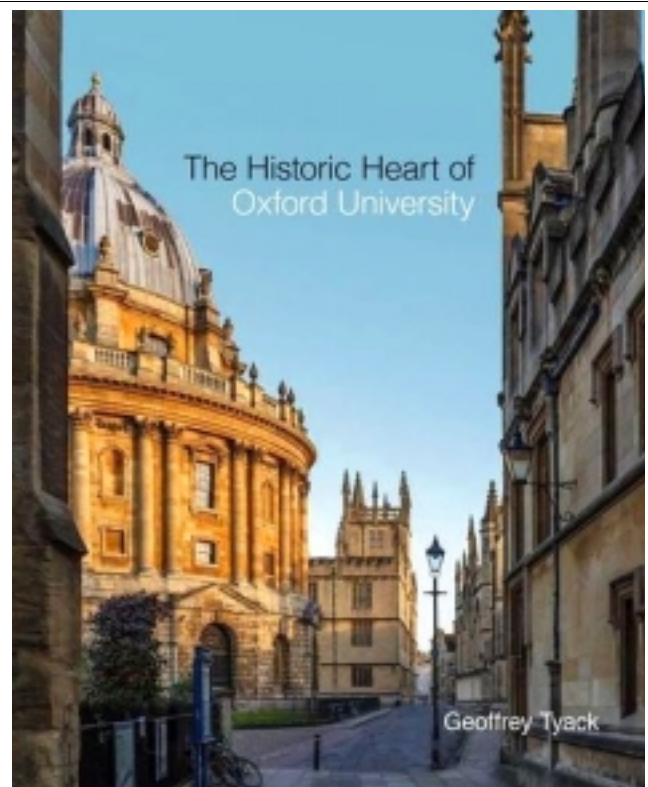
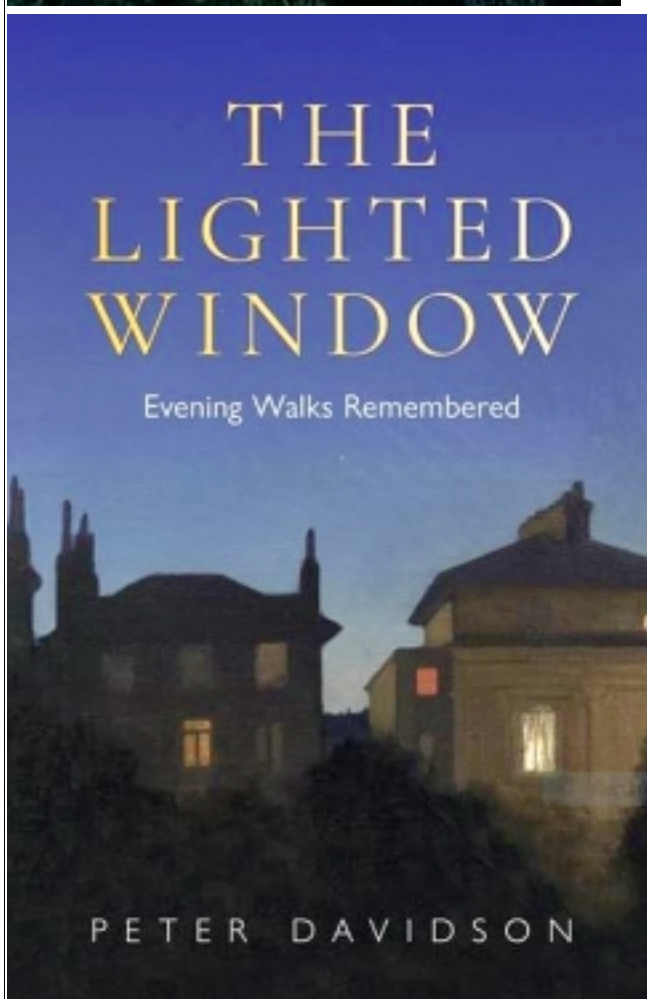
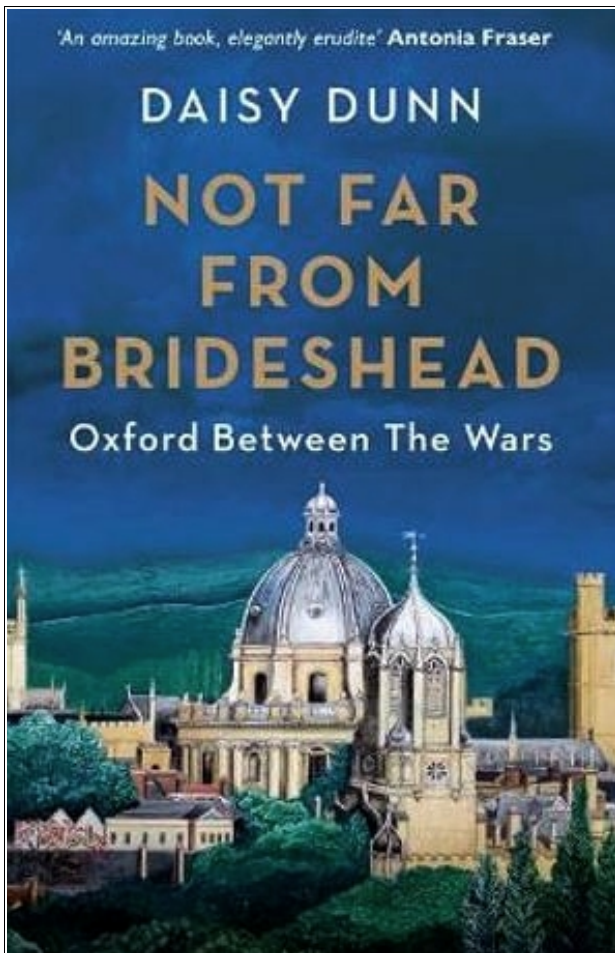
Financial Times columnist **Simon Kuper**, in *Chums: How a Tiny Caste of Oxford Tories Took Over the UK*, notes that 11 of the 15 post-war British prime ministers went to Oxford University. Three PMs didn't go to university (Winston Churchill, James Callaghan, and John Major), while Gordon Brown went to Edinburgh University.

Kuper argues that to understand power in today's Britain 'requires travelling back in time to Oxford somewhere between 1983 and 1993', when Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, David Cameron, George Osborne, Daniel Hannan, Dominic Cummings, and Jacob Rees-Mogg were running Oxford Union student debates and aspiring to run Britain.

Kuper, an Oxford contemporary, originally thought 'modernity would wipe out these ridiculous Etonians, with their white ties and their speeches. It didn't occur to me that they had identified the route to power.' Rhodes scholar Malcolm Turnbull reflects that the Oxford Union was 'less of a forum for debating the big issues of the day' than a venue for proving to be 'an entertaining speaker', which Johnson and Gove certainly have been.

Dominic Cummings, when advisor to Johnson, criticised the humanities: 'we should stop selecting leaders from a subset of Oxbridge egomaniacs with a humanities degree'. Yet Cummings read history, as did Hannan and Rees Mogg, while Johnson read classics ('Greats') and Gove studied English. In 1981, Oxford admitted three-quarters of all pupils who applied to study classics. In the 1930s, the Oxford Classics Faculty employed more than one in five of the academic staff.

The 'Chums' in Kuper's devastating indictment were clearly focused on their direction towards political power and ultimately towards taking Britain out of Europe. Kuper argues that today's



Oxford University doesn't 'tolerate articulate bluffers', with the University specifically targeting a diverse intake of talented students.

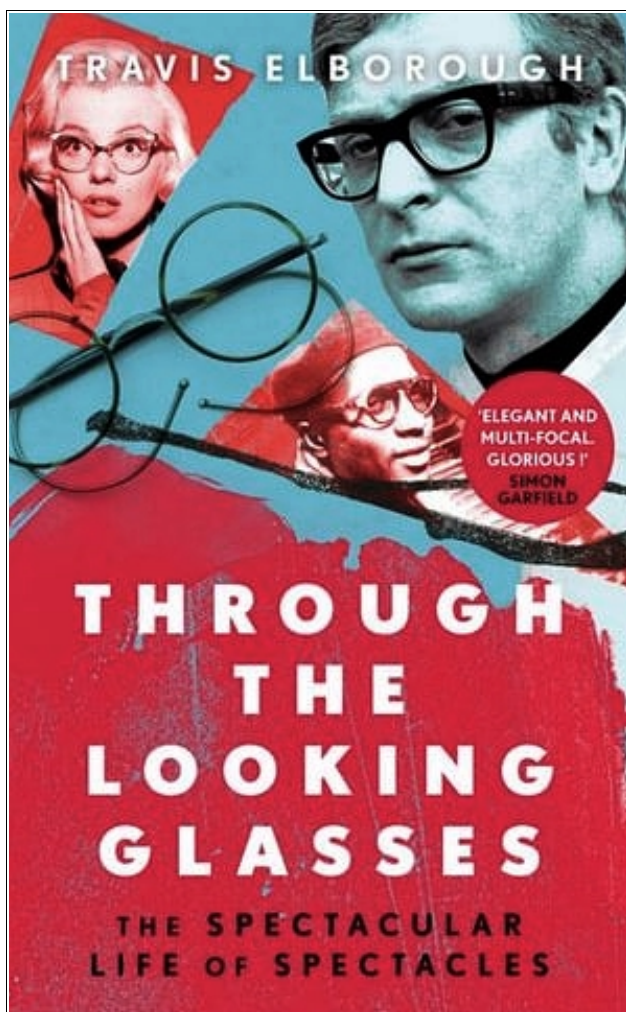
The results, announced in late May of the major UK Research Excellence Framework, saw Oxford at the top of the British higher education research rankings. Vice-Chancellor Professor Louise Richardson identified the University as 'a research powerhouse' whose impact puts 'this research in service to society by making critical contributions to global health, economic prosperity and cultural life'. Oxford rules in different ways. OK?

Classics was ingrained in Oxford as the most prestigious degree, as amply evidenced in **Daisy Dunn's** lively ***Not Far From Brideshead***. Dunn provides a portrait of Oxford University between the Wars through the private and public lives of three famous classic scholars, Gilbert Murray, Maurice Bowra, and E. R. Dodds.

Dunn, herself a classicist, provides intriguing vignettes of the trio: Australian-born Gilbert Murray, who married Lady Mary Howard, 'one of Oxford's fabulous monsters' with links to the world of *Brideshead*; Maurice Bowra, whom Isaiah Berlin called 'the greatest English wit of his day', who never forgot that; and the 'outsider', Eric Dodds, from Birmingham University, who was appointed to replace Murray as Regius Professor of Greek.

Dunn writes, 'Though they could hardly have been more different in personality and style, one





a libertine and veteran of the Western Front with an appetite for good food, society and praise [Bowra]; another an Irish pacifist and amateur hypnotist [Dodds]; the third an elegant Australian of Victorian reserve [Murray] — this trio inspired some of the most brilliant writers and thinkers of the twentieth century.’

*Not Far From Brideshead*, a book full of insights and anecdotes, does not shy from the dark side of Oxford rivalries and class distinctions. Matthew Arnold once wrote that Oxford was the ‘Home of lost causes, and forsaken beliefs, and unpopular names, and impossible loyalties’, all of which come to the fore in Dunn’s book, which places its main characters definitively within the political and social settings of the interwar years.

College loyalties last for life. Oxford constantly reminds its graduates regarding fundraising. Oxford’s belief, unlike Cummings, in the humanities was boosted in 2019 by an £150 million foundational gift to create the Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities, the largest single donation to Oxford since the Renaissance.

***The Historic Heart of Oxford University***, by **Geoffrey Tyack**, Emeritus Fellow of Kellogg

College, will certainly appeal to graduate nostalgia as well as a wider audience. Tyack draws on his research on Christopher Wren, Nicholas Hawksmoor, James Gibbs, and Giles Gilbert Scott to focus on Oxford’s world-famous architectural heritage around its historic heart, notably the Bodleian Library, the Sheldonian Theatre, and the Radcliffe Camera Square. The text of a beautifully produced book is enhanced by numerous archival prints and specially commissioned photography.

In ***The Lighted Window***, **Peter Davidson**, a Senior Research Fellow of Campion Hall, Oxford, begins and ends his impressive, multidisciplinary book with a walk through the night streets of Oxford. Davidson juxtaposes related accounts of visual arts and literature with the topography of walks, which move from Oxford to cities including London, Edinburgh, Ghent, Stockholm, Leiden, and Princeton. Cities in which lighted windows provides Davidson with inspiration to ‘let the mind absorb place and moment without concern about direction’.

**THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASSES: THE SPECTACULAR LIFE OF SPECTACLES**  
by Travis Elborough (Little Brown; \$39.99)

**IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF SPECTACLES**  
by Stefana Sabin (Reaktion Books; \$34.99)

British cultural historian **Travis Elborough** and German biographer **Stefana Sabin** trace the evolution of spectacles, which Elborough believes to be one of humanity’s greatest inventions. Sabin provides a short cultural vignette of around 100 pages, while Elborough, in nearly 350 pages, provides a much more detailed historical and scientific account, although not ignoring the ever-changing cultural impact of spectacles.

Travis Elborough takes the reader from the early attempts at improving eyesight to the rise and fall of Google Glass and warnings of the deleterious impact on eyes from increasingly staring at screens. Both refer to the fuzzy visuals of ancient history through Greek philosophy and Arab scholarship.

Both follow the trail of lense making in Pisa from the late thirteenth century and the significant developments of ‘God-given vision’ in Florence and Venice, notably in the fifteenth century, when lenses were usually attached to a band around the head. Henry VIII had his bolted onto his battle helmet. Lenses that hooked over the ears did not appear until the 1720s.

IN  
THE  
BLINK  
OF AN EYE  
A Cultural History of Spectacles

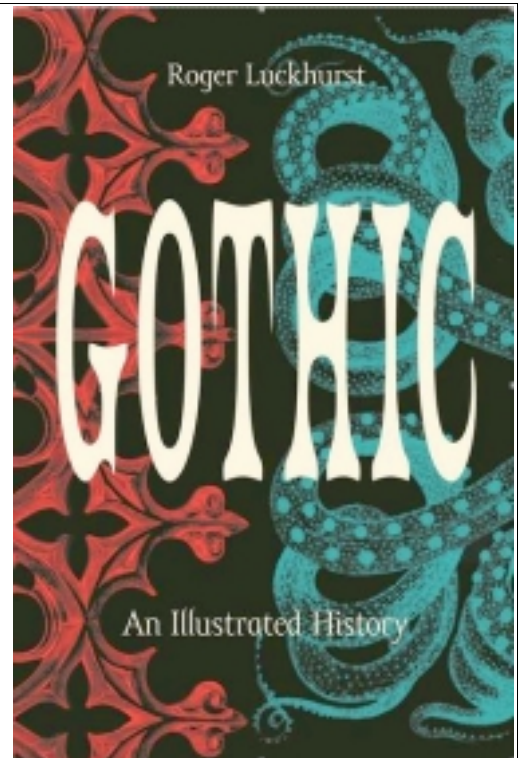


Elborough describes the rapid take-up of spectacles in the nineteenth century when cheap, small type printing, in the form of newspapers, railway timetables, and three-decker novels led to an increasing demand for spectacles. In the twentieth century Elborough and Sabin extend the depiction of spectacles from literature to the cinematic.

Dorothy Parker famously wrote in 1926, 'men seldom make passes/at girls who wear glasses'. A 2017 survey revealed that women wearing glasses on the dating app Tinder were 12 per cent less likely to receive an approving 'right swipe' than those without. Elborough's chapter on glasses and female sexuality includes the myopic Marilyn Monroe character in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953). Monroe's confession that she had 'always been attracted to men in glasses' may have contributed to her marrying the bespectacled Arthur Miller.

Michael Caine's Harry Palmer in *The Ipcress File* (1965) made glasses fashionable, as did Gloria Steinem's 'aviators' in the 1970s. Sabin notes that J. K. Rowling's 'bespectacled hero' Harry Potter led to an acceptance by young adults of wearing glasses.

Ronald Reagan, however, saw glasses as a negative and therefore wore contact lenses in public. No such problem for Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese in our visually oriented politics, although Albanese's new Byblos Black Havana glasses quickly led to critical comments from Morrison.



Many people intentionally make a spectacle of themselves in 'statement shades', but more importantly, as Sabin comments, spectacles have 'fostered the development of civilization by more than doubling working life, permitting greater precision and enabling professions reliant on reading and calculation to emerge and thrive'.

**GOTHIC: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY**  
by Roger Luckhurst  
(Thames & Hudson; \$49. 95)

A comprehensive study of the Gothic in the widest sense is to be found in **Roger Luckhurst's** beautifully produced ***Gothic: An illustrated History***. In 20 short chapters with 350 illustrations, Luckhurst, Professor of Modern Literature at Birkbeck College, London University, adopts a pluralistic, non-Eurocentric approach to his subject. He writes, 'The genre has long broken out of its narrow origins and become a global phenomenon encompassing literature, architecture, art, film, TV, fashion and every conceivable digital platform. It is a dark imagination that has stealthily crept across the globe'. The 20 chapters are divided into four sections 'Architecture & Form', 'The Lie of the Land', 'The Gothic Compass', and 'Monsters'. A selection of the subjects covered in the index under B alone, such as the Bunyip, Beyoncé, Bombay Gothic, Algernon Blackwood, and Beowulf, reveals the book's wide compass. Authoritative and accessible prose ensures that Luckhurst's *Gothic* will become a standard work.





## CRIME, MYSTERY, AND SPY FICTION

### SILVERVIEW

by John le Carré (Viking; \$32.99)

David Cornwell, aka **John le Carré**, died in December 2020 at the age of 89. *Silverview*, his twenty-sixth and final novel, was written some years before his death.

His son Nick Hathaway has wondered if his father delayed publishing *Silverview* until after his death because it was too 'close to the bone' in its depiction of the British intelligence service. The critical tone of le Carré's recent novels on the service, and a 2016 public spat with a former Head of MI6, might, however, render this theory a little less plausible.

The novel begins in a deserted East Anglian seaside town, in the late 00s, where Julian Lawndsley, 33, having amassed a fortune in the city, has decided to open up a bookshop, although he knows very little about books.

Julian is an improbable character, but represents the standard le Carré innocent who becomes entangled in a complex web of intrigue and

betrayal. Julian's life changes when Edward Avon, who claims to be a retired academic, enters the bookshop and begins to ask favours from Julian.

In reality, Edward, of Polish origin, turns out to be a former field agent, once 'a bloody good joe', whose belief in the service has been impacted by events he experienced in Bosnia. Avon's wife, who is dying of cancer, was a former top Middle Eastern analyst for British intelligence, who suspect a major security leak has emanated from one of them.

Enter a decidedly Smiley figure, Stewart Proctor, Head of Domestic Security, also experiencing marital infidelity like Smiley, who begins to pick away, like a 'bloodhound', at the intelligence back history of the Avons.

Le Carré writes, 'Like all families of its kind, the Proctors knew from birth that the spiritual sanctum of Britain's ruling classes was its secret services'. Proctor is, however, becoming increasingly sceptical of the certainties of the ruling class.

One of Proctor's former senior colleagues reflects as to what they achieved in their careers, 'We didn't do much to alter the course of human history, did we? As one old spy to another, I reckon I'd have been more use running a boys' club'.

The Le Carré themes are familiar: idealism morphing into betrayal and the evocation of a Britain that has lost its sense of place in the world, 'poor toothless, leaderless Britain, tagging along behind (the US), because it still dreams of greatness and doesn't know what else to dream about'. Le Carré became an Irish citizen just before his death, partly in despair of Brexit.

*Silverview* may not be in the top rank of the le Carré novels but, despite some structural creaking, is an engrossing read, juxtaposing public duty, loyalty, and individual morality.

### LOVE AND OTHER CRIMES

by Sara Paretsky (Hodder; \$32.99)

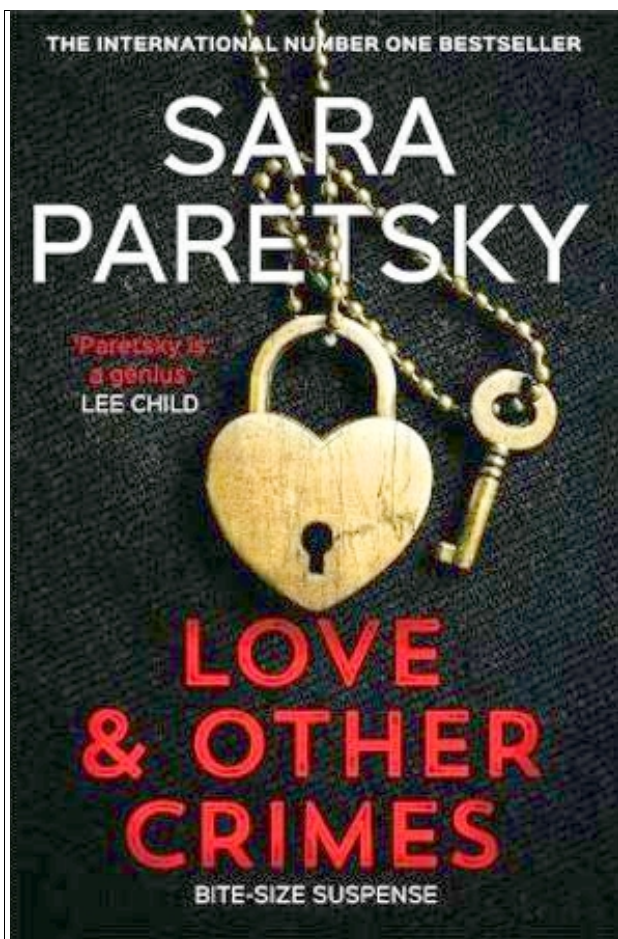
### OVERBOARD

by Sara Paretsky (Hodder; \$32.99)

**Sara Paretsky** is one of only four living writers, and the only woman, to receive both the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America and the Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain. In 1986 she created Sisters in Crime, a worldwide organisation to support female crime writers, which now has more than 4000 members.

Paretsky published her first novel featuring V. I. Warshawski, a feisty, uncompromising,



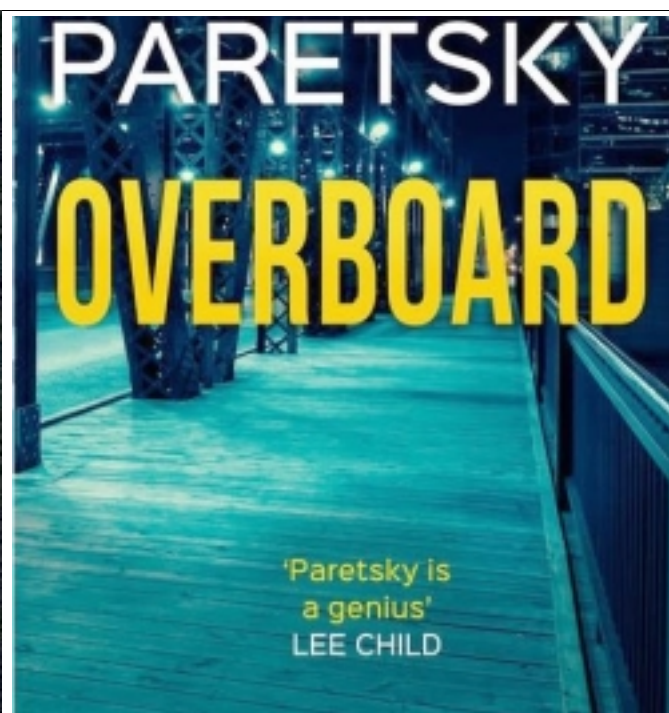


Chicago private investigator in *Indemnity Only* in 1982. Since then there have been another 20 best-selling V. I. novels and one not-very-successful film starring Kathleen Turner.

**Love and Other Crimes** is a collection of 14 short stories, eight featuring V. I., all of which have an afterword by Paretsky about their creation and their place in her life. 'Love and Other Crimes', the title story, sees V. I. take on the case of a family friend who has been wrongly accused of murder. To make matters more difficult, V.I. has to deal with the obnoxious sister of the accused and a family, 'who turn dysfunction into an art form', before the case is resolved.

Paretsky writes in her introduction, 'We kill out of passion, we kill out of love — love of money, but also love of family.' V.I.'s love of her police father Tony is very evident in 'Wildcat', set in the turbulent days of the riots and racism surrounding Martin Luther King's August 1966 visit to Chicago.

The young Victoria places herself in danger to resolve what turns out to be her very first case. Her mother beseeches her never again to be 'putting yourself in front of killers and mafiosi'. Victoria responds, 'Of course, Mama, of course. I promise you.' Paretsky's love of Victorian crime fiction is reflected in her Arthur Conan Doyle 'tweak', 'The Curious Affair of the Italian Art



Dealer'. Paretsky assumes Dr Watson's voice in a story that pays homage to nineteenth-century American writer Anna Katharine Green, whose detective stories preceded, and arguably influenced, those of Conan Doyle.

Dr Charlotte 'Lotte' Herschel, a regular character in the V.I. novels, is the victim in the dystopian short story, 'Safety First', set in a world of biased Homeland Security courts and a *Keep America Safe Act* that has seen Lotte imprisoned for 'the medical treatment of undocumented aliens' and for abortions of women who have been raped. This is a very relevant story for a contemporary America where the ground-breaking *Roe v Wade* judgment is allegedly under threat at the US Supreme Court.

The V.I. Warshawski stories call out social inequity, misogyny, racism, and corporate corruption, reflecting Paretsky's long-felt concerns over class, racial, and sex discrimination in America.

**Overboard** is **Sara Paretsky's** twenty-first novel featuring her Chicago private detective, Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski, known as V. I., who debuted fictionally 40 years ago in *Indemnity Only*. The rest, is as they say, crime fiction history.

Paretsky has said that V. I. provides her with 'a voice to the world', a voice Paretsky acknowledges, has 'become more sombre' over the decades. Paretsky wrote the novel during the first year of the pandemic, which becomes incorporated into Paretsky's 'own fears that bleed into the novel'. *Overboard* is darker than usual, with its background of a Trumpian, pandemic-inflicted, America, replete with economic and racial inequalities.

Paretsky's championing of social justice issues certainly plays out in *Overboard*, which opens with V.I.'s two dogs finding a teenage girl lying injured on the shores of Lake Michigan. The girl only manages to issue one word to V. I. before she becomes unconscious.

The main police investigator Lt. Scott Coney, renowned for his violence towards witnesses, refuses to believe that V. I. doesn't know the girl or her background. When the still unidentified girl disappears from the Chicago hospital, and the two people closely involved with her in the hospital are killed, it is clear that this is no simple case.

Finding the missing girl takes V. I. down a dark investigative pathway that will involve significant personal danger. V. I. is confronted by police aggression and surveillance, a disgruntled mob leader, and real estate corruption involving the forced selling of the homes of residents in a privatised aged-care home.

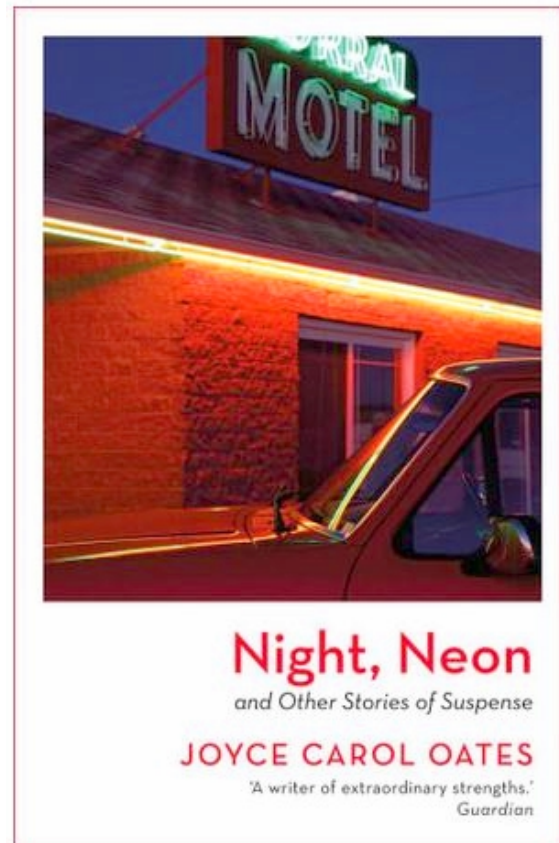
The main plot line also includes the activities of the dysfunctional Litvak family, the vandalism of a synagogue, where V. I.'s long-standing characters Lotty and Max Herschel are members, and flashbacks to V. I.'s early years in South Chicago.

In *Overboard*, V. I. is beaten up by both police and gangsters, dives into a river to escape being killed, and is imprisoned in a cellar facing death. This raises the question of V. I.'s age. While Paretsky has tinkered with V.I.'s age in a previous novel, V.I. still seems young enough to absorb the considerable physical punishment she receives. Paretsky has not aged V.I., as with Ian Rankin's John Rebus, rather using the fictional non-ageing formula, as adopted by Lee Child in his Jack Reacher novels.

Paretsky has said that *Overboard*, written under lockdown, was much more difficult to bring together, the complicated plot line going through seven drafts. This does show in terms of narrative flow, but, while it may not be the best V. I. novel in the series, it has more than enough character depth and action for the global legion of Paretsky fans.

## NIGHT, NEON AND OTHER STORIES OF SUSPENSE by Joyce Carol Oates (Head of Zeus; \$29. 99)

Award-winning American author **Joyce Carol Oates** caused a stir in 1999 with her controversial Marilyn Monroe novel, *Blonde*. It has now been filmed, starring Ana de Armas, and will be a Netflix release later this year. Oates has called the film 'an exquisite portrait of Marilyn Monroe', noting



'the tone of the film is hard to classify, not surreal but not totally realistic, not "horror" but suffused with the dread of horror'. The same description could be used to describe the title novella and the eight short stories in *Night, Neon*.

'Miss Golden Dreams 1949', which continues her fascination with Marilyn Monroe, is written from the perspective of a DNA-cloned Marilyn Monroe being auctioned at Sotheby's, with a starting price of \$22 million. The story follows 'Marilyn's' coaxing of an elderly, and clearly wealthy, businessman, whom she constantly addresses as 'Daddy', to make a bid. Oates reflects on the continuing commoditisation of Monroe and American perceptions of beauty.

Another American cult figure, Charles Manson, features in 'Parole Hearing, California Institution For Women, Chino, CA', which was written on the 50th anniversary of the notorious Manson trial. Oates has commented, 'The story is partly historic, based upon composite "Manson-girl" figures ... imagined as the expression of one who in her heart exults in the most profound, if horrific, act of her entire life. She is not repentant, in fact she is rather proud of herself, even as she pleads for parole' for the fifteenth time.

The novella 'Night, Neon' retrospectively follows a young woman, Juliana, through her unfortunate, and often violent, experiences with men, although with a possibly happy conclusion.



The reader must choose. Oates has said, 'I think that my stories tend to be unpredictable because women who appear to be headed for victimization don't always wind up as victims but, in fact, as aggressors, surprising even themselves with their capacity for self-defense, shading and violence.'

