

SF Commentary 113

July 2023 84 pages

DANIEL KING on MICHAEL G. CONEY

MATS DANNEWITZ LINDER on CLIMATE FICTION

COLIN STEELE'S BOOKWORLD

50 LETTERS OF COMMENT



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PHOTOGRAPHS: Gerallt Llewelyn (p. 33); Diane Martin (p. 43); Casey Wolf (p. 47); Yvonne Penney (p. 51); Chris Barkley (p. 63); Giampaolo Cossato (p. 72); Irwin Hirsh (p. 78); John Litchen (p. 81).

ILLUSTRATIONS: Dennis Callegari (pp. 53, 83); Joe Pearson (p. 57); carl juarez (p. 57); David Russell (pp. 61, 62); Yolande Oakley (p. 65).

3 **DANIEL KING**
MICHAEL CONEY AND THE 'COSY' SF NOVEL

9 **MATS DANNEWITZ LINDER**
CLIMATE FICTION:
ENTERTAINMENT AND/OR WARNING

14 **COLIN STEELE**
COLIN STEELE'S BOOKWORLD

42 **I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS**

42 **BRUCE GILLESPIE**

43 **LESLEIGH LUTTRELL**

44 **LETTERS OF COMMENT TO SFC 110**
STEVE JEFFERY :: CASEY WOLF ::
LLOYD PENNEY :: DENNIS CALLEGARI ::
JOSEPH NICHOLAS :: WILLIAM BREIDING ::
DAVE LANGFORD :: KEN SAUNDERS ::
DAVID GRIGG :: BILL BURNS ::

LEANNE FRAHM :: ROMAN ORSZANSKI ::
GUY SALVIDGE :: MATTHEW DAVIS ::
THOMAS BULL :: DAVID RUSSELL ::
TONY THOMAS :: JOHN HERTZ ::
STEPHEN CAMPBELL

59 **DAVID GRIGG**
REVIEW OF THE MILLENNIUM JOB

64 **LETTERS OF COMMENT TO SFC 111**
DON ASHBY :: LEIGH EDMONDS ::
HENRY GASKO :: PATRICK MCGUIRE ::
GIAMPAOLO COSSATO :: KIM HUETT ::
DAVID PRINGLE :: TARAL WAYNE ::
ROB GERRAND :: TIM TRAIN ::
IRWIN HIRSH :: JOHN D. BERRY ::
EDWINA HARVEY :: CY CHAUVIN ::
MURRAY MOORE :: JERRY KAUFMAN ::
KENNEDY GAMMAGE :: JOHN LITCHEN

76 **ROB GERRAND**
STRANDED

82 **WE ALSO HEARD FROM ...**

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Daniel King

Michael Coney and the 'cosy' SF novel

Agatha Christie is widely credited with creating the subgenre of 'cosy' crime novels. The motivation behind the use of the word 'cosy' appears to be her typical use of a restricted setting, such as a village, for the crime scenario and its investigation; and also her recourse to the intimate interaction of characters, rather than to the scientific examination of tangible clues (as is the case in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories) to provide resolution of the crime puzzle. In this article I intend to argue that **Michael Coney**, in his 'first period', likewise adopts restricted settings and the detailed interaction of closely observed characters to create what one might call the 'cosy' SF novel. This is in contrast to his later books, in which he expands his horizons but to the detriment of character, the novels of this period 'feeling their way' until they reach culmination in the wild, idea-driven extravaganzas of *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Gods of the Greataway*.

The titles listed below are the novels of Michael Coney's first period on which I shall be concentrating. One early novel, *The Hero of Downways*, represents a move in a less restrictive direction, just as Agatha Christie, with works such as *The Big Four*, also experimented with less constricted, global thrillers; I shall not be considering *The Hero of Downways* here.

- *Mirror Image* (1972)
- *Syzygy* (1973)
- *Winter's Children* (1974)
- *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that Catch* (1974)
- *Hello Summer, Goodbye* (1975)
- *Charisma* (1975)
- *Brontomek!* (1976)

Of these novels, four (*Mirror Image*, *Syzygy*, *Hello*

Summer, Goodbye, and *Brontomek!*) are set in small communities on other planets: in the case of *Mirror Image* it is an Earth colony on the planet Marilyn; in the case of *Syzygy* and its sequel, *Brontomek!*, it is an Earth colony on the planet Arcadia; while in *Hello Summer, Goodbye* (and its sequel *I Remember Pallahaxi*, published posthumously) it is alien, not-too-distant-from-one-another towns such as Alika and Pallahaxi. *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that Catch* (also published as *The Girl with a Symphony in her Fingers*), on the other hand, is set on a small part of the 'Peninsula', a formation on a future Earth created by a huge tidal wave. This is an Earth where interstellar travel is known. Coney, in private email correspondence, drew my attention to ten other stories set on the Peninsula; they form, as it were, small islands a little 'offshore' from the novel that is the main landmass. As a research aid, I list the stories here:

- 1 **'The Hook, the Eye and the Whip'** (*Galaxy*, March 1974)
- 2 **'Bartholomew & Son and the Fish Girl'** (*New Writings in SF* 27, 1975)
- 3 **'Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel'** (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, January 1976)
- 4 **'The Cinderella Machine'** (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, August 1976)
- 5 **'Catapult to the Stars'** (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, April 1977)
- 6 **'Sparklebugs, Holly and Love'** (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, December 1977)
- 7 **'Penny on a Skyhorse'** (*Galileo* 11–12, 1979)
- 8 **'Die, Lorelei'** (*The Magazine of Fantasy*

and *Science Fiction*, May 1993)

- 9 **'Poppy Day'** (*Spectrum SF* 5, edited by Paul Fraser, February 2001)
- 10 **'Mehitabel's Memories'** (*Spectrum SF* 6, edited by Paul Fraser, July 2001).

A number of points should be made with regard to these. Stories 1 and 2 were adapted by Coney into the novel itself; the rest stand alone. Secondly, Coney in an email dated 21 May 2005 commented:

'My favourite was *Sparklebugs*, which was intended to be the last story in which Joe Sagar is finally jolted out of his cynical outlook, but publication dates, editors' requests etc. resulted in later stories being written and some being published out of order.'

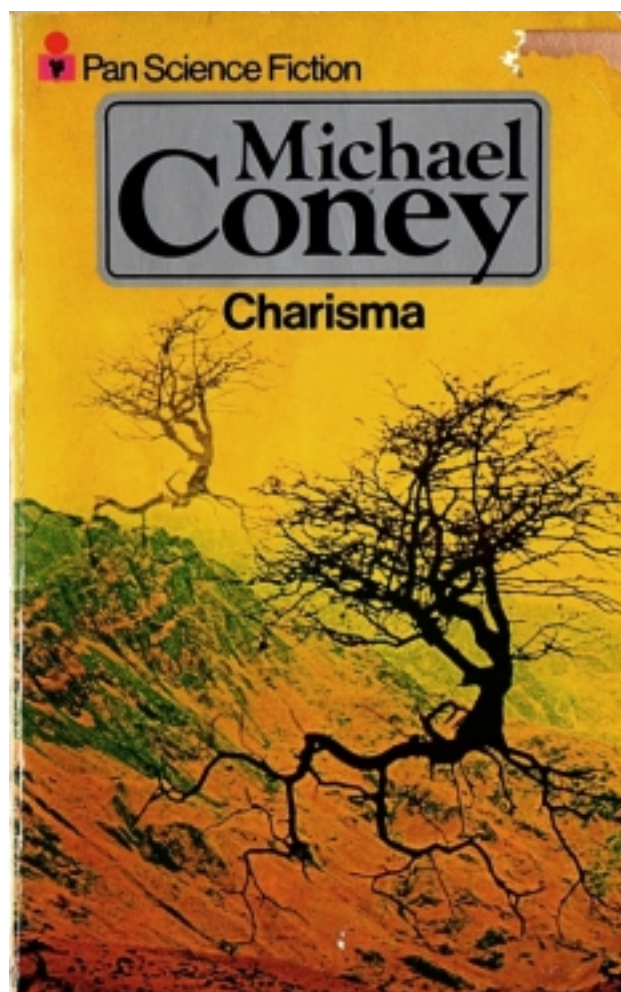
The last three 'Peninsula' stories extend well — in terms of when they were written — into what I am calling Coney's 'later period'.

Charisma is also set on Earth, but a not-too-distant future Earth, where we do not yet have interstellar travel but we do have research into parallel worlds and timelines. The action is confined almost exclusively to a small Cornish village called Falcombe. In this novel and in all the others of this period except *Winter's Children*, Coney

heightens the restricted feel by providing detailed local place names, such as 'Starfish Bay', 'Anchor Pool', 'Finger Point', 'Pacific Kennels'.

The above establishes the fact of the novels' restricted settings. But there are also repressive aspects that ensure the characters cannot easily escape their confines. In *Winter's Children*, for example, it is the harshness of the weather that keeps the characters confined to their belltower, while in the three colony novels it is the presence of dangerous creatures (*Mirror Image*); the imminent 'Relay Effect', which lays people's minds bare (*Syzygy*); and post-Relay Effect economic hardship (*Brontomek!*). Significantly, however, both *Syzygy* and *Charisma* are detective novels; and Coney is able to draw on familiar detective story tropes, such as the suspicion adhering to anyone who ventures too far from the scene of the crime or behaves in any way oddly, to act as a constraining influence.

It will be appreciated with regard to the above that physical constraint shades into psychological constraint; and in the case of *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that Catch*, the constraints are all psychological: Joe Sagar, the protagonist, 'cannot' leave the Peninsula for any length of time simply because (1) he owns and runs a very demanding



business (he farms 'slithes', creatures from another planet that shed their emotion-receptive skins; Joe also owns a production facility that turns the skins into clothes); and (2) he is in love with Joanne, a criminal who has entered into 'bondage' with the novel's other main character, the ageing former actress Carioca Jones. (In the Peninsula stories criminals receive a remission of their sentences if they agree to supply replacement body parts should the person to whom they are 'bonded' require them.)

This leads straight into my consideration of character, and it is the constraining interplay of character that really transforms Coney's novels into a subgenre all of their own. Coney's best characters come alive to the extent that it is entirely possible to read and enjoy his novels simply as character studies. I know of no other SF author of whom this can be said. To illustrate the strength of Coney's characterisation, I propose to look now at **Mrs Bernadine Earnshaw**, who is arguably Coney's most 'rounded' character (to use E. M. Forster's critical term).

What makes a character 'round'? Without delving into literary theory, it is simply the amount of mutually reinforcing, consistent detail we are given about the character, presented in such a way (for example, by means of humorous anecdotes or memorable turns of phrase) that the character stays in one's mind long after the story has been read.

For a start, then, Mrs Earnshaw is presented with first, broad brushstrokes as an old woman. It may be thought anachronistic that in a time when interstellar travel is possible anyone should look or be 'old': surely, it may be argued, there will be drugs or procedures that can correct ageing. Indeed, other anachronisms (such as *Syzygy's* petrol-driven outboard motors) are present in Coney's work — and the work of virtually all SF writers, I might add, with the possible exception of Greg Egan. But in the Peninsula story 'The Cinderella Machine', cited above, Coney does address the problem of ageing; and as he later places the colony novels, *Charisma* and *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws the Catch*, in the same universe (largely via the presence in all of them of the powerful Hetherington Organization), it seems fair to give him the benefit of the doubt here.

To return to Mrs Earnshaw: Brian Stephens, in his essay on Coney in *Argo Navis* 3/3, describes her as a 'level-headed, exceptionally wise old woman, one of the few to keep their head during the Relay Effect' (Stephens 1978, p. 27). To this one may add that Mrs Earnshaw generally dislikes people for their hypocrisy and stupidity, and she

is not afraid to speak frankly about and to them. At the same time, she has a certain need for people; she has, for example, a paid companion called Miss Cotter, who it turns out in *Brontomek!* views Mrs Earnshaw as her 'te' (ideal person). Marine biologist Professor Mark Swindon, the protagonist of *Syzygy*, initially perceives Mrs Earnshaw as 'the wealthiest person in the area ... irascible and demanding, a leader in colony life, a snob' (Coney 1973, p. 66). Further, when Mark Swindon is told that, owing to rising tide levels, Mrs Earnshaw and Miss Cotter are to be billeted in his 'dome' (home), his reaction is 'Not those two old hags!' (Coney 1973, p. 79). Such is the complexity of the characters' interaction, however, that Swindon develops considerable respect for and admiration of Mrs Earnshaw. One motivation for this occurs when she bravely defends him with a gun from the other colonists at a time when they are accusing him of murder. Mrs Earnshaw is thus shown also to be a risk taker; later in the novel it is revealed that she is willing to risk taking an unproven Relay Effect protecting drug sourced from one of the colony's 'tearaways', Tom Minty. It is a testament to Coney's skill with characterisation that the reader is easily able to accept that Mrs Earnshaw, despite her general dislike of people, can be on friendly terms with such an unlikely figure as Minty.

There is minimal physical description of Mrs Earnshaw; Coney prefers to show rather than to tell. Nevertheless, the reader quickly receives the impression that Mrs Earnshaw is a physically imposing person, especially by comparison with Miss Cotter, who 'titters about':

'Miss Cotter twittered around unpacking, every so often bending solicitously over Mrs Earnshaw, who sat firmly ensconced in my favourite wing chair' (Coney 1973, p. 83).

Similarly, Mrs Earnshaw's voice is described at one point as rising to a 'roar' of temper; and when Mark Swindon at one point hears doors slamming, he automatically assumes it is Mrs Earnshaw who is responsible for the noise.

We also learn a considerable amount about Mrs Earnshaw's tastes. She has a fondness for drinking tea (Mark Swindon assumes her brand would have been expensively imported from Earth) but not coffee; at one point she is described as 'grimly making coffee with the clumsiness of long inexperience' (*Syzygy*, p. 104). She also disapproves of pipe-smoking (Coney 1973, p. 94). In *Brontomek!* we learn of her tastes in men: her late husband was an Admiral; and she remarks at one point 'You will notice that my ideal man is not a lily-livered punk ...!' (Coney 1976, p. 135).

But Mrs Earnshaw is no stereotypical battle-axe; at one point: “I’m sorry, Professor Swindon,” she said with unexpected gentleness. “I’m a stupid, intractable old woman, and you and your young lady will have to be patient with me” (Coney 1973, p. 89).

I hope that the above goes some way towards showing Coney’s skill with characterisation. Despite this, his novel after *Brontomek!*, the almost-unknown *The Ultimate Jungle*, dramatically turns away from intimate settings and complex characterisation. Indeed, and bizarrely, in the title of his novel *Charisma* he can be seen literally to curse the two novels — *Charisma* and *Hello Summer, Goodbye* — which Stephens considers his best and which are most typical of his ‘cosy’ style; for *Hello Summer, Goodbye* is also published under the title *Rax*, which is a curse word in the novel; and *Charisma* contains the same curse in disguised form.

If I may be permitted a slight digression: a number of readers on the internet site Goodreads have concluded that Coney ‘got his words wrong’, and that he really meant to use the word ‘chimera’ instead of ‘charisma’. But the letters of ‘charisma’ rearrange to ‘Ra chiasm’, and ‘chiasm’ is a word

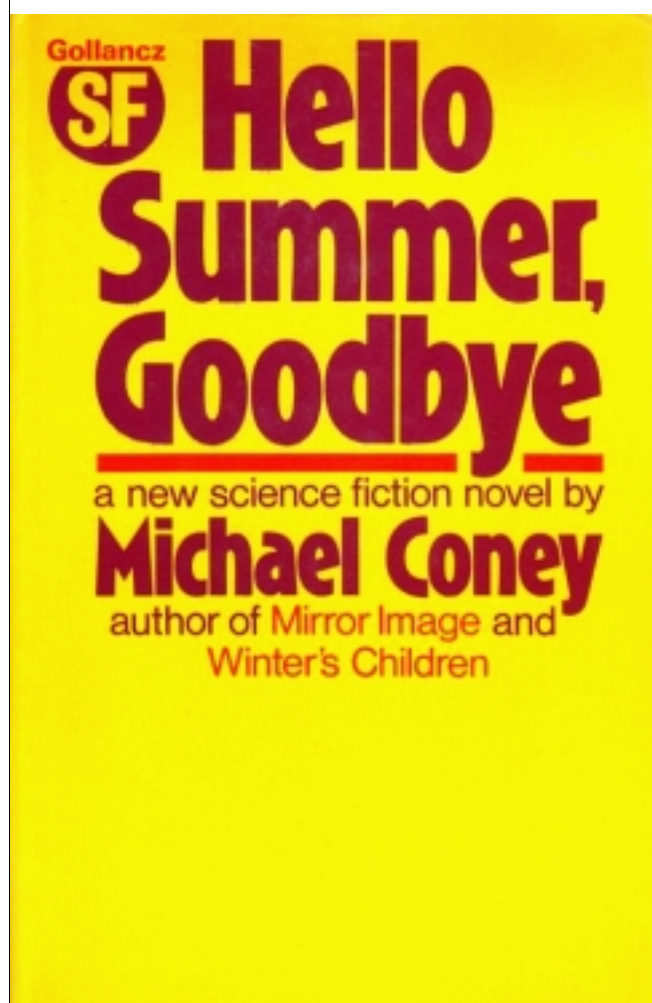
that means an X shape. Putting the two together we get ‘RaX’. Why this obsession with the word ‘Rax’? One pointer may be that it is found in the incantatory word ‘Abraxas’, which *Wikipedia* summarises as ‘a word of mystic meaning in the system of the Gnostic Basilides, being there applied to the “Great Archon” ... The word may be related to Abracadabra, although other explanations exist’.

Alternatively, ‘Rax’ may be a ‘corruption’ of the Latin word for ‘peace’, for in Greek ‘P’ is the letter Rho, which is pronounced ‘R’. We will never know.

To return to the main thrust of this essay: Malcolm Edwards in his January 1976 *Science Fiction Monthly* review of *Hello Summer, Goodbye*, comments: ‘I do wish that he would stop setting his novels in dressed-up versions of English fishing villages, but I’m sure he will, in time’ (Edwards 1976, p. 1).

While Edwards’ request is odd — you may as well ‘wish’ that Ray Bradbury had stopped setting his stories in an idiosyncratic Mars modelled on small-town America — his wish was granted with *The Ultimate Jungle*, for one strand of this novel is set on a far-future Earth. The story of the novel is simple: it has been discovered that over a thousand years in the future the sun will go nova, rendering escape from the Earth to other star systems necessary; the starships’ passengers will have to travel in suspended animation. But the starships are limited in number, so most people will have to be left behind. While this does not represent an immediate problem for people — it is their descendants, rather than they, who will be affected — there is still considerable disquiet among the population. To ameliorate this, the principle of ‘Penultimacy’ is introduced, which means that no one will know which is to be the final starship. In fact, to complete the illusion the last starship will remain on Earth. The protagonist, who falls foul of the commander of the program, one Admiral Laker, turns out to be an occupant of this last starship: he awakes, with partial amnesia, from suspended animation on a far future Earth covered in jungle. Fairly obviously, the Penultimacy idea is illogical, for (1) presumably there would be sufficient time for sympathetic people to create more starships; and (2) it seems unlikely that the inhabitants of an obviously grounded starship would be left in hibernation until civilisation as we know it ceases to exist. Why not wake the people up?

These objections aside, the scenario is clearly a dramatic departure from the ‘cosy’ criteria I have outlined, for the characters in the jungle strand are almost-faceless jungle tribespeople, and the



setting is anything but restrictive, as the tribe is constantly having to 'Climb' to escape rising water. Yet *The Ultimate Jungle* is a transitional novel, for considerable attention is paid to an earlier, cosy strand: it depicts Coneyesque characters (though not nearly as well drawn as usual), who are based around a 'Station' and are preparing for the starship evacuation of Earth. Importantly, the novel is set in the same universe as the other novels I have been so far been considering, for brontomeks are mentioned. The jungle strand gradually predominates in the novel, but Coney is as yet unable to make the most of his expansive material, instead concentrating on dull squabbles between members of the tribe (although there is one poignant moment when the protagonist reaches the top of the trees and looks out on what the world has become). I should point out that I personally dislike novels that switch from strand to strand (or, as seems to be de rigeur with SF these days, from the point of view of one character to many others): it's as though one is being forced to start reading a new story just as one is getting interested in the other one. I suspect that the multi-strand/multi-character approach is used mostly to disguise authors' inability to construct plots (and to a certain extent this criticism does apply to *The Ultimate Jungle*). Still, the novel provides a springboard to wider horizons; these are explored in his next novel, *Neptune's Cauldron*.

Published two years after *The Ultimate Jungle*, *Neptune's Cauldron* thankfully returns to single-strand narration and the complex plotting at which Coney excels, and as a consequence is a much more readable novel. But even though the novel shares with *Syzygy* and *Charisma* the feature that its protagonist, Tyg, is under suspicion of murder, the novel is a dramatic departure from the cosy framework of these two novels. Both criteria that I have been employing are relevant here. For a start, Tyg is not confined within a colony or research station: he is very much on the run, and after crashing on the planet Storm he visits many different places there. Second, because the characterisation is not as strong as usual — for example, the tycoon Caiman and the revolutionary Whiptongue are caricatures rather than characters — the solution to the murder mystery is achieved via the unravelling of physical clues rather than as a result of character traits and their interplay.

All this would not matter so much if Coney had managed to launch the novel into his later sub-genre where ideas, by virtue of their wildness and grandeur, take centre stage; but instead the novel falls flat on its face (as does virtually all SF, from

Le Guin to *Star Trek*) in its depiction of corny aliens. The issue here is complex, but there are two key points. First, the best SF, as outlook, gets its power, its oppositional force, by pitting humanity against an Other, something alien, unknown. But when the human perspective collapses into the alien perspective (or even simply interacts with it in a one-on-one basis) this oppositional force is lost, and the story becomes at best pedestrian and at worst corny.

A closely related but second issue concerns language: language is the way we present the world to ourselves, so as soon as we have aliens presenting ideas in our language they cease to be alien ideas but simply become quirky human ideas presented by beings of a (usually) quirky description. Translation of alien speech or sounds is no solution, because translation implies a common ground, a bridge linking two things that must therefore be fundamentally similar, not Other. The only effective way of presenting aliens is to present them 'out of the corner of the eye' and never have them actually speak. J. G. Ballard's 'The Voices of Time' and Damon Knight's 'Stranger Station' are stories that do just that, and it is for this reason they excel. Coney's own 'Those Good Old Days of Liquid Fuel', by far his best short story, is also in this category. In a simple story about a character who enjoys watching arriving starships much as some people are trainspotters, Coney succeeds wonderfully in capturing the vastness and majesty of the universe merely by hinting at the worlds and beings the starships have encountered.

I have said that Coney never manages (or even tries) to launch *Neptune's Cauldron* into a realm where ideas can take centre stage. He does, however, take a further step towards this with his next novel, *Cat Karina*. Unlike the other Coney novels I have been considering, the beginning of *Cat Karina* suggests the focus will not be on human relationships; and indeed the first pages spell out a dramatic shift in the novel's outward focus: the implication is that the reader will be propelled into a dizzying far future with towering time scales and transcendent ideas that are presented and then tossed aside as though they are nothing:

'There is a giant computer which straddles the world. It has its roots deep in the Fifty-second Millennium. ... It walked through history hand-in-hand with Man; it saw the building of the first Domes, it survived the reversal of the Earth's magnetic field, it watched the Age of Resurgence, it fought Man's wars for him and even, in the Domes, lived his life for him. It became so powerful that it was able to observe

practically everything that happened on Earth and, from this, project what was going to happen in the future — or the Ifalong, as it is more correctly called. Now, in these Dying Years, the computer is still there, still observing, thinking and predicting, in countless solar-powered centers all over the Earth. It is called the Rainbow. I am called Alan Blue-Cloud. In a way I am the Rainbow's interpreter' (Coney 1982, pp. 1–2).

This vision is of a world that is the complete opposite of the restricted, cosy environments I have been discussing: the envisaged world is in fact nothing less than the multiverse itself, which Coney calls the 'Greataway', with various time lines 'happentracks', and the totality of them the 'Ifalong'. If this isn't dizzying enough, Coney further disorients the reader by blurring the distinction between fact and fiction: he suggests that at a certain point in history people become dissatisfied with bare facts, and turn instead to 'Romance'. This vision frames and is central to ***The Celestial Steam Locomotive*** and ***Gods of the Greataway***: in them, it is impossible to determine to what extent their narratives are future history or future fable — or whether, given the vastness of the Greataway, there is ultimately any real distinction between these categories. Leibniz's famous 'identity of indiscernibles' is probably in the background here.

The next few pages of *Cat Karina* continue well as Coney remains in 'idea-bomb' mode: we are told that there is an ultimate Purpose, and 'it is directed towards ending the imprisonment of the greatest person the Earth has ever known: Starquin, the Almighty Five-in-One' (Coney 1982, p. 10). Starquin is often alluded to in *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Gods of the Greataway* as well, and his presentation is always 'corner of the eye'. This, of course, is how I have been arguing the Other in SF should always be presented; and Starquin is thus a triumphant example of how SF should proceed.

Unfortunately, *Cat Karina* retreats from there, as Coney focuses on the central 'character' and her sisters, and their petty perspectives completely negate the grand vision that Coney promises. If you can imagine the Bennett sisters from *Pride and Prejudice* rescripted by Gene Roddenberry in collaboration with Michael Moorcock, you have a fair idea of the feel of much of *Cat Karina*. (The sisters have feline DNA as well, so Walt Disney is probably in the background too.)

As I have said, *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Gods of the Greataway* deliver on the promise hinted at in *Cat Karina*, and are among the best SF books I have ever read. To discuss them further would be beyond the scope of this essay, but for reasons I have given they do not detract from Coney's achievement with the 'cosy' novels such as *Syzygy*. Coney no doubt wished to affirm his commitment to both visions; for he bequeathed to the world ***I Remember Pallahaxi***, where we find the character Uncle Stance, who is almost as vivid as Mrs Earnshaw. Shortly before Coney died, he made *I Remember Pallahaxi* available to download for free from his website. He told me in an email: 'The sequel to *Hello Summer, Goodbye* has got nowhere, despite a rave review from my agent's reader, and winning an award in Russia for the best serialisation of the year. I can't find an English-language publisher; the reason being given is that it's too long since I published a novel and the publishers don't want to re-launch me.'

Ironically, *I Remember Pallahaxi* found a publisher two years after his death, a fact Coney would no doubt have considered a puzzle on a par with those worthy of investigation in *Syzygy* and *Charisma*.

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— Daniel King, 2022

MATS DANNEWITZ LINDER from Norrtälje, Sweden, writes: ‘At long last, here is my contribution to *SFC*, which I have been reading and admiring since 1973 (already its 34th issue). I’ve been a science fiction fan since around the age of nine or ten (although I did not know it was called that). Other than that, I am a translator, writer, and editor (of, among other stuff, a number of fanzines).’

Mats Dannewitz Linder

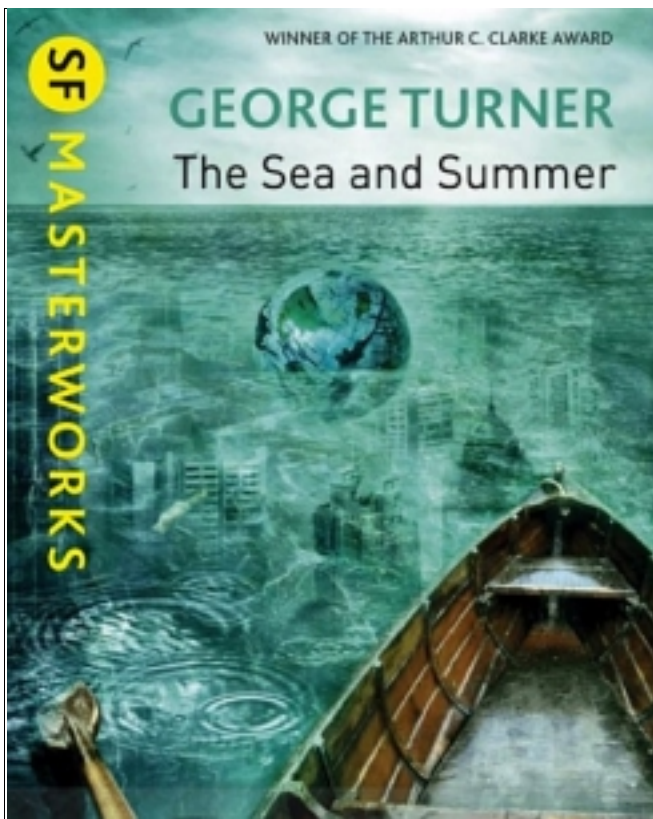
Climate fiction: Entertainment and/or warning

A lot of near-future science fiction, says Kim Stanley Robinson, ‘is also becoming what some people now call climate fiction. This is because climate change is already happening’. And indeed, it seems that William Gibson’s 2003 adage that ‘The future is already here — it’s just not evenly distributed’ is more true now than ever before, in that those who are mainly responsible for the climate change are suffering less from it than those who are not thus responsible. But perhaps paradoxically, most of those who write climate fiction belong in the former group. Thus it has become a way of, at least in fiction, distributing a bleak future to those who otherwise are less participating in it.