This is certainly the case in the opening story, 'Detour'. A married woman, Abigail, driving home, is forced by roadworks to take a detour down an isolated forest road, where she stalls her car and loses her mobile in a flooded ditch. Seeking help, she finds herself in an isolated house where she is locked in the bedroom by an unknown man who clearly recognises her as his wife. Abigail wonders if she is concussed and that her confused mental state is indeed reality. But if not, will she have to kill her 'imposter husband' to be free?

Oates certainly knows how to twist the tensions in her engrossing stories of psychological suspense.

## POPULAR CULTURE

### LONG-PLAYERS:

#### WRITERS ON THE ALBUMS THAT SHAPED THEM edited by Tom Gatti (Bloomsbury; \$34.99)

**Tom Gatti**, Deputy Editor of the *New Statesman*, in his introduction to ***Long Players: Writers on the Albums that Shaped Them***, traces the evolution of music listening over the last five decades, from LPs to cassettes to CDs and now streaming.

Gatti notes the return of the popularity of the physical LP. With one in eight albums bought in 2019 being vinyl, 'listeners are returning to the album as an unbroken artwork ... to be played from start to finish without interruption'. They also provide a physical personal collection, as with books over e-books.

Gatti asked 50 leading authors to tell him about 'a record that changed them or shaped them or that was important at a particular time or place'. Most choose 'virgin plays' of albums from their teenage years, 'a time of heightened receptivity'.

Contributors include Ali Smith (the only one to choose more than one album), Marlon James, Deborah Levy, George Saunders, Bernardine Evaristo, Neil Gaiman, Daisy Johnson, David Mitchell, and Esi Edugyan.

The oldest album is chosen by the late Clive James, *Ellington at Newport* (1956), and the most recent, Daisy Johnson's choice of Lizzo's *Cuz I Love You* (2019).

David Mitchell describes the impact of his teenage encounter with Joni Mitchell's 'raw autobiography' *Blue*. For Linda Grant, Joni Mitchell's later album *Hejira* indicates 'the great paradox of 70s feminism ... love pulling you one way and freedom the other'.

Deborah Levy, after listening to David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust*, writes that it 'was nothing less than throwing petrol at the naked flame of teenage longing and desire for another sort of life'.

Sarah Hall compares Radiohead's *OK Computer* to 'a great short-story collection', while Marlon James credits Björk's *Post* in helping him resolve a crisis of faith and sexuality. Lionel Shriver chooses Mark Knopfler's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which, for her, 'hits eternal notes of lost innocence, mourning and mortality'.

Ian Rankin, selecting John Martyn's *Solid Air*, writes 'Give me an album at a certain age and it is mine for life, as Miss Jean Brodie might have said'. Anglo-Indonesian poet, Will Harris, linking rap and poetry, reflects how Warren G's *Regulate ... G Funk Era* revealed 'rhythm was life and life was rhythm'.

George Saunders attests how the somewhat opaque lyrics of *Fragile* by Yes reassured him that 'to make something beautiful might mean to make





something that you, the artist, don't fully understand ... the aim is realised through the process of making'.

*Long-Players* is an unusual and fascinating combination of essays, with each author's musical choices resonating in individual time and place.

## BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### TWO HITLERS AND A MARILYN

by Adam Andrusier (Hachette; \$32.99)

**Adam Andrusier** began collecting autographs as a teenager, before becoming a full-time autograph dealer in 1997. He is a regular exhibitor at the New York and London book fairs, has worked for Christie's and Bonham's auction houses, and inspired the main character in Zadie Smith's 2002 award-winning novel *The Autograph Man*.

Andrusier's website, at the time of writing, contains a three-page Karl Marx manuscript for £225,000, a one-page Rasputin letter for £27,500, and a £35,000 Billie Holiday four-page 1938 letter in which she claims, after being sacked by Count Basie, she will never sing again. It also features an autograph note by Marilyn Monroe, intended for her analyst Marianne Kris, for £9500.

Each chapter in *Two Hitlers and a Marilyn* is based around a celebrity autograph search, but the book is as much, if not more, about growing up in the 1980s in a somewhat dysfunctional Jewish family in suburban London than a Rick Gekoski style analysis of the autograph business. Indeed, Andrusier admits, in places, he has changed names, dates, and events, which lends an element of doubt regarding verisimilitude.

Andrusier grew up with a volatile father, whose non-work passions were Israeli dancing and collecting postcards of synagogues that the Nazis had destroyed. In later life, Adam Andrusier, as a grandson of Holocaust refugees, bought and sold a signed copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* commenting, 'I did find something about it fascinating, I remember feeling it was a really weird object ... this guy who had done unthinkable things to our family and so many. It was a sort of revenge, a way to slightly tame that terrifying image in my head.'

Andrusier began collecting autographs as a child, beginning by knocking on the door of Ronnie Barker, who lived nearby. As a teenager he fronted, in London, Elizabeth Taylor without success and Nelson Mandela with success. He admits his early motivation was to impress his father by collecting autographs from his father's favourites,

such as Cary Grant, Frank Sinatra, and Greta Garbo,

Andrusier issued his first catalogue when a music student at Cambridge University, deciding that he couldn't really afford to keep buying autographs without selling some. He learnt the hard financial way about autograph authentication from secretaries to autopens to forgeries.

A Marilyn Monroe forgery was easily detectable, but the young Andrusier was taken in when he bought expensive Elvis Presley items from a Swedish E-Bay source who said they came from a German woman who had known Elvis in his time in the US military. That learning came at the considerable financial cost of £30,000, when Andrusier had to reimburse an American dealer to whom he had sold the Presley items.

Andrusier clearly learnt from those early years but he does not cover in any depth the later years when he became one of the leading international dealers. Andrusier notes the changes since his childhood in collecting autographs, as prices soar and many buyers focus on investment collecting. He also believes, like Rick Gekoski, that the internet 'has taken a bit of the thrill out of the hunt'.

Andrusier believes collectors 'spend a lifetime collecting objects that tell a story about your tastes and who you were'. The same would apply to book collecting as to autographs and ultimately what to do with collections. 'You collect these things and there's this notion that at the end you'll have this kingdom with all your things but actually you'll be dead, and your kids will be having to figure out what to do with all these things you've amassed.'

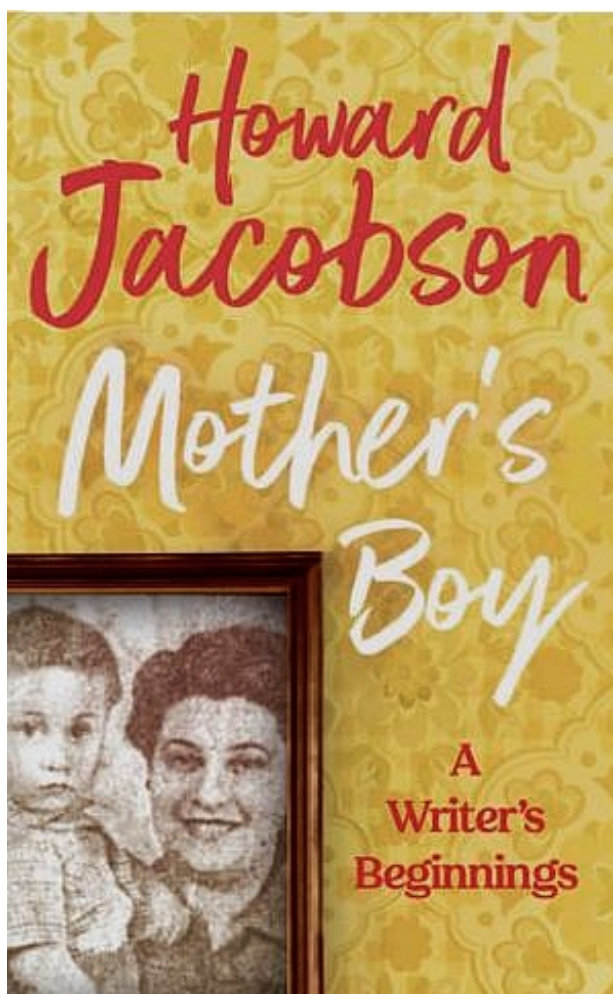
*Two Hitlers and a Marilyn* is an engaging read, with the young Andrusier trying to come to terms with Jewish family life and his passion to collect autographs. This reviewer hopes, however, he will now bring out another book on his later experiences at the top end of the autograph-collecting world.

### MOTHER'S BOY: A WRITER'S BEGINNINGS

by Howard Jacobson  
(Jonathan Cape; \$39.99)

**Howard Jacobson**, who will turn 80 on 25 August, did not publish his first novel, *Coming From Behind*, until he was 40, but since then his output has been prolific, including his Booker Prize winner, *The Finkler Question* (2010).

His memoir, *Mother's Boy*, his twenty-third book, covers his childhood to the publication of that first novel in 1983, a time when, he says, he



was 'a failed husband, a failed father, and a failed university lecturer'.

Jacobson's life will be familiar to many through depictions within his fiction and nonfiction. *Mother's Boy* provides a bittersweet retrospective of his first four decades. Born into an Eastern European Jewish family, Jacobson recalls the 1940s and 1950s Manchester being 'an easier time for a Jew to be growing up than the present'.

It was his mother Anita, a woman of 'apocalyptic pessimism', who imbued the young Howard with a love of literature. His father Max, variously an upholsterer, market trader, taxi driver, and a magician, had a 'bouncier demeanour', but claimed never to have read a book.

Jacobson won a scholarship to Downing College Cambridge, his mother pressing toilet rolls on him to take in case the university ran out. Apart from, or because of, becoming a Leavisite, studying under the influential literary critic F. R. Leavis, Jacobson 'went through Cambridge without merriment or joy'.

After graduation, 23-year-old Jacobson married his Mancunian girlfriend Barbara and was appointed Lecturer in English Literature at Sydney University, in a department that became

controversially split after curriculum changes by the Leavisite head of department, Professor Samuel (Sam) Goldberg, who later became a Senior Fellow at the ANU's History of Ideas unit.

In several books, Jacobson has previously covered his hedonistic time in Sydney when 'I forgot to be a good husband'. The marriage collapsed, with Jacobson returning to a teaching post at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, which, he says, had a 'deleterious effect' on his novel writing, 'Since I couldn't be Dickens, I couldn't be anybody.'

Jacobson, after much self-doubt and prevarication, eventually writes *Coming From Behind*, whose main character is Sefton Goldberg, a.k.a. Jacobson, a disgruntled Cambridge-educated polytechnic lecturer. Jacobson had retreated to Cornwall, where his second wife Rosalind (they divorced in 2004) owned a craft gallery. Jacobson writes the novel that critics call the successor to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*. The rest is literary history.

Jacobson's mother died in May 2020 at the age of 97 when Jacobson was halfway through writing *Mother's Boy*, but he was able to tell her before she died, 'If it was being Jewish that held me back it was being Jewish that got me going.'

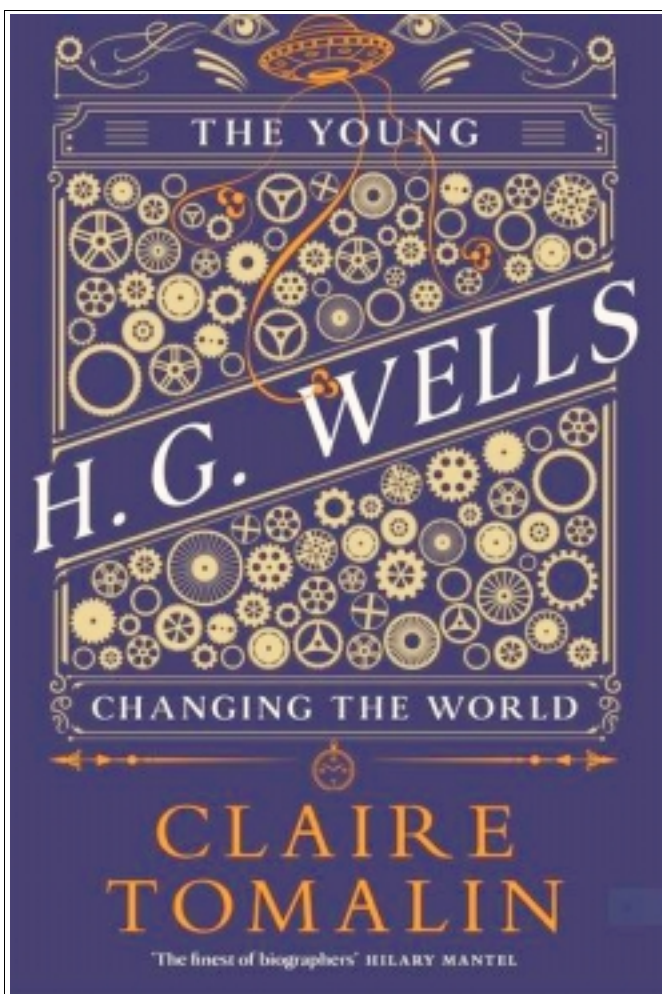
## THE YOUNG H. G. WELLS: CHANGING THE WORLD by Claire Tomalin (Viking; \$45)

Renowned biographer **Claire Tomalin**, now in her late eighties, has produced a lively and vibrant account of the life of **the young H. G. Wells**, whom she terms an 'iconoclastic visionary'. Tomalin summarises Herbert George Wells (1866-1946): 'I set out to write a book about the young Wells, covering his formation, the years in which he worked, thought and developed his skills as a writer ... He had strongly held political views favouring social equality, republicanism and the establishment of world government. He saw himself as a working writer, not an artist in an ivory tower; he was rightly proud of his achievements, and expected to be well paid for his work. And he could be unreliable, selfish and even vengeful.'

To Tomalin the essential Wells is early Wells, so she concludes her biography in 1911 when Wells is 45, although there is a final chapter summarising the rest of Wells's life, in which 'his celebrity was immense'.

Ultimately, Wells had 'every social circle in the kingdom open to him', but in his early life he experienced poverty and severe illnesses, some of which continued throughout his life. It was only when his mother became a housekeeper at a great



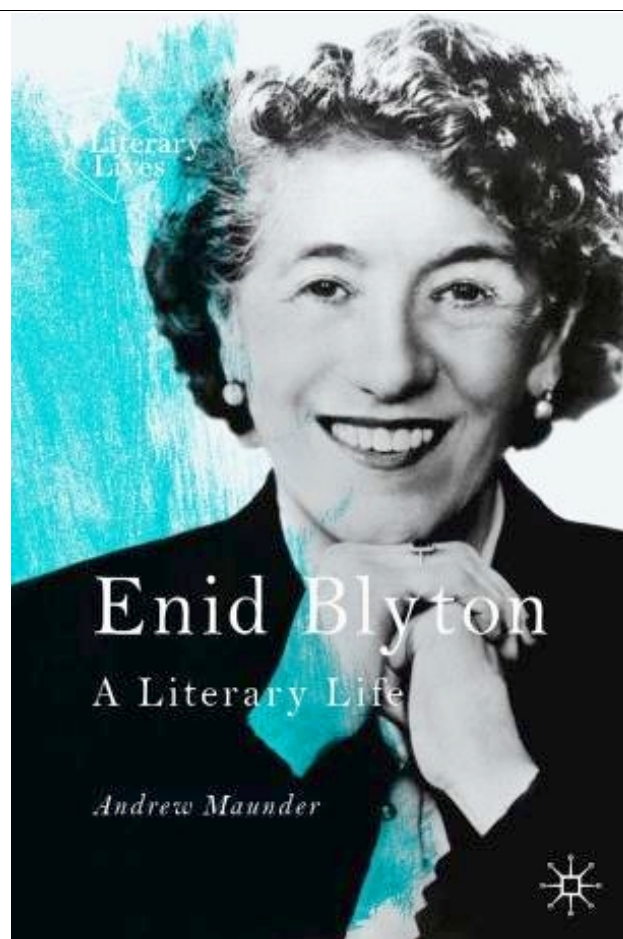


country house, Uppark in West Sussex, that Wells, living in the servants quarters, benefited through medical treatment and access to a large library.

Wells, after leaving Uppark, where he experienced first hand wealth and class inequalities, had several unsatisfactory apprenticeships and became a teacher, before winning a scholarship to the London Normal School of Science to study biology. His first publication was *A Text Book on Biology*.

It is interesting that Wells is probably better known today for his 'scientific romances' rather than for his mainstream novels, such as *Tono-Bungay*, *Mr Polly*, and *Kipps*, and his nonfiction, such as *The Outline of History*. His first bestseller was *The Time Machine* (1895), and others soon followed, including *The War of the Worlds* (1897), inspired by events in Tasmania, and the disaster the arrival of the Europeans had been for its people, who were annihilated'.

While largely sympathetic to Wells, Tomalin does not shirk from his faults, noting, 'he followed a life of enterprising promiscuity ... was a bad husband and an unreliable lover'. The person who suffered most was his second wife, Jane, who



'found herself abandoned for ever longer periods ... while he carried on his love affairs (with, for example, Dorothy Richardson and Rebecca West) in blazes of publicity'.

Tomalin, in conclusion, emphasises 'Wells's central passion for social equality and government dedicated to make a better life for all its citizens', issues that are just as important today as when they were reflected upon at Wells's funeral in 1946.

### ENID BLYTON: A LITERARY LIFE

by Andrew Maunder

(Palgrave Macmillan; \$34.99)

**Enid Blyton** (1897-1968) was, and is, one of the most prolific and commercially successful children's authors ever. Blyton's books were estimated in 2019 to have sold over 600 million copies, particularly in her numerous series, such as 'The Famous Five', 'Noddy', 'The Secret Seven', 'The Faraway Tree', and 'Malory Towers'. Andrew Maunder, Associate Dean, School of Humanities at the University of Hertfordshire, notes that in a 2015 poll to find the 50 most inspiring Britons of all time, Blyton was ranked nineteenth, between Agatha Christie and Queen Victoria!

Blyton still sells 10 million books a year globally



and has reclaimed her position as the world's best-selling children's writer from J. K. Rowling. **Andrew Maunder**, who comments that she was 'a one-woman marketing genius', is fully aware of the significant criticism of Blyton's books, and indeed devotes a whole chapter to that critical commentary.

In 2019, plans by the Royal Mint to honour Blyton with a commemorative coin were blocked because of concerns over sexism, racism, snobbery, and xenophobia in her books. In the subsequent debate, Blyton's defenders argued her work needed to be seen in the context of the time she wrote. English Heritage, while acknowledging concerns, reported it had 'no plans whatsoever to remove' any of the commemorative plaques on Blyton's houses and noted the author's books remain 'loved by many'.

Maunder covers Blyton's life, work, and reputation in a readable, analytical, and considered overview, concluding that Blyton is 'a figure whose rehabilitation is long overdue'. Maunder's analysis benefits from access to Blyton's business correspondence between 1940 and 1960, including the Macmillan archives in the British Library, which Maunder states have been largely overlooked, 'partly because they've not been catalogued yet'.

Maunder explores the conflict of the 'dynamic, ambitious writer who wielded considerable power in a male world but who also espoused the values of home and husband', within the reality of Blyton's domestic and family life. Blyton, rightly or wrongly, appealed to middle-class sensibilities — the middle-class family with the father as the breadwinner, the mother who stays at home, arranges flowers, and plans for dinner. Blyton once wrote, 'My public, bless them, find in my books a sense of security, an anchor, a sure sense that right is always right and that such things as courage and kindness deserve to be emulated.'

Maunder analyses the reason for Blyton's popularity across numerous genres in both fiction and nonfiction. Her agent once said, 'She knew exactly what she was doing. She told me once that she deliberately wrote for children of every age from three or four to 14 and 15 ... Her idea was to catch them young and keep them enthralled as they grew older.' Blyton connected directly and deliberately with her young readers. Ian McEwan is quoted, in the text, stating that by the age of 11, 'he had read probably every word that Enid Blyton had written'.

Blyton benefited from the bleak post-war environment in Britain. With severe rationing in place, the food descriptions titillated, with

descriptions of hard-boiled eggs, pickled onions, tinned peaches, pork pies, anchovy paste, sausages, chocolates, jam tarts, and eclairs, all washed down with great 'lashings' of ginger beer. The exotic adventures of the Famous Five and the Secret Seven and the boarding-school adventures at Malory Towers and St Clare's opened freedoms beyond the culinary. Emma Rice, the director of the 2019 stage production of *Malory Towers*, emphasised that Blyton schoolgirls are 'strong female characters'.

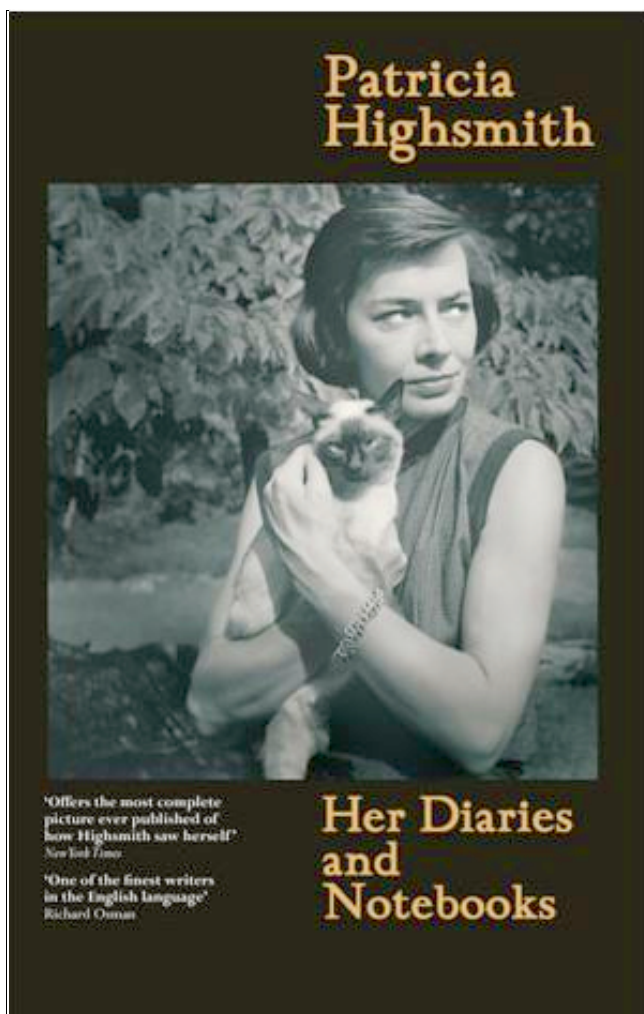
In the 1950s, when her popularity increased dramatically through theatre and television adaptations and clever merchandising, Blyton was estimated to be earning the equivalent of nearly £5 million a year in today's currency. *Noddy in Toyland*, described as a 'pantomime', which opened in London on 23 December 1954, ran for over five years. By 1962, 26 million copies of the 'Noddy' books had been sold. It was, however, the commercial success of these adaptations that provoked the first major critical comments. Colin Welch, the journalist who called Blyton 'a literary Stakhanovite' in a famous *Encounter* article in 1958, termed Noddy 'the most egocentric, joyless, snivelling and pious anti-hero in the history of British fiction', while fellow children's author Noel Streatfeild derided Blyton's 'simple stories' as 'meant for the less intelligent public'. Librarians began taking Blyton books off the shelves in libraries.

Maunder documents the reassessments of Blyton that have emerged in the last three decades. Peter Hunt outlines, in his 2001 book *Children's Literature*, 'a complexity of ideas beneath the apparently simple surface'. The re-branding of Blyton has also occurred, with numerous spinoffs and updates. Acclaimed children's author Jacqueline Wilson has written a new 'Faraway Tree' book to be published soon. Wilson says, 'It's a privilege to be able to write about Blyton's iconic characters and invent new children and magical creatures of my own.'

Maunder has judiciously established the framework for the continuing debate on Blyton's influence and her role in children's literature and publishing.

**PATRICIA HIGHSMITH:**  
**HER DIARIES AND NOTEBOOKS**  
edited by Anna von Planta  
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson; \$34.99)

**Patricia Highsmith** (1921–1995) is renowned for her psychological thrillers, notably her first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950), filmed by Alfred



Hitchcock; *The Price of Salt* (1952), which became the 2015 film *Carol*, starring Cate Blanchett, and the best-selling 'Riplied' quintet featuring the 'suave, agreeable and utterly amoral' Tom Ripley. Highsmith's 22 novels are ones in which good and evil are turned on their head.

After Highsmith's death, 56 thick spiral notebooks were found in the linen cupboard of her Swiss home, where she had become a misanthropic recluse. Anna von Planta, Patricia Highsmith's longtime editor, has condensed the 8000 pages of Highsmith's diaries and notebooks, now in the Swiss Literary Archives, into a still whopping thousand pages. Each chronological selection is prefaced by a concise and informative summary.

There have been three major biographies of Highsmith to date: two, by Andrew Wilson and Joan Schenkar, had access to the diaries, and the third, by Richard Bradfield, was published only in 2021. Many readers, therefore, will be familiar with Highsmith's decidedly complicated personality, turbulent alcoholic life, and writing career.

Nearly half of von Planta's book is devoted to Highsmith's early life in New York from 1941 to

1950. Von Planta comments, 'what amazed and touched me ... was to discover the raw and unrestrained voice of the young Pat in her early notebooks, ... which tell of frequent heartbreak, difficult choices, hard-won professional triumphs and a furiously fast-paced social life. It was to witness the painful becoming of Patricia Highsmith'.

Highsmith had overwhelming belief in her writing. On St Valentine's Day 1942, Highsmith, then a college student, wrote: 'I shall be something. I shall do something'. On 5 May 1950 she notes, 'writing is a substitute for the life I currently live, am unable to live.'

Highsmith never married, commenting, 'Living with someone you love is so disillusioning.' By 1950, she had had numerous short-term relationships with women, often older and married. Her diary entries reflect on love and murder, with Highsmith once contemplating murdering one of her lovers, stating 'murder is a kind of making love, a kind of possessing'.

Her cultural contacts included Paul Bowles, Aaron Copland, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Arthur Koestler, and W. H. Auden, but her insights are almost always internal. Highsmith reflected, 'I run into people like a steel needle'.

**Patricia Highsmith: Her Diaries and Notebooks**, which sees 'the famously secretive Highsmith revealing the roots of her psychological angst and acuity', is a must for Highsmith completists, but, for others, it will be a book for dipping into, while observing the increasing darkness of a major writer's mind.

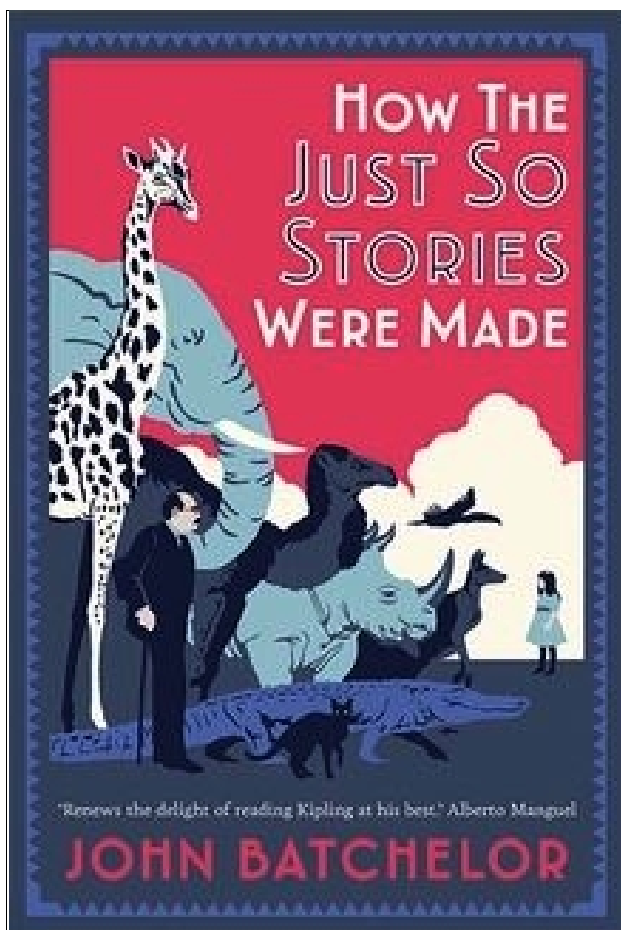
## HOW THE JUST SO STORIES WERE MADE

by John Batchelor

(Yale University Press; \$39.95)

**John Batchelor's** previous books include biographies of Joseph Conrad, John Ruskin, and Alfred Lord Tennyson. Now he turns his attention to Nobel Laureate **Rudyard Kipling** (1865–1936) and the **Just So Stories**. Batchelor notes that Kipling was a major figure in English letters but 'one always slightly apart from the great central strand, acknowledged but slighted, appreciated, but never fully canonised'. Batchelor addresses, through the book's subtitle: **The Brilliance and Tragedy behind Kipling's Celebrated Tales For Little Children**.

The stories began with Kipling telling his 'Best Beloved' daughter, Josephine, bedtime stories, which Josephine insisted 'had to be told "just so"'. Sadly, Josephine died of pneumonia when she was just six and had heard only three of the 'alternative



creation narratives' before her death. Kipling wrote the rest of the 13 stories as 'imaginative reparation'.

In 1902, when the *Just So Stories* was published, Kipling was 36 and already famous because of the publication of *Kim* and *The Jungle Book*. G. K. Chesterton described the stories, which Kipling illustrated, as 'fairytales from the morning of the world'.

Batchelor, who places the *Just So Stories* directly in the context of Kipling's private and public life, acknowledges that the stories contain traces of racism and imperialism, traits that were much more evident in Kipling's later works. He highlights the stories for their humour and the deliverance of moral lessons, such as in 'How the Camel Got His Hump', 'How the Leopard Got Its Spots', and 'The Cat That Walked by Himself'. Gillian Avery, award-winning children's author and historian of children's literature, has commented that 'it is Kipling's triumph that in the *Just So Stories* he found a vein of humour that captivates both the old and the young'.

Batchelor writes that Kipling, who visited Australia in 1891, 'retained an interest in and enthusiasm for Australia and its settlers'. In 'The Sing-Song of Old Man Kangaroo', which describes how the Kangaroo, pursued by Yellow-Dog Dingo,

got long legs, Batchelor comments the Kangaroo story is 'printed as prose but sounds like blank verse. It has the energy and impetus of Whitman's free-verse metre in *Leaves of Grass*.' He notes the message of the story is that 'it is a mistake to seek popularity: the need for adulation in the playground is the error of a small child. We are reminded that the young Kipling desperately needed to draw attention to himself.'

On the last page of *How the Just So Stories Were Made*, Batchelor affirms that Kipling's 'talking animals, alternative versions of the creation myth, patterns, riddles and structural inventiveness' allowed him to enter 'the free imaginative world' of small children to create 'a much-loved classic'.

## BOOKS ABOUT BOOKS AND LITERATURE

### THE BOOK LOVER'S BUCKET LIST: A TOUR OF GREAT BRITAIN by Caroline Taggart (The British Library; \$40.25)

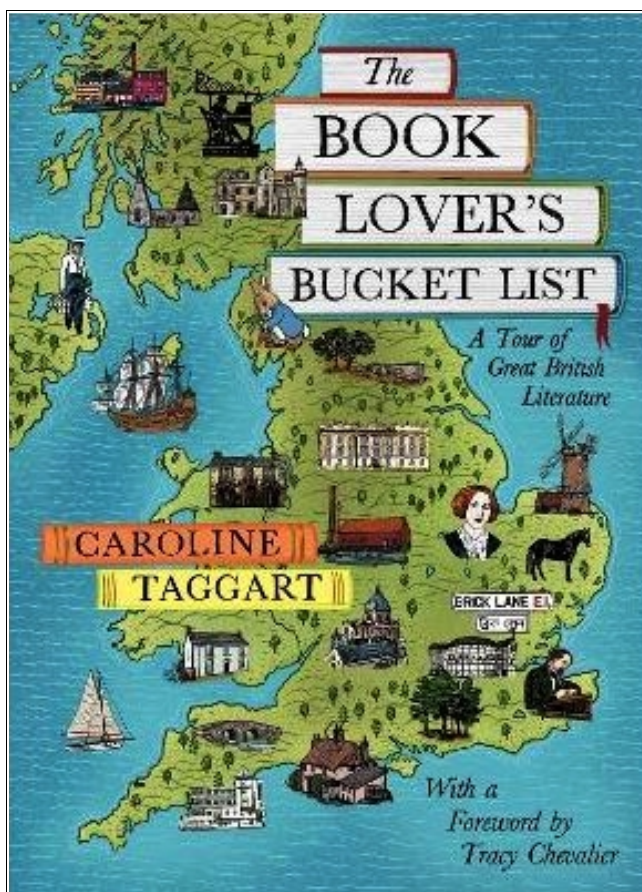
Given that travel to Britain is now possible in 2022, book lovers travelling there will certainly benefit from **Caroline Taggart's *Book Lover's Bucket List***. Even for those staying home, it provides enticing armchair travelling around a landscape 'chock full of literary landmarks', as Tracy Chevalier writes in her Foreword.

Taggart describes 100 sites, arranged geographically, associated with famous British writers, poets, playwrights and authors. Each entry, in a beautifully produced hardback, comes with location colour photographs, relevant book illustrations from the British Library collections, and, where available, website links.

All the famous associations are there. The London house where Charles Dickens wrote *David Copperfield*, P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster's Mayfair, William Wordsworth's Dove Cottage, Lord Byron's Newstead Abbey, Bram Stoker's Whitby, the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth, Evelyn Waugh's Castle Howard, Walter Scott's Abbotsford, Beatrix Potter's Hill Top in the Lake District, Shakespeare's Stratford, and Jane Austen's Chawton, Bath, and Lyme Regis.

Taggart also includes sites where TV and movie adaptations have been filmed, such as Stamford in Lincolnshire, used for George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Castle Howard for Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, and Lyme Park for Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.





The entry on Philip Pullman's Oxford takes the reader to the Oxford colleges that provided the backdrop for Pullman's Jordan College in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, as well as the Botanic Gardens.

The book also features less well-known sites, such as Monica Ali's Brick Lane, Olaudah Equiano's 'African Tomb' on Tottenham Court Road, Seamus Heaney's Lough Neagh lake, Winifred Holtby's Hull, Oscar Wilde's Cafe Royal, Lewis Sunderland's 'inspirations' for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and Sam Salvon and Andrea Levy's post-Windrush West London.

Many will not know that Senate House at the University of London was the location for George Orwell's Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Taggart comments, on the accompanying picture of Senate House, 'you can see why the building has been described as Stalinist and why Winston Smith looked upon it with such dread'.

Even railway stations are included. J. K. Rowling is referenced at Platform 9 and a half at King's Cross, Michael Bond's famous bear can be found at Paddington, while John Betjeman is remembered at St Pancras.

In the museums devoted to an author, the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre at Great Missenden, where you enter through chocolate doors to be greeted by Willy Wonka guides, stands

out. It also has an 'Automatic Grammatizator' where visitors can assemble strange words and phrases into a story.

It's very clear that wherever you are in the United Kingdom, you are never far from somewhere associated with a good book.

**GUARDED BY DRAGONS: ENCOUNTERS WITH RARE BOOKS AND RARE PEOPLE**  
by Rick Gekoski (Constable; \$32.99)

**WHITE SPINES: CONFESSIONS OF A BOOK COLLECTOR**  
by Nicholas Royle (Salt; \$18.50)

**Rick Gekoski** and **Nicholas Royle** are at opposite ends of the book-collecting spectrum but united in their passionate love of the book.

Rick Gekoski buys and sells at the rarified top end of twentieth-century rare books and manuscripts, while Royle is never happier than when seeking his beloved Picador white spine paperbacks in Britain's charity and secondhand bookshops.

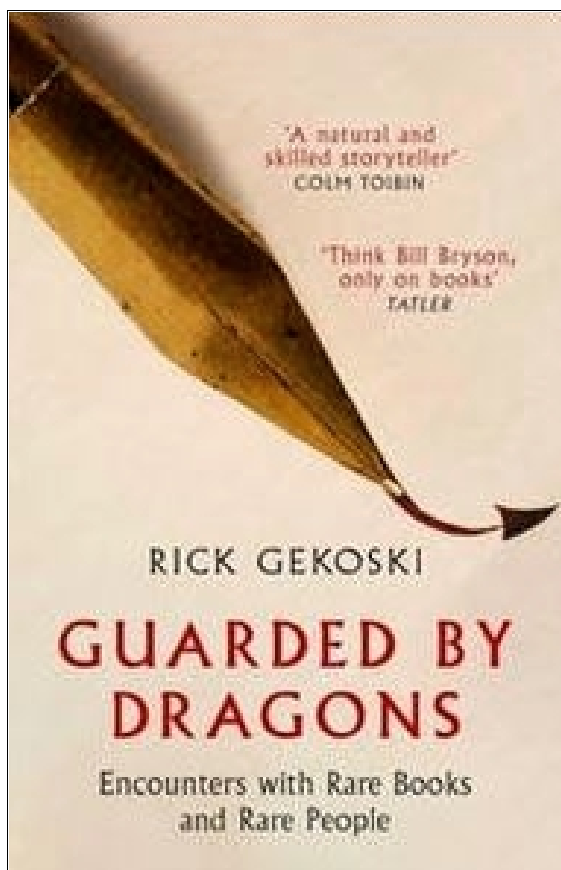
Gekoski is a gifted raconteur, as those who attended his two ANU/*Canberra Times* Meet the Author conversations will attest. In his bestselling bibliomemoir, *Tolkien's Gown* (2004), Gekoski, a former doctoral student at Merton College, Oxford, recounted how he obtained Tolkien's dinner gown, which Tolkien had discarded on leaving the College.

When Gekoski, in the early 1980s, became a rare book dealer, the Tolkien gown, 'original black cloth slightly frayed', featured in his second catalogue, selling to an American professor for £550. This led to Julian Barnes asking in the *Times Literary Supplement* if Gekoski would buy D. H. Lawrence's underpants or Gertrude Stein's bra if they came on the market. Barnes was probing Gekoski as to where you draw the line.

The buying and selling lines are very evident in ***Guarded By Dragons***, a book full of fascinating and revealing interactions, not always amicable, between Gekoski and leading authors.

Gekoski recounts how he paid Charles Monteith, a renowned editor and director at Faber & Faber publishing, £28,000 for a collection of Philip Larkin notes and postcards. Their subsequent sale was blocked by Toby Faber MD who decided, *de novo*, that letters privately sent by authors to their editors at their homes belonged to Faber.

Gekoski comments, 'Within a month I had spent as much in lawyer's fees as the cost of the



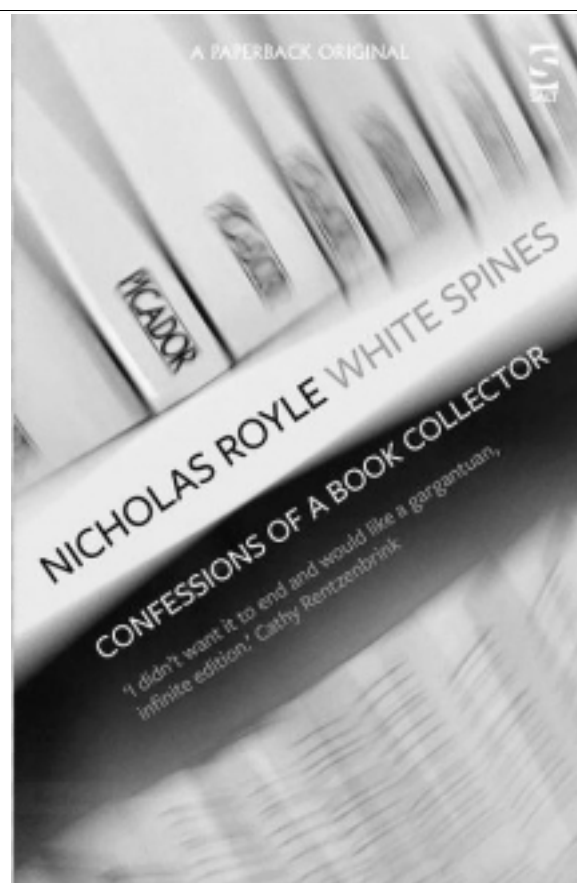
letters Faber wanted returned.' It was eventually settled out of court, with Gekoski having his legal costs covered and his payment reimbursed for the letters Toby claimed belonged to Faber.

Gekoski's title references a Saul Bellow quote, 'Every treasure is guarded by dragons. That's how you can tell it's valuable.' Gekoski also recounts some lengthy, and sometimes acrimonious, dealings with literary dragons such as Ted Hughes, William Golding, and John Fowles.

In 2004, Gekoski paid £22,000 for box files that had wended their way through several dealers from the deceased estate of the daughter of Sir Leon Simon (1881–1965), who took part in the drafting of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 in which Britain expressed support for a Jewish state.

Gekoski and a Jewish rare book dealer ultimately unearthed the only known surviving handwritten draft of the Balfour Declaration, which sold in 2005 in New York for \$775,000. The family of Sir Leon Simon engaged lawyers but, as Gekoski reflects, they had authorised in writing the original house clearance, so that was not his responsibility. Legal discussions ensued, with an ex-gratia payment made to the Simon descendants, but Gekoski and his bookselling partner received even more 'substantial cheques'.

Graham Greene, a bibliophile himself, was



much easier to deal with, but not so his mistress. Greene's 123 love letters to Yvonne Cloetta were bought by Gekoski for £15,000. Yvonne was happy to take the money, writes Gekoski, but not the subsequent questions about Greene's love life when the letters became public.

Equally stressful, but less litigious, was when Gekoski organised the 2013 Sotheby's auction, on behalf of English PEN, of 50 contemporary first editions, annotated by their authors. It was worth it in the end, with £455,000 raised for PEN.

A first edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, with Rowling's annotations and original illustrations, sold for £150,000 at auction. Rowling annotates, for example, on page 133, that Quidditch 'was invented in a small hotel in Manchester after a row with my then boyfriend. I had been pondering the things that hold a society together.'

Hilary Mantel added 2650 words to 123 pages of *Wolf Hall*, including the comment, 'I made up the affair between TC + his sister-in-law. Not without reason, but because it seems to reflect the semi- incestuous knot that Henry himself got into.'

British author **Nicholas Royle's** *White Spines* is a world away from auction houses and literary celebrities. For Royle, the charity book shops and small secondhand bookshops around Britain are treasure troves in his quest to collect 'every single



B-format Picador paperback published between 1972 and 2000, when the publisher abandoned its commitment to the white spine with black lettering in a more or less uniform style’.

Royle is currently nearing 1000 Picadors, including reissues and redesigned covers. Royle provides a slice of publishing history, as well as reflections on Picador authors such as Richard Brautigan, Chinua Achebe, and Angela Carter. He also provides fascinating insights into bookshops around Britain that he visits and their idiosyncratic owners, as well as his own life from student days onwards. This is another excellent bibliomemoir.

*White Spines* is a sort of Bill Bryson BandB for book lovers, while *Dragons*, at times, resembles the world of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Naturally, Gekoski has a chapter on selling Sylvia Plath’s 1925 annotated copy of *The Great Gatsby*!

**READING THE SEASONS: BOOKS HOLDING LIFE AND FRIENDSHIP TOGETHER**  
by Germaine Leece and Sonya Tsakalak  
(Thames & Hudson; \$32.99)

Can books change our lives? Book sales globally have shot up throughout Covid lockdowns. The

term ‘bibliotherapy’ was first used in August 1916 by Samuel Crothers in an August *Atlantic Monthly* article. Reading for therapeutic relief is almost as old as reading itself.

Today, bibliotherapy takes many different forms, from helping young readers to appreciate books, to literature courses run for prison inmates, to reading circles for elderly people suffering dementia.

The British National Health Service now even has a ‘books on prescription’ service, while ‘Bibliotherapy with State Library Victoria’ is a free, ‘facilitated self-reflective approach’, using stories and poems through podcasts, ‘to give everyone access to literature’s healing power’.

*Reading the Seasons* celebrates the power of books and reading through letters between two Australian bibliotherapists, Sydney-based **Germaine Leece** and Melbourne-based **Sonya Tsakalakis**, both associated with The School Of Life organisation.

They hope to reflect ‘how stories nurture, challenge and shape’. Their interaction, through their correspondence over a year, reflects their love of books originating from their previous careers as publisher and librarian respectively. We also learn about their home life, families, fears, and achievements.

Their reading is wide, ranging from Stephen King, who provides ‘insight into the emotional fallout from trauma’, to Javier Marias, who reveals the need, in ‘a psychologically intricate way’, for ‘a private and secret life’, as indeed both reveal in their letters.

They also provide notes, in smaller type in the margins, on books that reflect the points they are raising. Thus, Genevieve sitting alone as a ‘listen-thief’ in a cafe, leads to citing Rachel Cusk’s books and Cusk’s phrase, ‘the plotlessness of life’, whereby ‘examining our inner journey give us shape and meaning’. A section on mother-daughter relationships references a sidebar on Pavlos Matesi’s *The Daughter* (2002).

Genevieve reads Jeanette Winterson’s *Christmas Days* (2016) in the lead-up to Christmas, reminding her of ‘the importance of tradition and ritual’ and that ‘Fiction and poetry are doses, medicines. What they heal is the rupture reality makes on the imagination’.

Author and title indices confirm the wide authorial coverage, which includes Dante, Robert Dessaix, Helen Garner, Enid Blyton, C. S. Lewis, Naguib Mahfouz, and Sun Mi-Hwang. Thematic listings, under headers such as ageing, families, friendship, and grief, provide listings of relevant



authors and books.

The long-letter format of *Reading the Seasons* makes this an ideal book to pick up for bibliotherapeutic browsing in troubled times.

**THE DEVIL'S ATLAS: AN EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO  
HEAVENS, HELLS AND AFTERWORLDS**  
by Edward Brooke-Hitching  
(Simon & Schuster; \$49 99)

**Edward Brooke-Hitching**, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, who calls himself an incurable cartophile, is the author of the best-selling books *The Phantom Atlas* (2016), *The Golden Atlas* (2018), *The Sky Atlas* (2019), and *The Madman's Library* (2020).

*The Devil's Atlas* is a sumptuously illustrated guide, divided into three parts — hells and underworlds; limbo and purgatory; and heavens, paradises, and utopias — as reflected throughout history in global cultures and religions. Brooke-Hitching describes his book, in Shakespearean terms, 'as a guide to the landscapes of the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns'.

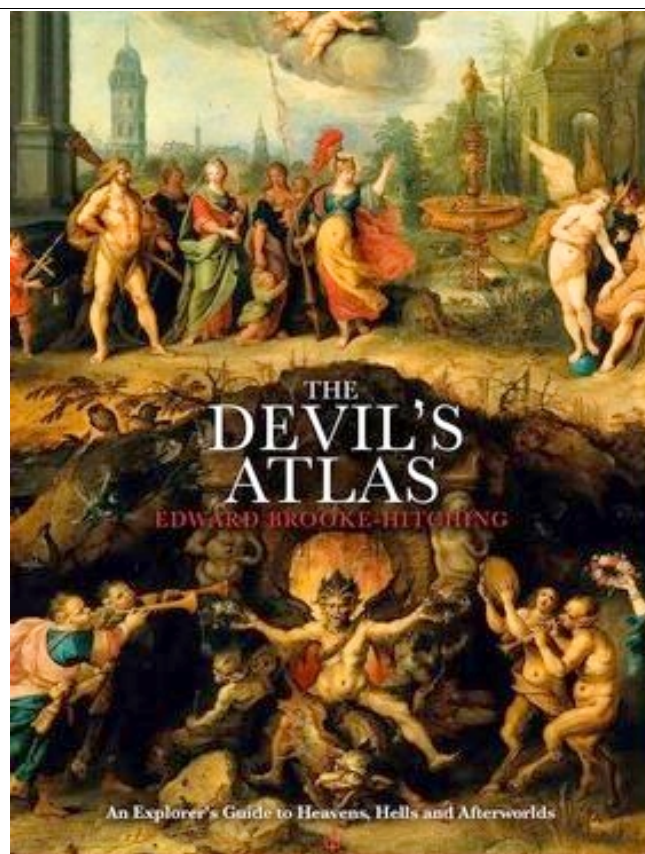
He makes it clear that this is not a history of world religions, although he does provide a backdrop from a 2017 UK BBC survey on religion, which found that 46 per cent of people believe in some form of life after death; of those, 6 per cent believe this to be heaven or hell.

Quoting Vincent van Gogh that 'We take death to reach a star', Brooke-Hitching hopes that his 'exploration of the un-explorable' will provide 'insights into the historical imagination in engagement with the continually discomforting subject of mortality'.

Its coverage, as envisaged by scholars, artists, and cartographers over the centuries, ranges from the 13 heavens of the Aztecs, the Viking mirror world, the Islamic depictions of Paradise, the Chinese Taoist netherworld of 'hungry ghosts', to the 'Hell of the Flaming Rooster' of Japanese Buddhist mythology.

Brooke-Hitching notes that hell, in fact, has actually often frozen over in the small town of Hell in Livingston County, Michigan. To many writers, like Jean-Paul Sartre, hell is other people. He notes that in the construction of the Western image of hell there is no more significant figure than Dante Alighieri.

Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, written between 1308 and 1320, 'envisioned the afterlife with such persuasive, horrific detail that it profoundly shaped the mortal fears of an entire continent',



especially inspiring the 'infernal cartography' of European Renaissance artists.

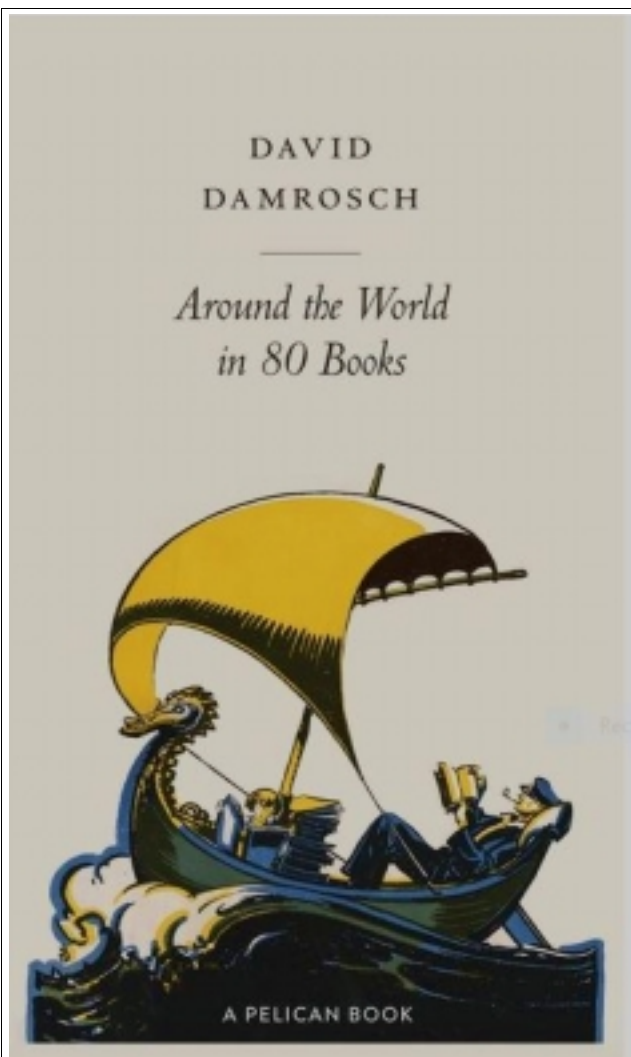
Brooke-Hitching recognises that defining heaven, Paradise, and utopia has usually resulted in a much more 'nebulous elusive geography than its infernal antipode'. It is easier to transport the physical horrors of earth's climate and geology into hell then to re-create the 'else-where-ness' of heavens and paradises. Nonetheless, he succinctly describes the many attempts, especially through religious belief, to re-create the heavenly afterlife.

Brooke-Hitching concludes by contrasting Dante's absorption into God's love with the Venerable Bede's description of mortal life being compared to the flight of a sparrow passing through a lighted hall. *The Devil's Atlas* is a stunning and informative chronicle of imagined portrayals of afterlife.

**AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 BOOKS**  
by David Damrosch (Pelican; \$45)

**THE PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS BOOK**  
by Henry Eliot (Penguin Books; \$65)

World Book Night is celebrated each year on 23 April. *Around the World in 80 Books* by **Professor David Damrosch**, the Director of Harvard's Institute for World Literature, would

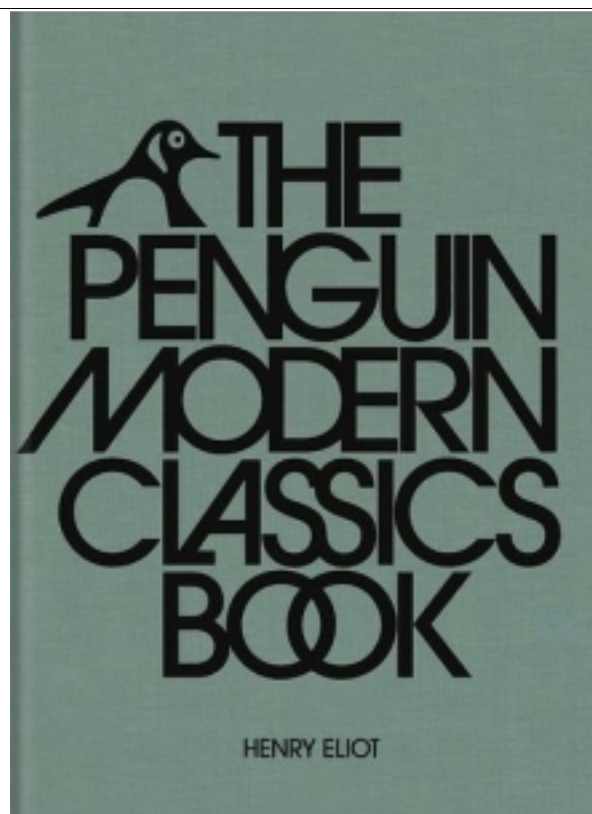


seem to be essential reading on that night.

Damrosch takes Jules Verne's 1873 novel *Around the World in 80 Days* as his model for his 80-book global roundup of both classic and modern literary works. Damrosch quotes *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius at the end of his introduction, '*Lector, intende: laetaberis*: Attend, reader, and you will find delight.'

Damrosch's descriptions of his 80 books are covered in 16 chapters, each with five authors, organised under two headings: Cities, such as London, Paris or Kraków; or Regions, such as Tokyo-Kyoto, Shanghai-Beijing, 'Brazil-Colombia', and 'The Antilles and Beyond'. To give a flavour of the content, under the header 'Tehran-Shiraz', Damrosch covers books by Marjane Satrapi; Farid ud-Din Attar; poets of Shiraz; Ghalib and Agha Shahid Ali. Unfortunately, Australia and New Zealand miss out completely, even though Damrosch includes countries not on Phileas Fogg's fictional itinerary.

Damrosch's comments are often eclectic, interspersed with personal details and family history, but always interesting. He begins his



travels in London with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and ends with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, a work 'that can awaken and guide our moral sympathies'. He believes we need 'literature as a refuge in troubled times', as he roams across genres that 'have responded to times of crisis'.

Damrosch often chooses books 'in dialogue with one another', which provides some unusual couplings, such as P. G. Wodehouse and Franz Kafka; and linking seventeenth-century Japanese poet Bashō with the Simpsons. He determines not to simply tell a one-sided story by the victors of history, so he documents, for example, nahuatl Aztec poetry and Derek Walcott's writings on colonial oppression and racial inequality.

**Henry Eliot**, the author of *The Penguin Classics Book*, has a sumptuous new compilation, ***The Penguin Modern Classics Book***, which describes the over 1800 Penguin Modern Classic paperbacks that have been published between April 1961 and April 2021. In just over 600 pages, Eliot covers 600 authors, labelled by the publishers as 'modernist pioneers, avant-garde iconoclasts, radical visionaries and timeless storytellers'.

Each entry is accompanied by a book-and-author description and a cover illustration. The biographical descriptions are often eclectic. Eliot notes that Isabel Colegate, the author of *The Shooting Party*, lived in Midford Castle, 'a Gothic folly shaped like a giant ace of clubs', while Boris Vian, the author of *Froth on the Daydream*, 'died of a



heart attack while attending a screening of an unsatisfactory film adaptation of his 1946 book, *I Will Spit on your Graves*'.

In relation to Penguin cover design, Eliot says 'From the beginning, built into the DNA of Penguin, has been this idea that the books need to be beautifully designed'. Early illustrators included David Gentleman, Michael Ayrton, and a young Quentin Blake, but after 1963, says Eliot, the designers 'began to increasingly use existing artworks — the idea being that the cover artwork was roughly contemporaneous with the text'. Thus, a 1964 cover of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* features a work by fellow Bloomsbury Group member, the artist Duncan Grant.

Henry Eliot is conscious of the problems of defining a modern, classic: 'It's a really slippery term ... the definition I find the most helpful is from Ezra Pound. He said that a classic is a classic not because of any structural rules or criteria that it meets, but because of a certain internal and irrepressible freshness. And that rings true to me.'

Nonetheless that freshness is restricted by gender and geography. Four-fifths of the authors are men, and nine out of 10 are white. The book, which is arranged by country, reflects a Western northern hemisphere predominance, especially for authors from the British Isles and North America. China only has three authors, while the North Africa section has only one book, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*.

The Australia section contains 12 mostly deceased authors, with Patrick White, the numeric standout. The only contemporary authors are Helen Garner and Robert Drewe. No Richard Flanagan or Tim Winton here. New Zealand only has four authors, Katherine Mansfield, Ruth Park, Ian Cross, and Patricia Grace.

Eliot recognises these deficiencies, and the original Penguin publishing decisions would've been determined by which countries they were published in and authorial copyright availability. Eliot indicates these the issues will be taken into consideration regarding future choices, 'The task of a classics publisher is to identify these imbalances and redress them.'

Nonetheless, the recent addition to the Modern Classics series of the entire corpus of Len Deighton, however welcome, will not help that balance. Similarly, the section on Belgium is totally dominated by Georges Simenon, as Penguin commissioned in November 2013 a major project to publish all the numerous Maigret novels in new translations, now achieved.

Despite the criticisms, however, of a lack of balance in global coverage, *The Penguin Modern Classics Book* is a beautifully printed and illustrated hardback, which will provide many hours of engrossing bibliophilic browsing.

— **Colin Steele**, November 2021–June 2022

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## I must be talking to my friends (continued from page 15)

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**JEFF HAMILL**

**4903 Fremont Ave Nth,  
Seattle WA 98103, USA**

I haven't been reading much SF, or any other literature for that matter. (I did read Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder* at the beginning of this year.) Otherwise, life is much the same for me as before the pandemic: I'm still doing volunteer graphics work for Pathfinder (the Socialist Workers Party's publishing house), listening to lots of classical music (C. P. E. Bach and Mahler most recently), and Agnes and I are still watching murder mystery shows (*Vera*, *Shetland*, *Adam Dalgliesh*, *Professor T*, and so on) several times a week. And *8 Out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*.

After seeing *SFC* 107, and reading about your printing problems, I thought that maybe a few copies could be printed here in Seattle and we could mail them to your US subscribers who are '(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.'

I imagine you could tell me how many copies this would involve printing. Maybe instead of sending you cash I could cover the cost of printing and mailing. (This would be for the US only, of course.) If the number needed is small — less than 10 — I could possibly organise this myself, although it has been years since I looked into printing anything. More than that, I would ask if there is anyone else in Seattle who could help. (Maybe Jerry Kaufman?)

For myself, I prefer reading *SFC* on my iPad; I prefer reading anything on my iPad, because I need the back-lit screen to read comfortably (my low-light vision has never been good). But not everyone is like that, of course.

(30 December 2021)

**\*brg\* Jeff sent me a US\$100 bill toward *SFC* expenses. I thanked him, but had to point out that the problem with sending print copies of *SFC* to USA is not only the expense; it's the US Post Office's unwillingness to accept 80-page issues of *SFC* sent from Australia. Or at least, not all of them. After a long correspondence, Jeff and Agnes offered to print and send out four copies of *SFC* 108 using the PDF file I sent them. Obviously it would have been great if they could**

**have printed and sent copies to all my usual American readers, but that was presuming on their generosity. So Jeff and Agnes rustled up the photocopying paper and printed at home four copies, which they sent out. This was an amazing effort, as I suspect that the cost of printing and posting each copy would have been \$US30 or more. I've kept my own stash of print copies of *SFC* 108 here, and one day I hope to find a way to send the rest. Don't, as they say, hold your breath. The fundamental problems with international postage created by the Trump administration have not been corrected by the Biden administration.\***

**MICHAEL BISHOP**

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

It's been a difficult couple of months for us, referring unabashedly to my struggles with a proton-therapy wound that simply will not heal. However, I'm now seeing an infectious-disease physician who has taken a particular interest in this wound and who has promised to heal it, over time, if I'll just stay with him as he learns more about the issue and ministers to it in his office in LaGrange a couple of times a week. The man's name is Ravi Kamenpolli, and he's a wound-care as well as an infectious-disease practitioner.

Thank you so much for the e-issue of *SF Commentary* 108. I'm surprised and gratified to see the attention that you've given to my stories, our Christmas letter, and my now somewhat-worn list of 104 Really Cool Books. This is a lovely, uplifting surprise, even though I knew you had the material on hand, and I'll cherish the fact that you've printed your first fiction in *SF Commentary* in its long and illustrious history.

I might mention that the first story in the book is called 'Love's Heresy', not 'Love's Enemy'. Otherwise I have no nits to pick with anything that you have to say about either the collection or my work in general. You've been nothing but kind.