It should be pointed out, though, that in science fiction, global warming is nothing new. In an email, our editor Bruce pointed out that ‘this is what SF people in general, and fans in particular, have been trying to tell the rest of the world for the last 40 years’ (without much success, one might add). And indeed, already in 1969 **James Blish** wrote the following in the novella ‘**We all Die Naked**’: ‘The burning of fossil fuels might have fallen off with the invention of nuclear power, but the discovery in 1968 of the Alaska oil field aborted the nuclear boom and produced a new spurt in burning. Carbon dioxide is not a poisonous gas, but it is indeed heat-conservative, as are all the other heavy molecules that had been smoked into the air. In particular, all these gases and vapors preserved solar heat, like the roof of a greenhouse. In due course, the Arctic ice cap, which had been only a thin sheet over a small ocean, an ocean furthermore contained in a basin also heat-conserving, melted, follow by the Greenland cap. Now the much deeper Antarctic cap was dwindling, dumping great icebergs into the warming Antarctic Ocean.’

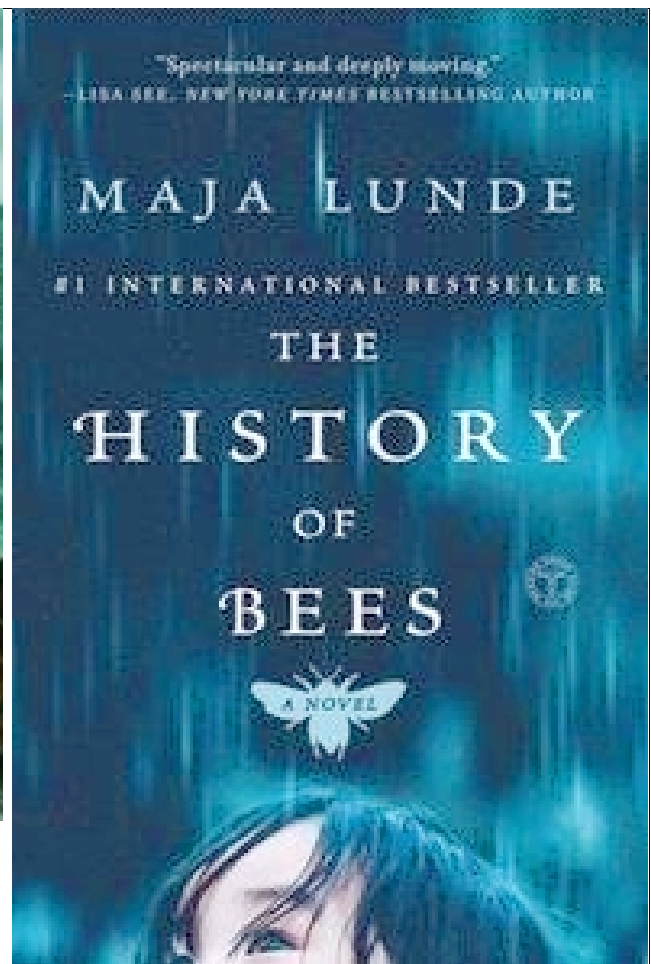


And in 1971, **Ursula Le Guin** mentions the same phenomenon in her novel *The Lathe of Heaven*: ‘Urban and industrial effluvia had not been controlled soon enough to reverse the cumulative trends already at work in the mid-twentieth century; it would take several centuries for the CO₂ to clear out of the air, if it ever did. New York



was going to be one of the larger casualties of the Greenhouse Effect, as the polar ice kept melting and the sea kept rising.’ (She mentions the Greenhouse Effect also in the 1975 short story ‘**The New Atlantis**’: ‘Due to the greenhouse effect of pollution, indeed Antarctica may become inhabitable.’)

It is not true, however, that **J. G. Ballard**’s novel ***The Burning World*** (1962) is about ‘our’ type of climate change; here the polar regions have indeed melted because of global warming, but that is due to increased solar radiation. Similarly, **George Turner**’s famous ***The Sea and Summer*** (1987) takes place in a world where the levels of the oceans are significantly higher than today, but the causes are many: ‘they had started a sequence which had to run its course in unbalancing the climate. Also, they were bound into a web of interlocking systems — finance, democratic government, what they called high-tech, defensive strategies, political bared teeth and maintenance of a razor-edged status quo — which plunged them from crisis to crisis as each resolved problem spawned a nest of new ones.’ Its predecessor, the novella ‘**The Fittest**’ (1985), was more explicit: ‘I learned how the global temperature had risen a full degree Celsius in the previous forty years, that the Antarctic ice cap was melting, and that the coasts not only of Australia but of the whole world were being slowly drowned. “One day,” Dad said, “all Melbourne will vanish under sixty metres of water.” We listened politely and did not take it in. “One day” was for ever away.’



The Sea and Summer is a rather typical example of the many sf stories that take place after the Earth has been hit by the results of climate change: in some places floods, in others droughts. Other and perhaps more famous — at least more recent — examples are **Emmi Itäranta**’s ***Memory of Water*** (set well into the future of Lapland; water is a scarce commodity and China rules Europe), **Octavia Butler**’s ***The Parable of the Sower*** (water is extremely expensive and fires are raging in a future USA), **Kim Stanley Robinson**’s ***New York 2140*** (where life goes on in a relatively orderly way in a New York that is flooded by hundreds of feet of water), **Bing and Bringsvaerd**’s ***London 2084*** (again with raised sea levels), and **Maja Lunde**’s magnificent tetralogy ***The History of Bees*** (2015), ***Blue*** (2017), ***Przewalski’s Horse*** (2019), and ***The Dream of a Tree*** (2023), recounting the story of mankind’s possible near-extinction as a result of climate change and related disasters.

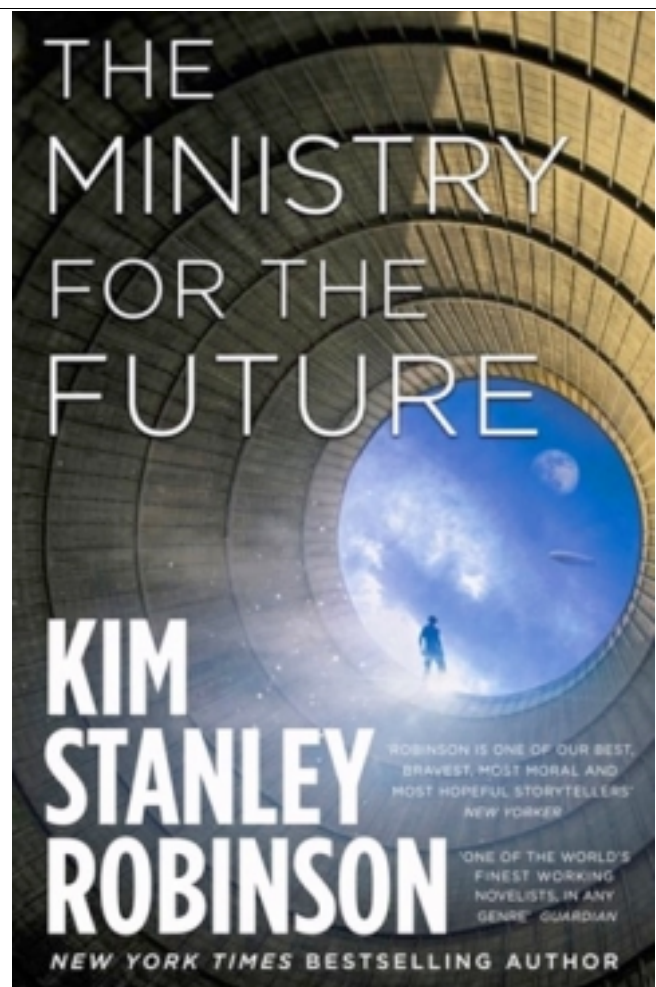
The same views of rather distant futures (when radical changes have already taken place) can be found in most of the contributions to the special initiative taken in 2016 by the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University: A Climate Fiction Short Story Contest. So far it has resulted in three anthologies, ***Everything***

Change: An Anthology of Climate Fiction, volumes I, II and III (may be downloaded free of charge); altogether 33 short stories with very varying themes even if a common thread is that they depict a future situation after radical changes have already taken place. Actually, this was always standard sf fare: the post-apocalyptic tale about a group of people making do as best they can in the face of difficult circumstances and often also other, hostile groups. (George Stewart's ***Earth Abides*** is a famous and relatively early — 1949 — example.) The causes of the apocalypse usually seem of less importance than the action itself, and this may well apply to many climate fiction stories as well.

Still, the efforts in *Everything Change* evidently are attempts to give warning as much as to entertain (in a serious manner). Thus they could be seen as a reply to the Indian writer **Amitav Ghosh**, who in 2016 wrote ***The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable***, where he called for literary depictions of a world during and after climate change. The problem with what has been written so far, he says, is that it is seen as science fiction and is therefore not taken seriously. Today, this topic 'ought to be the main concern for all the world's writers'. The same argument is made in the book ***On Time and Water***, where its author **Andri Snær Magnason** relates a meeting with **Wolfgang Lucht** from the Climate Research Institute in Potsdam. Lucht says: 'If you are a writer and do not feel the need to write about climate change, then you understand neither the science nor the seriousness of the matter. Anyone who understands what is at stake will not prioritize anything else. I head a large group of scientists. We publish graphs and charts according to the tradition of our sciences, and people look at them, nod and in some way get it, but they don't really understand.'

And indeed it seems to be a concern for quite a few writers nowadays, both within and outside of the science fiction field. However, most of the examples mentioned above are of the post-apocalyptic type. And regardless of how well written and convincing all such post-apocalyptic images may be, one might wonder what reaction they may provoke in the average reader. 'How terrible, now we all have to act to avoid that situation'? Or just a fascination with a well presented if frightening story (maybe like **McCarthy's *The Road***)? A story which is simply seen as ... well, as science fiction.

It is of course difficult for most people to imagine the consequences of two degrees' increase of the Earth's average temperature — then fiction literature may be of help. At the same time, it is important to avoid giving the readers the feeling



that it is all only more or less pure fiction. So perhaps narratives that tell about the climate change that we can see happening right now might affect the reader more directly. (In an interview, Neil Stephenson — author of *Termination Shock*, mentioned below — says that 'it seems to bring greater immediacy if the setting of the book is maybe a little bit in the future' as opposed to, I take it, far into that same future.) Here, the primary example must surely be **Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*** (2021). It presents us not only with the idea of a ministry, appointed in 2025 under the Paris Agreement, which will protect the interests of future generations; but it also outlines various concrete measures that are intended to halt climate change, and it also tells about terrorist groups taking extreme action in extreme times. The same writer's trilogy '**Science in the Capital**' (***Forty Signs of Rain*** [2004], ***Fifty Degrees Below*** [2005], and ***Sixty Days and Counting*** [2007], in abbreviated versions collected in ***Green Earth*** [2015]), must also be mentioned. It is set in the near future and depicts both flooding and how disruptions of the Gulf Stream lead to rapid temperature drops on the US east coast.

Another near future with both legal (judicial

processing) and illegal activities is depicted in **Paolo Bacigalupi's** engaging and disturbing novel ***The Water Knife*** (2015). It is set in the south-west of the United States, where drought and extreme water shortages lead to fights over the remaining water. However, there is a risk that the thriller setting will take the edge off the message that — one supposes — lies below the story. (The same writer's ***Drowned Cities*** [2012], however, is set far into the future and deals, despite its title, with more disasters than global warming.)

And even **Amitav Ghosh** himself contributes, in the contemporarily set ***Gun Island*** (2019) — which, however, brimming with implausibility, including myth and folklore, seems to fall prey to his own misgivings of looking very much like a work of fiction rather than a 'warning'.

Quite something else is **Barbara Kingsolver's** ***Flight Behavior*** (2012), a gripping love story (and much more) in a contemporary setting where the unexpected behaviour — due to rising temperatures — of Monarch butterflies plays a major role; through them, climate change gradually permeates the story up to a passionate recount of the larger picture. Maybe precisely this type of novel can provoke a reaction in some readers.

Also set in the near future, where we see the disaster taking place before our eyes, is **Risto Isomäki's** ***The Sands of Sarasvati*** (2005). This is about a tipping point, which consists of Greenland's vast glacier slipping into the sea, causing a huge tsunami that drowns large parts of Europe. Yet another interesting novel takes place some 100 years in the future but still feels like almost today. This is ***America City*** (2017) by **Chris Beckett**. Here we are presented with a United States of enormous rotting forests, vast dried-out dust bowls, and extreme hurricanes. People are fleeing northwards, and in order to make room for them the idea is to more or less force Canada, which is sparsely populated, to accept Americans. This leads to serious conflicts, but what is interesting is that even as a reader you find it difficult to take a position in such an almost impossible situation.

For some reason, there are few depictions of geoengineering, that is, technical solutions based on mostly large-scale technical interventions in climate conditions. This is particularly surprising given that sf is so often about technology (and science). As can be seen from the above text, the stories are almost always about how people are affected by, and how they deal with, changed circumstances. One exception is ***Termination Shock*** (2021) by **Neil Stephenson**. An attempt to inject massive amounts of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere plays a major role here — as a stop-

gap solution while a practical method for massive carbon removal from the atmosphere is being developed — but there are also small-scale technical innovations, such as a sort of 'stillsuits', as in Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

I have encountered at least four novels which address a specific tipping point that — perhaps curiously — is almost never discussed, namely the methane clathrate hypothesis: that rising sea temperatures (or drilling for oil or methane) could trigger sudden emissions of methane in enormous quantities of methane clathrate from the seabed. There is ***Mother of Storms*** by **John Barnes** (1994), where a nuclear explosion releases huge amounts of methane, resulting in accelerated climate change and colossal, long-lasting hurricanes. In **Frank Schätzing's** ***The Swarm*** (2004), the continental shelves collapse because of the destabilisation of the methane clathrate, and a mega tsunami follows. A mega tsunami is involved also in ***The Rapture***, by **Liz Jensen** (2009), where it is triggered by drilling after, precisely, methane. And finally in ***Convenient Mistruths*** (**Geoff Strong**, 2020), Arctic drilling once again leads to huge methane emissions, which in turn accelerates climate change to catastrophic proportions.

But what about the opposite point of view? Given the huge sums of money that have been spent, in other contexts, on denying that climate change is something to worry about, or that it is even real, one might think that literature would be used for this as well. But such novels seem to be in short supply. The only ones that stand out include ***Fallen Angels*** (1991) by **Larry Niven**, **Jerry Pournelle** and **Michael Flynn**, whose story is that, in the near future, radical environmental movements have intervened against the global warming which they (erroneously) fear is coming, thereby causing a new ice age. But a bunch of better-knowing scientists are fighting — along with a group of science fiction fans! — to save the world. The second title is ***State of Fear*** (2004) by **Michael Crichton** (sometime sf writer, author of not only the famous *Jurassic Park*, but also successful works such as *Sphere* and *Congo*), which deals with eco-terrorists and also contains a lot of arguments for the author's view on global warming. It seems, however, that none of these books was written with the support of any organisation on the 'climate denial' side.

Most of the works mentioned above are written by Americans. But what about climate fiction writers in other countries? They exist, of course, but a quick check on German and French works underscores the fact that just as science fiction in

general is mainly an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, so is climate fiction. (One wonders why this should be, even if it is mainly true when it comes to sf. I am certain that neither Maja Lunde nor Emmi Itäranta nor even American Barbara Kingsolver see themselves as writing ‘science fiction’.) Still, this may explain the fact is that most climate fiction takes place in, and concerns, industrial societies — that is, the northern hemisphere. Even though most of its authors live there, it is still remarkable because the countries of the southern hemisphere are those which will be first, and most, affected (and in many cases already are so). One notable exception is *The Ministry for the Future*, which has a much broader perspective.

Furthermore, all of the works mentioned so far seem to try to give warning (or perhaps just entertain) by telling stories more or less of doom. But some people have called for a literature that shows how a better world — without climate change, or after it has been averted — might look, in order to inspire and give hope. However, such tales are conspicuous by their absence, probably for the same reason that utopian tales are both few and rarely particularly readable. One might think that it should not take a new Le Guin to picture a world after the system change that many believe is necessary for us to avert a climate catastrophe. On the other hand, perhaps the ‘utopia’ is simply the world we are living in, which one may hope may survive reasonably well if we can learn to avoid the worst climate changes.

But can we? And — to get back to the Amitav Ghosh — can sf/climate fiction help us do that? Maybe that is not the point. Maybe the point is just that climate change is happening and it is caused by us humans. And once we know that, whether thanks to climate fiction or not, we may be moved to take whatever action we consider needed. But activist **Andreas Malm** (PhD and author of — among other books on the climate crisis — *How to Blow up a Pipeline*, where he advocates sabotage in order to save the climate) has stated that ‘the effect of the bourgeois climate novel has to be regarded as negative to date: a contribution to passivity’. His only exception is Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*. Today, he would be likely

to add the recent Swedish novel, *Det är tropiska nätter nu* (2022; *Tropical Nights Are Here Now*) by **Anna Dahlqvist**, in which the protagonist, a young wife and mother, in desperation joins a movement that uses sabotage as its means to get attention, with deadly results.

One particularly interesting reaction is exemplified by the brilliant British-Danish writer **Liz Jensen**. After her spectacular novel *The Rapture* (mentioned above), she said: ‘How could I write about anything else?’ But having written *The Uninvited* (2012) — where a striking system change is brought about by all the world’s children, rejecting the society that their parents have created — she came to the conclusion that writing fiction is not enough to reach out to people. Instead, she became one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion’s Writers Rebel, which ‘uses words and actions to draw attention to the emergency situation of climate and ecology’. Maybe she reasoned like the critic who wondered ‘what, if anything, a few science fiction writers can do to influence those prominent world leaders whose income depends on nothing being done about climate change?’

Still, as **Anindita Banerjee**, associate professor at Cornell University, says: ‘Stories give a certain shape to scientific evidence, lending it depth of field and breadth of perspective, allowing people to position and imagine themselves vis-à-vis material changes in the world around them.’ And ‘Interpretation may create understanding. And understanding may create change’ (**Åsa Beckman**, Swedish critic). The questions with regard to climate fiction are, on the one hand, who reads it and, on the other hand, how are they affected? Is it perhaps mostly read by those already convinced? Or if not, is it mostly considered thrilling entertainment? (Nothing wrong with that, of course.) If it leads to some kind of new insight, what does that in turn lead to? Silent frustration at the state of affairs? More voices in the debate? Even to action in the form of civil disobedience? Acts of violence? Only the future will tell.

— **Mats Dannewitz Linder**, 2023

Long-time reviewer for *SF Commentary*, COLIN STEELE writes regularly for both for *The Canberra Times* and *Biblionews*, the journal of the Book Collectors' Society of Australia. In recent years, his review coverage has expanded beyond SF and fantasy to cover a wider subject spectrum. His longer reviews of book matters, which I enjoy greatly, appear in *Biblionews*, a lively magazine that I recommend. Get in touch with the editor, Richard Blaire, at blairitage@optusnet.com.au.

Colin Steele's Bookworld

Favourite books

COLIN'S BEST BOOKS 2022

[As sent into *The Canberra Times*.]

In nonfiction:

- **A Private Sky: Letters of John le Carré 1945–2020** (Viking; \$39.99) illuminates a complex public and literary figure
- **Simon Sebag Montefiore's** massive 1300-page **The World** (Weidenfeld and Nicolson; \$69.99) confirms that we don't really learn from history
- **The Library: A Fragile History** (Profile; \$49.99) by **Andrew Pettegree** and **Arthur der Weduwen** reaffirms the importance of libraries and the conservation of knowledge in an era of fake news and digital complexity.

In fantasy and SF, two Canberra authors stand out:

- **Daniel O'Malley's** **Blitz** (HarperCollins; \$32.99) cleverly juxtaposes the supernatural in 1940s London and the present day
- In **36 Streets** (Titan, \$24.99), **T. R. Napper**, former diplomat and aid worker, dramatically explores Chinese geopolitics in a future Vietnam.

Outstanding nonfiction books from the 47 ANU/Canberra Times Meet the Author events include:

- **Kylie Moore-Gilbert's** harrowing, yet uplifting, **The Uncaged Sky: My 804 Days in an Iranian Prison** (Ultimo Press; \$34.95)
- **Frank Bongiorno's** **Dreamers and Schemers** (La Trobe University Press; \$39.99) provides a refreshing new perspective on Australian history

- **Brett Mason's** **Wizards of Oz** (New South; \$34.99), a scientific page-turner, reveals how Howard Florey and Mark Oliphant helped win World War II and shape the modern world.

OTHER PEOPLE'S FAVOURITES

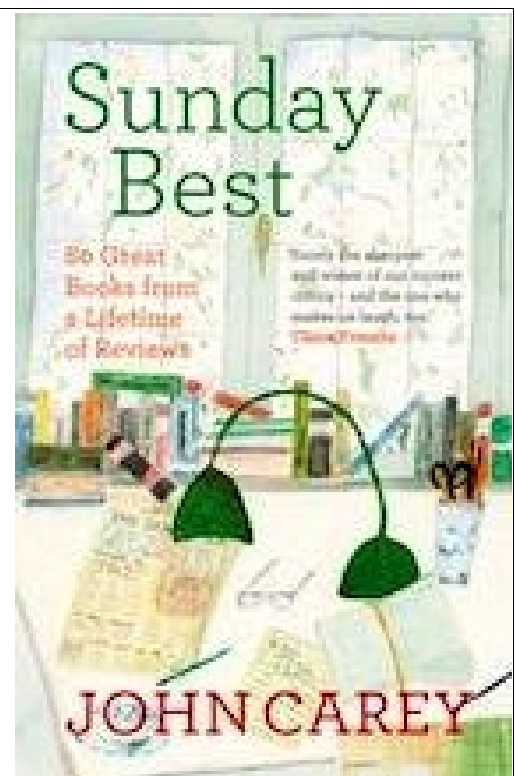
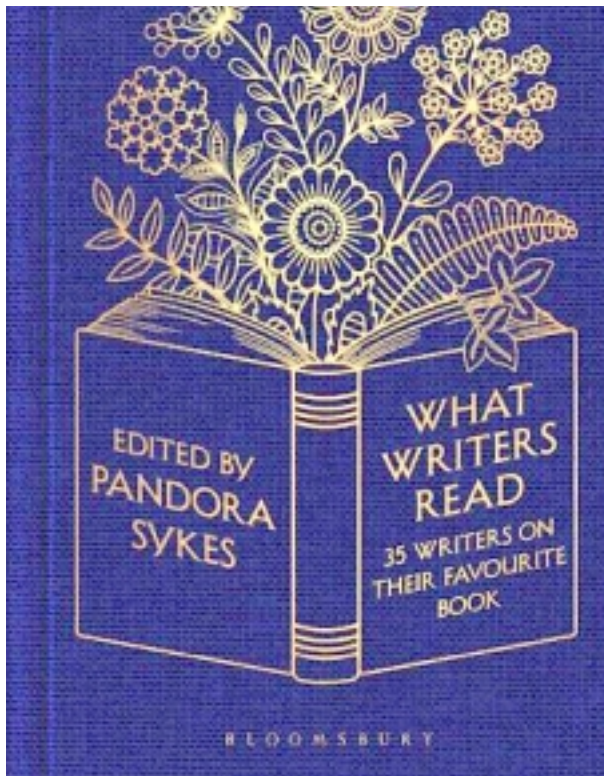
WHAT WRITERS READ:

35 WRITERS ON THEIR FAVOURITE BOOK
edited by Pandora Sykes (Bloomsbury; \$24.99)

One of the perennial questions posed to authors at literary festivals, is 'What is your favourite book?' In **What Writers Read**, **Pandora Sykes**, British award-winning writer and broadcaster, has asked that question of 35 authors, who have responded with short essays on the book they hold most dearly and the influence it had on their lives and writing. All profits and royalties from the book go to the National Literacy Trust, which works to end literacy inequality, particularly in young children.

Sykes notes that seeking out an author's favourite book is 'like peeking behind their brain curtains to see the cogs turning within'. Authors whose 'brain curtains' are drawn include Nick Hornby, Ann Patchett, Marian Keyes, Elizabeth Strout, Elif Shafak, Ali Smith, Derek Owusu, Sebastian Faulks, Lisa Taddeo, Monica Ali, Damon Galgut, William Boyd, and Fatima Bhutto.

Nick Hornby reveals the trauma that he experienced as a child after, it was revealed, in April 1968, that his father 'had managed to start a second family without the first one knowing anything about it' and his father leaving. Hornby took refuge in *Emil and the Detectives* by German poet



and satirist Eric Kastner, which provided 'comfort, distraction and companionship'.

Marian Keyes chooses *Cold Comfort Farm*, whose humour lifted her spirits when she was feeling suicidal in 1990, while Elif Shafak, growing up as a young bisexual woman in a conservative Turkey, found 'solace and freedom' in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

William Boyd reveals that Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* helped him make sense of his own childhood background of war in Biafra.

For Monica Ali, *Pride and Prejudice* ignited her 'lifelong love affair' with Jane Austen, drawing strength from Elizabeth Bennett on 'the path to self-knowledge'.

Sykes has admitted that she doesn't have a favourite author but she enjoys anything by David Sedaris, who 'mines his personal life keenly and intimately'.

SUNDAY BEST: 80 GREAT BOOKS FROM A LIFETIME OF REVIEWS
by John Carey (Yale University Press;
\$41.95)

John Carey, Emeritus Professor of English at Oxford University, has reviewed well over 1000 books for *The Sunday Times*. ***Sunday Best*** brings together 80 of his lengthy reviews, published between 1986 and 2021, covering fiction, biography, science, anthropology, and cultural history.

In 'The Critic as Vandal' (1976), his inaugural

lecture, Carey argued that much 'academic literary criticism, as currently practised, was largely engaged in turning works of literary art into barely readable prose'. Carey could hardly be accused of that in his extremely readable books on Thackeray, Donne, Dickens, and William Golding.

Carey's believes that it is the duty of the writer 'to make the reader want to turn the next page', and he certainly displays that ability in *Sunday Best*. Who would forget his description of Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as 'a woman with the face of a china doll and the soul of a tapeworm'?

An interesting theme throughout is how Carey deals with talented writers and artists who act terribly towards others. Carey deplores the actions, *inter alia*, of V. S. Naipaul, Tintin's creator Hergé, and Eric Gill, as depicted in biographies, but argues that we must never cancel their artistic achievements.

Carey writes in his introduction that you 'must never review a book you don't think worth reviewing'. He must have come close to not reviewing the memoir of Tom Maschler, the innovative CEO of publishing house Jonathan Cape. Carey takes Maschler to task for wondering if pre-Internet, the Frankfurt Book Fair required him to travel to Germany. When Julian Barnes gave a dinner party for Maschler, Barnes disappears and Maschler finds him asleep on the bed. Carey comments, 'It is a reaction to Maschler's company the readers of this book will readily understand.'

In reviewing Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's*

Wife Carey questions 'Greer's reputation as a revolutionary thinker and disturber of the piece'. The first sentence of his review of Paul Strohm's *The Poet's Tail* on Chaucer begins, 'Paul Strohm has written a brilliant book and admirers of Geoffrey Chaucer may wish that he hadn't', which makes one immediately want to read on.

Grayson Perry's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* is termed 'one of the most gripping and intelligent accounts of an artist's growth I have ever read'. And that childhood growth was traumatic, 'Perry's mother became pregnant by the local milkman — a busy roundsman, who had already two other customers pregnant — and his father left for good'. Perry's mother went on to marry the milkman, who was also a part-time wrestler and night-

club bouncer, who 'tried out his combat skills on his new family'.

Carey reflects on a possible fate stemming from a review by his younger self. Carey visits the dying Clive James in Cambridge. Carey is aware that he had once written a critical review of James's first book, *The Metropolitan Critic*. It soon became very clear that James had not forgotten. Carey writes, 'Later his widow told me that he could have quoted the offending review word for word.'

Sunday Best is a wonderful collection of the cream of Carey's reviews and, as with the best of reviews, inspires the reader to seek out the books themselves.

Science fiction and fantasy books

IN ASCENSION

by Martin MacInnes (Atlantic; \$32.99)

In Ascension, Scottish novelist **Martin MacInnes's** third novel, follows the themes that he established in both his first novel, *Infinite Ground* (2016), which won the Somerset Maugham Award, and his second novel, *Gathering Evidence* (2020). MacInnes' framework is that 'that climate disaster has been and continues to be enabled primarily

through our refusal to accept human integration in the natural world'.

In *In Ascension*, Dr Leigh Hasenboch, a Rotterdam marine microbiologist with a troubled family history, is sent to investigate a mysterious hole off the coast of South America, which apparently is three times deeper than the Mariana Trench and may contain new life forms.

Leigh's marine work then links her to another strange phenomenon, being part of a three person interstellar space crew to track down a mysterious huge ovoid, which evokes memories of Arthur C. Clarke's classic SF novel *Rendezvous With Rama*.