I had better close — I came upstairs to gather some information for our taxes this year and also about pending medical appointments.

(13 March 2022)

Bruce, I just wanted to tell you that the hard copies of *SFC* 108 and 109 reached me yesterday, as mailed from with the States by *SFC* supporters Jeff

Hamill and Agnes Gawne, whom I will also thank in a snail-mail letter to their address in Seattle, a message that I will write today and post to them tomorrow.

In any case, I'm honoured to be the author of the first two pieces of fiction to appear in your deservedly praised, indeed iconic, magazine of intelligent SF news, commentary, and criticism. It's something that I never expected but now enjoy with heartfelt gratitude ... and, forgive me, pride.

(2 May 2022)

## IRWIN HIRSH

**26 Jessamine Avenue, East Prahran VIC 3181  
(for the time being)**

As Wendy and I are busy getting our home ready to go up for auction (the campaign starts first week of February), in a not-yet-finished LoC to recent *SF Commentaries* I've written:

In your comment to Mark Plummer (page 15) you mention that Sally Yeoland and I could have the best stash of John Bangsund fanzines. When you published *SFC* 105 this may have been true, but since then Sally has given me John's file copies of his fanzines (and some other stuff), as she's afraid that if something happened to her they'd probably be tossed out. John's file copies weren't complete. There isn't a full set of *ASFR*, for instance. They also weren't well maintained, though over the years Sally (I suspect) had done a reasonable job at getting some order to it all. Some of the copies are in a bad state, crumpled, cigarette-smoke stained, etc. Because of other things going on, I haven't had a great chance to do a proper sort, but I did scan some items for fanac.org and added some lines to Mark's database. There is some detective work to be done — what does that unstapled page belong to? — and one day this will all happen.

The 'other stuff' includes six archive boxes that are John's correspondence files. I've only had one look quick through the files, which look to go back to the 1950s. It was Sally who put them in the archive boxes, when John urgently needed to move, so a Big Sort will have to be done. I'm not going to begin doing this until after the house auction, or when we move into our new place, or whenever. When doing this we may be able to locate the first publication of *Nova Espresso*.

At this stage I intend to keep the boxes. If I'm going to pass the correspondence to someone/body else I'll first be consulting Sally on this. My fanzine collection (or about 75 per cent of it) has and will be going to Monash University Library. I know that John Foyster's fanzines collection was

also donated to the Monash Uni Library. Does anyone know if this donation also included Foyster's correspondence?

(20 January 2022)

Thank you for *SF Commentaries* 105 and 106 (and 103 before them). I know they are expensive to produce and post and I appreciate the effort.

Looking through them there is part of me where I've come to dread the existence of your fanzine. This is because almost every issue has well-written memories of recently departed fans, and it's sad to read those obituaries.

I've attended a few Covid-restricted on-line funerals, but this is an extension of something has been around for some years. When my father died, in 2014, we were asked if we wanted the funeral service to be live-streamed (and available for later viewing). It involved just a small extra fee to ensure that they switched on the camera, made sure the streaming worked, and for the space on their website. We readily jumped at the offer, as my father's brother (and his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren) live in Canada, and we knew that they and others wouldn't be able to attend in person. Giving people the link allowed them to attend the funeral.

In your review of *Portable Storage* I was surprised to read that you just wait for contributions to be offered to you. Perhaps I'm reading this the wrong way, but does that mean you don't solicit specific contributions? If so, I'm surprised by this. Was this always the way with *SFC* and *The Meta-physical Review*? I suspect not, though I have only a gut feeling for the basis of this. The *SFCs* I first read had article-length reviews and long-form articles from many people, and I'm surprised if this was due only to happenstance and not an editor sending out begging letters. On the other hand, and to limit this to a very small sample size, I know that your contribution to my *Sikander* was solicited from you, while my only article in *TMR* was sent to you on spec.

**[\*brg\* I am a magpie among fanzine editors. Not only do I receive articles, but often I ask people if I can reprint their articles that appear in sources that are unfamiliar to me. The result is a never-diminishing glittering nest of wonderful contributions. When I put together each 80-page issue of *SFC*, I usually find I have over 160 pages of material to choose from. This means that many articles and stray pieces of material are pushed from one issue to another, down the line, sometimes for years. Much of that material is written by me, originally for my ANZAPA magazine \*brg\*. Hence I really should publish**



**SFC 111 at the same time as 110.**

**Hence I'm rarely in a position to beg for new material from my favourite writers. William Breiding's recent issues of *Portable Storage* show there is a hunger among non-professional writers for a 'market' for their articles about SF/fantasy subjects. Perry Middlemiss's *Alien Review* is the new magazine offering such a market, but I hope other fans follow his example.\*]**

I both like and don't like Colin Steele's reviews. His longer reviews are good, but I wonder about the brief reviews. The latter don't really tell us much, except that the book exists. I can understand their inclusion in a newspaper column but wonder what they add to a fanzine. I've sort of come to the idea that if the reproduction of the book-cover uses more space than the discussion the review isn't for me. So, in 105, I appreciated the reviews of *Piranesi* and *Rodham*, and the Books about Books and Readers, and the Biographies sections, far more than the reviews on pages 70–3.

**[\*brg\* Colin explains himself well in his introduction to his new column in this issue. He has been sending me his *Canberra Times* SF book reviews since 1979 — hundreds of them — and nobody else has volunteered. It's the *Canberra Times* policy that has changed recently.\*]**

Yvonne Rousseau is someone I didn't know at all well. It's easy to read how important she was to you, and I appreciate the effort you put into the opening section of issue 106.

I was, however, taken aback about you writing

that the way *ASFR* (2S) came about led to you not attending Nova Mob meetings for two years in the 1980s. My first response is that this can't have been true, but re-reading your line 'rather patronising and self-important in manner' hit a nerve. I don't know about you, but I saw this from John Foyster, which surprised me as in a lot of other ways John had an expansive and inclusive manner to his interaction with fandom. I remember John telling me that the low number of LoCs from Aussies meant that Aussies weren't interested in the SF discussion they were publishing. It's true that I never wrote them a LoC, so I was one of the fans John was referring to. However, I'd received all the issues they'd published, but I was a subscriber and it was interesting (patronising, to use your description) to hear him tell me that my hard-earned meant nothing to him.

(finished 2 July 2022)

**[\*brg\* John had a way of making sudden 180-degree policy changes about important fannish matters. When I entered fandom, he insisted that all his publications should be available for 'the usual' (whim, letter of comment, traded fanzines, etc). Yet when he took the helm of *Australian Science Fiction Review (Second Series)*, he and the Collective proclaimed that it would be available only for subscription, not even for trade with other fanzines. Fortunately, Yvonne Rousseau, also from the Collective, made sure that I received every issue.\*]**

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## Feature letters:

### Remembering John Bangsund

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**SALLY YEOLAND**

**Box 4049, Gilberton LP0, Preston VIC 3072**

**21 April 2021:**

**Today would have been John Bangsund's 82nd birthday**

I wish that he was here to be able to celebrate it but it just wasn't meant to be. Instead I'd like you to raise a glass or whatever your preference is in John's memory.

This time last year John was in St George's Hospital Kew waiting for a placement at Westgarth Aged Care Northcote, intending to start a new part

of his life, but the pandemic put an end to that.

And two years ago we were celebrating John's 80th birthday with the *Eightieth Annish* to celebrate his life. And he loved the fact that so many of you were part of that which meant so much to both of us.

Although we haven't been able to have a memorial gathering as yet to remember John, I will be forever grateful to all those amazing SF friends who have scanned so many of John's SF fanzine publications which can be found at: <https://fanac.org/>

As we were saying back in August 2020, it was always going to be hard to imagine a world without John Bangsund. But it is what it is. I was fortunate

enough to have him share his life with me for more than 47 years. I can't ask for more than that.

Thank you so much for being part of John's life and mine

## Remembering John Bangsund one year on

There we were twelve months ago today finding out that John Bangsund was no longer with us. We were almost halfway through Lockdown 2 in Melbourne because of Covid-19, which was planned to go for 42 days and instead lasted some 111 days. We never imagined that twelve months later we'd still be fighting an even stronger variant, the Delta strain, but that we would also have several types of vaccines available to help us try to fight this virus.

John left us when the world had been turned upside down, and here we are a year later and that's still the case. While it was such an enormous loss and still is, life goes on, and of course it has been so different without him. We still haven't been able to organise a memorial gathering for John because of the succession of various lockdowns within Victoria and elsewhere. And then there have been various closures of State borders which seems to be ongoing, because of new exposure sites that keep popping up each time we think we've managed to subdue it.

It was such a great tribute to John that some of you got together and decided that, as part of the FANAC Fan History Project, you managed to not only find most of John's fannish publications, which was quite an achievement in itself, but also undertook the challenging task of scanning copies of all of John's fanzines and uploading them on the FANAC website, which is really such a lovely tribute to him.

I list herethe main links on the FANAC website for those publications of John's that have been scanned so far:

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/Australian\\_Science\\_Fiction\\_Review/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/Australian_Science_Fiction_Review/) (1966–1973)

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/Bundalohn\\_Quarterly/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/Bundalohn_Quarterly/) (1972)

<https://fanac.org/fanzines/Crog/> (1969)

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/New\\_Millennial\\_Harbinger/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/New_Millennial_Harbinger/) (1968–1975)

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/Philosophical\\_Gas/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/Philosophical_Gas/) (1970–1997)

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/Stunned\\_Mullet/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/Stunned_Mullet/) (1975–1977)

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/Bangsund-Other\\_Publications/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/Bangsund-Other_Publications/) (1970–1980)

[https://fanac.org/fanzines/Society\\_of\\_Editors\\_Newsletter/](https://fanac.org/fanzines/Society_of_Editors_Newsletter/) (1979 one issue)

<https://fanac.org/fanzines/Hanrahan/> (1980)

John's CV mentions that he also published *John W. Campbell: An Australian Tribute* (1974) and a number of other small fanzines, plus about 130 issues of the *Society of Editors Newsletter* (1978–96) for the Society of Editors (Victoria) so watch this space (fanac.org). Please raise your glass to remember John.

(20 August 2021)

Bruce, thanks so much for the print copies of *SF Commentaries* 107 and 108, which were a lovely surprise. But we've lost so many friends — and now Monica Litchen. I'm so glad you reprinted that photo of Monica and me from 1973 at Manuka. I am just waiting at Macca's Kingsbury while my car is being washed, as I have the day off.

It has been so sad reading about all our friends who are no longer with us, especially Monica. But it did sound from what John Litchen said that things had been very tough for them both during the last few years because of her medical condition and deterioration. That's the difficult thing about getting old.

I now have a wonderfully clean car. It was such a feeling of déjà vu at the car wash, as it's on the corner of Clunes St and Plenty Rd, Kingsbury, two doors along from where we were living in 1988 before we moved to Gillingham St. Today was the first time I had eaten in a cafe since the middle of last year, which felt a bit strange. I've got the rest of this week off work so am going to do something for ANZAPA and send a message to Jack Herman who is, I hope, managing to recover from his fall. When Omicron or son of manages to settle down it really would be good to catch up with you both.

(23 March 2022)

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## Feature letter:

### Trying to cross enough fingers

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**MARK PLUMMER**

**59 Shirley Road, Croydon,  
Surrey CR0 7ES, England**

I'm not yet ready to commit to a *Banana Wings* for Corflu/Novacon, Bruce, but we are indeed working on one now — Claire is editing a letter column as I type — with the expectation of having it available for the conventions. That probably means we won't be able to mail copies until after Novacon. We'll be doing our usual hybrid print and electronic versions.

I remember how much I appreciated being able to have a haircut after the first UK lockdown last year. The odd thing is that for years I didn't have a haircut at all, literally for nearly two decades from about 1989, although my hair reached a certain length and just stopped growing. But once I started having haircuts again in 2008 I found that I really do miss them if the opportunity is denied to me.

Covid case numbers in the UK topped 50,000 a day earlier this week, but we still have few mandatory restrictions. There are some calling for action now to avoid another Christmas lockdown. We're also seeing some shop shortages, nothing too serious, but there are some products that you can no longer simply assume will be there in the supermarket if you want them. Reportedly, some supermarkets are filling shelves with pictures of fresh fruit and vegetables to disguise their absence, at least to a casual glance.

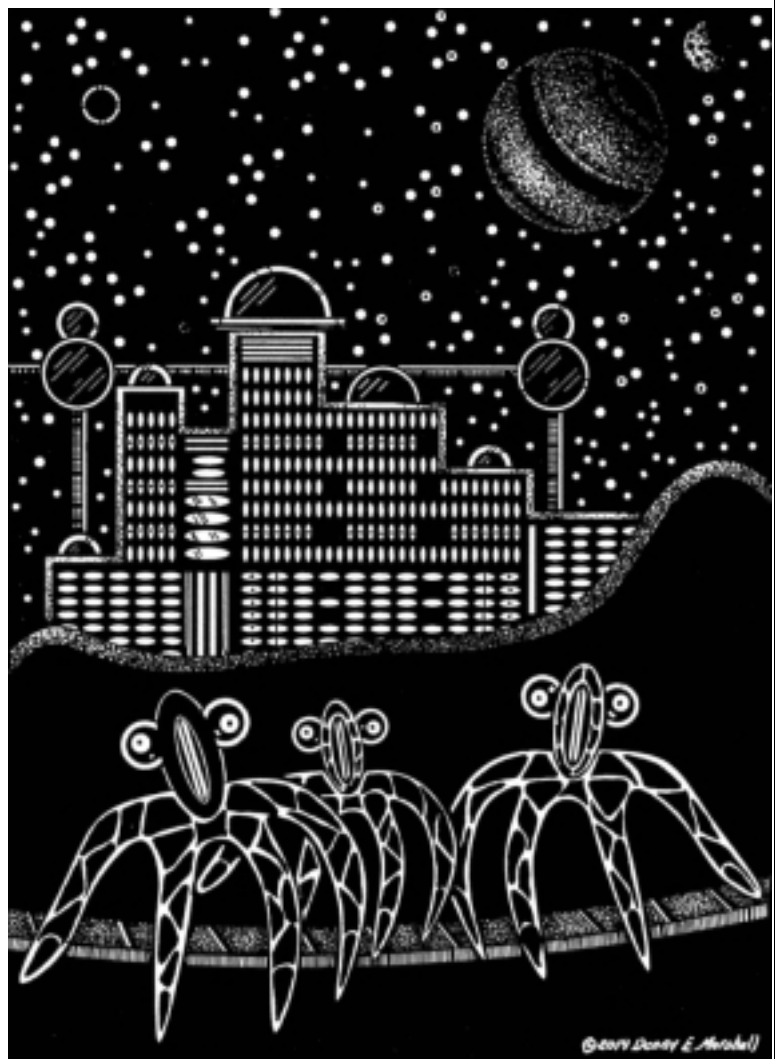
Still Claire has just been cheered — although I suspect loccol work now delayed — by England demolishing the West Indies in the T20 World Cup...

(24 October 2021)

I was just reading your editorial in *SFC* 107, Bruce, written in September when you thought, 'Life is good — with crossed fingers.' Maybe, then but now, not so much — or perhaps you just

didn't cross enough fingers for long enough. The Omicron variant is storming through the UK as we wonder when we'll hit 100,000 cases a day. Possibly before I've finished writing this — and yes, I was about half-way through when up popped the news that yesterday's total is over 106,000.

Interested to read about your forays into cooking. I did the majority of our cooking for about 10 years because I was usually the first one home from work, and still do about two or three dinners a week. We cycle through a ten-year run of a food magazine called *Olive*, dishes selected from the current month's issues, giving us more than enough recipes that we don't need to repeat a dish in the course of a year, even if several are clearly variations on a theme. Taking recipes from a single venue has the advantage that they're reasonably





consistent so you know whether the portion size is optimistic or whether they underestimate the cooking time for potatoes, but I still find that I lament the frequent lack of precision. Some years ago, Julian Barnes wrote a cookery column for *The Guardian*, collected as *The Pedant in the Kitchen*, and I was particularly taken by his wrestling with the concept of a ‘medium onion’. Despite a general familiarity with *Olive*’s recipe format, I still find myself mentally yelling at the page, ‘Yes, but what does that *mean*?’ when confronted by a cook-it-until-it’s-done instruction. How hard would it be to give a ballpark here, two minutes or two hours? Despite many years of practice, I am not an instinctive cook.

The heart of *SFC* 107 (I nearly said ‘the meat of the issue’ but it felt like a tasteless link) is the obituaries, once again reminding me of the way Claire and I found you in the outer reaches of the convention centre during Aussiecon 3, reading the obituaries in *The Age*. ‘My favourite bit,’ you said, Bruceishly.

**\*brg\* I still read the Death Notices on the few days per week I still buy *The Age*. However, it has almost completely dropped its Obituaries page, once its best feature. In fact, it’s dropped nearly all its best features since 2013.\***

Of the people memorialised here, I knew Judith Hanna best, although not really all that well, given she only lived about 20 miles away in the same city. We attended a number of parties in her and Joseph’s house, including the one in 1996 when we met Yvonne Rousseau and John Foyster. I recall Judith contacting us after one gathering, trying to find out discretely who was responsible for rearranging Joseph’s ‘Kings of England’ fridge magnets into a non-chronological sequence. I’ve quoted a couple of times now Dave Hodson’s remark in *This Here...* that Judith would ‘ask: “How are you?” and she genuinely wanted to know if you were okay or not and, if you weren’t, she’d listen.’ As I think you know, we went to her funeral back in September, a packed room that doubtless would have been fuller still had it not been for prevailing conditions. It was rather conflicting because we were seeing many friends for the first time in a year-and-a-half or more, which would have been nice were it not for the circumstances.

I think I did almost-meet Doug Barbour at one of the conferences hosted by the Science Fiction Foundation, *A Commonwealth of Science Fiction* in 2004, but I’m not sure. We went to several SFF conferences in the early years of the century, two of which were in Liverpool, and at one I’m sure I remember briefly seeing somebody and thinking,

‘Crikey, that’s Doug Barbour’, although not really being sufficiently sure of myself to go over and say hi. Truthfully, those conferences were always a little intimidating, all those professors, doctors, lecturers and postgraduates, eminent academic and critics — and me with two not-very-good ‘A’ levels and a Preliminary One swimming certificate. The attendee badges would sport an institutional affiliation as well as the person’s name, and at least once we found ourselves badged as ‘Banana Wings’, which proved a minor talking point at least. So I probably almost-met Doug Barbour once, but nothing more than that. I always enjoyed his letters in *SFC*.

I’m more certain that I did meet Carol Carr, although again only the once, at the Portland Corflu, and then I don’t think we spoke much. We have a copy of her *Collected Writings*, something that, rather embarrassingly, I’d not got around to until recently. I particularly liked her eclectic ‘Stuff’ columns’.

I never met the other people you memorialise here, really unsurprising in the case of Nanci Griffiths and Charlie Watts (I’m resisting the urge to jokingly append ‘... but me and Keef, we’re like *that*’ in case you actually believe me.) I don’t think I even met Ed Meskys, although I certainly saw him around at US Worldcons, each time thinking of Dave Langford’s TAFF report where he wrote of meeting Ed: ‘he murmured something to me, and I nodded encouragingly to him. Nobody had told him I was deaf. Nobody had told me he was blind. He murmured something else as I waved goodbye, and another fannish meeting of minds was over.’

Looking through Colin Steele’s overview of ‘The Field’ I see a field that is increasingly unknown to me, where finding even a familiar title or author among his reviews is rare, and a book I’ve actually read is as one with the elephant shrew and the northern hairy-nosed wombat. I count only four, and one of those, *The Carpet People*, was years ago. Is it just that I no longer go into bookshops, partly because of the pandemic but more because I tend to get ebooks these days, meaning I literally don’t know what science fiction books look like. *The Guardian* has been running various best-books-of-the-year lists, including a top-five science fiction and fantasy titles selected by Adam Roberts, and I’d only heard of two and had read none.

A few months back it dawned on me that this year I have bought no paper books at all, or at least not for myself. I’ve bought books as gifts and given books as gifts, but all my personal book purchases this year have been electronic. Having had the revelation it became rather a point of principle to maintain it throughout 2021, and with a week to

go I look set to accomplish that with a mixed sense of achievement and horror. Not going into bookshops is only a part of it, because I used to buy books online too, but even that's fallen away this year. I'm not entirely sure why. Space considerations, I think. Our house is full of books and that's been true for years, but I think it's the increased sense that buying more is stacking up problems for the future, even if those problems already exist with our current holdings and not making the problem any worse doesn't make it any better either.

Aside from the space they occupy, another advantage of ebooks is that it's often possible to buy relatively recent releases for not very much money, about a couple of dollars in your money.

I've read some good recent non-fiction this year, including *Frostquake: The Frozen Winter of 1962 and How Britain Emerged a Different Country* by Juliet Nicolson and *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* by Laura Spinney, both of which speak to our current condition. The Nicolson examines the impact of the UK's long winter of 1962–63, and seems to argue that it was a triggering event for the cultural sixties. It's not entirely compelling in that respect, as it cites events that, while happening *around* the time of that winter, clearly preceded it or followed it and weren't in any way influenced by it. As *The Guardian's* reviewer notes, 'John Profumo didn't sleep with Christine Keeler in the summer of 1961 because he needed to keep warm.'

I was also impressed by *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London Between the Wars* by Francesca Wade. The women all lived in Mecklenburgh Square in the London district of Bloomsbury. They weren't all there at the same time and they didn't even necessarily know one another, but it's a good mechanism to examine what was happening in that particular time and place.

There's a splendid bit where Hilda Matheson is at a party and H. G. Wells walks off with her purse by mistake, so she has to borrow a bus fare home from Bertrand Russell. I think there's something wonderful about being at a party with all these celebrated people and yet still having to travel home by bus.

A rare print book for me was *Finding Dora Maar*



by Brigitte Benkemoun. This has a wonderful conceit. Benkemoun's husband lost his diary and she managed to find a similar replacement, more of a diary case really, on eBay. This still had the address list used by a previous owner, and whoever that was, was clearly connected to the arts world, as it includes phone numbers for the likes of André Breton, Jean Cocteau, and Paul Éluard.

Benkemoun eventually deduces that the former owner was Dora Maar, the photographer and model and mistress of Picasso, and then sets out to identify all the people in the address list, not all of whom are famous: alongside the artists and writers there's her cat's vet, for instance. The book doesn't quite deliver on the potential of its idea, I fear.

I am also increasingly reading crime novels, something that's also guilt inducing because it's such a clichéd path for a science fiction reader. I have for years now been working my way through the books of Ruth Rendell, uncharacteristically for me and to Claire's evident distress without thought to their publication chronology. I mentally divide authors into those we buy on paper and those on ebook. Rendell is a still-on-paper author, and as I have no unread volumes in the house and I've accidentally not been buying print books in 2021, there's been no progress on that front. Back in 2009 I read *King Solomon's Carpet*, the fifth of her 'Barbara Vine' books, and I recall being unimpressed. This year I picked up cheap ebooks of the first two Vine novels, *A Dark-Adapted Eye* and *A Fatal Inversion*, and they're wonderful. I've no idea what my 2009-self was thinking, and don't even challenge the logic that says that Rendell is a print author around here while Rendell-as-Vine

is ebook.

I've also been working my way through P. D. James's Adam Dalgleish novels. Unlike Ruth Rendell, I am reading these in order and, if I'm honest, with a certain dogged persistence to the point where I wasn't quite sure why I was persisting beyond an I've-started-so-I'll-finish stubbornness. My obstinacy did though pay off with the seventh book, *A Taste for Death*. The Dalgleish instalments were never frequent, with often four years between volumes, but the gap between the sixth and seventh novels was nearly a decade. *A Taste for Death* seems so much better than its predecessors that it's almost tempting to go back to the start to see if I can find what I was missing.

It's not all classic stuff, though. I've also been keeping up with several contemporary series from Elly Griffiths. Her Ruth Galloway books focus on a forensic archaeologist, and are if not cosy then

some way distant from the gritty end of the spectrum. That's better represented by Susie Steiner, whose third Manon Bradshaw novel, *Remain Silent*, sees the police engaging with Lithuanian gangmasters in East Anglia; and Sarah Hilary's *Never Be Broken*, where violent London gang crime bleeds into the respectable middle class suburbs.

Perhaps I'll turn this into a best of year list at some point, but as noted earlier, there's still a week to go, and who knows what that will bring?

Christmas looms. I don't suppose we'll be doing much, all the more so because of the Omicron menace (surely a pulp classic by G. Peyton Wertenbaker). We are seeing Claire's parents on Boxing Day and mine at New Year, in both case restrictions permitting. At the moment there's nothing to stop us, but there are plenty of hints of a post-Christmas firebreak, so who knows?

(24 December 2021)

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## Feature letter: Multifaceted Judith Hanna

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**JOSEPH NICHOLAS**

**15 Jansons Road, Tottenham,  
London N15 4JU, England**

Just looking at your Judith tribute in *SFC* 107, and spotted two small errors. The photo on page 8 was taken in 1981, not 1980 (the clue is in it's being post-convention in Adelaide — i.e., Advention); and the photo on page 10 was taken in our back garden, not the allotment (which is where the photo on page 11 was taken).

Paging further through *SFC* 107, have you noticed that the astronaut figure on the cover of *Gallowglass* (page 139) is *exactly the same* as the astronaut figure on the cover of *Project Hail Mary* (page 147)?

(19 November 2021)

Among the things I've discovered, or have been reminded of, as I've been sorting through the papers and folders in Judith's room was the various other things she did that I could have included in my eulogy at her funeral. For example, I was pretty convinced that she was a past chair of the Permaculture Association of Great Britain, but couldn't find anything on their website to confirm that — but have since turned up, in a lever arch file labelled 'Permaculture Action Learning Port-folio', a list of the various voluntary positions she held during the 1990s. And there it was: chair

1996–1997, secretary 1997–1998.

Reading down the list, I found (or was reminded) that she was also a member of the management committee of the New Economics Foundation from 1993 to 1998, serving as chair and vice-chair of that in, respectively, 1995 and 1996. Also (another reminder), tagged as '1995 onwards', she was a member of the London Regional Transport Committee, a statutory government 'watchdog' body for public transport in the city (obviously drawing on the expertise in the subject that she gained as Assistant Director of Transport 2000, as it then was, from 1987 to 1992).

The list in question was current up to 1999, and also covered the various permaculture design and teaching courses she took and/or taught during the 1990s. After leaving Volunteering England, she had a brief period of self-employment as Seven Sisters Permaculture, designing a couple of gardens and doing related work; but that stopped — and I think the other posts were given up or had already been given up — when she joined English Nature/Natural England in 2002–03.

I feel a bit annoyed — with both myself and Judith — that we didn't have this information readily to hand when I was drafting my funeral eulogy, because her room was in such disorder that we couldn't find it. So I'm mentioning it here



now, as a further illustration of the talented, multifaceted and selfless person she was. A person I of course miss more and more with every day that passes.

(16 November 2021)

## Remembering a Community Gardener (Part 1)

Judith was known locally for her interest in gardening, and for the promotion of community gardens — although it took a few years for that desire to create gardens for others to emerge.

When we moved into our house in December 1993, we knew no one in the area, and that was pretty much how it remained for the next couple of years, as we concentrated on fitting out our new house and developing a garden for it. (We had joined the local Friends of the Earth group, but by post rather than in person, and didn't start attending the group's meetings until a few years later.) Then we got the allotment, which doubled the amount of time we spent on our own gardening efforts and (because we were both working full-time) left little time over for other projects.

Nevertheless, she began to take an interest in a patch of neglected land attached to the old school building on the corner of the High Road and Philip Lane — land that abutted Tottenham Green West and was within the curtilage of Holy Trinity church. In July 1995, she approached the then vicar about clearing the land of litter and turning it into a nature garden. The then vicar agreed; but the parishioners withheld their backing, and nothing happened until the spring of next year, when a thorough litter clearance was undertaken (although it always built up again, because of the bus stops just on the other side of the wall along the High Road) and some planting was done.

She kept a logbook for the project, recording and photographing the work done, which I have by me now. Nettles were scythed down, some of the long grass was strimmed and removed, bulbs and wildflowers were planted, there was assistance from neighbours who recognised the worth of the project and were willing to help out, there was liaison with the council and with other groups such as Tidy Britain; but always — always — there was a complete lack of interest from the Holy Trinity parishioners, who were perhaps more focused on an afterlife than the real one in the here and now. Weekend after weekend, she would remind them of the need to leave the gate unlocked so that gardening could be done; and weekend after weekend it would remain locked. Their one and only gardening effort was to strim everything flat one day in May 1997, including just-sown cherry seedlings.

The end came in 1998, when the church secured funding for the restoration of the old school building and the site therefore became off-limits to everyone bar the construction crew. But by then she had grown tired of the parishioners' disinterest, recording that this was deterring others from continuing to help — and also that her other commitments were reducing the time she could devote to the project (she had begun studying for a diploma in permaculture design, alongside her voluntary work for the Permaculture Association of Great Britain and the New Economics Foundation). After two years, she abandoned it.

A few years later, the church sold part of the land to the council, to be incorporated into Tottenham Green West. The wall along the High Road was removed, but the littering continues. There is now no sign of anything that she achieved there.

(18 November 2021)

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## Feature letter: Surviving the renovations

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**LEIGH EDMONDS**

**46 Hocking Avenue, Mt Clear VIC 3350**

I'm a bit frazzled at the moment, having just done a long telephone interview for a job I wouldn't mind doing. It was supposed to be done using a bit of software called Micosoft Teams and, although it worked fine yesterday and this morning, it failed utterly when it came time to do the business. It

might be just as well, when I looked at myself on the screen I looked old and tired, which is perhaps how I feel. Things that need attending to just seem to be piling up and I'm feeling like the proverbial swan right now. I'd like to think that things will calm down when the renovations and additions are finished but the work that has been done is excellent and worthwhile so we push on — chaps should be along any minute now to start installing

the solar panels and I will be pleased when that is done too.

I will pass along to Dot your comment that the book looks fabulous. Ballarat Historical Society is a little group of Ballarat people who started off doing bits and pieces and have turned into a respectable little publishing house specialising in history about the Goldfields Region. Dot Wickham is the powerhouse behind it and a good friend. She and Wayne were next-door neighbours when we moved into our first place here in Ballarat, and although she now lives in Brisbane and we in Mount Clear we organised publication of *Western Airways* with all the modern technologies of Zoom, Dropbox, emails, telephone calls, etc, etc. After I'd done the rewrite it took us probably four weeks to get it organised, drawn out when Dot had to go into hospital for a breast cancer operation, but she's a sucker for hard work, so it got done.

BHS had published the first two volumes of my history of Australian civil aviation, and will do the third and final when I'm able to get down to Melbourne to select photos for it. You and I probably know more people than we would like to admit who have boxes of unsold books they've published haunting their garages, and I have no intention of joining that august band, so those histories have been published only as ebooks. The trouble with that is publicising them properly, so this time I decided to print some hard copies to spread around too. So I got 20 printed, which came to \$44 each, and all but seven have been sent off, mainly to Western Australia. I have another four to send overseas (my bank balance shudders in contemplation of the cost) and I have three spare, which I will sell off at \$130 each (unless they get Mates Rates, of course). I now also have a hard copy to sit of my shelf and it looks, as you say, fabulous. As for the contents, I leave it to others ...

Thanks for the latest *SFC*, which is, as always, big and fat and full of interesting stuff. I hope I will get back to it sometime down the track but I did skim it just before. If you will forgive me, I will skip the first twenty or so pages because they will be too depressing to have to read in depth. It is true that our friends seem to be dropping like flies, and although I'm not denying that they are now dead I don't want to have to be reminded of their or our mortality too much. Best, for me at least, to let them remain as happy memories in my mind. But I have to add that I had not heard of Monica's death, which I did find upsetting. She was a delightful and cheerful person the times that I met her, and I thought that she and John were well matched. As for Charlie Watts, he was a better drummer than Ringo Starr, I'll give you that.

There must be some things coming out of the United States. I recently received a little packet of decals for airliner models from a dealer in America who could send them to me through a freight forwarder at the cost of about \$160, which was more than \$130 more than the value of the contents of the packet. It turned out that he was sending a large parcel to a person in New South Wales and included my envelope in with that, which that person sent on to me. The cost of postage overseas is one of the reasons that Dot and I decided not to print too many paper copies of *Western Airways*. It would be quite unrealistic to expect anybody to pay some sum for a book and then twice that to actually receive it. It is as though the world is conspiring to force us all into digital activity whether we like it or not.

Talking of digital worlds, among the interesting letters — of which there are too many to comment on — I enjoyed the paragraph in Robert Day's letter about the models that he has built in the past couple of years. Through some digital magic I get a notification in my emails when Robert posts something about modelling on his web page. It is always fun to go and have a look at what somebody else that I know through stf has made. I liked his Bartini VVS-14 and his Tu-143, I think I have kits of both in my collection and he inspires me to make them too — but there's other stuff that needs doing too. I won't burden you with the details.

It was good to see old friends in your letter column. Don Ashby finds himself doing the kinds of things I'm trying to avoid these days, things like backfilling the back yard. When we had the swimming pool removed from our back yard we found that the decking around it hid a gaping great chasm where the land slopes down to the back fence. It now needs a retaining wall and infilling but I'm leaving that to younger people who presumably know what they are doing. Then there's Van struggling with health problems enough to test the patience of a saint. Then there's Robyn, who has moved in just down the road from us at Bunninyong into a house that looks even more formidably modern than our new place.

Tony's comments about memory were thought provoking. He says he remembers little of his life before 12, which most people would regard as late. I, on the other hand, would say that I don't remember much before I turned 70, which is not quite true. If you were to ask me what I remembered from, say, 1984, I would reply that I remembered nothing. But if you were to tell me that was the year Valma and I went to one of the convention Eric Lindsay organised at Medlow Bath I would remember rather vividly the hangover after staying up most of the night drinking strong liquor with,

I think, Paul Stokes. Apart from that, nothing. As I say to people in my professional capacity, memory is good for the emotional content of an occasion but not the facts of the wise men 'who taught me all I knew'. That's what the contemporary documents are for, and if we don't have them we are in quicksand.

Enough for now. Men are tromping around on the roof, young Tristan is upset and yelling, Issy is hiding somewhere, and Robin Johnson has just rung with computer troubles. Life goes on. Back later if the spirit moved me and time allows.

(16 November 2021)

I've just got around to reading your issue of *SFC* about Bill Wright, and I just wanted to drop you an email to say how much I appreciated it. Dick's article is quite moving, and yours covers all the bases as far as I can tell. I'm glad that I went to interview Bill for the *History of Australian Fandom* project — not that I learned much that I didn't know about fandom, but I learned a lot about Bill. He was one of those ever-present personalities, and it will be strange not to see him at a convention — if I ever get to another one.

Reading of Bill's health problems reminds me that we're all getting on. Most times when I'm chatting with Robin Johnson our health issues and experiences come up, and I'm about to take myself off for my annual visit with my blood doctor. Still, let's get the most out of life while we can, and *SFC* has become a constant part of my life, for which my thanks.

(8 March 2022)

We have the painters in, and the need to completely empty rooms for them to work is causing more disruption than all the previous renovations put together. I'm not enjoying it, but I content myself that after another six or eight weeks all the interior work will have been completed and we can settle in for a long and happy occupation.

Robin is chugging along okay. He had a birthday last week, which means he is 82 or 83 and has all the usual old-age problems, but he appears to be as happy and content as is possible under those circumstances. He is, I think, looking forward to being able to make excursions to Melbourne again, but he is, like many of us, having trouble in getting comfortable with the idea of public transport, which is necessary to get to Melbourne. I think also that he was affected more by the death of Bill Wright and Roger Sims than he would like. Both were good friends to him.

How did you go with the colonoscopy? Both Valma and Robin have had them (Robin's saved

his life) but I've escaped that trial so far. I've been to visit my GP and blood doctor in the past couple of weeks for check-ups and they tell me I've healthy, I have to go to see the skin cancer specialist in the coming month or two for his all-clear too. Crossed fingers. I've gotten too fat over the past couple of years from too much eating and not enough exercise, which I hope to put to rights after all the relocation is settles down. Talking of cancer, I don't know if I've mentioned that Valma had a couple of skin cancers removed as a result of her visit to the skin doctor but it appears there are no complications as a result.

I'm plodding on with the history of Australian fandom, but it's slow going because of the relocation, and tedious because it's hard work trying to find the core of what happened in Sydney before the war among all the chatter about fussing and feuding that was written at the time, and since.

(14 March 2022)

I see that *SFC* did nicely in the FAAn awards this year, but *Portable Storage* was way out in the front this year. Congratulations for keeping up such a high quality for so long.

The painter has almost completed turning out house into a nice shade of green, but in achieving that end just about everything in the house is either in the garage, in the shed, or out in hallways etc. Apart from a few finishing touches the renovations are just about complete, but we now embark on the process of putting our lives back into order again after a couple of years of chaos.

I just saw that *iOTA* got three votes in the FAAN Awards. Some people have long memories.

(21 March 2022)

I guess you are right when you say that folks are less likely to send a LoC if they get a PDF rather than a printed copy. Sending out PDFs seems so much less personal than sending a paper copy, and thus there is probably less of a feeling of direct connection between the editor and the reader. It's a pity really that that aspect of fanzines has disappeared. I have to say, however, that all the PDF fanzines that I get go into a file in my computer. Looking at that file the other day, it seems that an alarming number of fanzines have accumulated there over the past few years. I'd hate to think how much space they would take up, even though we would have room for them in this new place. It's not so much a matter of space; it's a matter of feeling responsible for them, and having to look after them properly, that I can live without. These days the faneds that I like send me PDFs of their fanzines, which I regard as being almost the same as posting me a copy, except that it gets to



me without the tedium of the postal service.

Like you, I've been struggling to keep up with ANZAPA. It is good that David sends out those warnings that the deadline is approaching, and normally it would spur me on to get my contribution completed. This time however, it has been a week since I relocated temporarily into this room while my usual room is being repainted and will, in the fullness of time, have new benches and shelves. I must be getting old or something, because activities that would have been simple and easy a decade or two have taken their toll this time and I'm feeling quite fatigued by the process of emptying all the rooms so they can be painted. Not that I'm actually been moving anything heavy, but those walk-in wardrobes have to be emptied out and, gosh, Valma has a lot of clothes.

The other thing that turned out to be rather tiring was getting all the electronic gizmos in my office unconnected and then reconnected. The rat's nest of cabling at the back of the computer seemed to have turned itself into a Gordian knot and, of course, I'd forgotten which plug goes into which hole so it was some time before I figured out why the computer and the screen would not talk to each other. Most annoying was that the little USB gizmo that goes into the back of the computer that links to the keyboard and mouse went missing, which you'd think impossible in moving it from one room across the hall to the other. In the end, I gave up and was forced to buy a new keyboard and mouse. The one I'd been using had cost me \$39 at Officeworks, but some time back I'd seen a magical and very comfortable keyboard at Harvey Norman but hadn't bought it. This time I found the same keyboard at JB HiFi for only \$199 so I gave in to temptation and bought it. (Since I spend endless hours tapping away at keyboards I feel justified in buying such an expensive but better and more comfortable keyboard.) It was only after I got home that I discovered this keyboard didn't come with a mouse, so it was back to the shop to get one of those too. All this took time and energy and caused stress because I had to do some urgent internet banking while all this was going on. And the rest of the week seemed to pass in the same way with little emergencies that would normally have been easy to resolve taking much longer and being a greater headache because nothing was where it was supposed to be.

(22 March 2022)

Yesterday afternoon the operations of my new mouse were becoming uneven and I thought that maybe it needed new batteries. However I couldn't figure out how you would open it to put the new batteries in, and was eventually forced to peer at the instructions, which are printed in tiny print on a tiny piece of paper — it's just as well I have a magnifying glass. After a great deal of peering and squinting I figured out that this new mouse has a rechargeable battery, which explained the plug hole in the front and the short cable that came in the box which had puzzled me when I first opened the box. Problem solved. This discovery meant that I knew what to do when my new keyboard started flashing a red light at me. Now that I knew what to look for, it was easy to charge that up too. Now I have to remember to put the recharging cable in a safe place so I can use it again when I need it. All this modern wizardry! Young folk don't make it easy for us old folks, who can remember the pre-Beatles/Rolling Stones world.

Yes, I too have fallen out of the habit of long morning walks, mainly because tradies seem to turn up any time between 7 and 9 in the morning on random days and I have to be around to let them in and point them in the right direction. There's another reason why I'm looking forward to the renovation work being completed, so I can get back into that habit. I am hopeful that all the interior work will be completed in the coming week. It will be mainly putting up some hanging rails for our art — we seemed to have a lot of it in our old place but in this new and larger place ... all I can say is that you might find us hanging out in art galleries in months to come.

As well as morning walks we have a little spare room here that I intend to fit out as a small gymnasium. One of the reasons I was keen to move to Stalag Hemensley all those years ago was because it had a gym, which I used regularly until Covid closed it. As a result, my upper body strength has disappeared to almost nothing and the heavy microwave oven which I was once able to move around with ease is now too heavy for me. Consequently I had to get the builder to move it out of the pantry when painting had to be done in there, and I'm waiting for him to come back so he can move it back in again. I make a joke that it's old age catching up with me, which may be part of the problem. But we don't want to think about that, do we?

(23 March 2022)

**MATTHEW DAVIS**

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

You'll be pleased to know that the repetitive searching over the last few years, which provided all the Avram Davidson material, has produced an even greater amount of Fritz Leiber miscellanea: book reviews for Chicago newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s; his fanzine writing in the 1950s and 1960s; articles for *Science Digest*; *Buck Rogers* comics; a forgotten teaser for *Our Lady of Darkness* in a San Francisco underground newspaper. I have almost all of Leiber's columns for *Fantasy Newsletter* and *Locus* for the last 15 years of his life. Even round-robin newsletters he sent out in the 1970s. Almost every old sf magazine has been scanned into the Internet Archive, so stories and non-fiction that seemed impossible to acquire I now have. I even think I've found a story that was submitted to *Unknown* magazine just before it closed in World War II and Leiber thought he'd lost for decades.

Since Mark Olson has been scanning old *SF Commentaries* onto FANAC.org, do let him know there that all his work has been appreciated very much.

(17 November 2021)

**[\*brg\* I was wishin' and hopin' you might have finished the Fritz Leiber article, especially if it's as brilliant as your Theodore Sturgeon article**

from the last *Steam Engine Time*. With any luck I'll have room for the new article by the time it arrives. Take a look at my article about Avram Davidson in the latest *Portable Storage*, found on [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com).\*]

**GREG BENFORD**

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

Peter Rogan's letter in SFC 107 amused me: 'But Benford didn't have the advantage of my studies.' I talked with many WWII historians, and they largely agreed with my novel. Of course I know all he cites. No historian follows the logic of Rogan's odd tale of the peace faction in wartime Japan — because that faction was not large and was not at the meeting with the Emperor at all.

Plus, in 1945 the USA could produce atomic warheads at about two a month from our reactors (PU239), which were plenty with which to destroy Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

I lived in Japan from 1950 to 1952 during the Occupation. I speak German and Russian and know World War II history in detail, having also lived three years in occupied Germany. Also, I know the bomb production details (and I designed some tacticals myself too at Livermore).

Rogan should read *The Berlin Project* to see how the war ends in 1944. Argue with the actual book!

(14 March 2022)

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## Feature letter: The great autobiography continues

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**JOHN LITCHEN**

**3 Firestone Court, Robina, Qld 4226 (coa)**

**[\*brg\* (11 December 2021) I can't believe that you've published *Run With It* in the same year as *Grab That Moment!* It makes my own efforts seem puny, especially as emotionally you have suffered a much worse year than I ever have.\*]**

Most of *Run With It* had been done when I published *Grab that Moment*, but it would have been too much to include it in the one volume. I decided that a smaller second volume would be the way to go, and I did want to have it finished before the end of the year. At the moment I'm scanning photos from 1985 through to 1995. There are far too many of them.

Those fan photos in the book are all I have. I attended few conventions, and the ones Monica and I did attend I did not have with me a camera. I always assumed that someone else like Helena Roberts (as she was then) would be there doing that. I may have sent some of them to you at some stage in the past, but I can't be sure.

I discovered two things I missed in *Run With It*. On page 206, the second photo down on the left side is the wrong way around. It should be flipped, which I have now done in the original file. On page 101, the text under the top photo has two small mistakes. The end of the third line down should read 'reaches in', not 'reaches is', and immediately after there is an extra 'k'.

I am coming to terms with Monica not being here. The house is rather empty and the days seem

a lot longer than they did because I don't have to stop whatever I might be doing to go to see if there was something she may have needed, or sit and have a conversation with her while drinking a cup of tea. I do miss that. Even when I was perhaps in another room working on something on my computer, or outside trimming the garden bushes or cutting the grass, there was always the feeling that she was there. I would always be listening in case she called out to tell me she needed something, but now the place is silent, except when Brian is around, but half the time he's asleep anyway. It's amazing how a person's presence can fill the house, which you hardly ever notice until that person is no longer there.

(12 December 2021)

What surprised me about the articles of mine you published in *SFC* 108 is that they were written 10 years ago. Surely it couldn't be that long? Somewhere in one of them I mentioned I was 72, which made me think: when did I actually write those pieces? I checked my files and discovered the dates: the review of *A Case of Conscience* by James Blish in November 2013), and the review of *Children of the Atom* in April 2013. One or two others haven't surfaced yet. I'm not surprised, but what I find interesting is that the years have gone by so fast it's already ten years later and I turn 82 in three weeks' time.

**[\*brg\* The fault is in the Gillespie, not your files. The 'Reconsiderations' column has been accumulating and gathering strength now for some years, but has been booted out of issue after issue because of lack of space. It was only when I decided to drop both the letter column and Colin Steele's column in *SFC* 108 that I could finally catch up with some fine writing in 'Reconsiderations'. There are indeed more Litchen reviews in the continuing file, written when you first started writing your personal articles for my \*brg\* and *Treasure*.\*]**

I like that you put them under the 'Reconsiderations' heading. It does suit all the material. What I have found in the last few years is that interesting SF is very rare these days, and luckily, for me at least, I have kept a reasonable collection of books from the very beginning of my reading of SF. I can bring up something I read 40 or even 60 years ago. I know I won't remember much about that particular book other than that I have read it years ago, so re-reading it tends to bring out (sometimes) that forgotten sense of wonder I used to find in SF. At the very least I find it fascinating to see how well or not a book I once thought to be really good holds up.

A couple of years ago I re-read *Slan* and thoroughly enjoyed it. I also discovered that Kevin J. Anderson had written a sequel to it (2007). I now have a copy of it, and will read it sooner rather than later. I also re-read *Who Goes There*, a new edition with the parts missing from the original magazine publication. The films that have been done so far do not match up to the story as written, and a new version that is truer to the book should be considered.

I just recently re-read *The Body Snatchers* and found it as good today as it was back in the 1950s, and still better than most of the film versions, although the first film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, does seem nostalgic and is better than the last two made. The second film continued from the first and was not bad.

When I noticed that a new film called *Moonfall* was about to be released, I wondered if it was a filmed version of Jack McDevitt's book *Moonfall*, which has a huge comet that suddenly appears from behind the sun and crashes into and destroys the Moon, with the subsequent pieces going into orbit around the Earth or crashing into the Earth, with cataclysmic results. A spectacular book. It would definitely have made a spectacular film. Makes me wonder why no one has bought the rights to this story. Perhaps the cheapskates in Hollywood don't want to pay for good stories, so they write their own (which are usually crappy anyway) to produce.

Even though I read *Moonfall* in 1999, I had not remembered anything other than its title. Of course, the film of the same name is written by the producer/director, who is known for his spectacular epic films such as *Independence Day*, so it will have nothing to do with the scientific plausibility of McDevitt's book. I will see it when it is released on DVD and Blu-Ray, since I don't go to the cinema these days. The last time I went to the cinema was when *Avatar* was released in 3D. I enjoyed the film but not the 3D effects.

I do want to tell you that from April onwards, I will relinquish the PO Box, it being an expense I can no longer afford. Any mail posted to me will have to come to my residential address (see the beginning of this letter).

I've been scanning several thousand photo negatives covering the 1980s. Some are really damaged with mould spots and discoloration beyond repair, but some are really good. I've also been making some rather disjointed notes for the next memoir volume, to be called *Beside the Sea*. I am surprised to see how much Monica and I, with Brian tagging along, actually did. We went to



South Australia, we revisited the shipwreck coast of Victoria — the Great Ocean Road and the national parks along that coast. We also went inland to the Murray River and towns along it a couple of times. We went to Sydney three different times, once directly, and twice while coming back from Queensland, which we went to three times, in 1986, 1987, and again for Expo in 1988. Brian started learning to skin-dive, and there were a few bits and pieces I did underwater, including taking some scuba diving equipment photos that you commissioned, sort of, for a book Macmillan was publishing on modern physical education. I wrote some articles for Neville Coleman's *Underwater Geographic*.

I didn't meet with Eva Windisch until the early 1990s, so none of the articles and stories I did for her magazine *Tirra Lirra* happened until early to mid 1990s. Brian started karate in 1987 and the year after I joined his group and started training with them before switching to Aikido in Chile and continuing this on our return to Australia. I only stopped training about three years ago when I had to look after Monica full time. I did Aikido for just

over 27 years, reaching fifth Dan black belt and producing my two Aikido books as well as 34 newsletter magazines for Aiki Kai Australia.

In 1989, on 1 January at 2 a.m., my father died at 91 years of age, but his death wasn't registered until 2 January. There was his funeral, the first in our family. In 1990 we went to the USA, Mexico, and Argentina, and finished up in Chile for three months, returning home in March 1991. I guess that will have to be in a further volume. The interesting thing about that trip was that Monica kept a daily diary of what we did and what happened on that extended trip, while I tended to write up what had happened at the end of each week. So I have her version, her perspective on the trip, as well as my own for comparison. That should make an interesting volume I think. I also went to Easter Island in 1995, of which I have written about for you (in *The Metaphysical Review*) and after that we sold our premises in Williamstown and moved to the Gold Coast (November 1995). I also have thousands of images on negative as well as transparencies (slides) from that extended trip.  
(both 13 March 2022)

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## ELI COHEN

440 West End Avenue, Apt 14E,  
New York, NY 10024, USA

This is not a loc — I haven't read *SFC* yet. I was just starting to skim it (see, a totally unexpected copy of *Banana Wings* just appeared in my inbox, so I was working through that when I saw your post about *SFC* being available; this fandom thing is really getting out of hand). I immediately noticed some errors that I thought I'd bring to your attention:

The photo of Doug Barbour and me (p. 9) is from the 1979 NonCon in Edmonton, Alberta, where I was Fan Guest of Honour. It was taken by Susan Wood, by the way.

Genie DiModica (p. 11) was born in 1948, not 1952. Suzle is Suzanne Tompkins, not Kaufman (she kept her maiden name). While Jerry Kaufman is, indeed, from Cleveland, Genie (along with Suzle, Linda Bushyager, Ginjer Buchanan, Dena Benaton — who was married to Charlie Brown for some years — and various other well-known fen) was from Pittsburgh, and was one of the founding members of the Western Pennsylvania SF Association (WPSFA).

I know — from where you are, Cleveland, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania are practically next door to each other, like the famous twin cities of Minneapolis and Indianapolis

*Locus* published an obituary for Genie, written by Ginjer Buchanan (<https://locusmag.com/2021/09/genevieve-dimodica-1948-2021/>). For a history of WPSFA somebody would have to troll through the issues of *Granfalloon*, at least up to the diaspora. Of course one would also have to look for PghLange con reports, of which I had at least two in *Kratophany*. Lots of topics for a future Ph.D. in 20th Century SF Fandom...

(25 November 2021)

## HENRY GASKO

36 Hadley Drive, Wallan VIC 3756

We hope that Elaine and you are fine and enjoying the freedom of no more lockdowns. Judy has been busy setting up an Op Shop to support her Tiny Houses project. Her arthritis is quite bad these days, and she is also going to have a hip and possibly a knee replacement in the new year. I was nominated for the Wyndham Flash Fiction contest recently, but did not win. I have been working on ideas for a couple of novels — YA and horror, both set on a generation starship or a fleet of starships. I need lots of research — both for the technical aspects, and to read a number of the many previous novels using the same setting, to make sure I will be at least a little bit original.

(26 November 2021)

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## Feature letter:

### Walking tour in damp places

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**KIM HUETT**

**PO Box 735, Civic Square, ACT 2608 (coa)**

For some reason the post office decided that *SF Commentary* 107 was a parcel rather than a letter and thus laid the envelope to rest at my apartment door rather than interring it in my mail box. I can't say I object to this, as because of La Niña it has been raining quite regularly in Canberra the last couple of months, and rain is always a threat to mail sent to my apartment as my mail box doesn't do a good job of keeping anything placed in it dry, but then again mail boxes are so rarely designed to keep their contents dry. Do you not find the rain a constant threat to whatever mail you still receive at Howard Street? Anyway, it's due to the rain and a desire for improved security that I decided to rent another post office box. You might like to update your address list [as above]:

On the topic of dampness, what impressed most in *SF Commentary* 107 was Garrett P. Serviss and his description of the walking holiday in Lapland he took with Fitz-James O'Brien. Admittedly I thought them an unlikely pair for such a venture, but they do seem to have complemented each other quite well. Perhaps it was for the best that H. G. Wells wasn't able to accompany them after all.

No doubt part of my appreciation for this piece, and I do hope, Bruce, that you intend to publish more by Garrett P. Serviss, is the fact that I have also walked as much as possible whenever I have been overseas. It's simply the single best way to gain some understanding of how different parts of the world are put together.

For example, when I visited Britain in February of 1997 (this is where the dampness comes in as nearly the whole time I was there a fine mist of rain drifted down) I discovered walking around London to see the sights was a plan which failed because London is so huge, and the places of interest, regardless of what you define as places of interest, are so spread out that walking alone will leave the visitor floundering in a great Sargasso of history. However that doesn't mean a directionless ramble through the streets of London, or most cities for that matter, will be of no value. I rambled several times while visiting London, and found the experience most worthwhile because it gave me a

better feel for why I found the city so different.

Something that impressed me quite strongly about London was the absence of gaps. I'm used to the occasional tightly packed, shoulder-to-shoulder cityscapes in Australia, being confined to the office blocks of the CBD and to those older suburbs where terrace houses still rule. But in London everywhere I looked there was nothing but solid walls of masonry. Of course I understood intellectually that London couldn't afford to spread out in the manner of Australian cities, but it's another thing to go overseas and experience the reality of the difference. Especially as somebody who has lived so long in Canberra where open space has frequently been used as a point of emphasis. It wasn't until I visited London that I began to understand how Isaac Asimov could envisage a world-covering city like Trantor. An hour or two of wandering the streets of London can easily lull the unwary into believing that London is the world and the world is nothing but brick and concrete.

Less expected, but even more arresting, was the volume of people. Yes, I should have expected that there would be a difference given the vast difference in city size between Canberra and London. On the other hand, it's not the sort of thing I think about in anticipation of travelling. But then in the space of a week I experienced the foot traffic of Canberra, then Sydney, and finally London, and the differences were astonishing. After long years of walking the thinly populated streets of Canberra I had grown to view Sydney as something of an ants' nest on my occasional visits there. That was until I entered the London Underground during rush hour and for the first time saw true rivers of humanity. I hid behind a pillar until the worst of it, at least temporarily, had passed.

These experiences were to some extent surreal but not nearly as overwhelming as you might assume. This was because, while some of my experiences were unexpected, none of them felt alien in the manner Garrett P. Serviss describes his stay in Lapland:

We spent nearly the whole day crawling across this backside of the Moon. This was a land of formless valleys lined with broken slabs of rock that made purely upright travel beyond

impossible. Time and again we traversed great slabs chopped and sliced with a criss-cross of crevices that extended deep into the stone. I remarked to Fitz that if Herbert had been with us he would feel a great urge add such details as this to his Moon book. Fitz laughed and claimed Wells had no need to write of other worlds when wild places like this existed within reach. We then lapsed back into a determined silence.

On the other hand my impression of Britain was of a land more surreal than alien. My expectations were heavily influenced by a lifetime of books, TV, and movies set in a mythical Britain so unlike the landscape in which I had grown up. I had embedded within me material as diverse as *Eagle of the Ninth*, *Wind In the Willows*, *Oliver Twist*, *Oh! To Be In England*, *Arthur of the Britons*, *Catweazle*, *The Flaxton Boys*, and a whole host of other influences, which included pop songs like 'Penny Lane', 'Waterloo Sunset', and 'Lazy Sunday Afternoon'. Consequently I tended to see the real Britain through a lens of the fictional, which ensured it felt like a familiar fantasy rather than an alien country. It did get a little weird at times, for example, when walking down one particular London street set of a memory of the visuals from *Yellow Submarine* when 'Eleanor Rigby' plays.

Before I move on I'll remind you once more of the discussion I had with Yvonne Rousseau in regards to the 'Milly Molly Mandy' books, as it's entertaining and to some degree relevant. To start with, I was familiar with this series because an older sister of mine had been given the whole set as a child. They remained as part of my mother's library when my sister left home, and in due course I read them, because I eventually read everything in the house.

Looking back, I suppose I was sort of aware of the fact that all the main characters in these books were blandly nice people. This fact didn't make much of an impression on me at the time because I've never been much of a people person. So long as I don't find a character actively annoying I don't pay much attention to what sort of people are portrayed in the books I read. Combine this with the fact that most of the authors writing for children I encountered while growing up didn't attempt much characterisation. I suppose, looking back, Milly Molly Mandy, little friend Susan, and all the rest were rather more twee than the Bobbsey Twins or the Secret Seven, but other than that none of them particularly stood out for me. Except, that is, for Bert Bobbsey, who had pugilistic tendencies I always thought rather absurd. Consequently I tended to see such characters as

merely a means to an end. To my mind they were there to resolve the situation which had been set up, which is what interested me, not well realised people.

It was this lack of individuality that set my discussion with Yvonne off, because it was you, Bruce, who accidentally attributed the Milly Molly Mandy books to Enid Blyton. As I wrote back then and will repeat now, I suspect you remember all the British children's fiction you read back then as being by Enid Blyton because most of it was. Oh my goodness, but wasn't Enid Blyton astonishingly prolific? Of course I then made haste to correct you by mentioning that it was in fact Joyce Lankester Brisley who penned the 'Milly Molly Mandy' books. And can you blame her, pinned as she was under the weight of a name like that? Such a moniker belongs to a Bertie Wooster flame, the daughter of a crusty colonel. She would be as wet as a seal's underpants and write endless reams of awfully flaccid poetry for Aunt Dahlia's weekly magazine, *Milady's Boudoir*. She would also insist on reading what she considers her most moving works out aloud to Bertie, the prospect of which will move Bertie, but not in the way Joyce expects. So yes, Joyce Lankester Brisley had little choice but to write, given the name bestowed upon her.

Now as it happens Yvonne had also written to correct you and give her less than complimentary opinion of the 'Milly Molly Mandy' books. While responding to this in print, you mentioned to her that I was the guilty party who had kicked everything off in the first place by writing about the series in a positive manner. Naturally I felt I should explain myself, so I wrote to Yvonne and we compared our experiences.

Looking back on this discussion, I think I can see how we came to view these books so differently. I would argue that Yvonne saw the world of Milly Molly Mandy as a fictionalised version of reality and her childhood self resented how cleaned up and Sunday best everything was, when she knew from the world around her that this was a lie. I, on the other hand, never connected Milly Molly Mandy with reality, because for me England was a fantasy that had no connection with reality. My experience of England was a book of tales about King Arthur and his knights, a book of tales about Robin Hood and his merry men, Winnie the Pooh and the Hundred Acres Wood, and so forth. To me England was a park where all the trees were tall and spreading, the grass never grew too high or turned brown, and such inconveniences as venomous snakes and spiders were quite inconceivable (and, unlike in some films, inconceivable means exactly what I think it does). This rural



fantasy landscape rather appealed to me because it was so different to the world I ventured into every day. Robin Hood could camp in the forest without worrying about a snake crawling into his bedding (yes, I know Britain is home to a species of snake; I'm not impressed), King Arthur could ride out on his steed without ever being swooped by an aggressive magpie, and Milly Molly Mandy never had to worry about being stung by bull ants (non-Australians are invited to conduct an Internet search for bull ants and be glad their younger selves never encountered them).

So as you can see I arrived in Britain with some pretty massive preconceptions in place. Neither did I come up so hard against reality that these preconceptions were seriously challenged. Even after three weeks of travelling around the island the Britain I encountered continued to feel a bit like a theme park.

Take, for example, the time I walked around Hay-On-Wye and Shrewsbury on the same day. This happened because when I visited Britain I had made no firm plans beyond attending Attitude: the Convention in Great Malvern. I had quite rightly assumed that while attending the convention some of the people I met would invite me to visit them. Since Britain has far more to see than can be crammed into three weeks I decided to travel based upon who was willing to put me up for a night or two. Between visits I visited adjacent places of interest by using a Britrail pass. Back in 1997 a Britrail pass allowed me unlimited rail travel all over the island. Ah, Britrail passes, those were the days, eh Joxer?

It all began the Thursday morning after I had left Greg Pickersgill and the Memory Hole fanzine collection in Haverfordwest and began to travel back east. I did so with the vague plan of visiting Hay-On-Wye, the famed town of bookshops, even though I had no intention of buying any books. I didn't want the extra weight, as I'd be in the UK for another week and a bit followed by three weeks in the USA. Any purchases were going to be a burden for weeks to come or would have to be mailed home at great expense. Since I'd already spent a fair bit on postage for a great stack of duplicate fanzines courtesy of Greg, I wasn't eager to repeat the process. Besides, I'd promised to meet Pam Wells in Leeds Friday in order to hang out with the Leeds fans, so I didn't have unlimited time to spare. Still, even if I didn't plan to raid Hay-On-Wye's bookshops, I thought I'd like to at least have a quick look at what the town had to offer.