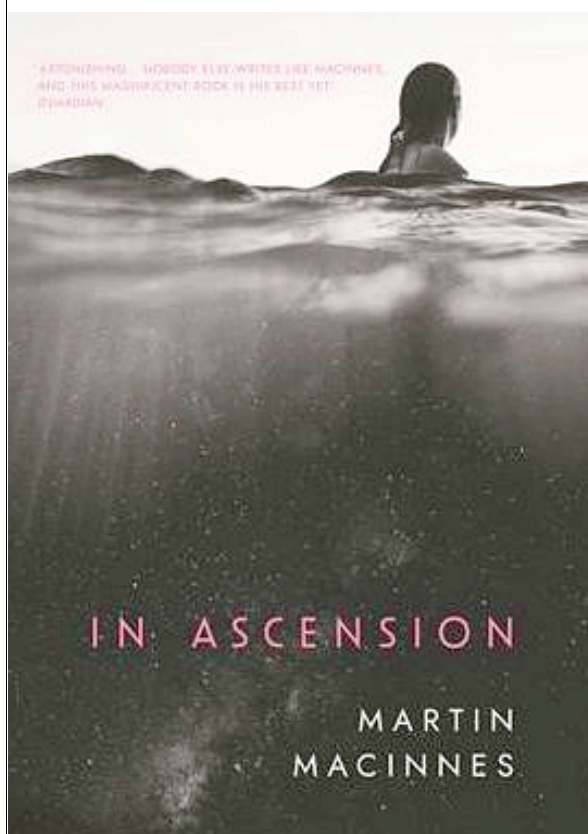
MacInnes is, however, no hard SF author, but rather one more interested in exploring the human condition, especially in terms of the boundaries between human and nonhuman, our origins and the natural world. MacInnes sees his thematically challenging novel 'as an attack against the assumption that humans are somehow "outside the (earth) system"'.

EXPECT ME TOMORROW

by Christopher Priest (Gollancz; \$49.99)

Expect Me Tomorrow, **Christopher Priest's** latest novel, follows the pattern of his recent novels in mixing time and place. Priest juxtaposes events in the nineteenth century with a climate-devastated 2050, impacted by increasing heat, dying vegetation, food scarcities, and power outages.

In 2050, Charles 'Chad' Ramsey, an erstwhile police profiler, with a twin brother, climate





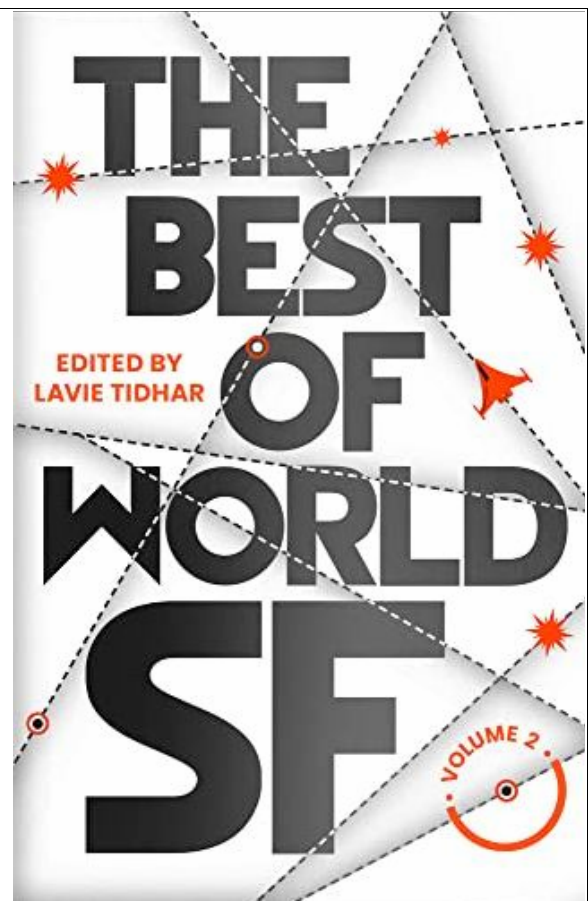
journalist Greg, improves his profiling research via an experimental neurological brain attachment. This enables him to signal back to family ancestors and twins, Adolph and Adler Beck, in the second half of the nineteenth century, who are decidedly confused by the temporal incursions.

Priest follows the lives of the Becks and the Ramseys in different literary styles, characters fragmentally connected by Chad's unexpected mental time machine. How the past and the present interact and influence the future is the key to *Expect Me Tomorrow*.

THE BEST OF WORLD SF: VOLUME 2
 edited by Lavie Tidhar (Head of Zeus;
 \$39.95)

World Fantasy Award winner **Lavie Tidhar** brings together an outstanding collection *The Best of World SF: Volume 2*, which features 29 stories from authors from 23 countries, thus moving outside the usual Western canon. Eight of the stories are original, while the other 21 have been published within the last decade.

The imaginative opening story, Nadia Afifi's 'The Bahrain Underground Bazaar', sees an old woman Zahra, dying of cancer, visiting Bahrain's virtual immersion chambers so she can experience the memories of other people's deaths and thus what



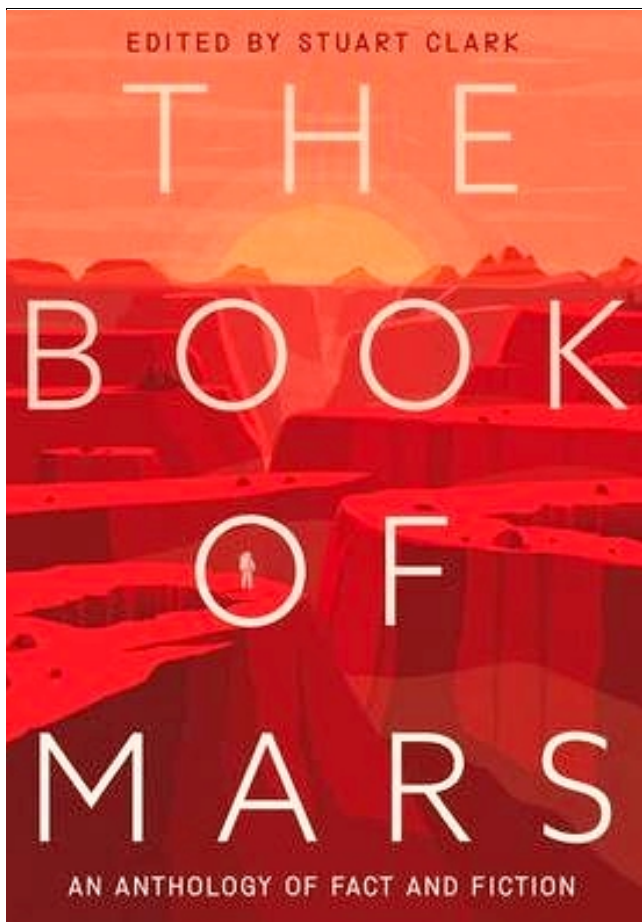
it is to face death. One experience will reconcile her to her fate and restore family relationships. Afifi delicately balances the corporate exploitations of the digital world with the emotional needs of a single person.

Dystopias and robots/artificial intelligence are prominent themes throughout the collection. Greek author Natalia Theodoridou, in 'To Set at Twilight in a Land of Reeds', has a world in which humans have made robots sentient to make them better at their harvesting tasks, but it also brings them sorrow amidst the human emotions.

In 'Kakak', Malaysian author William Tham Wai Liang reveals that exploited androids in a Malaysia, divided between rich and poor, can be more human than their owners, while Chinese author Xing He, in 'Your Multicolored Life', contrasts machine societies of freedom and slavery.

THE BOOK OF MARS:
AN ANTHOLOGY OF FACT AND FICTION
 edited by Stuart Clark (Head of Zeus;
 \$49.99)

British science journalist **Dr Stuart Clark**, in *The Book of Mars: An Anthology of Fact and Fiction*, traces Mars from 'Myth to Musk' through 100 selections of fiction and nonfiction. Each of the loosely themed six sections is arranged



chronologically.

The largely American and British fiction selection includes authors such as Stanley G. Weinbaum, Arthur C. Clarke, H. G. Wells, Andy Weir, and Roger Zelazny, but not Kim Stanley Robinson, whose award-winning Mars trilogy writings could inform Ellen Musk's views on the possibilities of terraforming Mars.

The chapter selections, in nearly 900 pages, are not always a successful blend of fact and fiction. The fiction is often in the realm of the fantastic rather than hard SF, such as in the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury. An unexpected short story is Martin Amis's 'The Janitor on Mars', in which a Martian robot reveals the reality of our place in the universe against a jarring background story of child abuse. Devotees of Mars fiction would probably be better served by Australian writer **John Litchen's** *Dreams of Mars: 130 Years of Stories about Mars* (2018) and its recent sequel *More Dreams of Mars* (2023, Yambu Press).

More relevant are the nonfiction writers, such as Christopher Mason and Robert Zubrin, although many of the selections are imbued with the optimism of Mars exploration without deep consideration of the financial, scientific, and ecological implications. Mars, however, still beckons for billionaires, as Elon Musk reveals in his chapter.

A WINTER GRAVE by Peter May (Riverrun; \$32.95)

Scottish author and dramatist **Peter May** is best known for his best-selling Lewis trilogy and Enzo Macleod novels. His new standalone, eco-noir novel *A Winter Grave*, is set in 2051 with flashbacks to 2023.

Political corruption is one of the backdrops in a Scotland, independent since the late 2020s, in which racial unrest is rife because of increased refugee migration. Two billion people have been on the move in countries severely affected by either intolerable heat or flooding, which has left many coastal areas in Britain underwater.

May has stated his novel emerged as a result of the anger he felt after the COP26 climate change conference in Glasgow in 2021. 'But I'm a crime writer. The question was how to write about climate change ... and still stay within my genre. And then it came to me. I wouldn't write about climate change at all. I would write a classic political thriller set in my home country of Scotland, but nearly 30 years in the future, in 2051, in a world transformed by a very different climate.

The consequences of global warming would be a backdrop to my story, not the story itself.'

When young meteorologist Addie finds the frozen body of an investigative journalist on a mountain near Loch Leven, veteran DI Cameron Brodie, working in a largely flooded Glasgow, is asked to lead the investigation. He is initially reluctant, as Addie is his estranged daughter and he has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Nonetheless, he determines to take on the case and also to seek peace with his daughter, estranged since Addie's mother committed suicide in mysterious circumstances.

Brodie's task, to find who murdered the reporter and the reason for his murder, is made more difficult when the isolated iced village of Kinlochleven loses all power; the sudden murder of his Glasgow pathologist companion; and Addie's animosity. Yet father and daughter must work together, as it emerges that the journalist was killed to prevent significant secrets emerging, with national implications, in relation to the nearby nuclear plant.

May uses his small closed village crime environment effectively in an absorbing grim thriller, in which Brodie must confront not only the ghosts of his past but also, in the present, a ruthless individual determined that he will never bring the journalist's investigations to national attention.

And in relation to the bigger picture, May hopes that *A Winter Grave* 'will shock people out of their complacency about climate change, and bring pressure to bear for action before it's too late. If it isn't already'.

QUEEN HIGH by C. J. Carey (Quercus; \$32.99)

C. J. Carey is the pen name of journalist and novelist Jane Thynne, who was widowed when her fellow novelist husband Philip Kerr died in 2018. *Queen High*, the sequel to Carey's critically acclaimed *Widowland*, is set in an alternative Britain, after a British alliance in 1940 enables Germany to win World War II.

In 1955, Britain is even more under the harsh rule of the German Protectorate, after the 1953 assassination of 'The Leader', i.e. Hitler, in Oxford's Bodleian Library at the conclusion of *Widowland*. Oxford is subsequently razed to the ground.

In 1955 Britain, women are allocated to castes that define social and economic roles. The highest caste, 'the Gelis', in honour of Hitler's niece, include 31-year-old Rose Ransom, who has some-



how managed to escape the attention of authorities despite her major role in the death of Hitler.

Rose continues to work as 'Chief Corrector' in the Culture Ministry, but is also assigned to be a 'Poet Hunter', following poets and censoring poetry, which is seen by the authorities as a means of transmitting subversive messages. An Orwellian state, under Protector Alfred Rosenberg's 'Aesthetic Hygiene Squad', vigilantly censors books and communication channels.

The lowest female caste are 'the Friedas', widows and spinsters over 50 who had no children, who are confined to the ghetto 'Widowlands', but who play a crucial resistance role. Rose recalls the phrase from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, 'Everyone in English society is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies', which works both ways in *Queen High*.

In *Widowland*, Edward Windsor and his American wife Wallis Simpson become the royal puppets of the Protectorate when George VI and his family escape to Canada. King Edward VIII dies in 1954, leaving Queen Wallis to prepare for the upcoming visit of President Eisenhower. The visit is intended to strengthen the Anglo-American alliance against the increasing power of Eastern Europe.

Rose, seconded to assist Wallis in the preparations for the visit, slowly gains Wallis's confidence,

learning that Wallis is desperate to return to America. In addition, Wallis has a secret document, which, if revealed, could dramatically affect the visit and provide a means to endanger the Protectorate, thus facilitating Rose's major role in the attempts to bring Princess Elizabeth to the throne.

Queen High takes a different approach to those of the two classic novels of Nazi victory in World War II, Len Deighton's *SS GB* and C. J. Sanson's *Dominion*. Carey never quite reaches the collective heights of Deighton and Sanson, but nevertheless delivers a compelling alternate history viewed from a feminist perspective.

THE TOLKIEN INDUSTRY

The Tolkien industry is certainly alive and well. The total cost for the Amazon Prime TV series, *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* has been estimated at just over US\$1 billion, although the 2022 first series, costing \$462 million, did not receive universal acclaim, which would not have pleased Amazon boss and Tolkien fan Jeff Bezos.

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) had published only a fraction of what he had actually written about the worlds of Middle-Earth when he died. These writings did not emerge until his son **Christopher Tolkien (1924–2020)** gave up his Oxford academic career in 1975, becoming his literary executor to edit Tolkien's unpublished writings and bring them to publication. Christopher once

said, 'I grew up in the world he created. For me the cities of *The Silmarillion* have more reality than Babylon.'

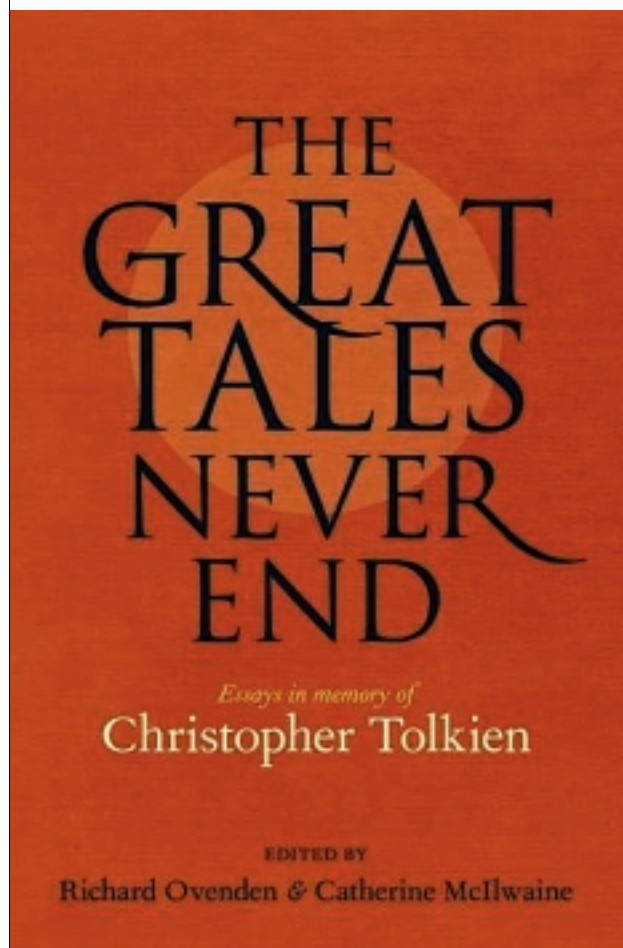
The legends of Middle-Earth were left in unfinished manuscript form, which Christopher Tolkien then edited into 25 books, including *The Silmarillion*, the 12-volume *History of Middle-earth*, and the standalone volumes of the *Great Tales* and **The Fall of Gondolin**. Christopher Tolkien, who described himself as a 'literary archaeologist', wrote that bringing his father's 'writings into publishable form was a task at once utterly absorbing and alarming in its responsibility toward something that is unique'.

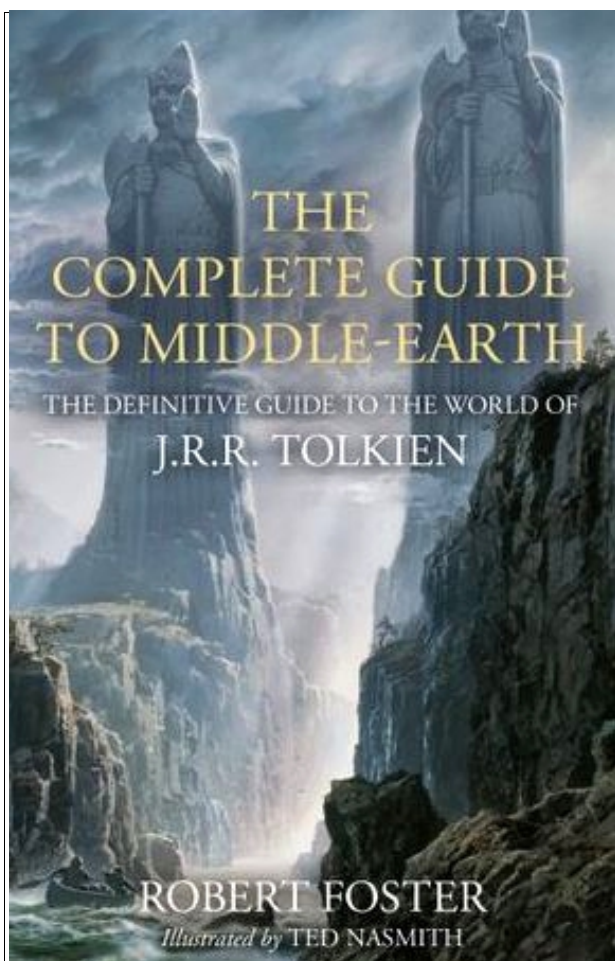
THE GREAT TALES NEVER END: ESSAYS IN MEMORY OF CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN edited by Richard Ovenden and Catherine McIlwaine (Bodleian Library; \$79.99)

Tributes to his nearly 50 years of editorial endeavours are documented in ***The Great Tales Never End: Essays in Memory of Christopher Tolkien***, edited by **Richard Ovenden**, Bodley's Librarian, and **Catherine McIlwaine**, the Tolkien Archivist at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Ovenden has commented, 'It's a massive achievement ... and that breadth of detail which Christopher's edited works bring to the world of Middle-earth would have never appeared if he hadn't taken on this labour — and it was a labour that really lasted 50 years.'

The Christopher Tolkien festschrift title references *The Two Towers*, in which Frodo Baggins tells Sam Gamgee that the great tales of heroism in Middle-earth 'never end'. Catherine McIlwaine's introduction and Tolkien's sister Priscilla remember Christopher the man, while Vincent Ferré traces the challenges Christopher faced in editing and producing coherent narratives from his father's manuscripts.

The editorial intent of the other chapters was to feature essays that 'Christopher himself would



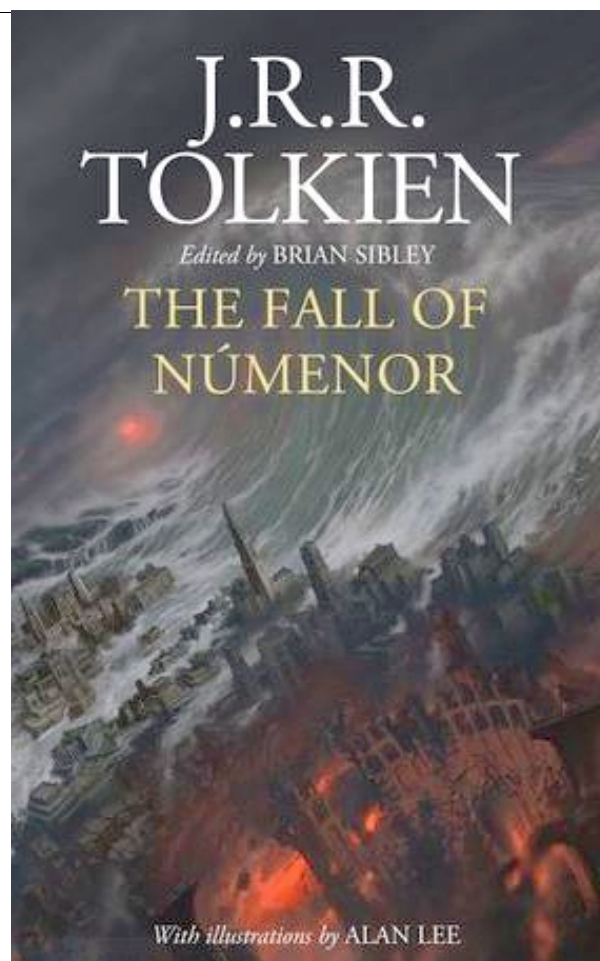


enjoy reading'. The essays, from Tolkien experts, such as Verlyn Flieger, John Garth, Tom Shippey, and Brian Sibley, cover topics such as, 'What was Tolkien's intended ending for *The Lord of the Rings*?' and details explaining 'the extraordinary array of doorways which confronted the hobbits as they journeyed through Middle-earth'.

The beautifully produced volume includes colour reproductions of J. R. R. Tolkien's manuscripts, maps, drawings, and letters from the Bodleian Tolkien archive, as well as photographs of and drawings by Christopher Tolkien. *The Great Tales Never End* comprises essential reading for Tolkien scholars and fans.

**THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO MIDDLE-EARTH:
THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE WORLD OF
J. R. R. TOLKIEN
by Robert Foster (HarperCollins; \$75)**

Documenting the Tolkien legendarium is a complex one. **Robert Foster's *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth*** brings together in an A-Z sequence all the key facts and information related to *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, augmented by full-page colour illustrations by Ted Nasmith. Foster's *Guide* is not a new work. It first appeared in 1971 and



was then updated in 1978 by Foster after the 1977 publication of *The Silmarillion*.

Christopher Tolkien once commented, 'If I have been inadequate in explanation or unintentionally obscure, Mr Robert Foster's *Complete Guide to Middle-earth* supplies, as I have found through frequent use, an admirable work of reference.' While Foster has not taken into account any of Tolkien's posthumous publications since 1977, it still remains an indispensable reference guide to the original published corpus of Tolkien's work, and it is good to have the book back in print.

**THE FALL OF NUMENOR
by J. R. R. Tolkien; edited by Brian Sibley
(HarperCollins; \$52.99)**

The Rings of Power TV series introduced new characters and events to the Tolkien chronology. It is therefore useful, in that context, to have ***The Fall of Númenor***, which brings together all of J. R. R. Tolkien's writings on the Second 'Dark' Age of Middle-earth collected for the first time in one volume. Tolkien wrote in the 1955 appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* that these were 'the dark years for Men of Middle-earth', but also the years of 'the glory of Numenor', before its eventual fall.

Brian Sibley, who produced the 1981 BBC radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, certainly knows his Tolkien, and deftly links the chronological inconsistencies of the manuscripts to deliver a composite perspective on Tolkien's Second Age. Sibley pays tribute in his introduction to Christopher Tolkien's 'long years of dedicated curatorial stewardship'.

The Fall of Numenor is another sumptuously

produced volume with a cover image by Alan Lee, 'the doyen of Tolkien art', along with Lee's 10 full-colour illustrations and 50 pencil sketches. In the Tolkien book publication context, in April 2022 the Folio Society issued a limited 1000-copy edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, each priced at £1000, with the entire stock selling out in 36 hours. The Tolkien great tales and sales never end.

Spy and crime fiction

THE BOOK OF THE MOST PRECIOUS SUBSTANCE by Sara Gran (Faber; \$32.99)

Sara Gran, Los Angeles-based novelist and screenwriter, is best known for her Claire Dewitt detective novels, but her literary profile has certainly changed globally with *The Book of the Most Precious Substance*.

Gran has said, 'I think, as a writer, it's a good idea to challenge yourself and do what you haven't done before. I could have followed the same template and had a career writing detective novels over

and over again.'

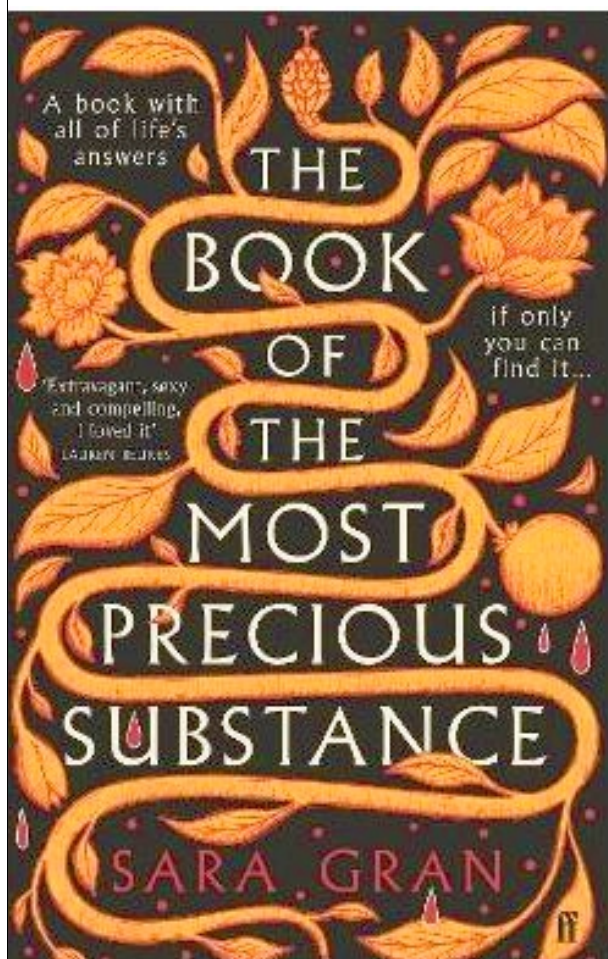
Instead, she has delivered a powerful sexual literary thriller featuring rare book dealer Lily Albrecht. Lily faces severe financial problems in supporting her husband Abel, 'a highly renowned writer of academic theory, criticism and obscure histories', who is immobilised with a rare neurological condition.

When Lily is asked to find an extremely rare early seventeenth-century book, 'the most precise and most effective grimoire of sex magic ever written', of which only three copies are thought still to exist, she believes her financial problems could be solved. Additionally, she might be able to help Abel, as it is rumoured that anyone with the book is granted one wish after completing five, mostly sexual, acts linked to the book. Lily will have to consider how much would you sacrifice for someone you love.

Lily embarks with her friend, University Rare Books Curator, Lucas Markson, with a 'charm unusual in book people', to track down a copy of the book. This takes them challenging and dangerous millionaire collector territory in New York, New Orleans, Munich, and Paris. Lily reflects, 'It was like the book already had me, and was leading me exactly where it wanted.'

Lily and Lucas initially discover fragments of the book and begin attempting the five stages, not knowing their ultimate fate. Lily is a strong character, with Gran depicting her 'waking back up to life' through her relationship with Lucas. Sex is a driving force in the plot, with Lily's encounters in a French château echoing Anne Desclos's famous *Histoire d'O*.

Gran has commented, 'I found it necessary to actually describe the sex. The writer is left to alternate between the words of pornography — effective in their proper context but a bit silly in a literary thriller about a rare book — and the words of anatomy, ugly in any context but needed to



explain what goes where. It was a challenge to weave these languages together to try to come up with something like plain, everyday English, and write about sex ... hopefully with depth, honesty and, most frightening of all, vulnerability. I'll leave it up to you to decide if I pulled it off'. Most readers will think she has.

QUEEN AND COUNTRY

by Alan Judd (Simon & Schuster; \$32.99)

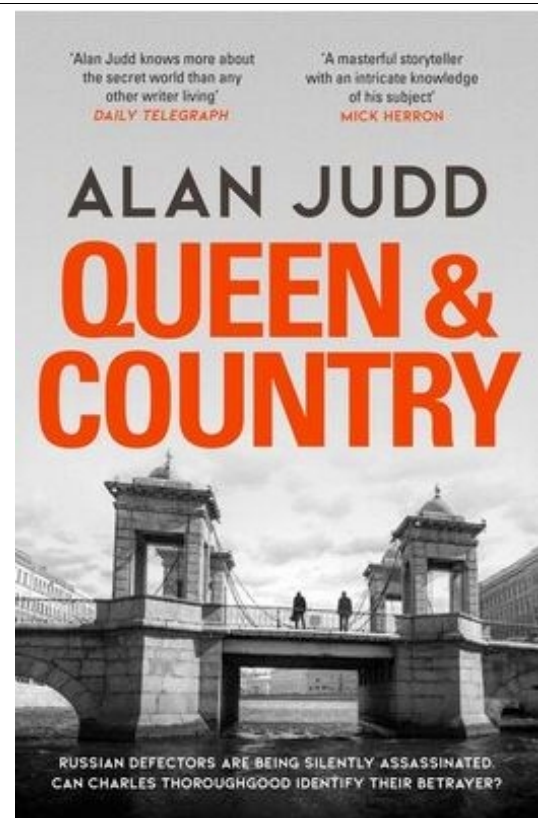
Alan Judd (real name Alan Edwin Petty), who served as a British army officer in Northern Ireland and later in the Foreign Office, currently writes for *The Spectator*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Oldie*. He is the author of 11 novels and two biographies, which have won several awards, including the Guardian Fiction Prize and the Heinemann Award.

While working in the Foreign Office, Judd began writing novels. His first, *A Breed of Heroes* (1981), later a BBC TV film, has as its main character a British soldier in Northern Ireland, Charles Thoroughgood. In subsequent novels, Thoroughgood becomes an MI6 agent, and experiences numerous personal and career traumas before eventually becoming head of MI6.