First though I had to stop in Cardiff to see about replenishing my funds and having lunch. It was

there I discovered a chain restaurant where it was possible to order a hamburger with a side order of baked beans. How common this sort of thing is I have no idea. I'd been told by several folk that the Welsh love their baked beans to the point that it's possible to order them with near anything but that might be an exaggeration. Mind you, I did encounter a lot of baked beans in Wales, so who knows?

The trip from Haverfordwest to Cardiff to Hereford took longer than expected so I didn't leave Hereford railway station and drag my bags over to the bus station till nearly four in the afternoon. Never having learnt to drive meant I couldn't hire a car, so if I was going to reach Hay-On-Wye it would be by local bus. Which I didn't mind except I was a bit worried about there being one that late in the day. A needless concern the bloke at the ticket office assured me. I would have felt more reassured if the bus I was suppose to be catching had been correctly labelled but I suppose circling the depot and asking several drivers if they were my ride was a little adventure thrown in for free.

What I didn't know was this bus firm specialised in free adventures. Once I was sitting on the correct bus we too off for a short tour of Hereford chiefly notable for passing a takeaway named Friar Tuck's. To judge by the deep fried goodness promised on the sign outside regular patrons would soon look like the good friar himself. Once out of town the bus drive took it up a notch as he began to zip along a series of narrow lanes. We visited a series of villages and circled through each until I was thoroughly disorientated. With the preliminaries over, the bus then took on the undulating border country that guarded my destination. The roads were no narrower, but now they twisted and turned far more and met each other at sharp angles, all the while obscured by tall hedges. Our driver apparently knew the area well because he didn't feel the need to slow down at all. He took corners, junctions, and bridges with enthusiasm, the effect of which up the back of the bus was not unlike riding a roller coaster. I leaned over to ask the old bloke in a nearby seat, 'Does the driver always go so fast?'

He just smiled, 'Nothing to worry about. Too early in the year for tractors.' Oh. Well that's all right then. I sat back and relaxed like I had a choice about all this. Which was probably the right attitude to take as the bus arrived in Hay-On-Wye without encountering even one tractor. Despite the rather alarming nature of the ride I was glad to have taken it because for the first time I felt deeply embedded in the countryside. As useful as I found travelling by train the view from the lines, or at least the lines I rode on were a bit limited. In

visiting Hay-On-Wye I was able to encounter unadulterated British countryside at last.

Hay-On-Wye itself was the smallest community I visited in Britain and the closest to what I've always imagined a proper British village should be like. The bus dropped me off near the top end of the village, and from there I cut across to the other side in search of the Old Black Lion Inn. I was in a hurry because the Old Black Lion had been recommended to me as the best place to stay in town, but with the rider that because of a very limited number of rooms I might be disappointed. If the Lion was full I wanted to know right away so I could find some other place to sleep. The Lion was indeed full, but this didn't turn out to be a problem, because the bartender was able to direct me to a nearby B&B. My only disappointment in staying there was a shower that didn't work properly. But since I only ever encountered one satisfactory shower in the three weeks I was in Britain I accepted this as part of the experience.

Having sorted out accommodation I strolled around the streets of Hay-On-Wye for an hour or so. My overwhelming impression of the village was that it was like a grey stone island rising up out of an ocean of newly green fields. The roads were bound on either side by narrow footpaths and lined all along with rows of houses and shops set shoulder to shoulder with every front door, even those of private homes, opening directly onto the footpaths. Everywhere in Britain that I visited the towns and cities had a walled-in look. It was a rare street that didn't feel like a miniature canyon. The effect had been overwhelming in London, but even here it was hard to ignore because of the contrast with the farmland that bordered the village. The demarcation between houses and fields was razor sharp, utterly unlike the tendency of Australian towns to gradually peter out. Well, there were farm buildings outside the village, but at such a distance they couldn't be considered as anything to do with Hay-On-Wye. In the spirit of discovery I looked over a number of back fences to discover narrow gardens. Even here though much of the ground was covered in stone or concrete, as if the locals were worried that if their village wasn't sealed up tight it would spring a leak and sink into the earth. Near as I can recall, only the area around the castle was grassed.

It was a striking contrast to the small country town where I grew up, where everything is spread out and every house sits in its own pool of greenery and grassed verges line every street.

Once it was dark I returned to the Old Black Lion for dinner. I suppose February was a bit early in the season for an influx of tourists, because I

ate in solitary splendour. Well perhaps splendour is not quite the word I want, because the front bar of the Old Black Lion has ceilings so low that Hobbits would feel right at home. They would no doubt also have appreciated all the array of knick-knacks cluttering the shelves along the walls and the assorted items dangling from the ceiling (exactly what these were I no longer recall, but I do remember having to dodge here and there). However, even Hobbits might suggest to management that movement might be a little easier if a couple of the tables were removed. Nonetheless it was very cosy, the perfect spot for a few drinks on a long winter eve. Where the Lion's own guests were I have no idea. Probably dining in some less cluttered restaurant I imagine. I was happy with the front bar, though, as it was as close to a proper fantasy tavern as I had ever encountered.

I was up early the following morning and so went out for a pre-breakfast stroll. This time I headed out of town and over the bridge that crosses the Wye. From there I went up and down several country lanes in order to see British countryside up close and personal. I saw nothing notably different, but then I guess fields are pretty much fields wherever you go. The only item of interest to me, therefore, were the hedges. Proper rural hedges are not something I've ever encountered in Australia, so I was keen to get on hands and knees and examine a genuine hedgerow very closely indeed.

Unfortunately the hedges around Hay-On-Wye were not as thick and bristling with plant life as I had always imagined. To be fair, my imagination has long been inflamed by descriptions of the bocage in Normandy, so my expectations were definitely too high. Plus, it was early spring so no doubt many of the plants that flourish in the hedgerows were in a less than noticeable state. It's probably also true that in these days of mechanical hedge trimmers the bushes that form the core of these hedgerows are more severely pruned than they once were. Still, despite looking a touch on the threadbare side, the trunks and branches that did exist looked suitably thick, gnarled, and not at all easy to push through. I didn't test this out, however, just in case somebody came along and disapproved. While the scene was not as impressive as expected, I could still see why walking down a narrow lane lined with such vegetation could inspire John Benyon Harris to create Triffids.

I returned to Hay-On-Wye, and one of those wonderful fried breakfasts I had everywhere in Britain. Once breakfast was done it was late enough to browse a number of the bookshops and buy a couple of books (though at this late date I don't recall what I bought). Much as I was enjoying



**Shrewsbury Castle.**

the novelty of slipping in and out of multiple secondhand bookshops, time was slipping away, and I wanted to stop off at Shrewsbury for lunch. So rather than wait for the bus I collected my bags and took a taxi back into Hereford. The extra expense was worth it for the time saved on waiting for the bus. The absence of any further roller coaster rides was just a bonus.

Shrewsbury was worth the effort because of my having read quite a few of the Brother Cadfael books. Whenever one or more novels are set in a specific real-world location it's always a bonus to walk over the territory described in order to experience it in physical terms. Mind you, this did mean I had to carry my luggage every step of the way from the railway station to the remains of the monastery and back. What I hadn't planned for in Britain was the absence of any public places to store luggage. If you didn't have a car or hotel room to leave your bags in, there was no choice but take them with you. This was apparently a measure to ensure the IRA couldn't plant bombs in luggage lockers etc. The absence of public rubbish bins was based upon the same logic. My bags weren't



**Brick wall of a bank in Shrewsbury carrying plaques commemorating various local executions.**

that heavy, but I can't say I enjoyed lugging them all around Shrewsbury. Still, I suppose most of Shrewsbury's medieval inhabitants were lugging around just as much over similar distances, so I guess it could be described as being all part of the experience.

These are the things we must endure in order to broaden our minds, I suppose.

My first enduring memory of Shrewsbury was of the castle. It was immediately to my left as I exited the station. What took me aback was that the stone it was built from was clearly orange in hue. Thus the castle loomed over the town like a forbidding carrot. It's really my own fault for being caught out like this. It takes the least amount of common sense to grasp that something like a castle is of course going to be built from local stone, even if that local stone doesn't come in a nice macho colour like dark grey. Instead, I carelessly assumed all castles would be dark grey in colour because of that previously mentioned lens of the fictional.



**Tudor architecture, Shrewsbury.**



**Chapel, Shrewsbury Abbey.**



Actually, once I was able to see past the colour I thought Shrewsbury castle a very nice example of the art of defence. It's not an especially large castle, but standing as it does upon a steep hill, which in turn is largely surrounded by the River Severn, I don't suppose it needed to be. It certainly thwarted all my attempts to enter it, every entrance I could find being thoroughly locked up. I contented myself with taking a few photos and walked on. From the castle I cut straight through the oldest part of the town towards the bridge over the Severn.

As luck would have it, the route I chose took me past the brick wall of a bank upon which a plaque commemorated various local executions. This included those of the Earl of Worcester, Sir Richard Venables, and Sir Richard Vernon, all of which had been mentioned in one of the earlier Brother Cadfael novels. Despite the unpleasant nature of the events being commemorated, I felt a definite thrill of connection. Within sight of where I stood, possibly almost within touch of events occurred that are remembered to this day. If you have any interest in history, it's hard not to feel a little shiver run down your spine in such circumstances.

Something that particularly struck me about Shrewsbury was the discordant nature of the architecture. An unusual observation, you might think, given I was in a country where any given street can yield buildings from a variety of different periods. Nonetheless, this struck me more forcibly in Shrewsbury than any other place I visited. Possibly this was because the distinctive Tudor buildings, of which there are many, contrast so very strongly with both earlier and later buildings built in brick and stone. Certain streets looked more like displays in an architectural museum than part of an everyday town.

My next surprise was the discovery that the

remains of the abbey were some distance away on the far side of the River Severn. I had assumed the abbey would be on the same side of the river as the town. I certainly don't recall Ellis Peters mentioning Brother Cadfael having to cross a bridge, but perhaps that's careless reading on my part? Still, it wasn't an unreasonable distance to hike, especially from a medieval perspective.

The chapel, which still stands intact, impressed me with its size. It towers over the flat ground that surrounds it even more impressively than the castle. Given the chapel is a bit less than a quarter of the original building (or so dubious memory suggests), the abbey must have totally dominated the surrounding landscape. It's easy to see how a place such as this could exert so much influence locally. Having admired the remains from every angle possible, I retraced my steps and struggled back up the hill with my bags. I'm glad I stopped off for a look, but I was equally happy to spend the next few hours sitting on a train. As enjoyable as being a tourist is, it's bloody hard on the legs.

Accompanying this letter are four photos I took while visiting Shrewsbury. You'll find they match up with my description of the town. Unfortunately the camera I used on this trip was one I had been given as a teenager, and it wasn't sophisticated enough to compensate for my lack of skill as a photographer. Consequently a great many of the photos I took turned out to be too poor to keep, so I have nothing from Hay-On-Wye to share with you. Well half a loaf is better than none.

(7 December 2021)

**[\*brg\* Thanks for this very enjoyable ramble, Kim. To forestall inevitable letters of comment, nowhere can I find in any recent issues of *SF Commentary* any reference to Garrett P. Serviss. But he sounds like someone I should like to publish.\*]**

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## Feature letter: Books that influenced me

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**WILLIAM BREIDING**  
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I meant to congratulate you when *SFC* 107 popped up at efanzines.com, but I have been steadily exhausted, and now I am ill from a proper flu for some days now. I checked to see if I'd been blessed with the Covid, but I have a garden-variety flu, not

our mighty pandemic-causing, world-gobbling influenza.

(27 November 2021)

I just wanted to let you know that I've been tremendously enjoying *SFC* 108. I've gotten waylaid by the Bryce/Thomas 'Books that Shaped or Influenced' lists. I don't quite understand what Jennifer and Tony mean when they say an

astounding 75 or 100 books influenced or shaped them, so I started making a list of books that actually did shape, influence, or reinforce my life views. This could easily manifest as an essay. Right now I'm stuck in my thinking on it, because I ran across a long-time period (mid 70s to mid 80s) where there seems to be no books at all that shaped or influenced my outlook, and it requires further digging into my reading life during that time to see if that is actually true. If this thing gets written, honesty would require that I get very personal in explanation of why these books or authors shaped or influenced me. But that seems daunting, so I don't know exactly how this will end up. At any rate, know that *SFC* continues to stimulate.

I did a search on Denny Marshall. He is a very widely published artist in the larger zine scene, with an undeniable graphic sense and technique. It's been a long time since sf fanzines mixed with the general zine scene.

I'm sure I must have read Ron Drummond's piece on Delany and Russ before, considering its publication genesis, but had no memory of it. He captured well that neo-fannish headlong rush of wanting to meet your favorite authors, and breaking social barriers to do so. I had similar compulsions, but was far too shy to allow them to manifest. I would have loved to do lunch with Clifford Simak in Minnetonka, Minnesota in 1977! So it was with real pleasure that I read Ron Drummond's piece of innocent enthusiasms and influences that led to his barging into these authors' lives. He's done a terrific job of capturing the insistent heartbeat that propels our loves in both literature and life.

I was intrigued by James Doig's reassessment of Frank Walford's *Twisted Clay*. When I was 15, and again at age 30, this kind of pulpish sleaze with a resonance towards literature captured my imagination. At 15 I was exploring for the first time the darker nature of the human psyche, reasons and variations of the sexual impulse, and the causes of mental illness and the broken soul. At 30 I would have read Walford's book as a re-affirmation of the causes of that darkness. I was curious enough to do a search and found that *Twisted Clay* had been reprinted in 2014 by Salt Press, a smallish literary publishing company in England. At some point ordering it seems inevitable.

I had no memory of sending you the 'Anti-Libertarian Review', and bust out laughing when I saw it in print. That was written when APA-50 was celebrating an anniversary (maybe thirtieth year?) and had invited former members (that

would be me) to contribute to the anniversary mailing. At the time APA-50 had three prominent Libertarians in their midst and I couldn't help but make some mischief, since my opposition to Libertarianism has only grown with each passing year. It was fun to revisit my harangue about Julia Elliot's *The New and Improved Romie Futch*. I hadn't reread it in years. Thanks for publishing these!

Of course, the big, wonderful elephant in the room is the fiction — by Michael Bishop, no less! I enjoyed both pieces tremendously, but the darker 'Yahweh's Hour', with its densely drawn dystopian background and its strong moral compass, is an impressive achievement in such a brief story.

Michael's 104 cool books was a treat, and I have read so few on his list! Something to look forward to in retirement, eh? Thank you, Michael!

To end where we started, and since you seem to like lists, below is a tentative start to a list of books/authors/genres that in some way influenced or informed the direction of my life. In chronological order.

- 1 Thornton W. Burgess' wildlife stories for kids
- 2 Andrew Lang's colored Fairy Books
- 3 The Wizard of Oz (Baum)
- 4 Paddington the Bear (Bond)
- 5 Denys Watkins-Pitchford's (writing as "BB") The Little Grey Men
- 6 Charles Beaumont
- 7 Guy Endore's The Werewolf of Paris
- 8 Carson McCullers
- 9 The Teachings of Don Juan (Castaneda)
- 10 The Pearl (a collection of Victorian Erotica)
- 11 Clifford D. Simak
- 12 Hermann Hesse
- 13 Samuel Delany
- 14 Edward Abbey
- 15 Raymond Chandler
- 16 Western genre (both pulp and literary)
- 17 Horror genre in the 1980s
- 18 William Least Heat Moon
- 19 Brian Aldiss
- 20 Ivan Doig
- 21 Steven Millhauser
- 22 Orson Scott Card (strange but true)

That last brings us up to the 1990s, after which I was unable to see anything that had really influenced me; after this point I may have become too jaded to be heavily influenced by a book or an author's insights, or a literary movement. There is

a gap from about 1978 to 1983 that needs more investigation and thought as to where/what I was doing and reading. Very little reading and a whole lot of living, I suspect. And of course — in tandem to the reading there was incredible influence being waged by films, still photography, and music.

(10 July 2022)

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## Feature letter: Recently received and read

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**STEVE JEFFERY**

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Fandom seems to have fallen into the background a bit, and I admit I am starting to get out of touch outside a limited and self-imposed five to ten minutes on Facebook in the mornings. I have to do that and then close it down, because otherwise the urge to keep scrolling and hitting refresh is too tempting and then I've wasted half the day.

Work is at that strange in-between stage where one major project is largely finished — bar formal testing — and ready for rollout, and the next is still in the design and exploratory phase. For which I have been trying to teach myself a bit of Python, since that seems to be the main language we've chosen for it. Pretty much all computer languages have the same structure and set of key words, but what trips me up is the precise grammar and dialect for each one. What we need is a Google Translate for computer languages (is there one already?; it's never occurred to me till now to check). Then I can write what I want to do in a language that I already know and get Google to tell me how to write it in Python (or Perl, or Ruby, or any of the thousand different languages there are). Hold that thought, Steve.

When you have been working from home for over two years now, the boundaries start to blur and you lose the distinction (much to Vikki's irritation) between being 'at work' and 'at home' when you no longer switch off the computer in the office and get the bus home.

So I've been dropping in and out most days this week, largely to catch up on the non-project side of work, a fair amount of which was my side function on the Pride UK Network committee at work, including a presentation on Allyship and a couple of meetings and a virtual networking and a Friday coffee morning get together.

I've let reading slip for too long, and am trying to make an effort to catch up on. I've been partly working through a list of books from last Christmas and my birthday (several of which were inspired by *SFC* reviews, although I've still yet to read either the new Richard Powers novel or *The Overstory*) and the interesting finds that turn up in the local library. Those have included Erin Morgenstern's *The Starless Sea*, which I thought was rather wonderful, Adam Roberts' *Purgatory Mount*, which I liked, but was too dim to appreciate how the different sections related to a whole that Roberts claims was a reflection of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (although, like its predecessor, didn't turn out to be a barrel of laughs, although it did have a great 'gotcha' twist that Gene Wolfe might have been proud of), and Octavia Butler's *Imago* (though I don't think I've read the previous books in her 'Lilith's Brood' sequence.)

Then from the present pile, Alastair Reynolds' *Inhibitor Phase*, returning to the 'Revelation Space' series that got me started and hooked ('Forbidden Planet, 2001', says the inscription in the first volume) after a long hiatus. And currently Arkady Martine's weird but fascinating *A Memory Called Empire*.

While not reading myself, I've been shopping for and wrapping books for Vikki's birthday in a couple of weeks. New books — hopefully — by some of her favourite authors, including Feist, Guy Kay, John Gwynne, Mark Lawrence, Matthew Ward, Steve Erikson, and Kate Elliot (although Elliot's *Servant Mage* turns out to be a novella rather than the usual 500+ page novel). And since no one was looking I snuck in the new Ben Aaronovitch novel and CHVRCHES' latest CD as a reward for me, since I was spending award bonuses from work that I could redeem as Amazon vouchers.

I say 'hopefully', because I admit I am losing track of the number of authors and series that Vikki is currently reading, and several of those



didn't have a new book out for her birthday. This is poor form. What were they thinking? She is doing her bit to keep the epic fantasy market in rude health, and they can't even write a new 600-page blockbuster in time. Partly this is my fault for finding new series she might be interested in, but partly because Amazon is actually pretty badly designed for searching for new books by authors, and seems to insist on showing you Kindle releases by default. Which is why I often go elsewhere (such as Colin Steele's reviews in *SFC*) to discover what might be new and interesting or worth talking a punt on, and then matching that with a list of what she's currently reading. (I have tried to persuade Vikki to update her wish list on Amazon, as she always insists I do, but it never works, and I usually end up having to keep a spreadsheet of where all her favourite authors have got to with different series.) But it's a gratifying haul, I think, especially added to the several transport books (her other hobby) she has helpfully flagged up for interest.

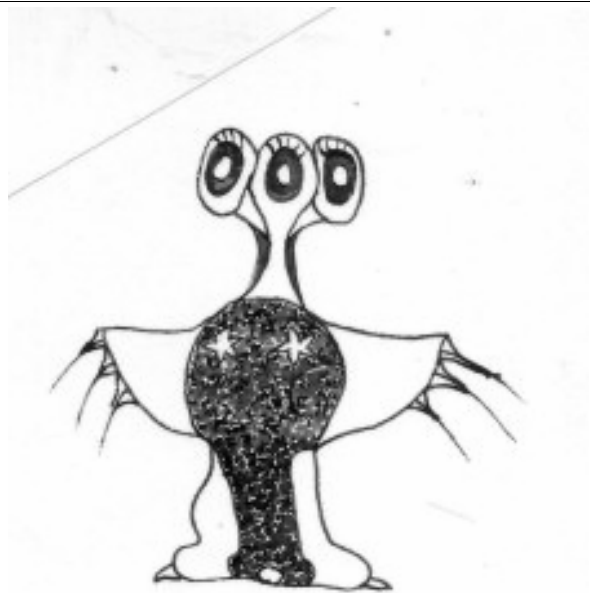
So that's us. What's left is either cooking (we have rediscovered the pleasure in having time to try new things now I don't have to commute in the evenings), the constant rotating jigsaw (now somewhere in the high 300s) on the dining table or various detective thrillers (Scandi for preference, but otherwise anything as long as it's not written by Jed Mercurio.) (Honestly, I cannot see the fuss over this man. You can build a garden shed out of most of the characterisation and dialogue in *Line of Duty*.)

Oh, and I am officially old. I got a free bus pass, and work keeps trying to remind me about my retirement options. Which I suppose I ought to do something about.

(25 June 2022)

We, of course, inevitably succumbed to Covid, probably the Omicron variant, after being ultra careful for over two years, although in both our cases it proved difficult to distinguish from what seemed a sudden summer cold until the red line hitting the T proved otherwise, and I suspect, if that hasn't acted as a second booster, that we probably will again, since I've been less paranoid about wearing a mask when out when 95 per cent of people have stopped using theirs, either in shops or on public transport. We shall see when Vikki gets back tonight, since her travel companion seems to have come down with something on their trip, although Vikki sounds chipper enough on the phone.

Prophecy [apa] went electronic a while back,



mainly for postage reasons (it now cost more to send a birthday card than to buy one in the first place), and while some people have taken this as a trigger not to worry about trying to fit an even number of pages, overall I don't think it's hugely bloated the overall mailing page count, which seems to run at around 40 pages.

Thanks for the pointers to the two review sites, which I'd add to Locus Online, *SFC*/\*brg\*, Prophecy, and various FB posts that point to interesting new books.

I did flag up the Hugo short fiction reading list a while ago and started working through the stories there and also others that the person who posted this on FB recommended as of interest, and found some good stuff. I was particularly taken with a time-loop story titled 'The Machine is Experiencing Uncertainty' by Merc Fenn Wolfmoor, but I need to go back and catch up on the rest of the list and another (from *tor.com*) of the Sturgeon Memorial Award finalists.

I was sidetracked into picking up a couple of Gardner Dozois' older *Best Annual SF* anthologies and working through various stories in those. From those, I was most impressed by Nancy Kress's 'Feigenbaum Number' as a classic example of what sf does best and no other genre does quite in the same way, by taking two unrelated ideas and smashing them into each other to see what new idea comes out. It's fairly old, but I can't remember having read it before, but it definitely remained in memory this time, possibly because it gave me another 'what if?' thought that I ended up discussing with a couple of other people.

(26 June 2022)

**FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER**  
**Marchettigasse 9/17, A-1060 Wien, Austria**

The Covid figures are high in Austria, and we are now in another lockdown. It doesn't affect me much since I am working at home, and I and my wife have already been vaccinated three times. But numbers of infected persons are rising steadily, and there have been many deaths. Because of my age, overweight, and diabetes, I belong to the class of persons who are especially vulnerable. But I am not afraid, and anyway I have already reached the average age of an Austrian male and may not live much longer, with or without Covid-19. Still, the last two years, with their various lockdowns and other restrictions, have been rather troublesome. But I have greater health problems: a severe arthritis in both hips and knees. I had an artificial hip implanted at end of September, and while the operation itself was no great thing, my knees still hurt, waking me up every night after a few hours of sleep. I suppose I'll also need an operation of the other hip in January, and this will settle the problem.

I have done very little this past year, not even read many books, but I have compiled another large issue of *Quarber Merkur*, some 300 pages. But since the actual production is in other hands, No. 122 will be available only next January, I suppose.

I have continued working to make the brothers Strugatsky known in the world. 2021 was the best year ever for them, in many countries, and *Roadside Picnic* in English is a phenomenon; it has become a steady seller in both USA and UK, as a trade paperback, in e-book form, and as an audio book. Soon there will also be hardcover editions from The Folio Society, illustrated by Dave McKean. Many books fall dead upon publication, but *Roadside Picnic* finds more new readers every year. This is a marked difference to the Lem books, which had zero sales soon after their appearance.

Always I wonder at the many letters you receive, something that is quite unusual here. I have no idea what my readers think, aside from the occasional letter from someone who has just discovered *QM* and is enthusiastic about it. I myself am not very communicative. The letters you receive are very interesting even if I do not know the letter writers.

(28 November 2021)

**TIM TRAIN**  
**8 Ballarat Street, Lalor VIC 3075**

Hi Bruce, I must thank you! Two new issues, one

copy of *SF Commentary* and *\*brg\** apiece, arrived in the mail yesterday! They were not entirely unscathed by the weather (I'm not sure if you got the storm in Greensborough; we certainly did in Lalor, though the Bureau of Meteorology didn't appear to have predicted it!) Still, the zines received only a little dampness around the edges, no fundamental damage. Last time we had spoken you were having problems finding a printer, so does this mean you have found a printer for the collected Gillespie publishing house now? In spite of my own best efforts to find a better printer, I keep on defaulting to the local OfficeWorks (sometimes best described as 'cheap and cheerful', other times as 'cheap and nasty'). I do have a new small zine project in the works, I will keep on trying to get it all ready before Christmas.

(3 December 2021)

**[\*brg\* My new printer has a shop only a few hundred metres from our place in Greensborough. I can recommend David Rawson, at Minuteman Press, 87 Main Street, Greensborough VIC 3088; phone 0420 754 026.**

**BEN PEEK**  
**Somewhere in WA**

Re *SFC* 104: I read Elizabeth Hand's *Curious Toys* as well, and thought it disappointing. Nothing seems to really come together, though I wished it would have. I like Darger — I find him an interesting figure — but Hand doesn't really do anything interesting with him, and the symbolic nature of the gay girl who dresses like a boy and the serial killer who performs as a half-man half-woman who kills little girls is problematic.

(5 December 2012)

Re a discussion on Facebook about our favourite short stories: My favourites have probably been split between Anna Seghers' and Julio Cortazar's. Seghers' 'Dead Girls Class Trip' is really amazing, and you can find a number of Cortazar pieces in *Blow Up and Other Stories*, such as 'Axolotl and Bestiary', which I really enjoyed. I read a second collection, *We Love Glenda So Much*. It was good, but not as strong — though the title story is great.

Ha Seong-nan's second translated collection, *Bluebeard's Wife*, isn't as great as *Flowers of Mold*, but 'Star-Shaped Stain' is great.

Danilo Kis' *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* is pretty great, as is *The Book of Kings and Fools*.

Mariana Enriquez's whole collection *The Dangers of Smoking* reads really well together — but 'Kids Who Come Back' is the standout.

I liked the Peter Carey I've read, but some of them were rereads. Still, 'Last Days of a Famous Mine' and 'The Fat Man in History' are great.

John Langan's 'Mother of Stone' (more a novella, I admit) is excellent, as is 'Technicolor'.

I really enjoyed Clarice Lispector's pieces, and I read Joyce's *Dubliners*, which I hadn't read before, and quite liked.

(4 December 2021)

**[\*brg\* I've owned the Cortazar collection for umpteen years yet still have never read it. Thanks for the tip. :: Peter Carey's collections are great, but other authors on your list are just names to me (e.g. Kis). :: *Dubliners* includes my favourite novella, 'The Dead', which was made into a successful film by John Huston (his last, not long before his own death).**

**My other favourite novella is Henry James' 'The Turn of the Screw'. Have you read Gerald Murnane's early short stories (esp. those in *Velvet Waters* and the novellas in 'Landscape with Landscape')?**

**Two of my favourite collections are those by Italo Calvino: *Cosmicomics* and *T Zero/Time and the Hunter*. Also Le Guin's first two collections, quite a few Aldiss collections, esp. *The Saliva Tree and Other Strange Growths*, and the five volumes of Philip Dick's short stories.\*]**

The Cortazar collection is great. Fully recommended. It's kind of funny to then watch the film *Blow Up*, based on the short story. I've not read any of Cortazar's novels (I have *Hopscotch*), but he's a really excellent short fiction writer. In 'Blow Up' he adopts a form that is circular, where a story ends up where it starts. He does it a handful of times to very fine skill. You can't help but admire how effortless he makes it look.

As for the other names, they're all pretty good. Anna Seghers' collection *The Dead Girls Class Trip* I recommend entirely. The stories in it are collected from over her life, so the first couple are a bit rough, but when she hits her stride, they're amazing.

Danilo Kis is pretty interesting, though sometimes a bit dry, I think (at least I found a couple of a bit dry — I'm keen on his novels though, and he was reportedly involved in a plagiarism scandal because of a cut-up novel that I find fascinating).

If you were curious to try Ha Seong-nan, I'd try her collection *Flowers of Mold*, as I liked that more than the most recent collection. *The Enriquez* is great.

Clarice Lispector is back in vogue at the moment, so there are a lot of new editions and translations, which I am thankful for. She's a

fascinating author.

Langan wrote a cosmic horror novel called *The Fisherman* that is really, really excellent. I love cosmic horror, but I often find it badly written and full of shit basically. Langan's writing is nice and literary and well done. The two pieces I mention above are from *Wide and Carnivorous Sky*.

I've read *Turn of the Screw* and a couple of the Murnane pieces. I actually have a copy of *Landscape in Landscape* and the *Collected Short Fiction* that they released a few years back (it includes *Velvet Waters*.) I liked them. I plan to read one of them soon, I think, in the one-piece-a-morning gig. Calvino I'm a big fan of, though I haven't read those books you mentioned (but own!). The same with Le Guin. I bought two collections that Small Beer put out years ago that I've always meant to read. The Dick short fiction I come and go with. I don't have the five volume set (sadly) but I've some others. I find with Dick that I really love some of it but others just leave me cold.

(4 December 2021)

## LEANNE FRAHM Seaholme VIC 3018

Many thanks for the latest *SF Commentary* and various issues of *\*brg\**. It's nice to be kept up to date, especially with ANZAPA, which I still have a fondness for.