Judd has said, 'I'm trying to show that people in spy organisations are ordinary people.' But, 'if intelligence is controlled by a government like that of the Chinese Communist party or Vladimir Putin, it won't be very nice ... It's a reflection of the political culture that it serves.'

The political and cultural settings are certainly up-to-date in the latest in the series, *Queen and Country*, which begins with high-level Russian defectors being poisoned with a previously unknown Russian chemical composite. Since the defectors were all in safe houses with changed identities, it soon becomes clear that someone near the top of MI6 is leaking their secret locations to the Russian FSB.

The latest death is that of a Russian biochemist, codenamed Beech Tree, whose defection Thoroughgood had managed before his retirement.



After the murders, acting head of MI6 Martin Manners (the new female head of MI6 is on maternity leave) wants Thoroughgood to return to investigate.

Thoroughgood is initially wary, and becomes even more wary when Manners proposes that Thoroughgood lead a Foreign Office delegation to St Petersburg to secretly interview the mistress of Beech Tree, a co-worker on the apparently untraceable poison that induces heart attacks. Manners comments, 'to be absolutely frank, Charles, you are expendable. In cover terms I mean ... You're not a clean skin we're trying to keep under cover and you'd have diplomatic protection.'

Alan Judd does not rival John le Carré or Mick Herron at the top level of the spy fiction genre but he is not far off, delivering in *Queen and Country* an engrossing and realistic novel of intrigue and betrayal.

Biography

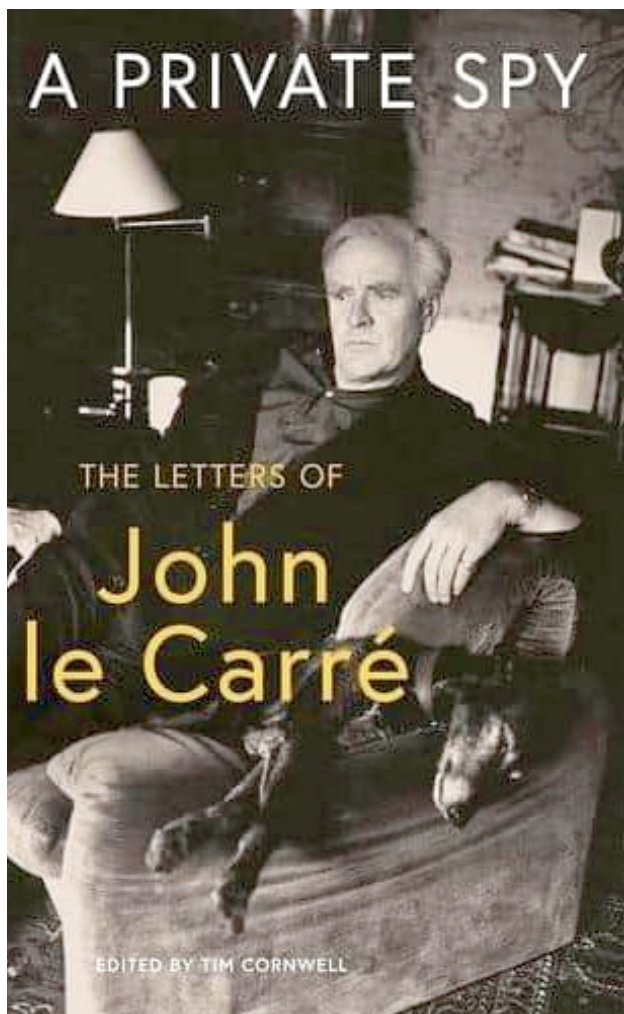
A PRIVATE SPY: THE LETTERS OF JOHN LE CARRÉ 1945–2020

edited by Tim Cornwell (Viking; \$39.99)

David Cornwell (1931–2020), a.k.a. **John le Carré**, is the perfect example of Philip Larkin's

lines 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad/They may not mean to, but they do'. Le Carré was always haunted by his father Ronnie's 'incurable criminality' and the abandonment of himself and his brother by his mother at the age of five.

Tim Cornwell, David's son, who died shortly



after writing the introduction to *A Private Spy*, uses the pen-name le Carré for Cornwell throughout the text, given reader familiarity with the name, although almost all of the letters are signed ‘as ever David’.

The selected letters, which fill 632 pages, follow le Carré’s life from his troubled childhood to Oxford, MI6, and *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), which led to nearly 60 years in the public eye after its publication made him a global best-selling author, who ‘defined the Cold War era and spoke truth to power’. Another son, Nick, has called le Carré’s life ‘a journey from wolf child to national treasure’.

The early letters are often more personally revealing than the later ones, in which le Carré is conscious of autobiographical legacy. ‘I have decided to cultivate that intense, worried look and to start writing brilliant, untidy letters for future biographers.’

Le Carré is notably more assertive when commenting on other people, particularly politicians. Tony Blair, whom le Carré detested after the Iraq War intervention, is ‘self-delusional, self-loving,

self-serving and self-forgiving’, while for Boris Johnson, ‘cowardice & bullying go hand-in-hand’ and Trump is ‘a thin-skinned, truthless, vengeful, pitiless ego-maniac’.

A Private Spy is a comprehensive supplement to Adam Sisman’s 2015 excellent biography and le Carré’s 2016 own collection of autobiographical essays, *The Pigeon Tunnel*. Le Carré saw Sisman’s biography as being too intrusive, although Sisman muted his coverage of le Carré’s numerous affairs. Le Carré once told his brother Tony, ‘My love life has always been a disaster area’, and later apologised for being ‘neither a model husband nor a model father’.

Tim Cornwell only includes ‘a smattering of letters to his lovers’, which include Susan Anderson, a museum curator, and Yvette Pierpaoli, an aid worker to whom *The Constant Gardener* was dedicated. Since le Carré’s death, however, his affairs have become more widely discussed, largely because of le Carré’s self-styled mistress Suleika Dawson’s 2022 book, *Secret Heart: John le Carré, An Intimate Memoir*, which revealed her two-year affair with le Carré in the early 1980s.

Simon Cornwell has commented on the Dawson memoir, ‘If Dad is to be regarded as a significant writer, and I think he was that, having a picture of every aspect of the man, and the processes he went through, the things he thought and felt, I think is really interesting.’

When 52-year-old Le Carré met Oxford graduate Suleika, who was in her early twenties, le Carré had been married to his second wife Jane for 11 years. His first marriage in 1954, to Ann, he later described as a silly mistake. Ann became the name of George Smiley’s enigmatic, unfaithful, wife in the Smiley novels.

Le Carré was unfaithful to Jane numerous times but she was indispensable to him as his editorial assistant, ‘the crucial, covert collaborator’ in the words of their son Nicholas. Jane died only two months after her husband. The last letter in the book is a an undated handwritten note from le Carré to Jane that begins: ‘You are the only woman.’

One of the models for George Smiley was his Oxford tutor, the Reverend Vivian Green, who helped le Carré financially with his fees during one of Ronnie Cornwall’s periods of bankruptcy. The charismatic, but criminally flawed, Ronnie was to haunt le Carré throughout his life. Le Carré’s trauma is first revealed in letters at boarding school when Ronnie tried to pay the school fees with black market goods instead of cash. Ronnie appears in fictional depiction in several le Carré novels, notably *A Perfect Spy* (1986) and *Single and*

Single (1999).

In the letters, le Carré engages in entertaining fashion with fans, publishers, directors, actors, and politicians. In later correspondence, le Carré rails against Britain's subservience to the USA, global capitalism, multinational corruption, and Brexit, 'an act of economic suicide mounted by charlatans', which led him to take up Irish citizenship just before his death. He wasn't always popular with the Western 'craven intelligence services', whom he said were being influenced by 'a handful of jingoistic adventurers and imperialist fantasists, backed by a lot of dark money and manipulation: populism led from above'.

Le Carré once called himself 'a mole too used to the dark to believe in light' but certainly Sisman's biography, Dawson's memoir, and now Tim Cornwell's compilation of the letters, full of rage, compassion, and insights, shed significant light on a complex literary and public figure. An added bonus are le Carré's illustrations and caricatures, peppered throughout the book.

**TELLER OF THE UNEXPECTED: THE LIFE OF
ROALD DAHL: AN UNOFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY**
by Matthew Dennison (Head of Zeus;
\$49.99)

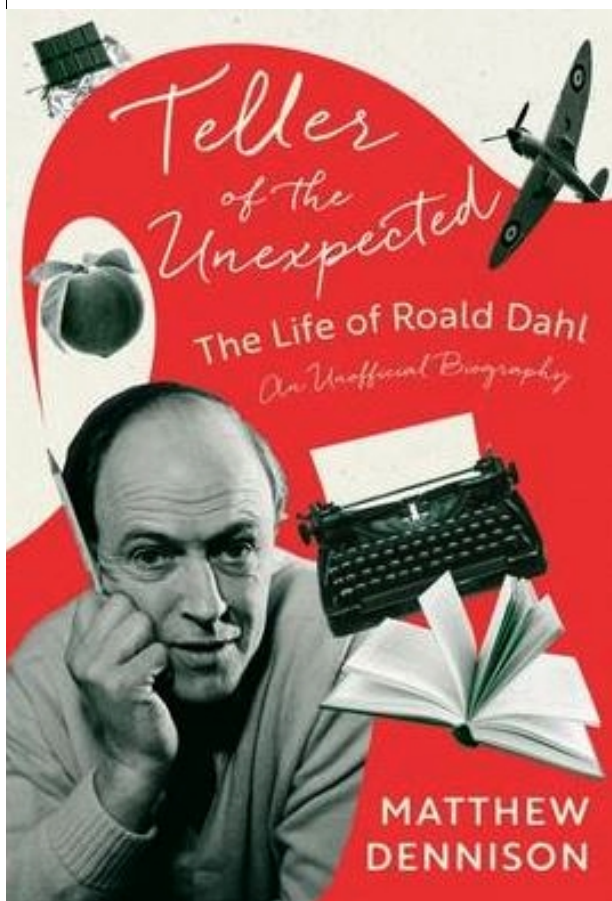
Matthew Dennison is the author of several

literary biographies, the most recent on Beatrix Potter. Now comes his account of the life and writings of **Roald Dahl** (1916–1990). Dahl is estimated to have sold over 255 million books in 58 languages to the present day, with a copy of his books selling every 2.6 seconds somewhere in the world. In September 2021 Netflix paid his estate 'a little over' £500 million for the Roald Dahl Story Company, owner of rights to Dahl's characters and stories, to create what has been called the Netflix 'Wonkaverse'.

Roald Dahl's continuing readership success comes through books such as *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Magic Finger*, *Fantastic Mr Fox*, *The Twits*, *George's Marvellous Medicine*, *The BFG*, *The Witches*, *Mattilda*, and *Esio Trot*. While Dennison is not as analytical as Jeremy Treglown's incisive 1994 biography and Donald Sturrock's authorised biography in 2010, he does provide an up-to-date, compact study, which balances the positives and negatives of Roald Dahl's complex life.

Dahl had a colourful life, which included a troubled childhood, an education at boarding schools that taught him 'the link between cruelty and laughter', derring-dos as a pilot, womaniser, and spy for Britain in World War II Washington, allegations of anti-Semitism and bullying, family medical tragedies, and, of course, the publishing success.

Dahl's father and sister died by the time he was four and his eldest daughter Olivia died of measles at the age of seven. Although often a distant and unfaithful husband, he cared for his first wife, the actor Patricia Neal, after her brain hemorrhage in 1965. Dahl became her 'browbeating Pygmalion' to maintain the required intensive speech and physical therapy. Dennison argues that these family tragedies had an impact on Dahl's life and



writings, the latter, however, allowing him to transcend his personal grief.

His fictional characters were decidedly black-and-white, Dahl said, 'I like villains to be terrible and good people to be very good'. Dennison reflects: 'At its best, Roald's writing, both for children and adults, is lyrical, hilarious, vivid, unpredictable, tender and utterly absorbing: his darkest fictions portray without regret a world of cruelty, cynicism, misanthropy and caprice.'

Like Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl was often overlooked by the literary establishment, who envied his huge commercial success. He took solace by commenting, 'I make things to please children. I don't care about grown-ups.'

Dennison writes: Dahl's 'fiction ... has convinced generations of child readers that, in a world of adult menace, the author is on their side'. Dahl aimed 'to turn the child into a reader of books'. This he clearly did in his lifetime, and continues to do.

SIMENON: THE MAN, THE BOOKS, THE FILMS by Barry Forshaw (Oldcastle; \$29.99)

Barry Forshaw, renowned crime fiction critic, writes that Belgian novelist **Georges Simenon**

(1903–1989) was 'the most successful writer of crime fiction in a language other than English' in the twentieth century. His 'most iconic creation', the pipe-smoking police inspector Jules Maigret, featured in 75 novels, published from 1931 to 1972.

Maigret first appeared in a 1930 serial publication, collected as the 1931 novel *Pietr-le-Letton*, a police procedural set primarily in Paris. The English translation, *Pietr the Latvian*, was the first book in 2013 of the excellent Penguin series of translations of Maigret novels.

Simenon, who wrote more than 400 novels, including the so-called literary '*romans durs*' and at least 1000 short stories, was the exact opposite of the devoted husband, uncomplicated and empathetic Inspector Maigret, as his biographers, Patrick Marnham and Pierre Assouline, have revealed.

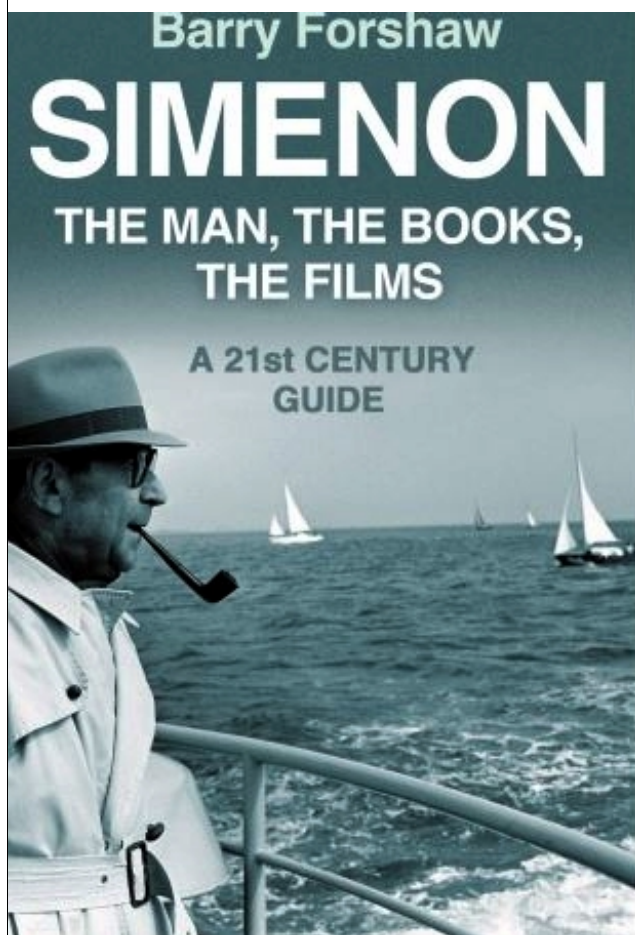
Ian Sanson has commented, 'Where Simenon was promiscuous, Maigret is uxorious. Where Simenon was self-promoting, Maigret is self-effacing. Where Simenon was swift, Maigret is slow. If Simenon were the analyst, then Maigret was undoubtedly the therapist.' Simenon's son John observed in 2020, 'My father was certainly not content in himself, and most of his characters, except Maigret, are like him.'

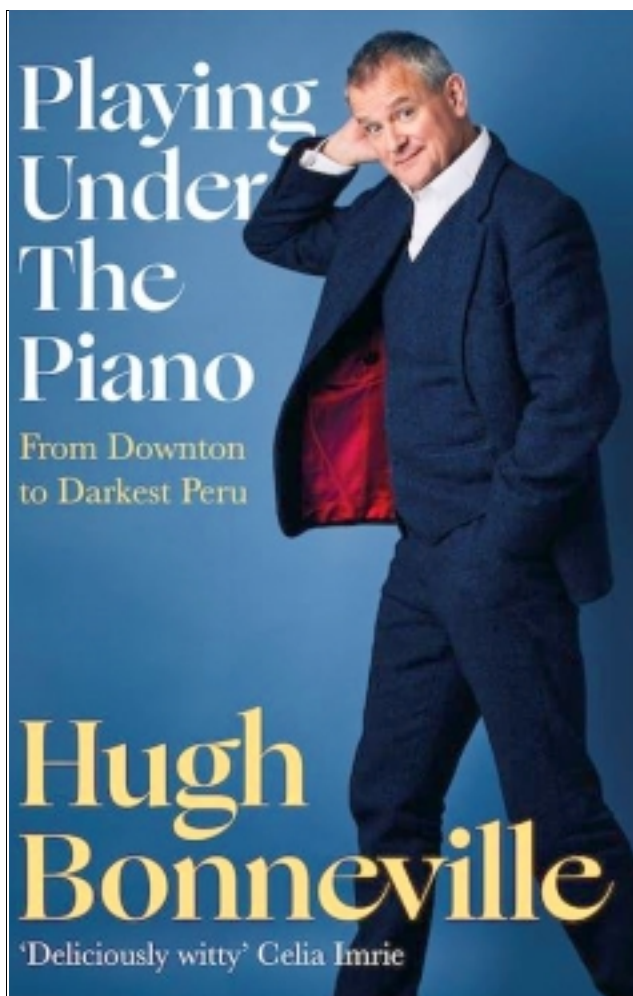
Forshaw writes, 'Maigret is much less a detective than a "weigher of souls" ... A rare sort of man, a hero who does not recognize himself as such. A quotidian figure at one with the victim, but also with the perpetrator; he sympathises with both. We believe in Maigret as he is one of us.' Maigret's credo was *comprendre et ne pas juger*, i.e. 'understand don't condemn'. Maigret was an efficient fixer, a *redresseur de destins*, 'a righter of destinies'.

Forshaw provides an effective introduction and reference primer to Simenon, aided by interviews with Simenon's friends, including his son John, his publishers, editors, and translators. He delivers an informed collage of 'Bite-size briefings' on Simenon's life and work, as well as an up-to-date annotated bibliography of the publications, which takes up over half the book.

The bibliography includes a very useful listing, 'Simenon on Screen', documenting the numerous film and television adaptations of Simenon's novels, beginning in 1932 with Jean Renoir's *La Nuit de Carrefour*. The 2022 film *La Jeune Morte* (*Maigret and the Dead Girl*), starring Gérard Depardieu, came out too late to be included in the bibliography.

As to the television adaptations of Inspector





Maigret, Simenon is reported to have favoured the 1960s BBC series starring Rupert Davies. He certainly would not have appreciated the recent series, starring Rowan Atkinson, whom Forshaw believes 'presented a singularly dour Inspector Maigret, with what little humour was allowed the character falling absolutely flat'.

FILM MEMOIRS

PLAYING UNDER THE PIANO: FROM DOWNTON TO DARKEST PERU by Hugh Bonneville (Abacus; \$34.99)

Hugh Bonneville's *Playing Under the Piano* is as polished as his character Robert Crawley, Earl of Grantham, in *Downton Abbey*.

Bonneville writes he was a 'little posh boy' from London, with a surgeon father and a mother, whom he learned after her death worked in MI6. He graduated with a theological degree from Cambridge University, where he spent most of his time

as an actor.

Bonneville provides a chronological memoir, with many anecdotes, of his acting life, from his first role as the third shepherd in the school nativity play to the global success of the *Downton Abbey* and *Paddington* films. After much stage touring experience, where he said he learnt 'by osmosis', he made his film debut in Kenneth Branagh's *Frankenstein* (1994), in which his character, Schiller, who only had one line, had his leg cut off and sewn on to Robert De Niro's Creature.

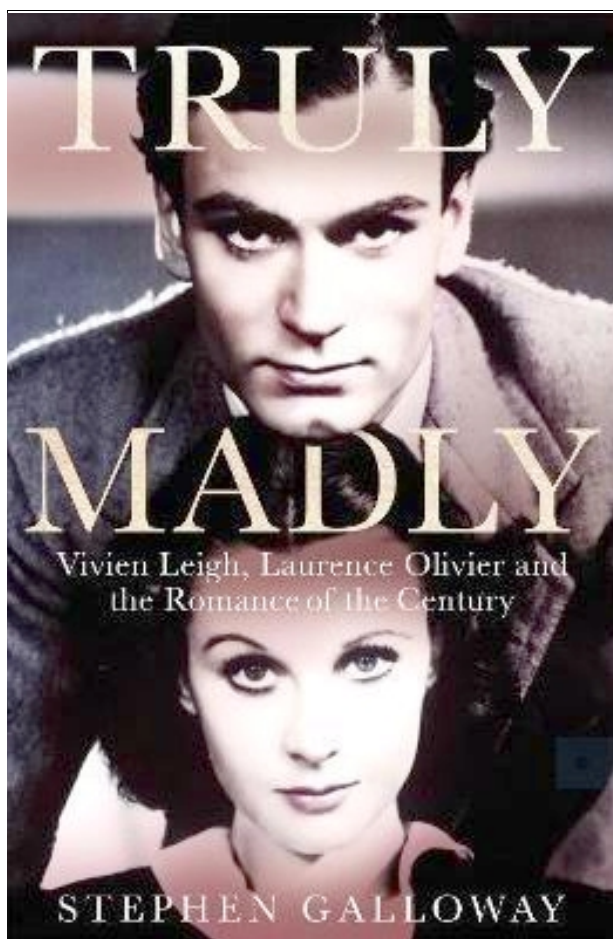
Bonneville never expected the success of the *Downton Abbey* series, which made him a global figure. He recounts many stories of the series and relations with his fellow actors. He quotes Shirley MacLaine, 'I had lovers all over the world ... one time, three in a day', to which Dame Maggie Smith responded, 'Oh darling, you have been busy.' Other stories cover his work with fellow actors, including Judi Dench, Sir Ian McKellen, Derek Jacobi, and Ralph Fiennes. Don't look for scandal but rather an entertaining memoir that is never dull.

TRULY MADLY: VIVIEN LEIGH, LAURENCE OLIVIER AND THE ROMANCE OF THE CENTURY by Stephen Galloway (Sphere; \$38.99)

Scandal and tragedy abound in ***Truly Madly: Vivien Leigh, Laurence Olivier and the Romance of the Century*** by **Stephen Galloway**. Leigh and Olivier, two of the biggest names in film in the twentieth century, fell in love in 1937, leaving their respective partners and children. 1940 saw Vivien Leigh winning an Oscar as Scarlett O'Hara in the *Gone With the Wind*, while Lawrence Olivier was nominated as best actor for Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Olivier was not pleased that Leigh won an Oscar before him.

Stephen Galloway, the former executive editor of the *Hollywood Reporter*, reveals 'the love, madness, and sadness' of their relationship with a focal point on Leigh's mental and emotional breakdowns through her then little understood bipolar disorder.

While there have been many books on Olivier and Leigh, Galloway, without avoiding the necessary accounts of the movies and scandal, provides a retrospective compassion, consulting medical experts to assess the contemporary treatment of Leigh's mental state, including electroconvulsive therapy for 'manic-depression'.

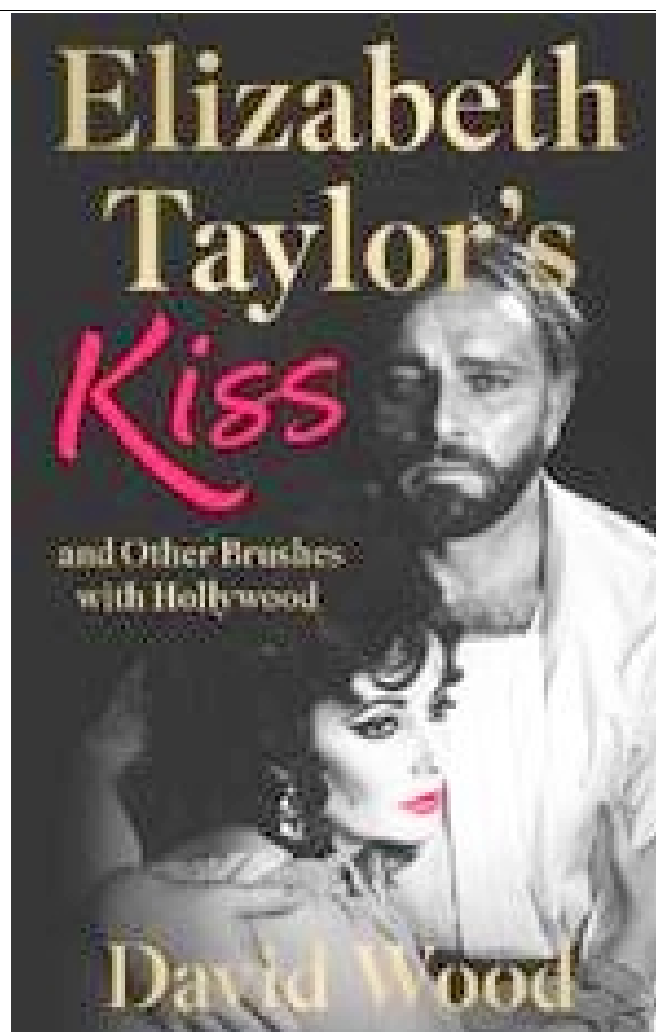


After an almost royal six months' tour of Australia in 1948, Galloway writes, after a fascinating chapter, 'the most glamorous couple in the world left Australia bedraggled, dog tired and barely talking'. Once they had been so full of life; but now, in Larry's words, they were little more than 'walking corpses'. Subsequently, Leigh had a tempestuous affair with Peter Finch in London while Olivier, who turned to Dorothy Tutin, in 1949 told Leigh their marriage was over.

Reality and fiction merged in 1951 when Leigh played the ageing, unstable, Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Playing Blanche, Vivien later acknowledged, 'tipped me into madness'. The descriptions of Leigh's decline in the next decade, before her death in 1967, are harrowing. Alcohol, as in another later 'romance of the century', of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, played a destructive part before Leigh died from tuberculosis in 1967; Olivier died in 1989.

**ELIZABETH TAYLOR'S KISS
AND OTHER BRUSHES WITH HOLLYWOOD
by David Wood (The Book Guild; \$25.90)**

David Wood's *Elizabeth Taylor's Kiss and Other Brushes with Hollywood* is a sort of



'touched by fame' film memoir. Actor and writer David Wood recounts his times working with famous names. It all begins for Wood as a student at Oxford University playing Wagner in the now famous 1966 production of *Dr Faustus* with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor at the Oxford Playhouse. Wood portrays a humorous and empathetic Elizabeth Taylor who states all she did, in her non-speaking role as Helen of Troy, was 'to kiss Richard and move around'. Taylor lends her expensive jewellery to Wood's girlfriend and makes sandwiches for the cast.

Each chapter has a section on what happened next to all the principal players. In the context of *Dr Faustus*, many of the students went on to glittering careers after Oxford. Jeremy Eccles, who played Beelzebub, ended up in Australia as a noted broadcaster and writer on Aboriginal art and culture.

Five other chapters cover Wood's 'close encounters' with Hollywood, including a volatile Shelley Winters, relying on prescription pills, when they played together in *The Vamp*. Other interactions include David Hemmings, Malcolm McDowell, Christopher Plummer, Roger Moore, and James

Mason. He describes these 'brushes with Hollywood' as a 'dreamlike wander through Wonderland', a far cry from the often nightmarish wander

through Hollywood of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh.

Book publishing

MUP: A CENTENARY HISTORY **by Stuart Kells (Melbourne University** **Publishing; \$60)**

What is a university press, how is it funded, and what does it publish? These are the key underlying questions in **Stuart Kells'** comprehensive centenary history of **Melbourne University Press**, now titled **Melbourne University Publishing**.

Kells, award-winning author, book trade historian, and adjunct professor at La Trobe University, believes his book is 'more than a history of MUP. It is also a large slice of the history of book publishing in Australia, and it provides a window into the history of Australian culture over the last 100 years'.

MUP's many publications have included the two-volume *Encyclopaedia of Papua and New Guinea*; Manning Clark's six-volume *A History of Australia*; *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*; the journal *Meanjin*; and more recently political books, such as *The Costello Memoirs* and *The Latham Diaries*. MUP's prestigious Miegunyah imprint, funded through the Grimwade donation, has seen the publication of significant books on art, history, and biography.

MUP was the first university press in Australia, established in 1921 initially alongside a bookshop, which provided significant funds to support the press in the twentieth century. Kells details people from the early history of MUP who made significant contributions to Australian publishing, such as Frank Wilmot, who prioritised Australian writing in the 1930s, and editor Barbara Ramsden, who 'served as the backbone the press for four decades'. In a sad reflection of the times, MUP Directors were all men during the twentieth century, the editors largely women. Louise Adler would change all that when appointed Director in 2003.

Kells notes, in his introduction, that he has 'taken care to approach the [MUP] controversies in an even-handed way'. One of the most notorious episodes in Australian publishing erupted in September 1993, when Peter Ryan, Director of MUP from 1972 to 1988, writing in *Quadrant*, publicly disowned Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*,

in which he had been intimately involved throughout its publication.

Mark McKenna reviewing Doug Munro's excellent *History Wars: The Peter Ryan–Manning Clark Controversy*, noted that 'for scandalous copy and gossip-laden controversy, there was nothing to equal it'. Kells reflects how MUP 'has been discussed and presented in the media is part of its story and impact. The media coverage speaks to how the press is seen as public property and an important cultural institution'.

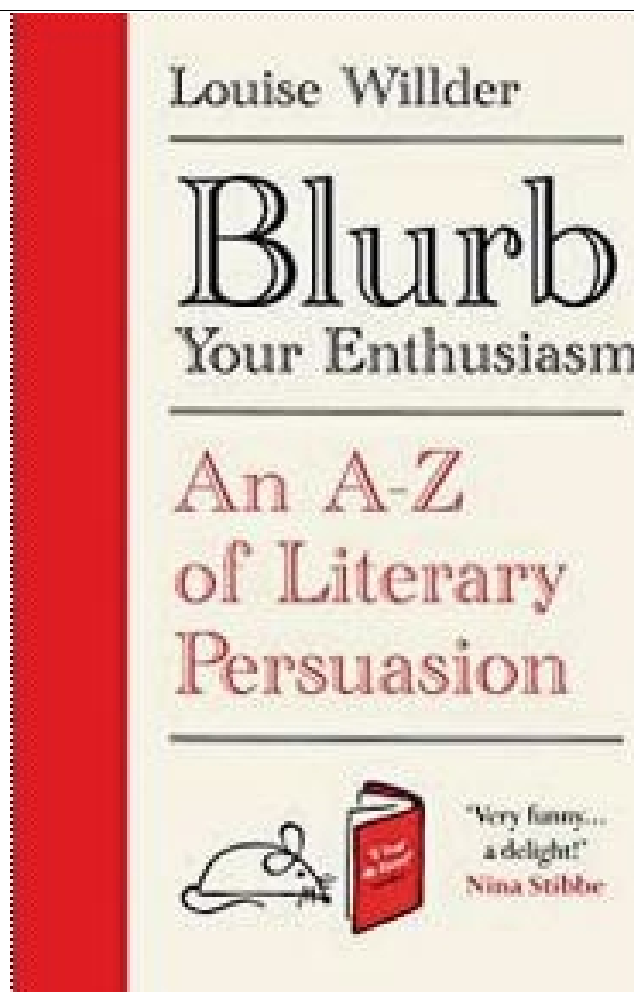
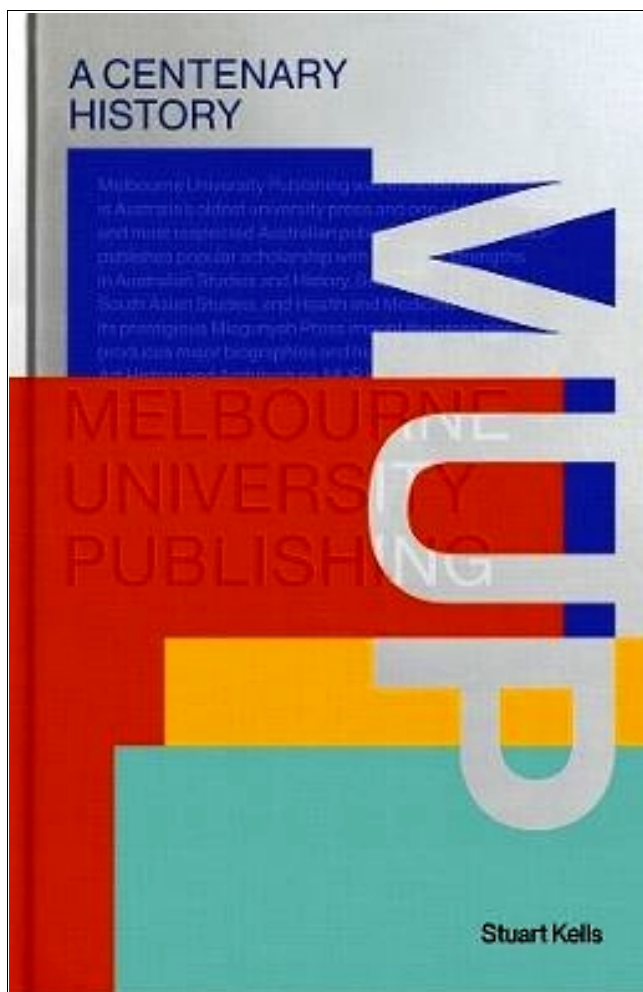
In terms of the MUP controversies, Kells' 'fair-minded' textual approach could be likened to presenting the cases for the defence and prosecution in a court case but without coming to a final judicial conclusion. In a history of MUP, published by MUP, this is probably a wise decision.

In that context, Kells did not interview key figures, including Louise Adler and the relevant Vice Chancellors, such as Glyn Davis, who once stated that 'save time — give in now' when negotiating with Louise Adler, whose first MUP book was Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark's *The History Wars*, which gained a large general readership.

There is no denying that subsequently Adler was a publishing 'force of nature', with an ability to tap into the public and political zeitgeist. Later, however, controversial titles such as *I, Mick Gatto* (was it really a book of 'local history?') and *Blonde Ambition: Roxy Jacenko Unfiltered* led to comments, notably from academics and other publishers, that Adler was running a commercial trade press under the guise of a subsidised academic press.

MUP was, for most of the period of Adler's directorship, reliant on significant one-off debt write-offs and a large annual University subsidy, which began at \$0.75 million and ended up as \$1.25 million. Kells notes that Vice Chancellor Douglas Maskell reported that the University 'had pumped \$26 million into the publisher over a decade and half'. MUP only began to post modest profits in 2017, although Kells notes, 'the profits were materially smaller than the subsidies provided by the University'.

Mounting dissatisfaction within Melbourne University led to several reviews and the decision



in January 2019 that MUP would henceforth ‘refocus on being a high-quality scholarly press in support of the University’s mission of excellence in teaching and research’. Louise Adler and five other MUP board members immediately resigned and another media war erupted.

Maskell now wanted MUP ‘to commission leading scholars and authors’ and ‘popularise academic research for a broad readership’. Current MUP Director Nathan Hollier has certainly achieved that mandate with books such as *Farmers or Hunter-gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate* by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe and *Vandemonians: The Repressed History of Colonial Victoria* by Janet McCalman.

Kells does not delve deeply into the frameworks of other presses, which could have provided a wider perspective to the Adler era, for example, New South, Text, Scribe, and Black Inc, nor does he delve into open access presses, such as the ANU Press, which in 2022 published 45 titles with nearly 4 million downloads and views, which makes taxpayer-funded research publicly and openly available.

This issue apart, Kells has delivered a rich, detailed, largely nonjudgmental, book, which

provides significant insights into the history and publishing of MUP, and thus of Australian cultural and political history.

**BLURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM:
AN A-Z OF LITERARY PERSUASION
by Louise Willder (Oneworld; \$29.99)**

A British publisher recently said, in terms of selling a new book, that the cover, the blurb, and social media marketing were actually more important than the actual words in the book.

Louise Willder, Copywriting Manager at Penguin Books, has written over 5000 blurbs for Penguin in a 25-year publishing career. Willder reflects that in blurbs, ‘You’re trying to offer the reader clues and little triggers, ... you’re always thinking about your audience and you try and imagine the reader in your head’. Willder endorses the words of Italian writer Roberto Calasso, who called a blurb ‘a letter to a stranger’, while Iris Murdoch believed ‘blurb writing is a mini art form’.

Blurb your Enthusiasm is enjoyable and comprehensive — nearly 350 pages. I was about to add that it’s extremely readable, although ‘readable’ is one of Willder’s *bête noir* descriptors, emphasising

after all 'it's a book'.

There are now more books published than ever before in a variety of formats, but until dust jackets became the norm in the late nineteenth century, the blurb did not really take off. The word 'blurb' was coined by American humourist Frank Gelett Burgess, whose 1907 book cover *Are You a Bromide?* featured 'Miss Belinda Blurb'

Some authors, like J. D. Salinger, shun publicity. *The Catcher in the Rye* sold 65 million copies globally with only Salinger's name and the title.

In her chapter 'Step Away From the Bonnet', Willder reviews the blurbs of Jane Austen novels over the decades and identifies the worst being attached to an edition of *Pride and Prejudice*: 'Mom's fishing for husbands — but the girls are hunting for love'.

Austen couldn't do anything about that one, but Jeanette Winterson was so infuriated in 2021

with the cosy, domestic blurbs on new editions of her Penguin paperbacks that she publicly set fire to them. 'Turned me into wimmins fiction of the worst kind! Nothing playful or strange or the ahead of time stuff that's in there. So I set them on fire.' Needless to say the ensuing publicity saw the Penguin covers changed. Willder asserts she was not involved in Winterson's blurbs!

Willder has a chapter on puns, in which she cites *Purls of Wisdom*, a book about knitting, and elsewhere gives high praise to the publicity line in Shirley Conran's *Lace*, 'Which one of you bitches is my mother?'

Willder doesn't believe human copywriters will be replaced by AI, as the blurb writer has to empathise with 'the reader and the effect that words will have on them'. In *Blurb your Enthusiasm*, Willder superbly tells the inside story of the outside of books.

Book collectors and bookshops

STALIN'S LIBRARY: A DICTATOR AND HIS BOOKS by Geoffrey Roberts (Yale University Press; \$51.95)

Can one define a life from a personal library? **Geoffrey Roberts**, Emeritus Professor of History at University College Cork and an expert on Russian dictator **Joseph Stalin** (1878–1953), thinks you can. Such analysis is particularly relevant as Stalin did not keep a diary or write a memoir.

Roberts aims to provide a 'picture of the reading life of the twentieth century's most self-consciously intellectual dictator' and thus provide a 'key to the character that made his rule so monstrous'. Roberts concludes Stalin was 'a Bolshevik first and an intellectual second'.

Stalin had assembled 25,000 books in his huge Moscow dacha library by the time of his death in 1953. It was dispersed after Khrushchev's dramatic denunciation of Stalin at the Soviet Communist Party's Twentieth Congress in February 1956.

Stalin's use of the personal library stamp 'Biblioteka I. V. Stalina' enables Roberts to track down a number of Stalin's books in Russian libraries, although Roberts especially focuses on the 400 books annotated by Stalin. Stalin was often particularly annoyed by grammatical errors in books, which he corrected in red pencil. His

non-regard for the physical nature of books was evidenced by often leaving greasy fingermarks on them.

Stalin originally praised the writings of political rival Leon Trotsky, but this changed over time. Stalin writes 'Fool!' in the margins of Trotsky's books, as he did with those of the Marxist theorist Karl Kautsky. The political writer he most admired was Vladimir Lenin, for whom there are no marginal criticisms, as indeed there weren't for Karl Marx. Roberts notes that Stalin was 'a very dogmatic Marxist ... a fanatic who had no secret doubts'. Stalin's mindset to approve mass murder is thus 'hidden in plain sight'.

During his thirty years in office (1922–53), Stalin collected books over a vast range of subjects. History was his favourite, followed by Marxist theory and then literature. Roberts' last chapter overviews the Soviet history publications that Stalin was personally involved with, either as editor or contributor.

Stalin, who assembled thousands of novels, plays, and poetry, was 'conservative and conventional' in his fictional taste, although his library did include works by Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. While Stalin once described writers in a socialist society as 'engineers of the human soul', nonetheless approximately 1500 writers died during Stalin's 'Great Terror' purge.

Stalin's Library proves that to read widely,



A portrait of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in his library, c.1943. (Photograph via Alamy.)

and assemble a large library, is no guarantee of a belief in a democratic society and a belief in human rights. You can clearly be at the same time, as Roberts' first chapter is titled, a 'Bloody Tyrant and Bookworm'.

REMAINDERS OF THE DAY

by Shaun Bythell (Profile Books; \$29.99)

The Canberra Lifeline book fairs continually reaffirm that readers still love to buy print books in a digital era. Lifeline benefits from the donations of books as retirees downsize. **Canty's Bookshop** in Fyshwick, the interior of which increasingly resembles the *Doctor Who* Tardis in terms of external/internal dimensions, is also the recipient of some significant collections.

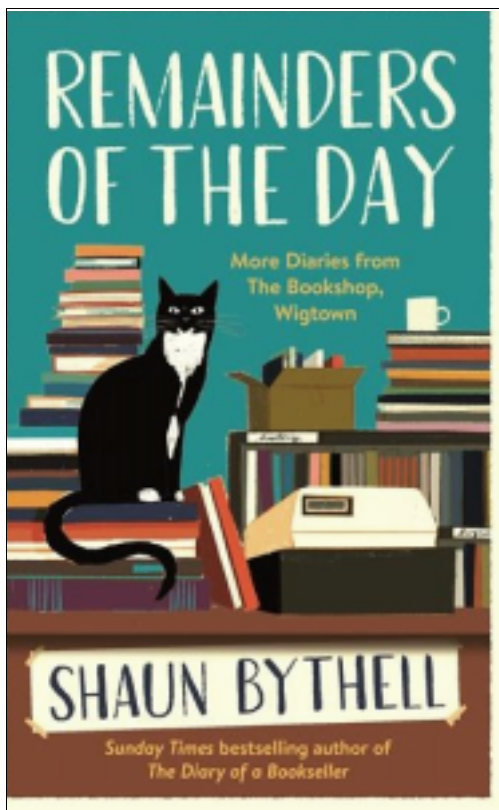
Luke Canty's facebook blog pales in comparison, however, to the diaries published by **Shaun Bythell**, whose Wigtown secondhand bookshop is the largest in Scotland with over 100,000 books.

The latest in Bythell's best-selling series, *Remainders of the Day*, features more of his strange and eccentric customers, including a woman who comes in to ask if he has any books

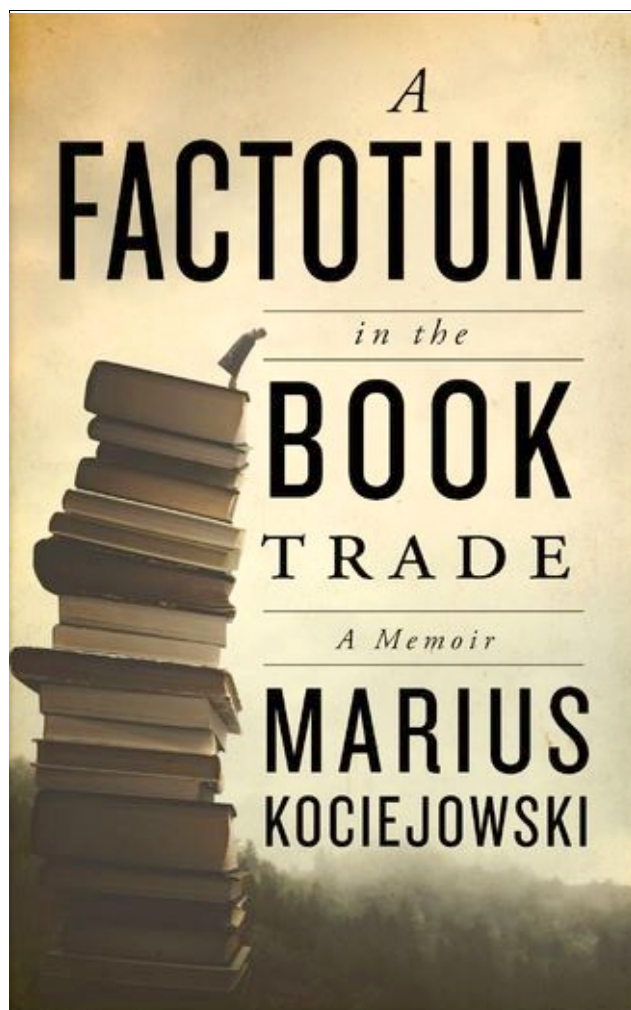
on 'cooking with roadkill'. When Bythell replies in the negative, she responds 'I've just written one' and demands he buy it. Another customer wants him to find *The Behavioral Effects of Canine Castration*.

Bythell juxtaposes accounts of his personal life with book-buying trips, ongoing battles with Amazon, and the interactions with his Italian assistant Emanuela, who gives him the finger from the adjoining bus stop as she leaves each day. Another assistant, Meredith, frustrates him by her constant misshelving, such as *Swallows and Amazons* being placed in the ornithology section

Also reappearing is 'Sandy the Tattooed Pagan', who uses the shop to sell his carved walking sticks, greeting 'visitors like a king greeting his courtiers'. Bythell's post-Covid epilogue, written in 2022, reaffirms his commitment to bookselling, with 'the shop never having been so busy'.



Bookseller and author Shaun Bythell inside The Bookshop in Wigtown. (Photo: Gerallt Llewelyn, 2014.)
The Bookshop is Scotland's largest secondhand bookshop.



**ONCE UPON A TOME: THE MISADVENTURES OF
A RARE BOOKSELLER**
by Oliver Darkshire (Bantam; \$35)

A FACTOTUM IN THE BOOK TRADE: A MEMOIR
by Marius Kociejowski (Biblioasis; \$29.99)

Oliver Darkshire's *Once Upon A Tome: The Misadventures of a Rare Bookseller* and Marius Kociejowski's *A Factotum in the Book Trade: A Memoir* reflect on the authors' employment in high-end London antiquarian bookshops.

Darkshire joined Sotheran's, established in 1761, at the age of 20 as an apprentice. His book recounts his decade with them, while Kociejowski reflects back on 45 years with various London antiquarian booksellers, notably Bertram Rota.

Kociejowski provides more bibliophilic depth in his memoirs, but the geeky Darkshire, who increased Sotheran's sales through social media, provides a younger perspective. Darkshire takes pleasure in dividing customers into categories such as 'Smaugs, Draculas, the Spindleman, Cryptids and Suited Gentlemen'. 'Smaugs' covet everything, while 'Draculas' specialise in one

collecting area.

Darkshire's range of contacts include shoplifters, book runners, and collection downsizers. Darkshire concludes that book collectors should either live alone or marry a co-collector.

Kociejowski muses that 'the book trade is a floating world for people of intelligence unsuited for anything else'. Nonetheless he seems to have survived quite well, recounting experiences with a range of literati including Patrick Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin.

Patti Smith comes looking for essays by Robert Louis Stevenson, Brian Ferry buys Wyndham Lewis, and Kociejowski sells a second edition of *Finnegans Wake* to Johnny Depp, who was 'trying incredibly hard not to be recognised and with predictably comic results'.

Philip Larkin visited Rota looking for first editions of his own books, but when quoted £200 for a copy of his first book *The North Ship*, replied that he would not pay that price 'for that piece of rubbish'. A more productive outcome comes when Margaret Thatcher's office buys a superbly bound copy of *Great Expectations* for presentation to Mikhail Gorbachev at the 1986 Reykjavik Summit.

Kociejowski notes that, while there are a number of female bookshop owners, there are fewer female collectors than men, reflecting, he believes, that women are usually more interested in reading the text of books than just collecting them. Valerie Eliot, the second wife of T. S. Eliot, was an avid collector, adding add to her late husband's library. Kociejowski recounts how one collector stalked T. S. Eliot, even following Eliot into the ICA toilet to sign books.

In related fashion, Kociejowski was once reprimanded for sending a customer, looking for Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, to the toilet rather than the feminist fiction section. He concludes his fascinating memoir, 'Rare books will continue to be sold, at auction or over the tops of walnut tables', but hopes we are never 'robbed of the mystery and serendipity of the old bookshop'.

FANTASIES OF THE BOOKSTORE
by Eben J. Muse (Cambridge University Press; \$24.95)

Independent new bookshops catering to their local communities have largely managed to survive in the face of Amazon and other discount providers. They have also increasingly become the location of novels in recent decades. Think *Mr Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* (2012), *The Little Paris Bookshop* (2013), *The Bookman's Tale* (2014), *The*

Bookshop of Yesterdays (2018), *The Last Bookshop in London* (2021), and Garth Nix's fantasy bookshop series.

The University of Bangor's 'Reader in Book-selling' (apparently the only such position in the world), **Eben J. Muse**, in *Fantasies of the Bookstore*, documents and analyses nearly 500 'book-

store' novels. Muse claims the first bookstore novel published in English was Christopher Morley's *Parnassus on Wheels* (1917), followed by its more famous sequel, *The Haunted Bookshop* (1918), the first example of a bibliomystery — books which now comprise two-thirds of Muse's entries.

The pleasures of older books

THE ART OF THE ILLUSTRATED BOOK

edited by Julius Bryant, with Elizabeth James and Catherine Yvard (Thames & Hudson; \$90)

Dr Julius Bryant, Keeper Emeritus at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, has selected, with his colleagues **Elizabeth James** and **Catherine Yvard** from the V&A's National Art Library, 153 examples of the illustrated book to lead the reader 'through the worlds of spirit, nature and human creativity'.

The end result is a beautifully produced small folio volume in which each book selection has several colour illustrations, providing a strong visual response to the texts. Numerous authors from the Victoria and Albert contribute to the 13 thematic chapters describing their choices from

the Art Library. Many of the selected books have never been on public display and have been specially photographed for inclusion in the book.

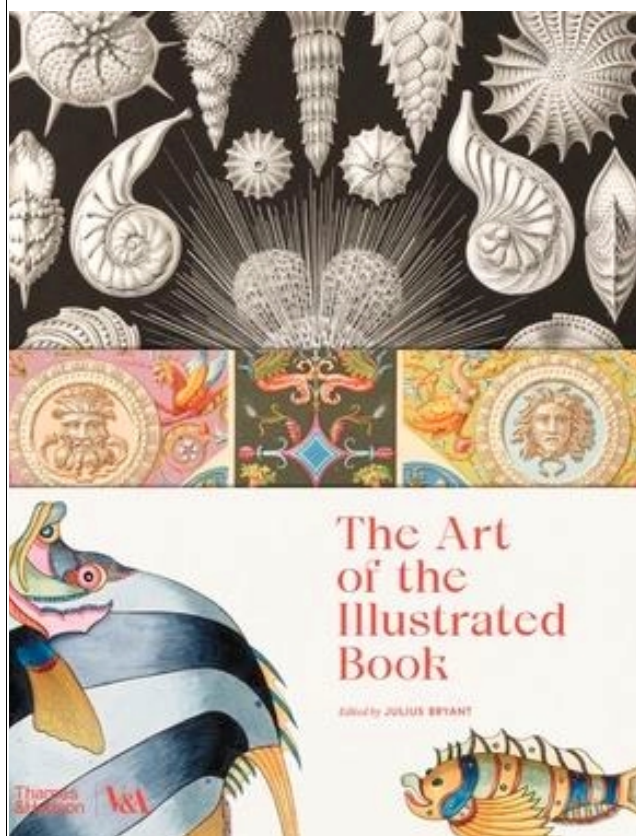
Usually, such overviews have tackled the subject in terms of technological developments from the earliest printing through to contemporary digital productions. Instead, however, following the introductory historical overview by Bryant, a subject approach is adopted through chapters covering religion, natural history, travel, fables and folktales, literature, art making, art history, architecture, ornament and pattern, festivals, world's fairs, fashion, and shopping.

The thematic arrangement, which begins with religion, natural history, and travel, aims to interpret and understand the spiritual and natural worlds as shared knowledge. The second grouping explores a creative response to the worlds of imagination and invention, while the final takes the reader to 'the social worlds of celebration where the art of illustration continues to play a part in global communication'.

Each chapter starts with a general introduction to the subject, followed by key examples accompanied by narrative captions. The commentaries place the illustrations in the context of the entire book and its design, typeface, binding, inks and papers.

Selections include Simon Vostre's *Book of Hours* (1515); Audubon's *Birds of America* (1827–38); Jean de la Fontaine's *Fables*, illustrated in a 1952 Mark Chagall two-volume edition; Piranesi's 1761 *Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de Romani*; Richard Powell's *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (1997); *Girl in Dior* by Annie Goetzinger (2016); Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1894) with Aubrey Beardsley line block illustrations; and Nizami Ganjavi's *Khusraw u Shirin* (1680), based on the Persian epic poem of the late 900s.

Bryant argues in his introduction that 'an entire history of art could be told through illustrated books . . . What makes the art of the illustrated book different from painting, sculpture,



architecture, design and the applied arts is immediate relationship between word and image’.

The Art of the Illustrated Book will appeal far beyond a bibliophilic audience, given its superb presentation of a fascinating and unusual selection of material.

**THE POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF THE
MANUSCRIPT CLUB**
by Christopher de Hamel (Allen Lane; \$80)

Christopher de Hamel was for 25 years the medieval manuscript expert at Sotheby’s auction house in London and is now Fellow Librarian at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. His books combine academic expertise with textual readability, exemplified by his last book, ***Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*** (2016), which won both the Duff Cooper Prize and the Wolfson History Prize.

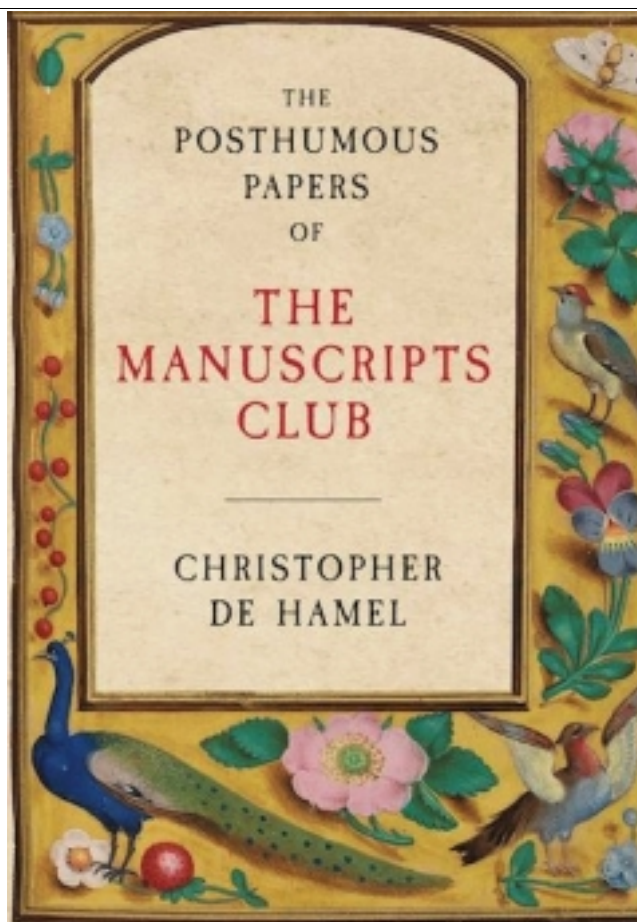
In *Remarkable Manuscripts*, he took 12 manuscript books and wove their history in engaging accounts, allied with personal vignettes. *The Posthumous Papers of the Manuscripts Club* follows a similar format, this time focusing on 12 individuals intimately involved with illuminated medieval manuscripts.

De Hamel roams over a thousand years to follow a monk in Normandy, a prince of France, a Florentine bookseller, an English antiquary, a rabbi from central Europe, a French priest, a Keeper at the British Museum, a Greek forger, a German polymath, a British connoisseur, and the woman who created the Pierpont Morgan Library.

The model for De Hamel’s book, replete with superb full-colour illustrations, is Charles Dickens’ *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, which as Simon Callow has said, is ‘a great hokey-pokey of eccentrics, conmen, phony politicians, amorous widows and wily, witty servants, somehow catching an essence of what it is to be English, celebrating companionship, generosity, good nature’.

While not covering that entire gamut, de Hamel has rounded up collectors, eccentrics, scholars, a conman forger, and one famous female librarian, all bound together by their passion for medieval illuminated manuscripts.

De Hamel calls his book ‘an inquiry into the relationship between people and manuscripts, and why they mattered and still do in human lives’. It encompasses book production and patronage, but also the history of scholarship and rediscovery, the evolution of taste and of the economics of the art market: ‘Manuscripts have a way



of weakening resolve, like soulful puppies in dogs’ homes.’

The first member of his ‘Manuscript Club’ is Benedictine monk and teacher, Saint Anselm (c. 1033–1109), and his scriptorium in Bec Abbey in Normandy. De Hamel, as with his other subjects, takes the reader to their physical locations and engages with his subject and their environment.

Thus, on his way to the Bec monastery in Normandy, he comments on a herd of cattle ‘whose ancestors would have supplied the parchment for manuscript pages’ before documenting its endeavours, creating, copying, and distributing manuscripts.

One manuscript, De Hamel’s second case study, has been called the most famous illuminated manuscript in the world. This is the richly illuminated fourteenth-century *Très Riches Heures* of Jean, Duc de Berry (1340–1416), son of the King of France, who claimed to possess the engagement ring of the Virgin Mary. The manuscript is now housed in the museum at Chantilly, which de Hamel describes in his manuscript framework.

De Hamel mixes his collector professions, including booksellers, librarians and illustrators. His chapter on the Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci (c. 1422–98) reveals how

Bisticci mixed in the Medici high circles, assisting them and 'fashionable humanists' in their quest for manuscripts and transcriptions of the classics.

Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631) assembled a great manuscript collection, 'gathering up thousands of discarded manuscripts' after the closure of the monasteries and their libraries under Henry VIII. Sadly, Sir Robert Cotton's library was partially destroyed by fire in 1731, including the book binding together the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and the old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*.

De Hamel documents that Dr Richard Bentley managed to carry the fifth-century *Codex Alexandrinus* out from the burning library under his arm. The manuscripts that survived, including the *Lin-disfarne Gospels*, became a base collection of the British Museum, now the British Library.

Later, in the nineteenth century, the British Museum library's Keeper of Manuscripts, Frederic Madden (1801–1873), the subject of a chapter, played a major role in developing the British Museum's collection of illuminated manuscripts, including the purchase of *The Bedford Hours*, one of the final productions of the Parisian school of illuminators. Unfortunately, Madden had a life-long distaste of making them available to a wider public: 'More harm than good can come from this public display of art to the mob.'