Totally loved the cover of *SFC* 107. I've been a fan of Poe since I started reading SF at a young age, and I'm sure Poe would approve of this illustration. So Poeish!

**\*brg\* But I had thought Alan White's cover is a tribute to the works of H. P. Lovecraft, not Edgar Allan Poe. I'll have to ask him.\***

And 2021 becomes worse. The Covid cases are soaring, as are hospitalisations. Like you and Elaine, I'm just not going anywhere except supermarket shopping and medical appointments. Nothing feels safe anymore, and I wonder when I'll ever feel I can move safely in the community. The small amount of editing I was doing for Queensland University of Technology dried up late in 2019, not surprisingly, and I don't imagine it will ever resume, so my only mental stimulation is crosswords and jigsaws.

The first pages of *SFC* were indeed sad to read. So many people loved and respected, and gone. My memory tells me that Judith Hanna attended the same writer's workshop in 1979, but old people's memories are notoriously bad. I'm sure I saw her at conventions. I didn't know her well then, but I



came to know her best through her Facebook posts. I respected her work and her dedication in London, but I most came to respect her for her valiant fight against the disease that so tragically ended her life. She has left a huge hole in many people's lives.

I was very interested to read the review of Stephen King's *Billy Summers*. While I wouldn't call Stephen King my favourite author, he's certainly my most compelling one. Of all his work, the 'Mr Mercedes' trilogy and the spin-off *The Outsider* are my favourites, combining my preferred genres, horror and detective thrillers. I was of two minds whether I should try this one, but Colin Steele's summation that '*Billy Summers* is one of King's best novels' has convinced me.

(15 January 2022)

*The Tribute to Bill Wright* (SFC 109) was a heartfelt collection of memories. I didn't know Bill really well, but after reading of his life and particularly his harrowing last years was both inspiring and sad. He must have been at one of the Friday night dinners I attended in 2016, because my one clear memory of him was his insisting I should attend the upcoming convention in Melbourne. I'm sure it wasn't because he thought I would be a particular asset to it, but because he so loved the idea of the fannish get-togethers and wanted everyone to share with them. I can believe he'll be truly missed by those who knew him.

(20 February 2022)

## CASEY WOLF

Vancouver, British Columbia V5M 4P5,  
Canada

I have been thinking of you a lot in the last few weeks. It seems like a very long time since we spoke — and I see now that it has been.

I'm very sorry to hear that your income has plunged by 50 per cent. That must have been very hard to adjust to. It sounds like it would be good for Elaine's health to be able to retire along with you, inadvertent as your own retirement is. I have been suffering from wrist pain for many many years, but I'm now having more exciting arthritic manifestations, like swollen hands and the in-ability to straighten my thumb and some very painful joints (though not all of them all the time), as well as somewhat frightening momentary dislocations of my most distal thumb joints. Don't know what they're called. The wear and tear that our hands go through, especially those of us who use them so much for our main occupations, is a bit of a shocker when you've gone through life taking certain things for granted. Like bendy

thumbs. If Elaine can avoid things getting any worse by stepping back from the computer, that would be great.

I'm glad to hear you were able to do some socialising once the restrictions were lifted. I hope you're still being somewhat careful, though. I've been cautious through this whole Covid thing, masking before we were told to, even when we were told not to, and I will continue it long after they lift the restrictions. Not only do I really not want to get sick — yes, even if it doesn't kill me — but I really really don't want to make any of the vulnerable people around me sick or dead, and almost everyone I see falls into the category of vulnerable.

I've certainly been in the company of humans throughout Covid, but not to the extent I normally would be and not doing the things I normally would. I am still very leery of going into restaurants, although I do make exceptions from time to time. The mask stays on for the most part, and I only go in if there's lots of room between us and other tables. But in the last couple of weeks I've seen three different friends just to visit, and that is an enormous shift from the last two years. We also went for walks, which I have not been able to do because of the pain in my back. So I'm very excited to have gotten to walk and not have to pay for it. And I didn't even have to stop after 15 minutes!

Do I have any news? Well, I finally have copies of my books and it's nice to have the odd friend who wants to buy one. I've been so wiped out I haven't even tried to flog them in bookstores, unfortunately, but I think they're doing OK through general online sales. I've really pulled back from the book work (largely promotional, but not entirely) my publisher expects me to do. It was not having a good effect on my health to be in that position for so long. I was hoping that I would then rally a bit, but maybe because I've had to continue to go to Physiotherapy appointments twice a week and so on I still am very fatigued. But I get so much out of my garden and the birds and insects that I'm trying to take care of, and I do have other things that bring me happiness. I've been reading some of my poems and videotaping them for *Nature Folklore*, an online program coming out of Ireland, so that's been nice, and I am going to start reading onto audio stories or poetry by other authors for a magazine I had one story in a few years ago. So even now I don't have the energy to write I get to be a little involved with creativity, and that's good. I've also been singing a little bit more and doing vocal exercises every day so that I can sing with some kind of fluidity. That makes me happy, too. I had gotten completely out of doing that.

I am reading an Australian book right now. My sister Carole recommended it, so I ordered it without looking at how many pages it was. I was a bit startled when it landed in my mailbox and was 636 pages long. I'm a slow reader so I don't often take on door stoppers. But I am so glad I am reading this book. It's Nancy Cato's *All the Rivers Run*, which I'm sure you're familiar with. There is something slow and meandering about the pace of the novel, which I enjoy very much, and I love her descriptions of the Australian landscape, the rivers, the protagonist's painting, and the nitty gritty of the boats themselves. At first I thought it was quite light reading, but I think it has a lot of depth despite not being written in a 'literary' style.

And I am surprised by how not-coy she is about what is happening in her characters' lives. She even mentions urination!

I read another Australian book recently that I liked a lot: *A Room Made of Leaves* by Kate Grenville. Set at similar time to this novel, and I kind of like the continuity, but a very different kettle of fish.

I understand now why the old ladies I knew when I was young had so little to talk about besides their aches and pains and their gardens. I feel a little bit dull. C'est la vie.

(6 March 2022)

## Feature letter: Venetian flood tides

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

I am going through a difficult time. Not so much for Covid (I had the third shot, Pfizer, on 2 December) but for my right knee, which has become



Photos by Gampaolo Cossato (see text).



**S. Marco Square under water. (Photo: Giampaolo Cossato.)**



**Giampaolo Cossato wading through the Venice flood.**

wonky and my legs have joined the choir. For me walking has become a perilous enterprise, especially with the steps of the many bridges Venice is proud to flaunt.

And some problem is affecting my eyesight when, sometimes, lines of text are criss-crossing each other. Plus my usual conditions, of course, but that's old hat.

I should have mentioned a while back that the picture you have published in *SFC* 99 (page 35), describing it as 'the Arches of the Doge's Palace' are in fact the arches of 'St. Marco's Square, Procuratie Nuove', while the 'Arches of the Doge's Palace' are the picture that I am enclosing. And the 'keepsakes', left by the tourists, are the white specks you see on the floor.

As you say in your comment, there must have been a mix-up of some kind whereby the above-mentioned picture and the one of myself 'wading the tide' have disappeared from my mail of 12 December 2018.

Furthermore I suspect that you have never received my registered letter of 15th May 2021. The content would have been of some interest to you, but it appears that this time we were not that lucky.

I have spent the Christmas week with my



daughter Diana, who managed to find a flight from Bruxelles, a task that is getting more problematic with each passing day.

Most of Italy is now turning yellow and, shortly, possibly orange. Omicron is getting the upper hand. And the FFP2 has become compulsory in closed spaces (restaurants, theatres, pubs, bar, transports ecc.) and you have to carry the 'green pass (strongest version)' if you want to have access to the just mentioned places, while in the open the surgical mask is required at all times.

Thanks for the link to the digital version of *SFC* 107. It was very much appreciated.

A word about the very famous 'Mose', the artificial barrier that protects Venice from the tides. This year they started using it, several times already. It actually does work, but the more it is used the more the Venice's lagoon ecosystem gets compromised. And every time there is a whopping figure of 300,000 Euros (AUD 469,000) to pay, without considering the added costs for the ships that have to carry all kind of stuff to Venice's harbour (which is inside the lagoon) that have to stop doing it for many hours.

I am also adding an 'encouraging' picture of S. Marco Square under water which I took in November 2012. No Mose at the time.

I could say happy, best, serenity aplenty. I said it but, I'm afraid, those words no longer seem to carry the message.

(28 December 2021)

**[\*brg\* Thanks for reminding me of the 150 Euros that you sent me in the middle of the year, and**

**which did arrive safely. However, I have no excuse for not having emailed you immediately. I can't even think of the reason why I did not. I know I was pretty upset at the time by the fact that four of the copies of *SFC* 107 I sent to USA were sent back to me, while most of the copies I sent did reach their destinations eventually. The US seems to be doing its best to ruin its Post Office, and the Democrats seems to be as guilty as the Republications. But still ...**

**In fact, I had forgotten that you had sent the amount, generous though it is. So I went digging through the high mountain of rubble you might call my In Tray — and there at the bottom of the heap were three nice new 50 Euro notes. But maybe you sent them without accompanying card or letter, and even your envelope became separated from the notes in my system.**

**I don't know what happened with the various photos you sent me. I seemed to have scanned some, and not others, because I certainly did not have file copies of all the photos you mentioned. Thanks for the updated photos, with captions.**

**Usually we do little over Christmas, but Elaine and I were invited to Christmas dinner with friends of ours. They even picked us up and took us home afterward. Sumptuous dinner, and we listened to a very expensive new sound system. The weather was perfect — 21C with a light breeze. Many Christmas Days in Melbourne have been spent sheltering from 38-degree temperatures. (Christmas Eve is the beginning of the annual summer holidays for many people. Australia shuts down for two weeks, at least.)**

**Thanks for the titbit of information about 'Mose' — not the sort of information that makes it to local newspapers.\*]**

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## LLOYD PENNEY

**1706-24 Eva Rd., Etobicoke,  
Ontario M9C 2B2, Canada**

Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 107. It has taken me a while to get to this point, for I took two weeks off from responding to fanzines to edit/copy-edit/proof an ebook, 488 pages of hard core space opera. I should be paid for it shortly, so I feel it's been well worth it. Such are the benefits of working from home.

The twin years of 2020 and 2021, coloured by this horrible pandemic. A shame about the shut-down of your printers. This kind of thing has been happening for some time, but the pandemic has accelerated the process. I don't know of any independent printers out there any more, unless I take my job to the local big-box business stores. All-digital may not sound appealing, but it's the only way now to communicate. Yvonne and I have

had our booster shots now, so we have had something of all three. Astra-Zeneca first, Moderna second, and our boosters were from Pfizer. Collect them all.

I always enjoyed Judith Hanna's zines, the few I received, anyway. The disadvantage of so much geography in the way, I suppose. These are all people I had wanted to meet, but there was never enough money to get me there. This goes for Douglas Barbour, Ed Meskys, and Carol Carr, too. (Actually, we'd see Ed at some of the Worldcons we'd go to, chat a while, and pet the guide dog. Judge was quite the party animal, shall we say?) And I never thought Charlie would be the first Stone to go.

The lockdown has been released here, but it is creeping back into possibility with the Omicron variant. I turned 62 in June, we celebrated our 38th wedding anniversary in May, and Yvonne

celebrated her birthday on the 19th of this month. We enjoyed our summer, with some trips to local parks, but much of our time was spent creating, me with jewellery and Yvonne with shirts for sale. Because of money problems, *Amazing Stories* will probably be published annually, but I hope to work on that upcoming issue as well.

It is a cold, dreary, rainy day as I write. We've already had discussions about where we'd like to go to in the spring, and where we'd like to take a picnic lunch. That won't come for a few months yet, but early planning usually works well for us. 2020 and 2021 have been hard on our souls, and I have at least a few hopes for 2022. We hope you got our Christmas card, and seeing what day it is getting close to, we hope for a wonderful New Year for you, and everyone. See you nextish.

(28 December 2021)

**\*brg\* Elaine and I are always grateful for your Christmas card, but there didn't seem to be much point sending you one in return — it would have taken a month to reach you. So, as always, thank you.\***

Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 109, the Bill Wright Memorial Issue. I did not know this fine gentleman, but I certainly knew of him, and of his works for Australian fandom, and prodom, too.

As Dick Jenssen remembers Bill, I can see how valuable a local SF club is for gathering together like interests, turning strangers into friends, with friendships that can last a lifetime, and networking that can create projects of legend. We are all not so lucky ... the last such club in the Toronto area was shut down close to 50 years ago, and no one dared to attempt to bring it back, until having a club wasn't thought to be all that important. If I could get a time machine cheap, I'd be a fly on the wall to see some of the pivotal events that got all of us to fannish do what we all do now.

Further articles illustrate the benefits of participating, devoting your time to make things happen. Most of us know how important it is to give of yourself to make the club or convention work, but it often takes an example to convince others, and I get the feeling Bill was one of those who were the sterling example of why we all should bother. Great photographs of Australia's finest.

Would that we all would be remembered for all our efforts in trying to make our corner of fandom as constructive, appealing, and fun as we could. Those who go before us had at least someone to appreciate them, with hopes that they knew it before they passed. The rest of us will have to just take stock of what we've done, and be satisfied.

Every issue of *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* Bill sent to me got an appreciative letter of comment, which often led to a few e-mail discussions. To me, the journalism student that I was and am, this was the heart of fandom, socialising, communicating, and enjoying the exchange of ideas with each other.

(6 March 2022)

I have been editing books, taking a few assignments with the agency that gets me jobs working at conferences and trade shows, and a few other things. Yvonne and I are assisting the local anime convention in selling and assigning tables in a 500-table vendors' hall. We have been so busy, and I need an appointment with myself to just goof off for ten minutes.

If Michael Bishop's stories make it the first time you've published fiction, the least I can do is to comment. I am admittedly ambivalent about 'The Alzheimer Laureate', possibly because it is short, and not much of a story, but it is more of a commentary on who is a star or fool, and what makes him one or the other. I know of one author who sometimes appears as a visionary, sometimes as an egotistic hack. He might appear as one or the other within an audience of readers, if indeed all are reading his work. At least his efforts pay the bills, so I will not judge further. Perhaps your character feels the same way, that the more esoteric/idiotic he writes, the more he is seen as the visionary/hack. All you can do is gauge the audience to see what they want or like of your work, and give them more, and be ready for the tide to change violently.

Could the second story, 'Yahweh's Hour', be a commentary on the competence of the audience to appreciate and understand what is presented to them, plus commentary on the competence and motive of those who create the content presented?

The Bishops' Christmas greetings: No matter what the right-wing pols say, this pandemic is not over, but its dangerous stage is mostly over. There are still many people dying from it every day, so we are making sure we are fully vaccinated. We can get our fourth shot (second booster) as of 21 May, and we will get it. Even with the easing of the pandemic, there have been no chances to meet with friends. It is like the pandemic killed much of Canadian fandom.

I suspect that I am totally not cool when it comes to Mr Bishop's article, but that's okay. I have read about a dozen or more of the books listed, so maybe I am not as uncool as I thought.

(19 April 2022)

**VAN IKIN**  
**c/o 17 Zamia Place, Greenwood WA 6024**

**[\*brg\* Thanks very much for *Science Fiction* 51/52 — rather a surprise, since I had been expecting the Stanislaw Lem Issue. But I see that the Terry Dowling Issue has been many years in the making.\*]**

Bruce, at last you get a reply. I'm so sorry for my silence, but my whole life has changed so much that very little is fully within my control anymore. 2021 was *not* a good year for me (or for anyone else, I realise) so 2022 bears the expectation of turning out much better. In the hope that it does — happy new year!

I think that when I was last in contact I mentioned that my wife, Marjory, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She came through extremely well, without need for chemo (which she was dreading) but is on lifelong medications. She is growing extremely frail (she is now 80) and I am in fact her carer — but this is getting harder for me because of my own situation (see below), and she has agreed that in the course of this year we will look seriously into what might be available to us in relation to homeware. We do *not* want to move (but will eventually have to, clearly).

My big problems started once I went onto medications for my Crohn's disease. It took quite a while to learn to live with and manage the side-effects, but I was fairly successful. Then my blood tests started to show that the medication probably wasn't working. That meant that I had to move from 'Tier 1' Crohn's medication to 'Tier 2', which is much more 'fraught': the tier 2 meds can cause severe liver damage within a week and in general do much more damage to the body (in order to hold the Crohn's at bay). For me it has just slowed everything down: not exactly lethargy (because I don't feel lethargic, though I can tire very quickly) but it makes me feel I have to be very careful and deliberate about anything and everything. (Medically speaking this is apparently an interference with the ability to concentrate, but it feels the exact opposite, as if I have to concentrate massively.) And on top of that the new medication has really impaired my immune system (as it's meant to do) and I keep coming down with irritating minor ailments like sore throats and cold symptoms.

But occasionally there are days like today where I can finally get a few things done, so let me answer that August 2021 email:

**[\*brg\* Very sorry to hear for the first time about your health problems and Marjory's.**

**One very important point — please update your colophon page to reflect your actual address (which you have on the envelope).\*]**

Unfortunately I can't — I'm caught in a catch-22. UWA doesn't recognise any work that is does not have an explicit UWA attribution, so I have to make *Science Fiction* a 'university' publication by using the UWA address. They actively discourage editing (especially journal-editing) as an activity (because it receives virtually no government recognition) and if I didn't follow the rules they'd be happy to discount the journal and I would lose my honorary status. The honorary status means nothing to me (it's completely unpaid and having/not-having a uni connection means as little to me as having/not having a passport, since I can't travel) *but* it means I get a 25 per cent discount on printing done through the uni printery, and that's vital. (I'm probably taking a risk by putting my home address on the envelopes, but that's the only way I can ensure that I'm speedily aware of returns.)

**[\*brg\* It's possible you are still not getting into the university very often, and therefore maybe missing out on a whole lot of mail, including perhaps several issues of *SF Commentary*. Because of lockdown, I was able to produce seven issues after March 2020, and I fear you might not have received them all.\*]**

I got to UWA twice in 2021, but colleagues keep an eye on my mail, and if I get a big build-up they let me know, and that's when I do a phantom evening visit to get the mail. I did receive the *SFC* issues, though I'm behind in reading (of *everything*) because of the medications. A long time ago you mentioned that you'd sent a LoC on the Mann issue, but that's the one thing I've not received.

The best address to use for me is c/o 17 Zamia Place, Greenwood WA 6024. This is where my son lives, but he has a sensible, functional mailbox (a galvanised iron box on a metal peg). Our place has a small mailbox built into a brick pillar, and many things get ruined because the postie has to bend then in half to fit them in. Marjory has never wanted to ruin the brickwork by remodelling and I never shifted to using a PO box, and now a PO box would only be a partial solution because I couldn't easily get there regularly anyway. I did get the recent *SFC*-mailing to Lalina Way, and without damage (because it was dry weather and the postie left them outside the box) but the Greenwood address is safest and I would receive Greenwood mail from my son within 7 to 10 days.

**[\*brg\* What is your printing arrangement? It**



would be very good to find a way of printing issues that look as good as yours — which is beyond the facilities of my new local small printer.\*]

I am lucky because I get the printing done (with discount) through UniPrint, the UWA printery. In the last 15 years or so I have been obliged to use them (in order to maintain the ‘university connection’), but that obligatory requirement became controversial over time and eventually led to the removal of the obligation and the introduction of a ‘carrot’ in the form of the staff discount, which I’ve now enjoyed for around a decade. I happened to start using UniPrint back in the ‘80s at a time it had been told to become financially independent or be closed, and the guy in charge was eager to be able to say they had a small journal-publication on their books. (He thought I was publishing quarterly, poor guy!) He kept my costs down in return for me accepting lowest-priority (which meant it sometimes took months for an issue to be printed, if they were busy). That guy is still there, up to issue 51/52, but UWA is always talking about dispensing with the printery, so I never know how long it’ll last.

My situation is not as bad as it sounds. I’m living a happy enough life, just diminished, and I know so many people going through real hell (medically, or economically, or relationship-wise — and sometimes in combinations of these) that I can see that I’m still lucky enough to be doing okay.

I will keep in contact as best I can, but if I’m silent for months please understand that I’ve gone back into the strange world where things just don’t get done (even though they nag at me constantly, as has been the case with my knowing how greatly overdue this reply is: I *know* this, but it doesn’t translate into the necessary sequence of simple real-world actions).

(4 January 2022)

**JOHN NEWMAN**  
**PO Box, Maldon VIC 3463**

It was a nasty shock to read of Judith Hanna’s death. I knew her briefly when living in Sydney, and she greatly broadened my concept of what a fan could be. She was poised, confident, and seemed so well connected that I was rather over-awed. There was mention of a sheep station, which sounded kind of grand. What a terrible loss, too soon, too soon.

You then go on to reveal to me how many people are shuffling off. I can only agree with you that Charlie Watts was the sort of musician that most

impresses. Knowledgeable, talented, and businesslike, he got the job done well, and produced great music without the ego trip part of it!

Of course, I didn’t know many of the fans and writers you mentioned. I don’t personally know John Litchen either, but was deeply moved by Monica’s last days.

These tales of woe and loss are another form of the celebration of life.

Sad, yes, but only sad because there was so much good. So much joy. In their inevitable demise, each person is missed, loved and mourned, and the contribution of their life is recorded in the anguish of those remaining.

I read about Monica on, as it turned out, the day when the last piece of paperwork to finalise my mother’s estate arrived, nearly 20 months since she died. Twenty months of being executor, of taxation and bank accounts, bequests, lawyers and accountants. It’s not over until all the tax is paid.

I was interested to read Colin Steele reporting that UK book sales were up strongly in 2020, and wondered immediately whether this meant ebook sales did even better, being much easier targets for impulse or binge buying. I love ebooks, but am still easily captured by a bookshop.

(5 January 2022)

**MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER**  
**P.O. Box 8093, Silver Spring,**  
**Maryland 20907, USA**

Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 107, which I printed out on a pleasant trip to the University of Maryland library. While we haven’t had a second lockdown because of Omicron, I’ve had a personal lockdown; after Discon, the most fun-free Worldcon I have ever attended. Because of the Covid restrictions, ended on December 19, I’ve restricted my activity to getting my mail three times a week, going to the supermarket, pharmacy, and hardware store, and going to doctor’s appointments. I hate being locked down, but I am doing my duty.

Here’s an example of how things have changed before Omicron. On my birthday, I went to see August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*, a large regional theatre in Washington. Before Covid, the theatre had a large bar that sold drinks, snacks, and, if you wanted, meals. The bar was still there, but they decided in the interest of safety to replace the bartenders with a table with free snacks and drinks. But someone decided that patrons might be angry if they were given fattening snacks. So they were portion-controlled 100 calorie snacks. I

wished I could have had my pre-Covid chocolate chip cookie from the bar.

Do you remember any favourite radio dramas from when you were a kid? I don't, but for the past 40 years in Washington we have had *The Big Broadcast* on public radio station WAMU for four hours every Sunday, so I know that any show with Jack Benny or Fred Allen in it is still funny and that William Conrad, who played Marshal Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*, had one of the all-time great radio voices. One of the books I read during the pandemic was Leonard Maltin's *The Great American Broadcast*, which has extensive interviews with radio stars and gives a very good sense of what a radio actor's life was like.

The 1981 series *Hollywood* is on YouTube because the rights for the series are so convoluted that the series can't be sold to disk, but it can be seen for free. I found it well worth my time. I have also been catching up on films that are shown for free on YouTube with commercials. These include Richard Attenborough's *A Bridge Too Far*, which was excellent because of William Goldman's fine script. I also recommend Joseph Mankiewicz's *Guys and Dolls* for its fine performances by Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando, Vivian Blaine, and Jean Simmons. Stanley Kramer's *It's A Mad Mad Mad Mad World* also works, despite its nearly three-hour running time.

Two books I'd recommend are Dave Langford's *Beachcombing and Other Diversions* and *Don't Try This at Home*, which collects con reports, including many from the 1970s I've never seen.

(17 January 2022)

## STEPHEN CAMPBELL

20 Bostock Street, Warrnambool VIC 3280

At first I thought the back cover was one of Dick Jenssen's marvellous creations until I realised it was an actual photograph of recent reality in Vietnam, an architectural anthropomorphisation of human as nature, resting in the hands of a giant Buddha.

Alan White's front cover showed a love of a certain theatricality in its alteration of your more formally formal title logo. I wondered if the contents of the magazine had changed, but I found you still provide a fertile place where seeds of many fantastic varieties are sewn in the ground.

I was delighted to see Andrew Brown in the photo tribute to Judith Hanna. It is the only photo of him I now have, and I loved him as a friend.

Thank you also for John Litchen's photos of the 1973 Fannish Football Match. I remember that



**Here's my favourite photo of Andrew Brown (r.) with Marc Ortlieb (l.), 1984. It's Marc who is of average height. (Photographer unknown, but probably Cath Ortlieb.)**

day as a challenge to my own personality as well as prowess, among people who were all in the grip of joyful imagination.

The other day I acquired a copy of the Hyland House edition of Lee Harding's *Displaced Person* (typeset by you). The photo on the cover reminds me that Lee looks much the same as he did at the ANZAPA 50th Anniversary Celebration in 2018.

The item I enjoyed most in *SFC 107* was Peter Rogan's letter. He seemed to fault Greg Benford's fictitious history because it is fictitious. I did love reading his kaleidoscope of opinions (many of which I agreed with) and ideas (which were illuminating). His suggestion that *2001: A Space Odyssey* failed because of its skirting of psychedeleia misses the point of the film: the immersion of spiritual philosophy into the madman who is guided by a psychedelic expressway guarded by sentinels to the alien world of his own identity and rebirth, with the suggestion that Earth humans are ancestors of beings from a technologically superior gas giant. Watching *2001* for the first

time in 1968 was stunning for a 14-year-old boy in a country school who would not know LSD for another five years. Knowing the details of the effects used does not for me extinguish the sense of artistic wonder I feel each time I see the film. Kubrick's treatment of the seriously mundane humans delighted me as much as the surrealistic ending, with its passionate music and waxy zygote floating in a vacuum.

I don't think L. Ron Hubbard created any religion; he simply reached out to a lot of alienated people with a high spirit of paranoia in an admittedly difficult world that seemed mostly against them. It was a science fiction writer's attempt to manipulate reality with calibrated art.

**[\*brg\* Hubbard did invent a religion, which he layered over the original Dianetics superstructure. Until I read a bit about Scientology, I had not realised the total weirdness of his religious imagery.\*]**

I would enjoy reading Peter Rogan's books, although they would have to be good to be as interesting as his letter.

Colin Steele's critiques always leave me with the realisation of how much reading there is still to be sought out. The titles alone of the books he reviews expand my imagination.

Thanks for the news of Don Ashby's enduring recovery. I have seen him work, and I expect he will rebuild a good home with a good atmosphere, as with all his homes over the last 50 years.

My production of graphic novellas moves forward slowly but surely. When I have finished a dozen I will attempt to get them published. They are fairly light-hearted and might entertain people.  
(8 January 2022)

I was saddened by the parting from this world of Bill Wright (*SFC* 109). I've known Bill since I was a teenager, and have always liked him and his enthusiasms. I enjoyed *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* and its heady quality. Recently David Russell and I spent a few hours with him at the St Kilda RSL. I was pleased to see that, apart from slowness, he seemed healed of his recent injuries. He retained that mischievousness that I always remember about him. May he rest in peace.

David and I attended a memorial gathering for Bill at a recent meeting of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. Although I'm not an official member I felt quite at home with SF fans doing and talking SF fan things.

I hope you don't miss Bill too much, Bruce. I know you and he have been friends for decades. I

know I will find him missing at all future fan meetings, the way I find Merv Binns missing from our lives.

David lent me a Corflu Concorde publication called *Dangerous Visions*, and made by fans in Bristol. This is faan fiction, with a focus on SF fandom, and containing many mysterious references to names and bodies of real fans. The most delightful article was a convention report, 'Welcome to the Pleasure Dome', written by Simon Ounsley: semi-satire, semi-serious, semi-insane, this story (report) gave me a complete feeling of an SF convention.

(6 February 2022)

David Russell has just passed me the news that you have tested positive for Covid-19. I do hope this is asymptomatic and that you do not suffer during your period of isolation or have after-effects. The Omicron variant seems to be more virulent and easy to catch, but less damaging, than the Delta strain. You have been a mentor to my life's development, whether you know it or not, and *SF Commentary* has been a beacon of learning and comprehension on the path I have taken. Although that path has been of the visual intellect rather than the literary, it is a path of understanding of our strange and wonderful civilisation, one that we are both part of. The plague may be a work of nature, about which I have little understanding, but civilisation's response to it is all too human, and somewhat confused. My hope, of course, is that Covid doesn't cause the disappearance of anyone I know and love.

Thanks for the print copy of *SFC* 108. Without print copies I have no access to the fandom I love.

Ron Drummond's article takes us back in time a bit, and Damien Broderick (writing about a novel by Lee Harding) and Graham Clement (writing about the George Turner short fiction collection) give me a strong sense of nostalgia for the days when George was still alive, and Damien was local, and Lee was showing us the fruit of his talents. I still think that George Turner's vision has been the most potent of any Australian SF author's rendering of chaotic human activity and mundane human reasoning, creating high-quality literature about diabolical ideas of humanity, especially those concerning the transformation of human biology. We are seeing some manifestations of George's vision at the moment.

Book reviews always have the most mental meat in them, and to me have always been at the heart of *SFC*. So it's a bit of a surprise to read fiction in *SFC*, but I understand why you have printed two stories by Michael Bishop. The first



book of his I read was *Philip K. Dick Is Dead Alas*, which I enjoyed.

Jenny Bryce and Tony Thomas provide a view of literature outside the science fiction perimeter. This intercommunication is harmonious with my own sensibilities, in that all ideas, and the words that suggest them, come from the same source, and our compartmentalising of them is merely an eccentric limitation of our own individual ways of reading. Excelsior to Jenny and Tony and their intellectual pursuit!

Both of Denny Marshall's covers give pleasure, and show serious versatility. Since you still print some copies, I hope the note I enclose will assist you with expenses. I am going to prepare something and submit it soon, with a hope that you can use it as a cover.

I'm still living monkish time in a caravan, because places to rent are disappearing for people of low income. Maybe concentration camps are being prepared for us, where we can entertain ourselves under surveillance, much as Bedlam did for affluent voyeurs in the nineteenth century.