When Madden decided that it was time to get married, he 'looked first among those who might inherit manuscripts'. Another collector, who is referenced in several chapters, is the English antiquary Sir Thomas Phillips (1792–1872), whose wife famously commented that she was 'booked out of one wing and ratted out of the other'.

Phillips was taken in, as were a number of others, by the subject of another chapter, the Greek forger of Biblical texts, Constantine Simonides (c. 1824–1890), whom de Hamel also calls 'a confidence trickster and a fantasist'. De Hamel uses him as a window to reveal the obsessive passion of collectors that allowed them to be swindled: 'Every age makes forgeries of what people care about most.'

The geographical context of the collecting is largely focused on Latin Western texts, but a chapter is devoted to the collecting of the Chief Rabbi of Moravia and then Bohemia, David Oppenheim (1664–1736), many of whose Hebrew manuscripts are now housed in Oxford's Bodleian Library. De Hamel's travels to Prague include a

visit to the Jewish cemetery, where the tombstones form 'an outdoor library of one of the most ancient forms of writing, in its oldest format, which is cut into stone'.

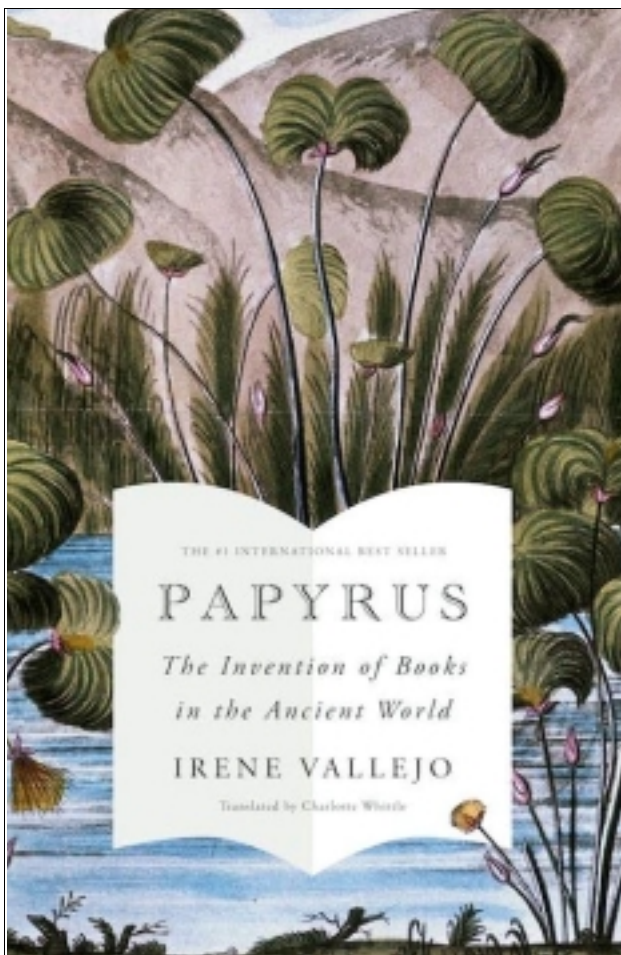
Sir Sydney Cockerell (1867–1962), who was obsessed with manuscripts from a very young age, did not have the money to pursue manuscript purchases. When he became Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, however, he was able to make significant institutional purchases. He claimed he had the perfect job as it also gave him a salary to build a personal collection. Unlike Madden, 'he enjoyed introducing [manuscripts] to people, if he thought they had interests in common'. At the end of his life, selling off his personal collection, he commented, 'I can now afford to have an egg with my tea'.

The New York millionaire banker J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) assembled the finest collection of medieval manuscripts in the world outside of the great European library collections. In 1924 the private collection became the public Pierpont Morgan Library in New York with the remarkable Belle da Costa Greene (1879–1950) as its first Director. Morgan had recruited Belle Greene much earlier as a curator to facilitate manuscript purchases. De Hamel writes, 'almost single-handedly, Belle Green created the fashion for millionaire manuscript libraries'.

Belle Green had, however, to hide her true origins. She was the granddaughter of slaves on both sides and her father was the first black graduate student at Harvard. The pale colour of her skin and adoption of a fictitious Portuguese name were essential for her to survive and evolve into 'a grande dame of America', with her own apartment on Park Avenue in New York.

Remaining illuminated manuscripts now can only be bought by extremely rich individuals or institutions and certainly never again on the scale of Morgan and his American competitors like Henry Huntington. The last person to assemble a collection of international renown was, according to de Hamel, probably the English brewing millionaire Major J. R. Abbey. De Hamel, while at Sotheby's, was involved in selling some of the last tranches of Abbey's collection of manuscripts.

Thus the de Hamel manuscript circle is now closed with *The Posthumous Papers of the Manuscript Club*, which is certainly destined to follow the remarkable popular success of *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*.



PAPYRUS: THE INVENTION OF BOOKS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD
by Irene Vallejo (Hodder; \$32.95)

A Spanish 2019 multi-award-winning book, *El infinito en un junco* (*Infinity in a Reed*), by historian and novelist **Dr Irene Vallejo**, has become a surprise international bestseller in an excellent English translation by Charlotte Whittle.

In *Papyrus: The Invention of Books in the Ancient World*, Vallejo intertwines her personal life and memories into her text, which traces how oral traditions became expressed in permanent forms of narrative through papyrus scrolls, cuneiform tablets, and Roman codices, and their influence on social, political, and cultural settings through to the present day.

This is no dry academic book, but rather one overflowing with lively descriptions of the authors, illuminators, librarians, and booksellers of the ancient world. The Great Library of Alexandria, founded around 300 BCE, which is a pivotal institution in Vallejo's history, was the first major storehouse of knowledge.

At one stage, the library was reputed to hold 500,000 scrolls, the result of the efforts of 'bandito-librarians', who aggressively acquired

material with ample funding from the Ptolemaic kings. Vallejo notes how Mark Antony hoped to influence Cleopatra by bringing 200,000 scrolls for the library.

Vallejo uses the rise and ultimate fall of the Alexandrian Library to reflect on the destruction of libraries and book burnings over the centuries, and the ever present need to preserve knowledge. Before the advent of printing, Vallejo describes classical texts as a 'filament of words balancing above the void'.

Before leaving Alexandria, Vallejo jumps forward to the twentieth century and reflects on the works of the Greek poet Constantin Cavafy to comment on homosexuality in the ancient world and the vibrant multicultural world of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.

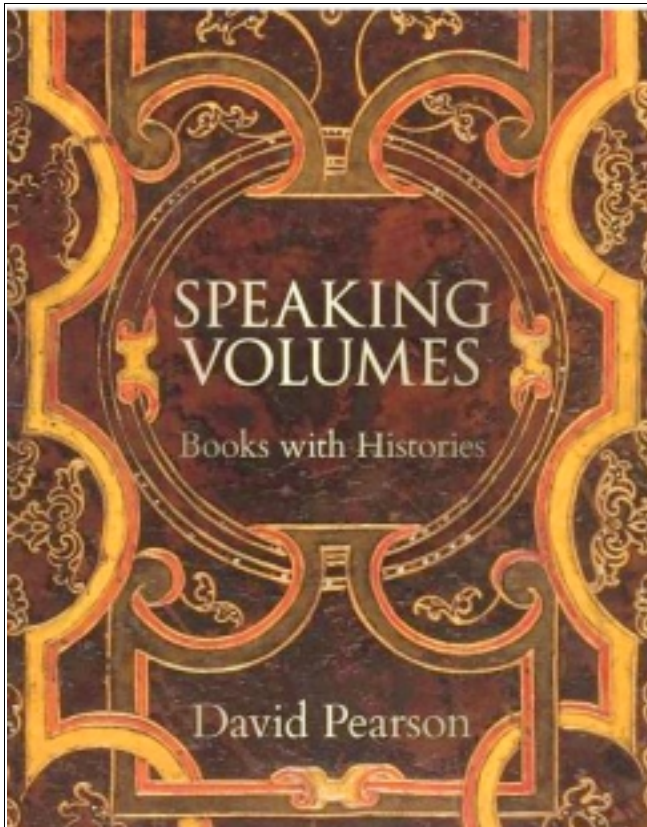
Vallejo documents the expansion of libraries and book production in the Roman world but does not neglect the voices of women, 'the weavers of stories'. Vallejo references 24 female writers, notably the Latin poet Sulpicia, an 'exceptional' Augustan noblewoman, 'a poet who speaks of her own life and feelings ... with no mediation by any man'. In *Papyrus*, Vallejo takes the reader on a fascinating and informative 6000-year journey from the clay tablets of Mesopotamia to the digital tablets of today.

SPEAKING VOLUMES: BOOKS WITH HISTORIES
by David Pearson (Bodleian Library; \$79.99)

David Pearson in *Speaking Volumes* delivers a book about why books matter. Pearson writes that he wants to rebalance 'our ideas around what our real treasures are, within our printed heritage' in a beautifully produced Bodleian Library book with 200 colour photographs.

Pearson is an expert on book ownership and textual annotations, which he uses to document social history and literacy over the centuries. He sees books as 'witnesses of historical incident', which provide the opportunity for him to range widely, from a ninth-century schoolboy's Latin grammar to a Shakespeare First Folio only recently discovered to include annotations by John Milton.

Pearson also describes books in a variety of conditions, including those damaged by bullets, theft, fire, water, and those whose text has been deliberately altered. For instance, Vallejo in *Papyrus* recounts finding, in a Madrid bookshop in the 1990s, a copy of *Don Quixote*, in which a chapter had been cut out and replaced by a chapter of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* to thwart the then Spanish



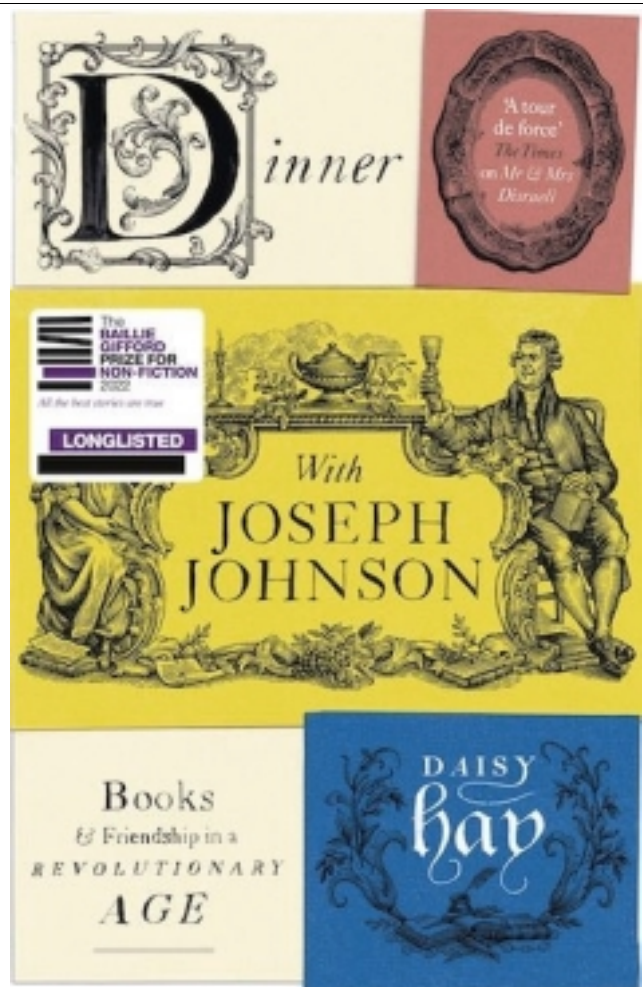
censorship of General Franco.

Pearson, in his final chapter, argues against dismissing print in the context of concerns for effective long-term digital preservation, while Vallejo fervently argues that ‘the book has proved it can go the distance’ over millennia.

DINNER WITH JOSEPH JOHNSON: BOOKS AND FRIENDSHIP IN A REVOLUTIONARY AGE
by Daisy Hay (Chatto & Windus; \$42.99)

The linked relationships of authors, booksellers, and publishers are succinctly captured in **Daisy Hay’s *Dinner with Joseph Johnson***, an absorbing account of Johnson’s involvement with leading writers and radical thinkers in the last decades of the eighteenth century, a period of considerable political, social, scientific, cultural, religious, and scientific change.

Johnson, a bookseller and publisher in St Paul’s Churchyard, London, gathered authors every week around his bookshop dining table for ‘the feast of reason and the flow of soul’. Their numbers included such figures as William Wordsworth; Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published by Johnson in 1792; the scientist and revolutionary



political thinker Joseph Priestley; philosopher William Godwin; doctor and botanist Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin; painter Henry Fuseli and radical pamphleteer Tom Paine.

Publishing for some did not come without a significant cost in a time of major political turbulence. Joseph Priestley, a fervent supporter of the French Revolution, saw his house in Birmingham burned down in July 1791, with the loss of his library and scientific equipment. He eventually had to flee to America where Johnson continued to send him books.

The government cracked down against radical ideas being expressed in print. Johnson himself was jailed for six months in 1799 for selling a revolutionary pamphlet. On his release, he continued to encourage young authors, adding William Hazlitt, Humphry Davy, and Thomas Malthus to his dining table. Johnson died in 1809, aged 72, leaving £50,000, which Hay says is about £4 million today. Johnson’s life amply reaffirms Pearson’s words, that ‘books do matter ... in human society’.

Lives and times

TOURISTS: HOW THE BRITISH WENT ABROAD TO FIND THEMSELVES by Lucy Lethbridge (Bloomsbury; \$39.99)

As tourists shrug off Covid fears and travel the world again, British author **Lucy Lethbridge**, mining a plethora of archival sources, traces the origins of British tourism from the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 to the 1960s boom in overseas package holidays.

Lethbridge writes, 'I've used, as far as possible, the voices of ordinary people from the nineteenth century to the 1970s. The rise of popular tourism is about the ascendancy of the middling classes and changing attitudes to travel, to work, to leisure, to the canon of established culture. It is about the desire to be different in the reassurance of being the same'.

Her subtitle 'How the British went abroad to find themselves' is an effective summary of the contents. While many tourists went to find new experiences, in reality it often meant they found 'they were exactly the same selves abroad as they'd

been in Britain, just a bit more bored, fussy and dissatisfied'.

As early as 1850 the Revd Henry Christmas warned, 'Those who wish to see Spain, while it is worth seeing, must go soon', while in the 1920s, Ada Harrison observed that Majorca had 'become one of those places which, the English say, are being spoilt by the English'.

With mass travel endangering popular sites such as Venice, Machu Picchu, and Angkor Wat, Lethbridge fully appreciates the paradox of modern tourism, which, 'with its inevitable commercialisation and standardisation, destroys the essence of what it seeks, even as it appears to encourage its survival'.

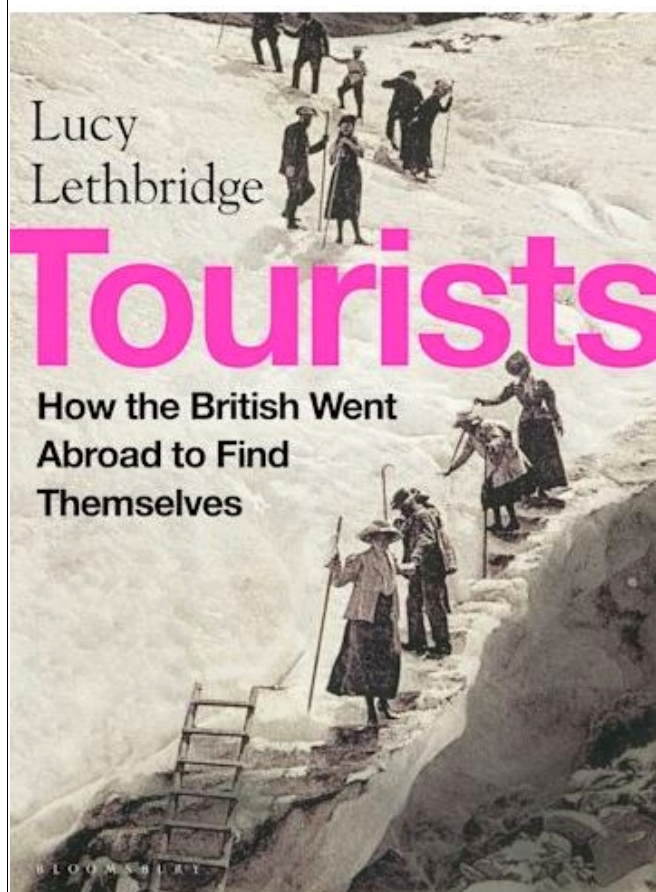
Mass travel began in the middle of the nineteenth century when the British middle classes flocked to Europe, encouraged by travel entrepreneurs such as Albert Smith, Henry Gaze, and Thomas Cook. Cook, who was a teetotaler and nonconformist preacher, in Lethbridge's words, 'almost singlehandedly enshrined the group jolly abroad in British culture'. Within a decade, Thomas Cook's tours had expanded internationally, although changing modes of travel booking led to Thomas Cook in September 2019 filing for compulsory liquidation, leaving 600,000 customers stranded abroad.

Lethbridge cuts off well before that date and, in over 300 pages documents the changing nature of tourism. Lethbridge highlights the biking and camping tours of the early twentieth century, which morphed into the booming caravan travel of the 1950s, leading to increasing sales of chemical toilets, Pakamac raincoats, and Camping Gaz cookers.

By the 1970s, 'all-inclusive holidays in the sun, devoid of any expectations of culture, made acceptable the notion of pure self-indulgence and enjoyment'. *Carry on Abroad* (1972) revealed how domestic inhibitions were shed 'until the coach returns everyone home to Britain — there to dream of the same thing, same time next year'.

DIPLOMATIC GIFTS: A HISTORY IN FIFTY PRESENTS by Paul Brummell (Hurst; \$57.99)

Paul Brummell, a British career diplomat, engagingly documents, in over 400 pages, 50 diplomatic



gifts reflecting 'diplomatic engagements across all eras and continents'. There are now strict rules in America, and indeed Australia, on the giving and receipt of diplomatic and official gifts.

Brummell's second chapter outlines the most famous of all diplomatic gifts, the Trojan Horse, the wooden horse given in 1250 BCE by the Greeks to the Trojans, which led to the popular phrase, 'beware of Greeks bearing gifts'.

Gifts can also go wrong in other ways. Mali's 2013 gift of a baby camel to French President François Hollande ended up, by mistake, in a traditional tagine.

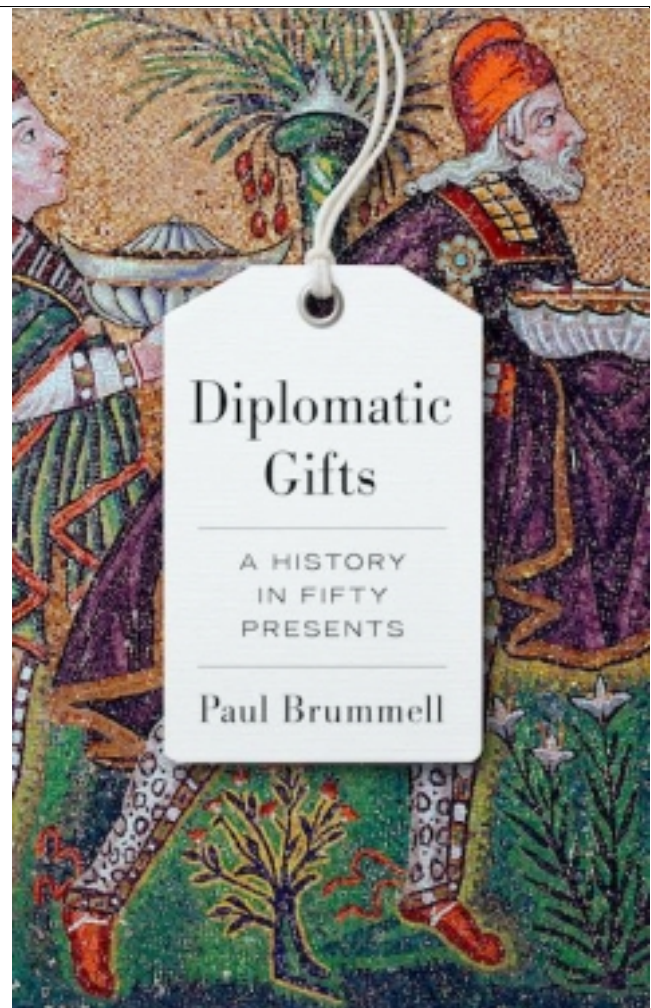
China's panda diplomacy was a feature of the second half of the twentieth century, most famously in 1972 when two pandas were flown to Washington after President Nixon's historic visit to Beijing.

Diplomatic gifts can also be large in scale, notably the Statue of Liberty, which was given to the people of America by France in 1884.

A scandal erupted in France in 1979 after it was learned that, earlier in the decade, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, then finance minister of France, had received several gifts of diamonds from Jean-Bédel Bokassa, the tyrannical president of the Central African Republic. Giscard subsequently claimed he had sold them on to raise funds for humanitarian purposes, but this was disputed by the relevant charities.

In total financial contrast, recent Australian donations seems to have favoured R. M. Williams boots, evidenced in Brummell's penultimate chapter. In 2008, Kevin Rudd gave the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a pair of Williams boots 'to showcase Australian tradition and craftsmanship'.

Yudhoyono may have been surprised when he was given another pair of Williams boots by Tony Abbott in 2013. Brummell hopes that Yudhoyono 'had become a fan of the footwear'. Abbott would provide another pair to the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2014 and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull similarly donated a pair to President Donald Trump in 2018.



Barack Obama also seemed to have had a penchant for favouring the same diplomatic gift. Brummell notes that Obama gave David Cameron in 2014 an lithograph by leading American artist Ed Ruscha and two months later Tony Abbott was also given another lithographic work by Ruscha. Abbott reciprocated with a surfboard and yet another pair of boots!

Brummell acknowledges diplomatic gifts can be a 'comedic footnote to international relations', highlighted by the straw penis-sheath given to the Duke of Edinburgh on a visit to Vanuatu in 2010. One wonders what the Queen made of that gift, certainly not a Beau in this instance from Brummell.

— **Colin Steele**, November 2022–March 2023

I must be talking to my friends

The non-health report

If 2022 was bad, 2023 has been much worse. Elaine and I have lost quite a few of our favourite people. I've tried to celebrate their lives in *SFC* 112, but that issue has been stopped dead in its tracks by Weird Health Stuff. Hence 113 appears before 112. I don't want to do a Facebook-style blow-by-blow account, but it seems there is no other way to make excuses for failing to publish.

When last heard of (in *SFC* 111), my left leg had improved greatly after the accident in Eltham in June 2022.

And then ... on 14 January, without any cause, my left leg again felt very sore. It began to swell below the knee. On 24 January I visited my trusty physio Adam, who took one peek at the leg, went white, and began to mutter about 'DVT', i.e. the possibility that I was suffering deep vein thrombosis in the leg, and could suffer a stroke at any time. He dropped everything, bundled me into his car (as I don't drive) and took me down to my GP's office about a mile away. Luckily my GP was consulting. She arranged for me to have an ultrasound of my leg on the same day. Adam brought me back home, I had the scan in the afternoon, and received the results the same day. No sign of DVT! However, the leg remained very swollen and sore. Nobody could work out why. I took a diuretic for a few weeks, and the swelling began to disappear.

And then ... From the beginning of February, my right leg became very sore, especially around the knee area. Again, no cause. I had not slipped on the footpath. I had not taken a fall. But I was finding it more and more difficult to walk comfortably. I went into town on 17 February when David Russell took me, Stephen Campbell, Robin Johnson, and Carey and Jo Handfield to lunch at the Florentino. The lunch was great (thanks, David!) but it was very difficult to climb the steep stairs to the upper floor.

And then ... Friday, 24 February, one of the

worst days of my life, I went into Melbourne. I did a few things in town, but had to stand all the way in the tram from Bourke Street up to Fitzroy to get a haircut from my Michael. I had my haircut. I took a bus to Victoria Park Station. As I tried to alight from the bus, my right knee gave way under me. I fell onto the pavement. I fell successfully, seeming not to have damaged anything. The bus driver helped me to my feet, but I found that I could take only tiny steps. My right leg and foot seemed to be barely working. Somehow I tottered up the ramp to the station. When we reached Greensborough Station my leg and foot felt even worse. How could I reach home? (I don't own a mobile phone.) It's all uphill from there. It took me half an hour to walk by tiny painful steps down Para Road to where it turns up into Main Street. Another quarter of an hour later I reached Cafe Spice, our favourite Indian restaurant. The bloke at the counter let me phone home. Elaine was able to enlist our next-door neighbour Gary to bring his car down from Howard Street to pick me up.

An X-ray a few days later showed that I had not damaged my knee, which was the painful area, but I had a minor fracture of my ankle. For the following five weeks I could not leave home. Since then, after lots of tests and scans, I've been recovering. By the middle of May I could walk well again. Thanks very much for Carey Handfield and Gary, our next-door neighbour, who at various times helped me get to the GP's office or the pathology service and home again. Thanks to Murray and Natalie MacLachlan for their help in attending Charlie Taylor's funeral. And endless thanks to Elaine, who had to change most aspects of her life during the weeks when I could do little but hobble around the house.

I still have no idea what caused the swollen left leg or bung right leg. But they sure have upset my life and publishing schedule.

— Bruce Gillespie, 30 May 2023

Feature letter: Lesleigh Luttrell's first Worldcon in 40 years

LESLEIGH LUTTRELL
Madison WI 53704,
USA

It was a bit odd going to my first Worldcon in 40 years, but of course plenty of old friends and folks who knew who I was but whom I hadn't met before were there. It was fun, especially spending time with my brother Chris (who appeared on two panels, one as moderator and one as speaker). I enjoyed it but I lack the energy to keep up with everything that happens at a modern-day convention.

Thanks for your very nice email message. It was on or about 11 August 1972 that we first met — Syncon was my first weekend in Australia on that first DUFF trip. You did have a reputation of being, not exactly shy but not heavily into socialising. Coming from my background in fandom, where fanzine publishing was taken seriously but socialising was equally important, meant I had no hesitation in talking to anyone. And you were one of the people I really wanted to meet — true of everyone I knew from reading their fanzines. I felt a real connection with you almost immediately. Some people were just what I expected but you were a surprise, a very pleasant one. I did really enjoy the time we spent together and am glad that you found it 'life changing', given that you seem happy with the way your life has turned out.

I'm also delighted that DUFF continues — and that there is a fan fund communal feeling among the folks who ever won a race/administered a fund. I actually joined the fan fund administrators online discussion group and helped with the general fund raising at the convention. So that is a bit of a connection to fandom I will likely keep. But I don't see myself putting out a fanzine, run-



**Chris Couch (l.) and his sister Lesleigh Luttrell (r.),
at Chicon 8, 2022.
(Photographer: Diane Martin.)**

ning a convention, or otherwise getting heavily involved. I'll stay comfortably on the edge and glad to keep in touch with old friends in the ways modern technology allows. I plan on being your friend for however many years we have left to enjoy.

(8 September 2022)

I looked at *SF Commentary* when you first announced it was ready — and let my brother know you had included the picture of me he took in Chicago. I admit I did not read the whole issue but I did enjoy the bits I read.

(19 December 2022)

[*brg* I'm very pleased that you were able to attend Chicon, 50 years after Syncon 2 in 1972. It seems a short time since those memorable days in 1972. I hope you can stay connected with fandom, and perhaps even return to Australia eventually.*]

Letters to SFC 110

Feature letter: Steve Jeffery's browsings and gleanings

STEVE JEFFERY

**44 White Way, Kidlington,
Oxon OX5 2XA, UK**

Work thing. We have cameras taking images from our production lines at work. But, of course, they are in slightly different positions and orientations and looking at different things, so the natty little problem we've been served with is 'If camera B could "see" the same items as camera A (but in practice it can't because part of it has been masked off) where would they appear to be?' Think of it as a cross between one of those pairs of Spot The Difference puzzles, Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Where's Wally? It involves a lot of math transforming images so that the same reference marks on each line up when the two images are overlaid — something which you can do intuitively in Photoshop using layers and scale and rotate tools, but much harder when you have to code it in maths as in an algorithm.

That's part one anyway, which we've solved. After which it gets a bit more complicated. (We had a really neat trick line which would have greatly simplified the math, but tech insist we do it 'the hard way' so it's back to a host of geometry and trigonometry tutorials. I can still just about remember Pythagoras' Theorem (something about squaws and hippopotamuses) but I'm playing catch up much beyond that. I wouldn't have wanted to do this in the days before Wiki and hundreds of YouTube tutorials on practically any topic you can name. Unfortunately YouTube also keeps distracting me with *Fripp* and *Toyah's Sunday Lockdown Lunchtime* videos. (She is two years younger than me, looks about half that and ten times better than I do, acts like she is still eighteen, and then turns up as a guest on *The Archers*. Go figure.

(29 August 2022)

The trouble with *SFC* — although it's a good trouble, so don't worry — is that even the feature letters can be longer than other people's fanzines,

so response to *SFC* 110 may, as before, come in instalments as I slowly work through.

Nice big section in Colin Steele's column on books about books. I recently finished Susan Hill's *Jacob's Room is Full of Books*, having enjoyed *Howard's End is on the Landing*, except Hill blots her escutcheon ('don't worry, it'll wipe off') at one point by revealing an ingrained snobbery about science fiction and fantasy of the 'I don't read it because I already know it's rubbish' school. I used to think the same about broccoli and sprouts when I was seven, but I grew up and found out I actually I liked them.

I wondered why there was a sudden flood of fanzines last weekend (*Inca*, *Askance*, *This Here*, *Captain Flashback*). Thirty seconds on Facebook suggested the answer might be the run-up to ChiCon, 2022's worldcon. If so, this is reminiscent of the old days where 50 per cent of all fanzines I used to get all arrived in the two weeks before Novacon (or the first day of the con).

Gleanings of today's charity shop browse include hardback copies of Ben Aaronovitch's *Among Our Weapons* and Al Reynold's *Evasion*, plus a paperback copy of the Gollancz SF Masterworks edition of Connie Willis's *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. Not bad for £3 the lot. I feel we should have that latter already somewhere, but I can't see it (or the rest of the series to be honest, though we have runs of both the Millennium SF and Fantasy Masterworks from the time Debs Beale was editor there). Both the Aaronovitch and Reynolds are dated 2022. In fact I've just recently finished Reynolds' *Inhibitor Phase*. It's still sitting on the bedside table pending finding space for it somewhere else. People mention their To Be Read piles all the time, but do they also have even bigger and more precarious Recently Read piles? (The one just inside the study room door is nearly as tall as I am, and that's an overflow from a couple of others. We really need more shelves, but that involves finding some more walls, which is a less obvious prospect.)

Unlike Mark Plummer, I have still not suc-

cumbed to the lure and convenience of e-books. My tablet died unexpectedly sometime last year losing anything I had stored on it, but I still think there's something more appealing about curling up on the sofa with a cup of coffee and an actual paper book than with a tablet or e-reader.

(4 September 2022)

I should apologise for my silence in recent weeks and possibly for the immediate future. My father is terminally ill and it's not an easy time for any of the family. Penning locs has not been the first thing on my mind.

(13 October 2022)

I think I told you my dad was diagnosed with untreatable kidney cancer a while ago, and died at home towards the end of November. I had been down to see him the day, but I'm not sure just how aware he was of who was with him at that point. It was, understandably, a bit upsetting.

His funeral was held on 7 December and there was a gratifyingly large attendance from people he and mum had known and kept in touch with for years, including a couple of twin cousins I probably hadn't seen since I went to University and the daughter of one of mum's friends who lived across the road from us when I was 11 or 12. As I said, they never let go of people. There was even one old lady called Yvonne who turned up out of the blue with a bunch of flowers who nobody could place and who explained that she was one of dad's taxi customers and he'd been driving her to appointments and visits for over two years to the point where she knew more about the family than we did about her.

Mum wanted to read Auden's 'Stop All The Clocks' at the service, and barely made it though before she and most of the people there were in tears.

Since then, the family, children and grandchildren, have been visiting mum to make sure there is someone with her most days, though the biggest brunt is falling on my sister who lives a few doors down in the same road. I have been down three or four times, including a couple of stopovers so there is someone there in the morning, both to keep mum company, even if we just sit and watch TV (a steady stream of daytime TV cookery shows, though I quite enjoyed one of the *Father Brown Mysteries* we watched last night; Vikki and I are more into Scandi-Noir) and to give my sister some time and space to herself. Mum really needs a carer (sis needs to work to pay the bills), since she can't get out by herself, and dad was fulfilling that role for the last three or four years.

As for us, we are well, or as close as it gets at our age. I probably need to think about retirement — I passed pension age last year — but it's a toss-up between having the time free so I can visit as and when, and carrying on working so I can support financially if needed. We should know more when the position with mum's pensions and benefits becomes clearer. Which may be some time. Dad was apparently a bugger with the shredder and didn't leave any paperwork for any of his accounts (though gut feeling is there isn't going to be anything in the pot, as what they had they spent immediately).

Other than that things roll on pretty much as they have before. I was still working, though working from home as I have been since the first lockdown over two years ago (it's easy to lose track when the days all seem the same, even — to Vikki's irritation — weekends). Vikki, who's been retired six years now, gets out and about, at least when the weather allows, on various trips to indulge in her transport photography hobby, sometimes with her young friend Jim, who is an architectural trainee. Otherwise we read, do puzzles, watch TV (as long as the words 'celebrity' or 'reality' or 'dating' do not appear anywhere in the program description), cook. Almost like normal people. (OK, well maybe not.)

Vikki's Prophecy apa is still going and hit mailing 200 last month. As it's currently on a bimonthly (as in every other) schedule, I suspect it may be one of the longest running apas in the UK, depending on whether TWP is still going.

Recent reading: Richard Powers' *Orfeo*, which managed to press all my buttons at once and hold them down through to the last page (can you possibly dislike anything when the Author cites Alex Ross's history of 20th century music, *The Rest is Noise*, as an inspiration?). I enjoyed *Bewilderment* and must get round to reading *The Overstory*.

As for sff/f: Al Reynolds' *Inhibitor Phase*, Arcady Martine's *A Memory Called Empire*, and Becky Chambers' *A Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* all hit the mark, and sequels to the last two are already in my Xmas wish-list, along with N. K. Jemisin's new 'City' book.

(19 December 2022)

Happy Christmas. Ours was nice and relaxed — transport strike makes a perfect excuse for spending a quiet Christmas between the two of us and therefore eating what we want to rather than being obliged to stress over a traditional Christmas dinner. So we had a ham roast, which turned out — much like its chef — pink and soft on the inside

and all crusty on the outside. With bubble and squeak. OK, so I know you're supposed to do that as a Boxing Day leftovers dish, but whotthehell, we like it, and we have a perfect pan for it so there.

Unexpected Christmas present: Alan Moore's *Illuminations*.

(26 December 2022)

Feature letter: Regrets for lost paper hearts

CASEY WOLF

**Vancouver, British Columbia V5M 4P5,
Canada**

I find it funny that you are encouraging me to read PDFs (actually amusing, not 'funny peculiar'). I seem to remember me trying to get you to read e-books, and you resisting mightily. Neither of us is really meant for anything but paper. Our paper hearts.

[*brg* Nothing to do with choice or preference. I can't afford to print or post paper fanzines any more, so you'll just have to suffer through PDFs. Sorry about that.*]

I will try to have a look at them, certainly, but I use this iPad for everything — email, social media, movies, and I really hate to pick it up again for pleasure reading. But the problem is largely opportunity. The paper fanzines I have in a pile beside a chair where I sit and relax. I just pick up whatever is on top and read a paragraph or a page or two and then put it down again till the next time I sit there. Whereas to read something on the iPad I have to actually have the intention to read that thing. And it just doesn't come to my mind. The fanzines by my chair say, hello! You haven't finished me! And I say, oh my gosh you're right! The fanzines in my iPad never peek out and remind me. It's also tricky to jot notes. It's not impossible, it's just that it doesn't happen. What it really boils down to is that freaking chronic fatigue. I always have so many more things I need or want to do than I actually have energy for and the trickier it is to do something the less likely I am to do it. I am finding it really hard to compose and edit on the iPad, also. My laptop has sung its last song so I am now limited to this device.

For example, I have been trying to write a review (not something that would interest you). I used to try composing such things in Word. Interestingly, the version of Word on the iPad will not let me move the cursor to where I want it. I can put it at the beginning of a word or the end of a word but I can't

pull it to within the word to correct misspellings, change case, etc. So that makes it pretty much useless. I have an app for note taking, Joplin, which I like a lot. But it wasn't meant for real writing. It does all sorts of weird things when I try to edit in it. It works better than Word but it's very difficult to navigate. I've even tried editing in iMessage. Each one of these programs has pluses and minuses when it comes to this. But what I wouldn't do for a working computer where I can just copy and paste and put things where I want and see the entire thing at once.

All right. I got a little sidetracked there. I started on that road just to let you know that I find it difficult to take notes about the PDFs on the iPad. It also needs to be done in a different program while I'm reading in Adobe. It just isn't a natural or easy format and so although I have great intentions to read not just your fanzines but various other things I've downloaded, mostly academic articles, I have a really hard time getting to them.

However! I have started reading one of the *SFCs* I didn't have time to read last year when I was so busy with book related stuff. It's 105. I haven't finished it but I am very much enjoying it.

I believe you said in *SFC* 105 that you use Word to format the zine. Colour me amazed. You do a great job. I have also used Word for many years to put out a newsletter and I find it quite frustrating. You must be more computer savvy than I am or you have just been quiet about how annoying it can be.

[*brg* I use Word to edit the text itself. I use good old Ventura to format the pages. If and when I lose the ability to use my old computer, I will need to switch to Quark XPress instead. It's not nearly as usable as Ventura, but it's a lot more useful than the other current DTP programs.*]

John Litchen says that he has copies of both the *Antifan* film and the second one, made in Sydney. I do hope these treasures make it onto the Internet at some point. I would love to see them.

[*brg* Both have been up on YouTube for several years. I assume they can be found by googling.*]

When I asked about your cats, I was wondering who you still had and how they were doing. Cats do die, sometimes sadly young. I always love to read your descriptions of your cats and their lives, and these two sound charming. I approve of the shortening of Esmeralda to Zelda, by the way. Much snappier.

[*brg* It's wise to touch wood when you say that your cats are doing well, but Chloe and Zelda, now aged 17, are still sprightly, delightful companions.*]

Six years later I do confess I miss my cats. A lot. There's so much more laughter and cuddling when they're around. (I do the laughing and they do the entertaining. I do the cuddling and they submit. Or not.) As I've probably said before a dozen times, making my little yard very attractive to birds and insects has helped fill the gap. The birds can be especially funny when they're young. And the invertebrates are always lovely. I was blessed to have chickadees nesting a few feet from my door and bumblebees nesting right beside it this year. Such a joy to have them around.

Why are you having trouble writing even about the light matters? Are you just not feeling in the mood? You say in another paragraph that being on Facebook has made it difficult to write pleasant chitchat. Is that because there's so much unhappiness expressed on Facebook that it's become a downer? I went onto Facebook very reluctantly for similar reasons to yours. Family. And then I started another Facebook account several years later in order to keep track of another group of individuals. But as you probably noticed I don't tend those accounts the way I ought if I really want to keep in touch with people. There's just something about Facebook where I end up feeling overwhelmed to a small degree. Small but noticeable if I pay attention. I'm much more comfortable on Twitter. Now, is that because of the people I talk to on Twitter versus the people I talk to on Facebook, or is it the actual format of the two media? Possibly a bit of both. On Facebook I connect with people because they're my friends, in the account where I 'friend' you. On Twitter I connect with people because we have a specific interest in common that I enjoy talking about. (The natural world and BBC4's *The Archers*.) I don't hear as much anger on Twitter as I do on Facebook,

not because it isn't there but because of the specific accounts I follow. There aren't as many photos on Twitter. Does that matter? The messages are generally shorter on Twitter. And it's all in one stream. I think that probably has something to do with it. Facebook just has too much going on all across the page. You can't simply look at your feed and what your friends have said. There's always other stuff there too. Twitter is more streamlined and I like that. I don't like the visual clutter.

I am so glad that your bout of Covid was not too bad. I have to admit I live in fear of catching Covid. I really don't want to feel that sick, and I'm alone, so I would be having to nurse myself. Just don't want to go there. So I am very limited in what I can do, and I am definitely missing important social connections, such as with family.

(20 August 2022)

I'm with you about e-books. I also have a fair number of unread paper books that call to me far more loudly than the e-books that nestle in my Kobo reader. Additionally, I keep hearing of books I'd really like to read and getting them from the library, so several of my last few reads have been library books. Speaking of which, I have finally discovered the American fantasy author, N. K. Jemisin. What a mind! I read the 'Dreamblood' duology, and I don't think I have ever read a fantasy novel more textured and subtle and well written in every way. They are both great doorstoppers of books, such that I normally avoid, but they didn't take me long to rip through. I just stopped doing everything else for a week (each).

You speak of John Bangsund and Doug Barbour. I enjoyed the conversation about John Bangsund in *SFC* 103. The two ditties John wrote (p. 16) are beautiful. That seems like a strange



word to use about 'Shall I compare thee to a summers day?/High pressure system centred over the Bight', but it is the one that came to mind when I read them. Delightful, funny, clever, kind.

At our age we have experienced so many losses. October 10 was the first anniversary of my brother's death, which absolutely floors me. I don't feel as though I am much different in my stage of grief than I was three or four months after he died. The bereavement walks that I participated in last winter were very helpful. I am extremely relieved to learn that they are starting up again and there is room for me to participate. I still need to talk about Vic.

I was wondering while reading this if you are selecting material for your own memorial issue. Surely you will give the person or persons to put it together some hint of what you would like in it. Your favourite editorial. Your best list. Or pictures of the cats, but which ones? These questions got me curious about your Wikipedia page, which does exist, I found, but someone — not you — needs to get in there and update the awards. You have a shockingly long list!

[*brg* Perry Middlemiss has done his best to keep up the Wikipedia pages of me and some other Australian fans, but some idiot Out There keeps wanting to edit them or scrub them altogether. I hope Perry writes about his Wikipedia battles sometime.*]

I'm also finally seeing a grief counsellor, also through the Vancouver Hospice Society. He is remarkably good and quite lovely. We've had one visit and I'm only allowed six, so that is a very limited offering, but a precious one. It's part of a study by the BC Palliative Care Society, looking into the services that are available for people facing bereavement. So in a strange way I look forward to that.

(13 October 2022)

I'm still reading *SFC* 105. I really liked both covers, by which I mean front and back (and for that matter the plethora of art throughout the zine). Very beautiful. Things have gotten so sophisticated, haven't they?

How unfortunate the printer couldn't do *Afterworlds* and *Outworlds* 71 in an Ace Double format. That would have been amazing. I have a great fondness for those books of yore.

Your response to Barbara Sharpe, on page 15: my Catholic upbringing afforded me a similar commitment to yours of a 'high individual activity level, without thought of profit, that forms the link between my childhood and teenagehood in the

church and the rest of my life in fandom'. Although for me that activity level without thought of profit has mostly been expressed outside of SF fandom, though there was a fair bit within that realm as well.

My days are such a peculiar unrolling of activity and depletion, with the vagaries of impulse and shabby memory seeing me involved in sometimes an astonishing number of projects at the same moment, wandering from one to the other and then thinking of yet another that I must do. The priority for my activity is almost all medical in nature and there is an awful lot of it, but there is also a lot of stuff that just needs doing around here. And then there is the work that I do (without thought of payment, as seen above) for my small community of folk who are devoted to Brigit. You will not believe how hard it is for me to say these words in your fanzine. I have always kept my SF fandom and spiritual life more or less separate. There never seemed to be much space for spirituality in the fan circles I have inhabited, locally, at least. Reading Dale Nelson's pieces in William Breiding's *Portable Storage* is perhaps giving me a little more courage in that direction.

I very much enjoyed Colin Steele's reviews, as usual. I ordered a copy of Shaun Tan's *Dog* (which turned out to be a tiny book, surprising me because the other one I had by him was large format) after reading the review, brief though it was, because I knew a friend would love this book for Christmas. I was startled, however, to see Cory Doctorow reviewed in the US section. He is Canadian, and apparently also British. Another Canadian author he mentions is Michael Christie.

[*brg* Neither Michael nor I knew that Cory Doctorow is Canadian. New Zealanders have a similar problem when they move to Australia — they are instantly sucked in and called 'Australians', despite their continuing ties to NZ.*]

After a drought that lasted more than three months in our supposed temperate rainforest climate here in Vancouver, and all the floods and fires and plagues that have hit BC in the last year or two, his book *Greenwood* sounds too painfully close to home. But I love the quote that Steele ends with: 'When do we choose self-preservation and when do we choose survival in a broader sense?'

(29 October 2022)

That is worrying information about Michael Bishop. Have you tried shooting him an email?

(2 November 2022)

No rest for the wicked? Working away on Christmas. For the first time in — what, three years? — I joined my friends for Christmas yesterday, and what a blessing that was. One of our number died in the summer and I thought, blast it, I can't go the rest of my life without spending time with my friends. Still, scary to be the only one masked. One actually had the duncity to say, 'But none of us has Covid.'

(27 December 2022)

I'm glad you're feeling better than you were on Christmas Day. I am sort of the opposite. The last few days I've been waking up with a tiny bit of a sore throat because I'm not getting enough sleep and when I get rundown like that my throat warns me. Today I haven't got a worse sore throat although it hasn't gone away but I am absolutely shattered. Coming home from my three or four days away to a nearly double-rent announcement was a horrible shock, and I had to spend several hours yesterday trying to deal with that when I was already utterly fagged out. Luckily, I was able to hide in here and not deal with the woman who is suddenly raising my rent, giving me a chance to rest a little and talk to her predecessor about what I actually have to put up with and what wriggle room there is. Not much, as it turns out. She did make a mistake, I was finally able to realise, and so the increase won't be quite as shocking as she has put it, but because they f—ed up and didn't increase my rent six months ago she's now demanding six months back, of \$253 a month. (UPDATE: She seems to have forgotten about that. Fingers crossed.)

I'm not quite sure why I have to be punished for what they've done, but unfortunately the tenants' rights people are taking an extra long holiday, so I'm going to have to face her without the backing — or the information — I was hoping to find. C'est la vie, c'est la merde.

[*brg* The rent inflation has also hit every town and city in Australia, with similar ruinous increases being imposed on the poorest people in our community — especially pensioners and single women over 50.*]

I understand why you aren't happy about having to go completely electronic but I think it's not a matter for embarrassment or shame, just regret. And I am sorry that you've had to re-retire when you have such a small amount of money to live on. Not a happy situation. Especially as prices are bounding on every side. This has made my sudden huge rent increase all the more distressing. I should say that it is a huge increase for me, but as housing prices go I have a very low rent even

still. The problem is I also have a rather low income to go with it. I had been revelling in being able to put gas in the car and buy all the groceries I needed for the first time in my life. I fear I will be going back to the old way eventually, of getting groceries once a month, squeaking by till the next pension, and so on. 'So on' includes more book buying in the last couple of years than I have ever been able to do. I guess that has to go, but maybe not quite yet. I'll have to do the math. My grocery wants are not excessive, I should say, and they don't include meat, which used to be a huge expense in comparison to vegetables. Now vegetables are insanely expensive, too. Nor does even my present book buying rival that of most booklovers.

Today's world takes me down, as well, and very sad and frightened for others. I know some things have improved in how we are with each other, and there are many people who really care about the state of things, the state of us. So I can only hope that the world someday will be a better place for all living beings.

Because I was lounging around with a broken toe for most of the summer and all of the fall, I don't have much to report, except that I very much treasured having my little yard and garden to spend the summer in as my toe healed. This year a pair of chickadees nested in my fence. I was so happy watching them take food to their little ones, though I never saw the babies, myself. The house finches did bring their children to the feeder. Oh wait! I didn't see the baby chickadees when they were tiny, but once they got big enough to leave the nest they were absolutely hilarious at the feeder. I enjoyed them very much. I read some good books while sitting out there, and drank some good tea and very much enjoyed watching the busyness of the creatures, as well as taking care of them and the garden.

Toward the end of the summer Rosa, the daughter of my ancient neighbour Antoinietta, told me that her mother was moving out. I said, 'Oh! She's moving to a nursing home?' Rosa looked completely shocked that I would suggest such a thing. I don't know if this is an Italian thing or just their family, but you would have thought I had suggested throwing her into the ditch.

For the last few years Rosa and her brother (and occasionally an adult child of theirs) (not theirs together, of course) would alternate spending the day with Antoinietta, going home each night. They no longer like to leave her at night, so they bought a little house that is a block or so away from Rosa's and between her and her daughter's house. Rosa and her brother are continuing to alternate spending the day with her, but now they have room to

stay over night as well. I think Antoinietta is the luckiest old person alive. They all get along so well that they are happy to spend the time with her, and she can continue to have her own home. It makes me happy that they are willing and physically and financially able to do this for her. She is a kind, lovely woman, always praising my garden and thanking me for it, when I know it is not the most beautiful of gardens to look at. And I think Rosa and her brother/daughter/etc. are the luckiest caregivers alive. To have so many willing to spend time with her, to not be isolated in taking care of an elderly relative — it is not the situation for any of the people I have ever known.

Canada has a terrible habit of simply tossing old people into unappealing, cramped, severely understaffed ‘nursing homes’, which was very clearly demonstrated when the pandemic hit and residents began to die like flies, some from Covid and some from ailments that were left untreated. Some weren’t even fed and lay in their excrement for days on end. The staff fled and couldn’t be replaced, leaving the homes even more poorly staffed. At one or two places they actually called in the Armed Services to take over. These were extreme circumstances but what they revealed was how poor the situation already was and that it took absolutely nothing to push it over into hell. This all happened very early on.

The other scenario that is common is people living with an ageing child, like my mum with my oldest sister. This is what they wanted, but it is extraordinarily hard. It is very difficult to get help with the elderly person, particularly if you aren’t well off, which they are not. There is no respite, where the caretaker can rest for a while. As is so often the case, what we have is a chronically ill woman in her late sixties caring for a disabled woman in her late eighties ... I won’t dive any deeper into the painful situations so many people have to live through, but when you contrast that to the good-humoured and generous approach Antoinietta’s family takes to her care, you will see why it lifts my heart so to what they have accomplished together.

(12 January 2023)

I read your article about Roger Weddall in *Portable Storage* 9 a few hours ago, and it’s really stayed with me. It’s a beautiful piece, Bruce, and I am very moved by it, both by what you reveal about you and by what you reveal about him. It makes me feel my love for you both, and I never even met him that I can recall.

I know that the LoC usually goes to the fanzine editor and certainly I will be writing to William Breiding, but this comment is for you.

I leave on 20 April and return in late June. I’ll spend a week in Ontario with my mum and then I go to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, before returning to Ontario for a last week with my dear grade 4 teacher, Sister Cecelia. By the time I get home I expect I will be either a new human altogether or dead.

I’ve factored in a bunch of rest stops with just myself so I hope that will be enough, and unlike last time, which absolutely butchered my feet for several years, I am doing everything I can to protect my body from the ravages of moving around in the world. Wish me luck!

(7 April 2023)

[*brg* After all the extensive (and sometimes intensive) email conversation with Casey over recent years, I was rather shocked to find that she had sent to William Breiding’s *Portable Storage* 9 the article that I had thought had always been meant for me! It is Casey’s wonderful article about the personality and work of Eileen Kernaghan. I’ve read some fine books by Eileen, because Casey had alerted me to them or alerted Eileen’s publisher to SFC. I published a short interview that Casey conducted with Eileen a few years ago, but had always hoped to receive the article that covers Eileen’s career. No wonder we fanzine editors are feeling just a bit sidwinded by *Portable Storage* over recent years, although we recognise its importance to all fanzine publishing.*]

I understand your disappointment about not being the recipient of my article about Eileen Kernaghan in *Portable Storage* 9, and I’m sorry about that. I had to make a difficult choice on that one. I left a lot unsaid toward the end of that article. I talked about the support she’s giving me but not the support that I’ve been giving her in the last couple of years. I wrote it under great pressure when I was supposed to be doing something very much else, because an organisation that Eileen was a part of for many years decided to do a newsletter dedicated to her. They got in touch with me and asked me to write something, and I thought they meant an article, not just a line or two. What I wrote was far too long and they only took a couple of sentences from it. So I sent it to William.

Thank you so much for saying that it is a superb article. You probably know that I am a perfectionist to a degree that is detrimental to my own wellbeing, at times, but in this case, because of the time pressure I was under (including the need to get this enormous trip planned, producing my own 30th anniversary newsletter, dealing with membership renewals, and several other things),

I had to stop working on it when it was far from polished. The ending especially is very abrupt and the article could have afforded to lose some weight as well. But I just had to let it go. So I'm glad that, however it turned out, you enjoyed it. And I do hope you get the chance to read some of her books. They are not many, but they are lovely.

I wrote you a while back saying I had an article in mind for *SFC*, I just have not had a chance to even think about it. I have so many writing projects promised for the fall I will probably come to regret opening my mouth.

(12 April 2023)

Feature letter: Lloyd Penney's life and times

LLOYD PENNEY

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Thank you muchly for *SF Commentary* 110. I know what you mean about not getting much actual mail. Except for the odd bill, and the even odder cheque, I receive next to no mail at all. We are getting ourselves ready for getting Christmas cards out (!), so time to assemble the Christmas card labels, and see who needs to be deleted, added, or adjusted. I don't get a lot of e-mail, either, if you don't count the endless spam.

Yvonne and I have now had four Covid shots, and we have inquired about a fifth, if it is available. I am now 63, and 2023 will see our 40th wedding anniversary.

Fanzines: I had asked Rich Lynch about the lack of a local, but that shall not stop me from responding anyway. Never has. If Rich does plan a letterzine of some kind, I hope he will do some reprints of what I have sent to him.

Have you received your Ditmar Award yet?

[*brg* Yes, thanks to Cat Sparks. Elaine tried to take a photo of the transparent lucite trophy, but that didn't work. Cat is a photographer, and successfully took a pic of her own trophy.*]

Many awards carry on without lots of publicity. I get so few of the publications you describe, but I have been getting *Ethel* for eons, back when Ian Gunn was the editor, and I would send Gunny letters. The MSFC has been extremely generous to me, even when they couldn't be very generous with themselves, and I publicly thank them for keeping me apprised of club activities for what seems generations. Personal thanks to LynC for keeping me in the loop.

I am discovering just how much damage the Covid-19 pandemic did to fandom in Canada. *Ad*

Astra, our literary convention in Toronto, is dead. So are CanCon in Ottawa, and VCon in Vancouver. All I have seen that's left is Keycon in Winnipeg, and When Words Collide in Calgary. I am not counting the comics and gaming conventions that have come back, or the pro-run conventions that seem to be spreading Covid just by opening their doors. I am close to saying that fandom is pretty-well dead here, with fans having moved on to other things over the past two years. I miss my friends, and there is almost no opportunity to see them. We have moved further into being vendors, and 2022 was an extremely successful year for us. We also need to feel useful, so we are returning to selling the dealers' tables for our local anime convention's Vendors Hall.

Since my last loc, I have edited three of those hard-core space operas, and I have found that the author has quite an appreciative audience online.

Lloyd Penney. (Photo: Yvonne Penney.)



I have also edited an upcoming book called *Cents of Wonder* by Steve Davidson and Kermit Woodall. These two are the masterminds of the revival of *Amazing Stories*, and the book is an anthology of classic stories that won the writing contests that Hugo Gernsback used to run in his magazines.

I see mention of Philip Pullman and the volumes of *The Book of Dust*. I hope he can get this third book in the series finally done and out before people forget the first two books. I have obtained for myself all the books on Lyra Silvertongue, and the universe within is compelling, but a suitable finish to the series seems still far off. I hope I am wrong.

After dinner tonight, Yvonne and I will head east to the Junction area of Toronto where of all people Cory Doctorow will be launching a new book. We can't afford to buy, but Cory is one of many people we had hoped to see again.

(16 September 2022)

Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 111. I certainly understand about phasing out paper copies of *SFC*. For many, retirement means not being able to afford much. I care more about the content than the medium. Yvonne's retired, and I am there in about a year and a half, so perhaps something will change. I am not expecting much, so I will have to be happy with what I get once I hit 65. Hey, let's talk about happier things

I know about colonoscopies — I have my next one this coming May. My mother died from colon cancer more than 10 years ago now, so I am doing this hoping that I won't be getting that cancer myself. You are lucky to have friends who will take you to where you need to be.

There are few clubs in the world who can brag about a 70th anniversary. I congratulated the MSFC in the pages of *Ethel the Aardvark*, and I'd be happy to do the same here. I think LASFS holds

the record for longevity, but any club that been around more than 50 years has much to show, and much to brag about.

So many passings. I met Robert Lichtman only once, and that was at a Corflu in Las Vegas some years ago. Maureen Kincaid Speller, only online. Lorna Toolis was one of the few friendly faces I would meet within the walls of the Spaced Out Library here in Toronto. She very much made that library a good place to be, and she helped with getting us function space there for Toronto in 2003 Worldcon bid meetings. (David Nickle is an old friend, with many of his articles appearing in our local paper, the *Etobicoke Guardian*. He has just gotten himself a new job with the City of Toronto.) Unfortunately, the others you list are but names to this non-world traveller, but there are so many of them.

I am still having WTF moments when I remind myself (frequently) that I am now the editor-in-chief of *Amazing Stories*. It's such an iconic position, I hope I can do justice to it. My biggest part of the learning curve is learning how to get around within the custom-built websites created for the magazines. They belong to Kermit Woodall, who takes on the even busier roles of art director, publisher (Steve Davidson gave it to him to free himself up to look after a sick mother), and managing editor. By the looks of the history of *Amazing*, the editor-in-chief gets all the attention, while the publisher gets most of the work.

Yvonne has been at her sister's place elsewhere in Etobicoke, making tourtières for Christmas, so I have been at home today, editing a book, trying to get caught up with all the stuff I have to do with *Amazing*, packing our stuff for a craft show tomorrow, and writing a letter like this one. Always a pleasure to see more *SFCs*.

(10 December 2022)

Feature letter: The Dennis Callegari column

DENNIS CALLEGARI
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Looking through my list of recently read books, I found more non-fiction works than books of fiction — and most of the fictional works are novels in already established series by Donna Leon, Lindsey Davis, Ben Aaronovitch, Seanan McGuire, and

Andrew Cartmel.