(10 March 2022)

**[\*brg\* And thank you very much, Stephen, for the \$50 note that you enclosed. Also thanks for the birthday card for my 75th birthday, even if by now I am 75-and-a-half.\*]**

#### DAVID RUSSELL

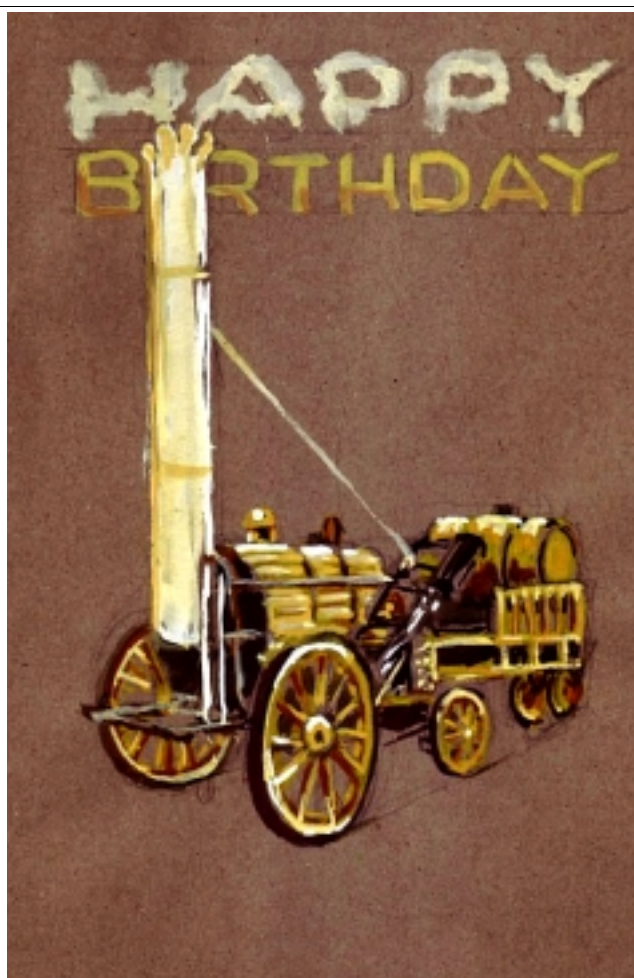
**196 Russell Street, Dennington VIC 3280**

Congratulations on no longer being confined to your home during your week of Covid infection. The freedom to leave your home whenever you wish must be a longed-for thing. Was Urban Grooves the first beneficiary of your custom, or did the need for grocery items win out?

Whenever I've been shopping at supermarkets, the least happy, most stressed workers are the ones doing the shopping for people who are unable to come into the store themselves. They are always in a hurry, as they grab the nearest rather than the best item on their list for one of the ten people they are shopping for, and you can tell that answering questions about where the refrigerated beans are aisled is the last thing they want to be doing.

And you, Bruce, have contributed to their unhappiness by casually contracting Covid!

**[\*brg\* The workers at our local Coles store did a fine job, with the second of the two deliveries arriving at 9 p.m. — but on the day promised. Only one or two items were not exactly what we**



wanted, but we had okayed them on the internet list before they were sent. I don't record whether we shopped on the Monday, our first day of freedom after a week of isolation. I assume so. My first stop was on the Tuesday — to visit Adam, my physio, as I do every two months. It rained most of the day. The following day was my last appointment with Dr Tversky in St Kilda Road, who had been treating me successfully for a rare inner-mouth complaint. It was my last visit, because Dr T. confided that he was retiring in June. So my first eat-out was at Papa Gino's in Carlton, for lunch, on the way home. It was very crowded, because it was school holidays, and the place was a bit understaffed. But the restaurant did a great job, as usual. (That's more information than you would want to know, but demonstrates the futility of asking for a simple answer to your simple question.)\*]

My sister Leanne has been caring for a couple of dogs at their owners' house while they are holidaying, so the plates have been piling up in the sink and the partially eaten cat food occupies ever larger numbers of small plates outside the house. I usually have a large wash-up the day before Leanne gets home. Inevitably she is disappointed with the standard of cleanliness that fails to occur when she isn't here to supervise and

cajole and threaten.

I'm glad you liked watching *Brigsby Bear*, which I gave you as a birthday present in 2019. I'm currently about halfway through the first season of HBO's *Lovecraft Country*, a ten-episode, three-disc Xmas present from my sister. I remember that you were impressed by the novel it's based on.

I'll sign off now, as there are dishes that need to be ignored.

(8 April 2022)

## DENNIS CALLEGARI

159 Kilby Road, Kew East VIC 3102

Thanks for *SFC* 108, which arrived a couple of days ago (though I didn't get to look at it properly until today). A bit of a coup, getting two of Michael Bishop's stories to print, plus a couple of articles.

There seems to be a bit of a nostalgic air about this issue, do you think? I also enjoyed hearing about the Booker Prize nominees, but the only one I've read is *Bewilderment*, which I had real trouble getting through — not because I didn't like the writing, but because it was all so sad. I understand the idea that not all stories need to be upbeat, but this one really got me down.

As for my own reading, I've just realised that I've spent the last few months reading mostly 'pandemic projects' by famous people:

- Dave Grohl's *The Storyteller*
- Jimmy Carr's *Before and Laughter*
- Brian Cox's *Putting the Rabbit in the Hat*
- Nick Offerman's *Where the Deer and the Antelope Play*
- Louis Theroux's *Theroux the Keyhole*
- Oh, and a book on writing by Ursula Le Guin, *Steering the Craft*, which once again proves that great writers can teach the basics of writing skills but not how to bottle the lighting. (Though Steven King's *On Writing* makes a valiant effort.)

Let me share a few thoughts about ...

### Prominent People's Pandemic Projects

- 1 **THEROUX THE KEYHOLE (TtK)**  
**Louis Theroux** is the son of the writer Paul Theroux, and is best known for his TV interviews with very strange people. *TtK* is literally his pandemic diary, and it was the least interesting of the books. I suspect two things: (a) Louis went a little bit bonkers during his lockdowns in the UK. (Running a business from home with his

wife, while pitching new programs, conducting Zoom interviews, and wrangling three boys under 15 can affect your sanity!) (b) He still got out and about during lockdown more than I ever have in normal times.

### 2 BEFORE AND LAUGHTER (BL)

**Jimmy Carr** is a British comedian whose comedy skates on the edge between sharp and cruel. In *BL*, he predicted that someday he'd go too far ... and mere weeks later he made a poor-taste joke about the Holocaust. *BL* is a curious beast: half autobiography and half self-help book. On the plus side, he is very generous to his fellow comedians.

### 3 THE STORYTELLER (S)

**Dave Grohl** admits that he wouldn't have written this if he had been able to tour with The Foo Fighters. It's a kind of autobiography, except that it's about stories associated with specific musical events. Very enjoyable, if eccentric. The story about having dinner with Paul McCartney, AC/DC, and a New Orleans marching jazz band is a good one, as is the story about trying to find the strip club owned by the band Pantera.

### 4 PUTTING THE RABBIT IN THE HAT (PRH)

This is **Brian Cox** the actor, not the astrophysicist. I can't say I read *PRH* in one sitting, but only because it's a long book, full of anecdotes about life in British and American theatre, movies, and TV — for which I'm a sucker. Apparently, being friends with Michael Gambon can be dangerous.

### 5 WHERE THE DEER AND THE ANTELOPE PLAY (WDAP)

**Nick Offerman** is an American actor and comedian, first known for playing a gruff can-do fixit man in the TV series *Parks and Recreation*. I asked my local library to buy this because the first part of *WDAP* is about a hiking trip that Offerman did with his friends, the writer George (*Lincoln in the Bardo*) Saunders and the musician Jeff (Wilco) Tweedy. Later parts of the book offer insights into sustainable living, and tell of a road trip across America during the pandemic. As well as being an actor and comedian, Offerman runs his own bespoke carpentry company. He leaves us in no doubt that he supports environmentalism, civil rights, indigenous

rights, women's rights, gay rights, trans rights, while at the same time respecting the people who are scared of those things. He keeps using that word 'nuance'.

(12 March 2022)

**JOHN HERTZ**

**236 South Coronado Street, No. 409,  
Los Angeles CA 90057, USA**

At an Internet-access machine today I sneaked a look at *SF Commentary* 109.

The man labelled 'unknown' at left in the photo 'Promoting the Australian Science Fiction Foundation, ANZAPA. and other Australian activities during Aussiecon IV' (p. 15P, p. 22L) is Thomas Recktenwald. He was a good friend of Waldemar Kummig.

I have just finished re-reading Wing-tsit Chan's *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. It is first-rate.

By now you will have seen *Vanamonde* 1482, with my attempt to set things Wright.

(14 February 2022)

**[\*brg\* Now incorporated into the John Hertz column in *SFC* 111.\*]**

Harry Warner Jr liked my con reports. Applause from him meant much to me. I'll see if I can get you captioned photos for my Loscon XLVII report. I'm writing up Discon III for *Vanamonde* now. Eventually I'll get to Site Selection (see my letter in the April 2022 issue of *Alexiad*). When the results were announced I hunted down some Ch'eng-tu (Wade-Giles transliteration; I hate *pin-yin*; when writing to the concom, or publicity of them, I'll spell it their way) representatives and quoted *Analects* 2:17 to them: 'When you know something, to know that you know it; when you do not know something, to know that you do not know it: that is knowledge.' They seemed to recognise it, even in English. I discussed its application, too.

You'll have seen my poem at the beginning of the Roger Sims tribute is an acrostic (read down the first letter of each line) in rhymed 5-7-5-7-7 syllable form like the Japanese tanka. I've sometimes tried Chinese-style poetry, for technical reasons much harder. You can see one at <http://file770.com/kate-hatcher-1974-2020>.

(4 May 2022)

**RICH LYNCH**

**PO Box 3120, Gaithersburg MD 20885, USA**

Thank you for assembling this very fine collection



of remembrances and appreciations of the late Bill Wright. I feel honoured that I got to meet him, though only for a short while, back in 2004 when I was in Melbourne for an international conference on carbon sequestration. On the final evening of the event I pried myself away from a scheduled food function so that I could have dinner with Bill instead. And you were there was well! You had set the whole thing up, as I remember. This many years down the road, I no longer have any specific memories about what we must have talked about but I do recall that our dinner went on for probably a couple of hours. So we must have talked about a lot. I regret that our paths never crossed again, and I wish I could have gotten to know him better. I know we'd have had a lot to talk about.

(16 February 2021)

**TONY THOMAS**

**Box 1215, Elwood VIC 3184**

Thanks very much for the recent *\*brg\*s* and the very fine *SFC* tribute to Bill Wright, which told me a lot of things about Bill which I didn't previously know, even though he was an acquaintance and friend since the 1960s. He lent me the reel-to-reel tape recorder, with foot pedal control, from which I transcribed some of the American convention conversations that John Bangsund obtained somehow, and which I think then appeared in *John W Campbell, An Australian Tribute*.

Inspired by the recent Nova Mob conversations about recent books read, and your perennial lists, I send you attached my own lists of favourites from 2021, compiled a few weeks ago from my lists of



books read, which goes back to the 1960s. Only in the last few years have I begun to rate these as I list them.

A beautiful book just published and received in the mail yesterday is the new Ray Russell biography of Robert Aickman, from Russell's Tartarus Books. I'm looking forward to this.

Books read this year worth mentioning include Tom Disch's last collection of poems published in his lifetime: *About the Size of It* (Anvil 2006), which I'd read some of before — a few when they were first published in the TLS decades before — but have now read all of. There are lots of Shakespeare allusions and references, and I'm writing something for the Shakespeare Society to give some of these another airing.

I also came across at the Ferntree Gully house Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James' *A Short History of Fantasy* (Middlesex University Press, 2009), and read this, which told me about a huge amount of fantasy I knew nothing about from the late 1970s to the 2000s, and includes a very useful 30-page chronology of important works and people.

Other books that impressed me recently were David Priestland's *Merchant, Soldier, Sage* (Penguin, 2013), by an Oxford historian, whose thesis is that we need to reimagine history as a constant struggle for power between the three groups of the title — sages including especially bureaucrats. He covers a vast range of history pursuing this thought, which if not entirely convincing, at least gives us a new slant on much of what we thought we knew.

Also, just out and just read is A. C. Grayling's latest essay on the world's problems, *For the Good of the World: Is Global Agreement on Global Challenges Possible?* (Oneworld, 2022). Three chapters set out the problems; Climate Change, Technology and the Future (especially AI), and Justice and Rights. Two more set out the solutions:

Genuine democracy in the major economies of the world where it is feasibly attainable, and everywhere promoting the justice and rights embodied in human rights instruments, is accordingly the best hope we have of the world joining hands to confront its challenges.

If not this, activism could impose the costs that governments and corporations are unwilling to bear.

My guess is that if voters and their governments do not take the considered course, such activism — as catastrophe comes closer and panic grows — will increasingly be the re-

course adopted. The choices therefore are between people and their governments accepting the cost, or some people imposing the cost or having reality impose a vastly greater and perhaps fatal cost. At the moment in which these words are written, the last of these alternatives is the most likely one.

A grim prediction from one of the best informed and deepest thinkers we have in the world.

On a more escapist note, I've recently discovered Laura Lippman, mystery novelist since 1997 but only read by me in the last few months. Her most recent novel is *Dream Girl* (Faber, 2021), a mystery, but also all about writing, Philip Roth, Stephen King et al. Perhaps even better is *Sunburn* (Faber, 2018). Her home town of Baltimore is her recurring subject, but really it's all of America too. Many of her books await, from the library and elsewhere.

(18 February 2022)

LYNC

PO Box 104, Coburg VIC 3058

I've had a look at SFC 109 on eFanzines.com. You are a stronger person than me. I am still struggling with overwhelming grief about the loss of Bill Wright when I try to tackle writing for and editing *Ethel the Aardvark*.

Two minor things. The unknown person in the photo on p. 15 is Thomas Recktenwald from Germany. Ghu knows why he is in that photo, but he is.

The other is that you have confused my citation speech with the presentation speech. What you have taken from the ASFF website is the Chandler Award citation for Bill Wright. The speech was very different — but you can see that for yourself when you get the *Ethel*. (It was originally published in *Ethel the Aardvark* 188).

I'm wondering — did you get a copy of Bill's acceptance speech that he wasn't supposed to have written? That could be quite interesting — especially as I think it is the last time he put pen to paper.

(16 February 2022)

CAROL KEWLEY

Port Glasgow PA14 5AA, Scotland (coa)

I met Bill Wright at the Melbourne Science Fiction Club in 2008. I thought he was very knowledgeable about SF, and very enthusiastic about getting people involved in various clubs and projects, such as Meteor Inc. and panels at SF conventions.

He also encouraged my art and he was kind enough to give me a copy of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* when he saw that I'd included one in an illustration. I miss him and I hope he's enjoying that big SF convention in the sky.

(3 July 2022)

**ROBERT ELORDIETA**

**Unit 4, 15 High Street, Traralgon VIC 3844**

It's great that you have seen *Nightmare Alley* (the original version) a couple of times. I haven't seen the original versions of *Nightmare Alley*, *The Narrow Margin* (1950s), and *Dark Passage* (1940s). I have seen the later movie of *The Narrow Margin*, which starred Gene Hackman. I have seen some Powell and Pressburger movies, such as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, and *The Red Shoes*. I have seen four Humphrey Bogart movies: *The African Queen*, *Casablanca*, *Sabrina*, and *The Caine Mutiny*.

I hope that you do get the chance to see *No Time To Die* and *Dune* when they both come out on Blu-ray. I have seen the 1984 version of *Dune*, directed by David Lynch, but not the the new version.

I did happen to buy *Catch Me If You Can* on Blu-ray from JB Hi Fi. I first saw this movie at the Village Cinemas in Morwell when it was first released. It was amazing what this guy got up to besides counterfeiting cheques, such as pretending to be an airline pilot and a lawyer.

(15 February 2022)

**DAVE LANGFORD**

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

Thank you very much for the latest wonders and marvels. Belatedly it occurs to me that I've made no real attempt to promote *Don't Try This At Home*, partly because (having done the ebook version years earlier) it seemed hard to talk it up as an exciting new publication.

I haven't written much about Seacon '79 because I was struggling with the ghastly new responsibility of having just launched a little newszine called *Ansible*. The post-Seacon issue was filled with reports by other people, which I thought it was terribly clever to have commissioned, but which left me exhausted after I'd copyedited and typed them all.

By the time when I should have by rights crafted my own jolly humorous yet subtly magisterial overview of that Worldcon, I'd also endured the horrors of running off early stencils on duplicator

paper that proved to be unfit for purpose, with horrible smeary results. Worst-printed issue ever! If it hadn't been for the vast guilty weight of subscriptions inherited from Peter Roberts's *Checkpoint*, I might have given up then.

(9 March 2022)

**ANDY SAWYER**

**10 Kingsway West, CHESTER, CH2 2LA**

Thanks for the links to SFCs 108 and 109, but I have been taking advantage of the early spring weather to paint some fencing before it gets hidden and made unreachable by the sprouting vegetation which is going to come up soon.

Book lists ... Hmm, I have read 28 of the Cool Books noted by Michael Bishop, so I don't know what that makes me. Perhaps 29 — I have no idea whether I have read *Shogun* ... I know I have read at least one book by James Clavell, but that was a long, long time ago. I quite like the idea of 104 recommended books. Down with the tyranny of the round numbers, I say, and let's have more random odd numbers in a sequence that peters out when the compiler has run out of possibilities.

It may be a reflection of the interesting times we are living in that the review which sprang out was that about John Storey's *Big Wars*. Looks like an interesting and disturbing book — are we perhaps living within its pages?

(17 March 2022)

**PATRICK MCGUIRE**

**7541-D Weather Worn Way,  
Columbia MD 21046, USA**

SFCs 108 and 109 safely downloaded. I do indeed have a loc on earlier issues started on my computer, but it admittedly has not been coming along very fast. One problem may be personal lethargy, but others are a chore backlog that was getting urgent (and is not yet cut down to size) and heightened activity from my local sf book club (which is still mostly meeting on Zoom but has hopes of another try at in-person starting next month). We had a ballot among nominations that had gotten up to 22 candidates. I had already read some and decided against others, for instance, because some were really genre thrillers with only a minor sfnal magazine. But that left a good number of candidates that I wanted at least to read enough of (mostly from the library or Kindle samples) to vote intelligently on. The club picks no set number in a round, instead having a vague cutoff of positive approval ratings among members. I thought we might get 10 books past

the bar this time, but only 7 made it. I probably will read some that didn't make it but that caught my attention, so the evaluation process was not in vain.

I've also been considerably distracted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Not much about it I could say here that will not be quickly overtaken by events.

And of course by the delightful Omega variant of Covid. Now that the variant seems to be going down on its own, home testing kits and N95 or KN95 masks finally are becoming easily available. (Yes, I'm vaccinated and boosted, although they're now talking about a possible second booster for older people.)

You say in the review of *Five Star Republic* that Chandler's *Kelly Country* did not have a US edition. I had read it in what I was pretty sure was one such. On checking the ISFDB, I find that it had at least two from DAW, the first coming only a year and a half after the Penguin Australia one. I had read the Kindle sample of *Five Star* and was not much impressed, but you say the plot takes a swerve, so perhaps I should reconsider.

(17 March 2022)

## ROBERT DAY

Flat 2, Heatherlea, Station Road, Kirby  
Maxloe, Leicestershire LE9 2EN, England

I have a note on my to-do list to download the last few issues and print them locally, but I know I'm now well behind again. Life is getting hectic again, with people lining up from all directions to get a piece of my time. In particular, one of the international railway societies that I've been secretary of for a number of years has now, in the past three months, lost both its Chairman and the editor of its Journal. I've taken over as pro-tem chair, and I'm also part of a triumvirate that's taken on production of our Journal, replacing one chap who had a prodigious output of both a quarterly journal and a series of books on Austrian railways, but whose eyesight is now failing, amongst other health problems.

I've already told some other people who have asked me to do stuff that I shall have to prioritise things in the coming year. I suspect that loccng fanzines is probably something else that may have to get put on the back burner. I shall be having a discussion with my employers tomorrow over my plans for the next year, which in my case are going to be 'establishing my glide path to retirement', though I've also asked them to think about how I can best add value to the company on a part-time basis, because money is not going to be in abun-

dant supply once I finish salaried employment next July. (Mind you, I also want to take a week's leave in the next couple of months to finish off a book on Polish railways that I've been contracted to produce. The publisher has generously set no deadlines on this, knowing as he does that I have fingers in a number of pies, like so many of his other authors! That will pay me money, though not every much.)

The company has changed the way we work, meaning that instead of being one in a team of six testers, giving me five different brains to pick, I'm now attached to a team of five developers, including two of the company's deepest-thinking code heads. All of them have ten or more years in the IT business, and their knowledge of our product and its architecture is prodigious. And most of it goes right over my head. I share the testing work for this team with one other tester, but I'm very conscious that I rely on him a lot for technical support. Mind you, I made a comment to him the other week about how grateful I was for his support on one particular problem, only for him to say that he only knew the answer to my question because he'd been struggling with the same thing just half an hour earlier!

I can sometimes still surprise myself as to how much techie stuff I can pick up and work with; but I'm beginning to wonder quite how much longer I can go on doing this; and even if I can do a crash course in database design and architecture in the next nine months, I'm trying to keep up with blokes who have ten, fifteen or twenty years' experience and product knowledge, and I just don't see how that is going to be possible. So tomorrow's conversation is going to be interesting, to say the least.

It was always a delight to see a bright yellow envelope on my doormat that heralded another Bruce Gillespie fanzine. Often, this was not only a delight but a surprise as well, especially when I added up the value of the stamps liberally covering one corner of the envelope like the board in a game of Go. In more than a couple of instances, I had already downloaded the relevant issue because I was not expecting my own hard copy. I always saw hard copies as a special boon, and I thank you for the ones you've sent me in recent years. But I could see what these were costing, and I certainly never expected them as a right, even when I'd contributed material, More power to Bill Burns' arm!

A few things in your lists chime with me. I read *His Dark Materials* last year for the first time, in response to the TV dramatisation. I found the points of difference between book and TV versions interesting. On the whole, I felt Lyra was more feral



in the book than in the TV version; and the setting of Lyra's world felt more 1930s than the 1950s that the dramatisation showed. I think Pullman keeps it very quiet, but in *His Dark Materials* he goes pretty much full genre, though of course we SF fans have been here before, with Keith Roberts' *Pavane*. My reviews here:

- Northern Lights by Philip Pullman | Deep Waters Reading (wordpress.com)
- The Subtle Knife by Philip Pullman | Deep Waters Reading (wordpress.com)
- The Amber Spyglass by Philip Pullman | Deep Waters Reading (wordpress.com)

I have the two volumes (to date) of *The Book of Dust* on the TBR pile.

(18 March 2022)

There has been no sign here of the third season of *His Dark Materials* being available; the BBC usually flag up forthcoming TV drama at the beginning of the year with trailers that, it is true, take careful watching and some degree of foreknowledge to work out just what dramas these unconnected glimpses are likely to come from. These trailers usually only get shown for a few days around New Year, but when I saw one, there was nothing that suggested that *His Dark Materials* would be upcoming in the first half of 2022.

Like you, I don't do streaming services beyond using the BBC iPlayer (TV on demand), mainly to timeshift (though it's the only route available to see stuff like *Killing Eve*, and I'm currently catching up with *Superman and Lois*, which strikes me as an interesting take on the Superman character, but how much did the world really need another iteration of the Superman myth?) So I'm reliant on broadcast TV, or picking stuff up on sell-through DVD long after the event (which, of course, makes me far less likely to take a punt on a series that I've heard nothing about). The trouble with streaming services is that in order to see all the series I could be interested in, I might have to subscribe to two or three of them; and there's only so much money to go around.

One thing that does irritate me, though — and this is a very specifically British problem — is the situation that HBO having already streamed *His Dark Materials* 3 highlights. This is a series with heavy BBC involvement, funded by the licence fee that all UK households with a television set — or, indeed, access to the internet and the online version of the BBC iPlayer — are required by law to pay. It is, the BBC coyly say, 'the unique way in which we are funded'. A lot of people on the political Right dislike this; they see it as a tax for

something a lot of people will not use, as a restriction on freedom of choice, and they feel it makes the status of the BBC as an independent broadcaster difficult to defend. It also irritates the Murdoch empire a lot, as the BBC has a lot of premium product that is a serious competitor to the News International/Sky output. The commercial broadcasting sector in the UK lives in fear of the BBC ever accepting advertising, because many of them know that if that ever happened, a lot of their advertising revenue would migrate to the BBC overnight.

But what really irritates me is that having paid for the BBC involvement with third party producers who are in the streaming business, such as HBO or Amazon Prime (in the case of *Good Omens*), those streaming services get the resulting show first and the BBC licence payer is at the back of the queue for broadcasting dates. We had to wait almost a year for *Good Omens* to get terrestrial broadcast. That's not what I pay my licence fee for.

(19 March 2022)

**[\*brg\* In Australia, governments gave up trying to extract a licence fee from members of the public in 1974, so the ABC depends entirely on a Budget allocation. Since we have had to suffer under Liberal–National Party Coalition governments (= conservative) much of the time since 1996, that allocation has been steadily reduced, mainly because of the extraordinary influence that Murdoch has on Coalition politicians. There is no sign yet that the new Labor government is going to give much relief to the ABC.\*]**

**GUY SALVIDGE**

**7 Jessop Terrace, Northam WA 6401**

It was great catching up in person in Melbourne at the Spaghetti Tree restaurant last Thursday, 14 April, after a hiatus of nearly seven years. That's how long it has been for me between trips to Melbourne, sadly. Melbourne seems much as it was pre-pandemic, although foot traffic in the city is surely still less than it was in the past. For the most part Melburnians are behaving as though the pandemic is over and in this they have my sympathies. They don't care for wearing masks if they don't have to, and frankly, neither do I. My cavalier attitude is not without consequence, however, as I tested positive for Covid-19 myself the day I returned to Perth. So now my 14-year-old son and I have a week's isolation to look forward to, no bad thing, as we live on a one-acre property in rural Western Australia. I'm triple vaxxed so I expect I'll pull through soon enough.



My engagement with the SF genre has been patchy at best in recent years, so much so that I missed reading Michael Bishop's stories in *SF Commentary* 108. I've since rectified this via efanazines.com. I was interested to read Michael's '104 Cool Books' list. I've read a mere 22 of his selections, although one of these is among my very favourites, Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280*. The only reading I've done in the genre recently is revisiting the works of Barry Malzberg, whose works have recently been reissued by Stark House Press. I'd wanted to read his novel *Revelations* for the past 20 years, but have never been able to track down a copy until now. Having read the reissued version now, I can say it was just about worth the wait.

My own reading and writing interests have gravitated toward historical fiction in recent times. I'm working on a PhD at Curtin University, for which I'm writing a novel set in early colonial Tasmania, and for this I travelled twice to Tassie in 2021. I should be finished with the PhD in 2023 or 2024 — fingers crossed!

(18 April 2022)

It's not just the Spaghetti Tree that's quiet. My son Leon and I ate out every day during the trip to Melbourne, and we were often the only diners or very nearly. The only place that seemed busy was the Queen Victoria Markets on Saturday.

It was fairly inevitable that I'd get Covid in

Melbourne; not to worry. I had my booster about four months ago so I'm sure I'll have a mild case.

As for back problems, I had chronic back pain in my twenties and thirties and what completely fixed it was swimming. Now I try to swim 100 laps a week in the summer months, and it just improves the back muscles tremendously. Almost no back pain for two or three years since I started this. So I recommend giving swimming a try.

I enjoyed our discussion about SF as well. Not many people I'd ever speak to who would know who Grania Davis is, or Doc Smith. It's just that for me SF is something that happened in the past. Malzberg would agree with me, except for him the 1950s was the peak. Personally I preferred the 1960s and 1970s in SF.

I hope to see you again inside seven years this time! Given that my daughter Ella is living in Melbourne now, this seems much more likely.

(19 April 2022)

#### **IRENE PAGRAM** **Colac VIC 3250**

I found various objects buried under a tall, toppling pile of many other things I was sorting through. We had a Facebook Message conversation about them, and then the plague struck!

I now know why our art school lecturers in the 1970s begged us to use acid-free high-quality paper — which as students we could never afford. Now I find that the adhesives and fixatives have left stains, and the papers have foxed with ages.

If you find any value in the memories, please enjoy. Otherwise, shred.

(6 July 2022)

**[\*brg\* The 'various objects' include original and preliminary sketches of artwork Irene did for various fan projects, including *SFC* covers, in the 1970s. I tried to publish every piece of art that Irene gave me then, but often all I have now are the printed versions and not the originals. I asked Irene if I could use them again occasionally. She said yes, although her own artistic style and vision have altered greatly since then. We have one of her recent nature-assisted artworks hanging in our front hall.\*]**

#### **MARIANN MacNAMARA** **PO Box 619, North Adelaide SA 5006**

I hope you will both keep well and of course continue those magnificent magazines, Bruce, — please don't fuss re any rush for me. I am

financially challenged just now because of the house building and having to extend my rental for so many more months. I'm looking for a casual job for a few months so I can cover these quite large additional costs. But hey, I am obviously so much better off than most that I am appreciative that things will just have to work out.

My life has been a history of walking the 'pirates' plank' — going a bit further out than most, then looking for an elusive or maybe ridiculous solution. I seem to be someone who stretches the

risk factors often! Maybe it was because my absolute favourite childhood book was *Treasure Island*. Loved it.

I plan to get to Melbourne in the new year, probably say end February/early March.

We are working on settling the 2020–2021–2022 Peter MacNamara Award. We can't keep up with the hiatus. More on that later.

(10 July 2022)

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## We also heard from ....

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**MANY KIND CONTRIBUTORS and PRESENT GIVERS**, including all those mentioned at the beginning of this issue. Also thanks to publishers for some books I haven't had time to read or review yet.

**WERNER KOOPMANN** (Buchholz, Germany), who has sent quite a few emails and photos over recent years.

**ROMAN ORSZANSKI** (Adelaide, SA) thanked me for the 'great set of pieces about Bill Wright. I just wanted to point out that the photo at the bottom left of p. 16 doesn't feature Paul *Day*, though the name in front is Paul *somebody*.' Nobody else picked up my mistake; the name should have been 'Paul Bray'.

**SIMON BROWN**, who points out that 'You have given my address as Vientiane, Laos, and indeed it will be from December 2021 ... Alison and I couldn't believe our lousy luck, after spending two years in South Africa with almost continuous

restrictions because of the pandemic, coming home to Australia just two days before the big breakout in Sydney in July. I am looking forward to my second stint in South East Asia.'

**TARAL** (Toronto, Canada), who is 'a bit surprised by Doug Barbour's death, since I thought of him as one of those "upstart" Western Canadian fans who appeared a few years after me. Then I realised that "a few years after me" was at most only two or three years, and that I am uncomfortably close to his age.

**ALEX SKOVRON** (Caulfield North, Victoria), with thanks for all recent issues.

**ALISON CROGGAN** (somewhere in NSW or Victoria), who is 'deeply grieved to hear about the loss of Doug Barbour — I hadn't heard. Thank you so much for letting me know. I am touched to hear he spoke of me. He was a lovely man and a wonderful poet.'

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 25 July 2022





# **SF Commentary 110**

**July 2022**

**92 pages**

**60 BOOK REVIEWS  
43 LETTERS OF COMMENT  
COLIN STEELE'S NEW COLUMN**



Carol Kewley: 'Lone house on Isla.'