I'll have to re-borrow *Orwell's Roses* by Rebecca Solnit, which I enjoyed and which told me interesting stuff about many subjects *other* than George Orwell.

I've just finished *The Dragon Waiting* (a reissued novel by John M. Ford), and am only part of the way through Karen Joy Fowler's *Booth*.



'Dirigible from the Earth to the Moon', by Dennis Callegari.

My reaction to *The Dragon Waiting* (TDW) is mixed. John M. Ford was a talented writer, and I didn't have a problem with his alternate-Byzantine fifteenth-century world (even one with magic and vampires). He clearly also did a lot of research on the historical background of Italy and England at the time.

My quibbles are comparatively minor. I suspect the book was intended as the first novel in a series that was never written. Some events in the book that should have been explored in more detail are rushed through, and the book sometimes leaps over important plot points that sent me back to work out what was going on. If these weren't deliberate ploys, I'm thinking that some important linking material may have been edited out.

You may remember a 'Christmas card' email I sent out for Christmas 2020 that contained my collage illustration for John M. Ford's poem 'Winter Sostice, Camelot Station'.

(24 August 2022)

Since last we talked, I've read (or tried to read) a couple more of the books you've listed in *SFC* 111:

- **Everision** (Alastair Reynolds): an SF tale that begins in the nineteenth century, was an interesting read until I realised what the 'twist' in the plot was ... at which point my interest in reading the rest of the book disappeared. What a shame; that first part was quite good. (And yes, giving away the twist would be a serious spoiler.)
- I've started reading **Terry Pratchett: A Life in Footnotes** (Rob Wilkins) and it's very enjoyable ... but so far I've only got as far as Terry's first venture into fandom. Fans will inevitably compare Terry's own early life and forays into reading (*Wind in the Willows*, William, Biggles, Tolkien, etc.) to their own. Some obvious parallels and some experiences that I doubt anybody else has had (... like being chased out of school by the headmaster for repairing an old set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). It is left up to the reader to determine whether Terry was telling porkies about his childhood.
- A recent outcome of watching the slow-motion car crash that is Twitter led me to discover a

couple of Harry Turtledove's alternative histories, ***The House of Daniel*** and ***Three Miles Down***. The first is a baseball fantasy set in 1930s Depression USA (complete with vampires, zombies, and werewolves) that Turtledove says was inspired by a conversation with Peter Beagle. The second is set during the

Watergate scandal and is about the discovery of an intact alien spacecraft at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. I didn't get into this at first, until I realised that it's not a 'first contact' novel — it's a 'before first contact' novel — at which point I found it far more interesting.

(24 December 2022)

Feature letter: A year of gardening

JOSEPH NICHOLAS

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In addition to the brief squib sent in response to *SFC* 107, you've also put in one of my Facebook posts about Judith's work for the Permaculture Association and the New Economics Foundation. I'm intrigued, however, as to why you only printed the first part of what became the four-part series 'Remembering a Community Gardener', especially as that first part was a tale of eventual failure, in contrast to the successes recorded in the other three parts. Perhaps you hadn't room for them, or overlooked them? On the assumption that it might have been the latter, I'll paste in the FB links to the other three below, although I don't expect you to publish them — after all, they concern gardening, which is scarcely a core interest for *SFC* readers! (Although I daresay that Elaine might wish to read them.)

<https://www.facebook.com/joseph.nicholas.10/posts/10159641432352277>

<https://www.facebook.com/joseph.nicholas.10/posts/10159660477497277>

<https://www.facebook.com/joseph.nicholas.10/posts/10159682099782277>

<https://www.facebook.com/joseph.nicholas.10/posts/10159702466087277>

As you noted in *SFC* 107, 'The main interest of both of them has been gardening', and during much of the past year I seem to have been engaged in nothing else. Indeed, as the year went on, it was borne firmly in on me that it really did take the two of us to keep up with the demands of both the allotment and the garden, and if we hadn't spent so much money over the past few years on the former — it's a large plot; we were given it precisely because there were two of us — (big new shed; expensive bed edging made from recycled plastic that unlike wooden boards won't rot and fall apart and need replacing every couple of years) I might

have been tempted to hand it back and look for a smaller one. (Although there is such an overhang of unmet demand for allotment plots in London that it would have been many years before one was available.) I took the decision to put several beds down permanently to soft fruit (in addition to the soft fruit bushes we already had), thus reducing the number of beds that have to be dug over and planted out each year (bearing in mind, also, that as I'm now growing only for myself I need to reduce the quantity of stuff grown anyway); and I now have some more fruit bushes on order, to take up another couple of beds. Gooseberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants; from the autumn of next year, I shall be turning out industrial quantities of jam to give away to my siblings and fellow plot-holders (whether they want it or not!).

But winter looms, of course, and gardening will come to a halt for the next few months, although it's been an amazingly mild autumn so far — on the day of the allotment association's AGM a few weekends back, the temperature reached a maximum of 21 degrees: possibly a record for late October (albeit not quite bikini weather). I shall instead be turning my attention to things to be done indoors — before she died, I promised Judith that I would complete the construction and fitting out of her big dolls-house and make the flat for her two Barbie dolls, but I haven't made much of a start on either apart from fitting the doors to the former and buying the wooden battens and panelling for the latter. Never mind the small stack of as-yet-unmade jigsaws that sit on a shelf behind me — doing two or more jigsaws over the Christmas/New Year holiday period was a staple activity for us — and the Lego bonsai tree that my sister Gail gave me last Christmas, with the stern instruction that she wanted to see its making recorded on Facebook. And there are one or two books to be read ...

I both admire and am dismayed by the number of books covered in *SFC* — admire, because so

many people obviously have the time and inclination to read so much; and am dismayed, because I don't seem to have anything like that amount of time and because it tells me (again and again) how far behind I've fallen. Indeed, I've fallen so far behind that (almost by default) I've made the decision not to bother with any writers other than existing favourites, otherwise I'll never keep up with them either — although as it is I'm not keeping up: I haven't read the latest three books from Chris Priest (or even acquired them), there are six novels by Kim Stanley Robinson (excluding *Ministry for the Future*, another book I haven't yet bought) on the as-yet-unread shelf, any number of volumes by Alastair Reynolds, China Miéville, and Ken MacLeod ... I won't go on: just listing the unread material makes me feel a bit depressed.

I did manage to get quite a lot of reading done during the lock-down summer of 2020, when we couldn't go anywhere but the allotment and when it was sunny and warm enough to lie around the garden for weeks on end with a bit of string up my botty (and sometimes nothing at all); but my reading fell off a cliff following Judith's cancer diagnosis, which was too much of a concern (I was initially going to say 'distraction', but that's quite the wrong word for this context) for me to be able to concentrate on anything much beyond the daily newspaper. My reading has still to recover — in the first eight months of this year, I managed a grand total of six books, three of which were exhibition catalogues (*Stonehenge at the British Museum*, *Canaletto at the National Maritime Museum*, and eighteenth- to nineteenth-century European painting *en plein air* at Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum). The others were Richard Fortey's second volume of autobiography, *A Curious Boy: The Making of a Scientist* (chronologically, it's the first: *Dry Storeroom No. 1*, published several years ago, covered his time at London's Natural History Museum), Alice Roberts's *Ancestors: A Prehistory of Britain in Seven Burials*, and R. J. White's *Life in Regency England*, the last-named published in 1963 and acquired secondhand a few years back. Things have improved slightly since, thanks largely to two foreign trips and the three-hour/three-and-a-half hour plane journeys involved getting there and back (eight days in Albania in late September and six days in Athens in late October, both small group tours of archaeological sites), but none of the books read on those journeys was science fiction: they were all popular science, in the case of the Athens trip some of the books acquired at New Scientist Live in early October. I'm sorry that this has been all about me — despite the subject line, it's not properly a response to *SFC* 110, is it?

But I'll send this off to you anyway and get back to reading all the goodies in it. Once I've had dinner, that is — tonight is pork belly strips, which will require slow cooking in the oven for the skin to properly crisp up. Judith used to do most of the cooking in our house — I could manage simple things such as breakfast every day, scrambled eggs at weekends, chicken stir fries, and spaghetti bolognese, but I left the more complicated things to her. Now I have to cook for myself, and have been slowly extending my repertoire — my sister Gail gave me the cookbook *Ottolenghi Simple* as a present last Christmas, which contains lots of interesting ideas that I've been trying out, and there's also the BBC *Good Food* website which I've been turning to more frequently. I'm even starting to enjoy the business of preparing and cooking food — although I doubt that I'll ever become really skilled at it!

(12 November 2022)

[*brg* I had not realised that there were four parts to 'Community Gardener'. In any case, I ran out of room in *SFC* 110 — the theoretical limit is 80 pages or 84 pages, for the few copies that I've been sending in the mail until now. *SFC* 110 went over that limit, so it cost \$5.50 per copy to post to Australians, instead of the usual \$3.30. For *SFC* 111, I printed ten copies, but I have been able to stick to 84 pages.

Thanks very much for your gardening experiences, both here and on Facebook. All I can do is look on in wonder, since I cannot bring myself to acquire all the background information it would take for me to become a gardener. Also, I refuse to bend down or bend over, so my practical input would be very limited. Elaine keeps control of our native plants forest, but finds it more and more difficult physically (for both knees and back).

The return to my emphasis on shorter reviews of individual books is inspired by the fanzines of David Grigg and Perry Middlemiss. I never listen to podcasts, and suggested to Perry soon after they started the *Two Chairs* podcast that I would be very interested in a written transcription. Try as he could, David has not been able to find the requisite piece of software (although I notice that the Octothorpe people have been able to do so) to produce direct transcripts, but both began their reviewzines made up of notes prepared for the podcast. Very enjoyable result, but it does place pressure on readers to 'Read! Read!' That's the impression I have of David's notes, anyway. And he and Perry are very much on my wavelength, so they have prompted me to return to mini-reviews, and others to get involved in the discussion.

Thanks for your reading recommendations.

Many of my own choices are made by going to any one of our shelves and simply picking a book. It can easily be a book that has been there for 40 or 50 years unread. I've never bought a book I didn't seriously want to read, but that doesn't mean I've ever been able to keep up.*]

A supplementary comment on *SFC* 110, in response to the last couple of paragraphs of Robert Day's letter.

He is broadly correct that co-financed productions between the BBC and a streaming service such as HBO result in the streaming service showing the drama before the broadcaster (sometimes many months before the broadcaster, as was the case with *Good Omens*); but he is quite wrong about the third series of *His Dark Materials*. At the time he was writing — March 2022 — principal photography had been completed only a few months previously and the episodes were deep into post-production, with oodles of CGI to be completed before they could be edited for television. Ergo, HBO could not have begun streaming highlights from the series. A teaser trailer has now appeared on the BBC's *Radio Times* website: this advises that HBO will begin showing the series next month, although there is no date given for the eventual BBC broadcast.

The first two series were broadcast in

November–December of 2019 and 2020, with filming of the third delayed by the Covid pandemic; the third is unlikely to be broadcast by the BBC before the New Year, because the current schedules are occupied by two very high profile dramas from which the corporation will not wish to distract audiences — *SAS Rogue Heroes*, which has been praised by no less a military historian than Anthony Beevor, and the baroque revenge western *The English*, which has high-born English lady Emily Blunt learning to shoot arrows, fire rifles, and kill bad guys without blinking.

The teaser trailer for the third series of *His Dark Materials* is available on YouTube. It is **!£\$%&!** brilliant. I loved the first two series, which would bring me to the edge of my seat, as I loved the trilogy; Judith disliked the novels, considering them preachy and overthought. The third novel of the trilogy, in which they invade heaven and defeat god, is one of the most exciting things I've ever read.

(24 November 2011)

[*brg* Much much later ... end of May 2023. *His Dark Materials*, Season 3, was released to an Australian streaming service early in the year, and on DVD and Blu-ray in April. I've bought my copy.*]

Feature letter:

The last days of Portable Storage **sigh**

WILLIAM BREIDING

**3507 N. Santa Rita Avenue, No. 1,
Tucson AZ 85719, USA**

Production on the *Portable Storage* 8 has been coming to a head. Just as your comments arrived we were buttoning up the final pages of the issue — i.e., the locs. The issue is 132 pages. So sorry I can't include it in the letters! (I am, however, amazed that you have a taste for my sercon writing; that was an interesting insight you had about my writing on books.)

Yes, the US is going crazy-nutjob and it is only going to get worse, alas. This country is in the midst of a downfall. And like global climate change it is coming far quicker than any one expects.

(18 August 2022)

Robert Silverberg has been on my mailing list since Issue 6 — he has a loc in the Eighth issue. I wonder

how long it's been since he had a loc published! That was pretty cool.

I am doing well — I am about to retire, and I am very ready for it. My last day is 13 January 2023. My body is starting to give out, so I suspect after the last issue of *Portable Storage* is published I'll just rest for awhile. Gail and I are hoping to move to Albuquerque pretty shortly thereafter. It's a scary time, both economically and socially, to be retiring in America. We'll both be on a limited income with very small work pensions and our Social Security cheques but we are both thrifty so I'm hoping not to eat dog food for dinner.

(17 October 2022)

I half considered using two pieces by you in *Portable Storage* 9, but decided that 'The Lark Ascended' deserved a solo appearance. It is a strong, strong piece.

I liked Mr Kincaid's piece on Joni Mitchell (from



COVER—BY CARL JUAREZ

Covers for the last two issues of *Portable Storage*, Nos 8 and 9: Joe Pearson and carl juarez.

TMR) so much I copied the relevant pages and sent it to my sister Susan who was the one that turned me on to Joni when I was a burgeoning pop-lover in late sixties. But it wasn't until *Court and Spark* that I fell in love, and then went backwards and really listened to her.

[*brg* Except for some of her hit songs, Joni Mitchell's voice and style rather irritated me until I listened to a program on alternative radio station 3CR in Melbourne a few months before she toured Australia in the early 1980s. The tracks that the presenter played included mainly those from her jazz-influenced albums, especially *Hejira*, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, and *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. Brilliant stuff, not only

because of the change in Joni's vocal style but also because of her inclusion of leading jazz musicians in her backing group. Her albums from that period made me a fan of both Pat Metheny and Jaco Pastorius. I was less excited by her concert at the Palais, St Kilda — the sound system was so loud and distorted that I could not catch a word she sang with her travelling band. It was only when she sang solo at the piano that I caught some of the 'Joni Mitchell magic'.*]

I also sent a copy of 'Listomania', the other article you sent me, to my friend John Fugazzi, who will absolutely adore it — he is a fanatical list maker and a pop chart follower, like you, from a very early age. I am hoping to have a piece by John

in the final issue of *Portable Storage*. (Fingers crossed.)

In your 2022 list [when it appeared first in **brg** 127 in ANZAPA] I was floored to see all the Fred Eaglesmith albums listed. I discovered Eaglesmith in 1996 when Cheryl Cline gave me a copy of his first album (CD) saying 'You're going to love this guy', and indeed I did. I stayed current with him for awhile but had no idea he was still making albums. I am going to have start catching up!

I got a statement from Social Security today telling me how much money I will start receiving monthly starting in February. This caused Gail to crunch the numbers of our combined incomes. If we can find a reasonably priced apartment in Albuquerque when we move, we should be able to live within the means of our static income. As Gail said, it all depends on how bad inflation becomes. Already in the last year our weekly grocery bill has doubled. Next we have to take stock of all our other monthly bills and see if there is anything we are willing to eliminate.

(20 January 2023)

DAVE LANGFORD

94 London Road, Reading,
Berks RG1 5AU, UK

I'm very glad to know that Peter Nicholls' collection *Genre Fiction* has arrived. When I sent out the first round of complimentary and review copies it was interesting to see Lulu report the Australian ones shipping first, followed by the USA and eventually the UK; while the first reports of actual arrival were from the UK, making me wonder whether we have slower printers but a faster postal system.

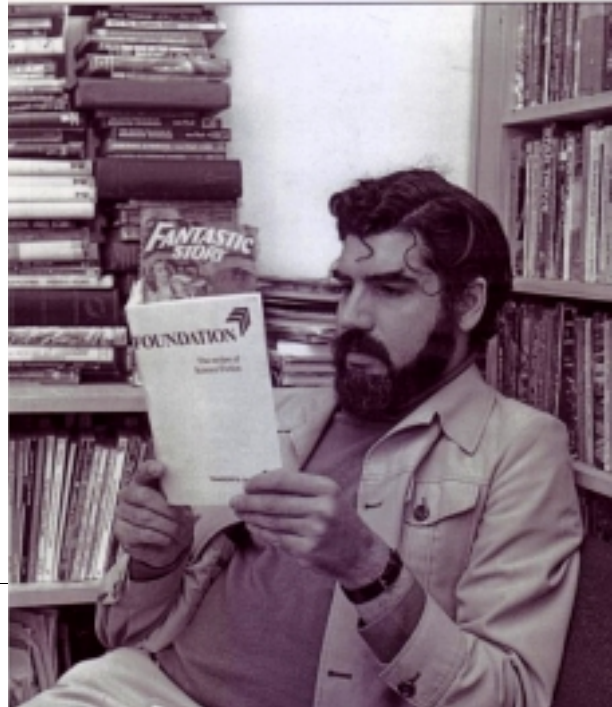
It's a huge relief to see it published at last, after many weeks of holdup.

Besides the first issues of *Foundation* (which had somehow made their way to the OUSFG library), Malcolm Edwards's last issue of *Vector* — the double number 7/8 in 1974 — felt like a magic touchstone for me. In Gene Wolfe terms, *The Book of Gold*. All those clever people being witty and enlightening about sf and fantasy! I really wanted to join them some day ...

[*brg* Peter Nicholls was almost the only working critic who held much the same prejudices as I have toward sorting out the quality stuff from the rest. That's because we both studied English at Melbourne University, although not at the same time. (Peter was eight years older than me.) We once tried to work out whether his tutoring work at Melbourne criss-crossed with my undergrad years in English,

Peter Nicholls

Genre fiction:
the roaring years



but it seems not.

It would have been nice to have been able to write as well as Peter, but Brian Aldiss and Chris Priest have always been top of my real-critics' list, along with Peter and, of course, Messrs Langford and Edwards. Malcolm did an amazing job with *Vector* in the early seventies and took over *Foundation* from Peter who, no matter how worthy his intentions, simply could not keep to a publishing schedule.*]

(16 August 2022)

KEN SAUNDERS

Thanks for the encouraging review in *SFC* 110. I appreciate your efforts very much. I was also pleased you took the opportunity to remind the readers of the work of my non-kinsman G. K. Saunders.

Definitely don't send me a paper copy of *SF* 110. I have moved to Canada for family reasons. Between them, Australia and Canada Post would want a king's ransom to undertake such a postal epic voyage and it would take only about as long as Marco Polo to complete the journey.

With the current tensions between China and the USA (and Australia and Canada by association), I think I should read some Chinese science

David Grigg reviews: THE MILLENNIUM JOB by Rob Gerrand

This is the first crime novel from this Australian author, in a projected series featuring the same police crew headed by Detective John Nguyen, based in Melbourne, Australia.

Full disclosure: the author is a good friend of mine, who I've known for many years; and I carried out the book design and layout of the interior (though not the cover) and helped Rob publish the book.

The Millennium Job has an intriguing beginning. A young woman called Deidre Makepeace wakes up after a boozy night out to find there's a man lying in bed next to her. She can't remember getting home, and the man is a stranger. Wondering what she got up to the previous evening, she reaches out to rouse him, but to her shock finds that the man's body is stone cold. And now there's blood on her hand.

In panic, she rings her friend Fran who lives in the same apartment building. Not thinking clearly, the two women bundle the body into one of the building's lifts and send it to another floor. They put the bloodied sheets into the washing machine. Shortly thereafter, they decide they've been stupid and call the police after all. But when the police get there, there is no body in the lift. Either there never was a body, or someone has moved it. What's going on?

The rest of the book lays out the investigations carried out by the initially baffled Detective Nguyen and his staff, who eventually discover the likely identity of the missing body, which in turn leads them to a widening web of intrigue involving a major bank, shady software manipulations during the 172K era, and the American Mafia.

The novel is fast-paced and definitely keeps you reading, and the conclusion is unexpected.

I do have a couple of minor criticisms. The eventual revelation of what happened to the stranger and how he ended up in Deidre's bed is clever and surprising, but I felt it could have had a lot more dramatic impact than it does.

— *The Megaloscope*, October 2022

fiction. As we once discussed in our email reminiscing about Stanislaw Lem, in repressive regimes science fiction can sometimes slip in commentary where other areas of writing are highly censored. A friend recommended *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin. China is so much in the news these days and I'm feeling less like we are moving into a new Cold War era than into something more akin to Europe in the years prior to 1914.

(18 August 2022)

DAVID GRIGG
100 Redleap Avenue, Mill Park VIC 3082

Thanks for *SFC*. Thanks for the mention of *Through the Bibloscope*, though my two-monthly compilation of reviews in *The Megaloscope* is what I'm going to concentrate on in future, and is going to be much more like a 'real' fanzine as you've been familiar with them. Including a letter column, which *Bibloscope* will never have, because the latter is really just a shadow version of my Substack newsletter.

(23 August 2022)

In *Megaloscope*, I'm responding to the bit in your email about the Hugos with this, if you care to

react to it: 'There's something to what you say about works published first in Britain, but it doesn't explain why really excellent SF/Fantasy works by American authors also don't even get nominated for the Hugo. I'm thinking of *Cloud Cuckoo Land* and *Bewilderment*, for example. Both indubitably science fiction, both excellent. Didn't get a mention.'

Of course you may quote me or excerpt from my review of Rob Gerrand's book.

(6 September 2022)

BILL BURNS
23 Kensington Court,
Hempstead NY 11550-2125, USA

There are four easy ways to find your fanzines on efanzines.com:

- 1 The current issue will be at the top of the front page for about a week, then will slowly move down. Go to <https://efanzines.com> and scroll down.
- 2 This link takes readers directly to the **Bruce Gillespie** page: <https://efanzines.com/SFC/index.html>



Then click on any of the fanzine titles at the top of that page to go directly to the start of the section for that fanzine, or scroll down.

- 3 This link goes directly to the **SFC** section:
<https://efanzines.com/SFC/index.html#sfc>
- 4 For the closest point to a specific issue, modify the previous link by adding the issue number. For example, to get directly to the box for SFC #108, just add 108, and so on:
<https://efanzines.com/SFC/index.html#sfc108>

If you're announcing a new issue on Facebook or in an email, method 4 will be the most useful. You can of course test it yourself before sending it out.

No problem with the lack of paper copies, but you should still consider Amazon's Create Space, with which Michael Dobson and William Breiding have great success at a very reasonable cost. One of the main advantages is that Amazon offers local printing in each country, which keeps the delivered price down.

(22 August 2022)

LEANNE FRAHM
Seaholme VIC 3018

SFC 110 arrived yesterday, and huge it is! Obviously I haven't been able to read it all, and there's not a lot I could comment on given I haven't read most of the books mentioned, if any. But I did like catching up on some of the letters — Kim's was almost a novella!

One thing caught my eye, and that was the bit about Enid Blyton. I find the modern tendency to discard what's seen as objectional to today's

society regardless of what inherent good may be attributed to it annoying. Context is important, and understanding that is a function of education, which seems to be a bit lacking. Here's an example: I saw the British black-and-white film *Mandy*, which came out in 1952, when I was seven or eight, and loved it. Recently it was on TV, so remembering it, I watched it again. I winced when the husband slapped his wife, and winced even harder when she apologised 'for making you hit me'. But the message in *Mandy* was about seeking and finding a better life for deaf Mandy. Yes, I can regret the domestic violence, but I can find joy in the ending. Is it really so hard to separate the two?

A house inspection is looming — something you home-owners don't have to contend with, so I have to press on to fulfil the requirements. Thanks for 110, I really appreciate it.

(27 August 2022)

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

This is the message I put out to publicise the September 2022 meeting of Critical Mass in Adelaide:

If you think about film adaptations of SF stories, you might well notice the large number of films (and TV shows) based on the works of Philip K. Dick. This month, we're inviting you to read one (or more) of his stories, then watch a film (or TV show) based on the story.

- Was it an interesting film?
- How faithful was it to the story?
- Did the film makers make any major changes?

Films based on P. K. Dick stories:

- 'Second Variety' (1953): *Screamers* (1995, Christian Duguay); *Screamers: the Hunting* (2009, Sheldon Wilson)
- 'Paycheck' (1953): *Paycheck* (2003, John Woo)
- 'Imposter' (1953): *Imposter* (2002, Gary Fleder)
- 'Adjustment Team' (1954): *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011, George Nolfi)
- 'The Golden Man' (1954): *Next* (2007, Lee Tamahori)
- 'The Crystal Crypt' (1954): *The Crystal Crypt* (2013, Shahab Zargari)
- 'The Minority Report' (1956): *Minority Report* (2002, Steven Spielberg)
- 'We Can Remember It For You Wholesale' (1966): *Total Recall* (1990, Paul Verhoeven); *Total Recall* (2012, Len Wiseman)

- *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968 novel); *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott); *Blade Runner 2049* (2017, Denis Villeneuve)
- *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (1975 novel): *Confessions d'un Barjo* (1992, Jérôme Boivin)
- *Radio Free Albemuth* (1976 novel): *Radio Free Albemuth* (2008, John Alan Simon)
- *A Scanner Darkly* (1977 novel): *A Scanner Darkly* (2006, Richard Linklater).

TV episodes/series based on P. K. Dick stories:

- 'The Hood Maker' (1953): *The Hood Maker* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Julian Jarrold)
- 'The Commuter' (1953): *The Commuter* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Tom Harper)
- 'The Hanging Stranger' (1953): *Kill All Others* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Dee Rees)
- 'Imposter' (1953): *Imposter (Out of This World)* (1982, Terry Nation)
- 'Sales Pitch' (1954): *Crazy Diamond* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Marc Munden)
- 'Exhibit Piece' (1954): *Real Life* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Jeffrey Reiner)
- 'The Father Thing' (1954): *The Father Thing* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Michael Winner)
- 'The Impossible Planet' (1955): *The Impossible Planet* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (David Farr)
- 'Human Is' (1955): *Human Is* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Francesca Gregorini)
- 'Autofac' (1955): *Autofac* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Peter Horton)
- 'Foster, You're Dead!' (1955): *Safe and Sound* (Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*) (Alan Taylor)
- *The Man in the High Castle: The Man In The High Castle TV series* (2015)

The stories on which the TV series *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams* are based are in the book *Electric Dreams*. Alternatively, the stories can be found in the five-volume *Collected Short Stories of Philip K. Dick* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Collected_Stories_of_Philip_K._Dick).

(27 August 2022)

GUY SALVIDGE

7 Jessup Terrace, Northam WA 6401

Thanks very much for sending me a copy of *SF Commentary* 110, which arrived during the week. While reading it, I realised it has now been 10 years since you published my Philip K. Dick reviews, and that you have cranked out more than 20 issues of

SFC in the interim!

Thanks very much for the kind review of *Complicity City*, which is much appreciated. After abandoning my attempts to write SF after at least 15 years of trying, I find I am now abandoning the crime fiction genre as well. One of the major problems I have is the sheer amount of often gratuitous violence in such novels, as well as the heavily codified and often formulaic progression. So I am a genre refugee again, this time attempting to find a home in historical fiction. At the moment this is going well and I am happily progressing on my PhD, for which I am writing a novel set in early colonial Tasmania. I am about to embark on my sixth visit to Tassie in six years this September–October, so I'll go prepared with newly purchased thermal pants and a puffer jacket. Before then I'll have to check out some of the films you discussed in the latest issue, including *The Burnt Orange Heresy*.

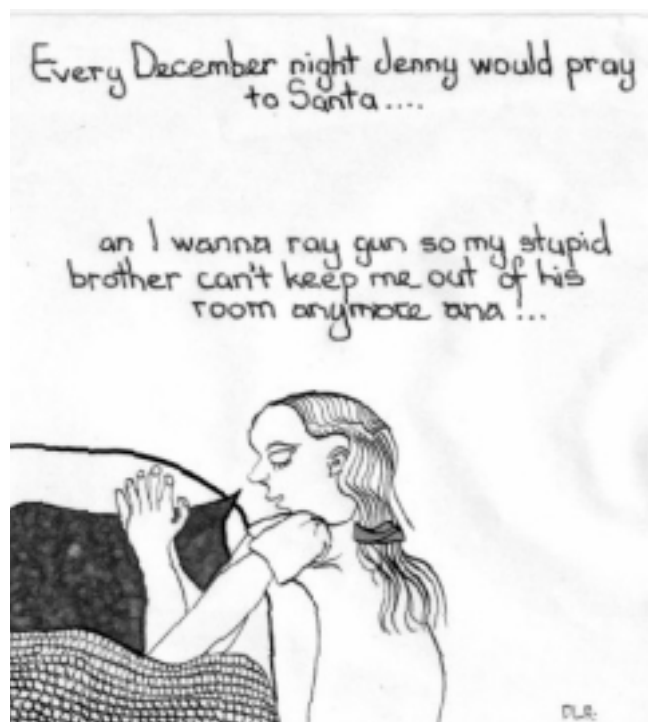
(3 September 2022)

MATTHEW DAVIS

15 Impney Close, Church Hill North,
Redditch B98 9LZ, UK

Actual words by me? The horror! The horror! I'm recuperating after babysitting my nephew for a week — but if you need someone to explain the recent Dragonball Z extension to Fortnite then do I have the seven-year-old for you.

I figured out that for every 1000–1500 words I write it equals in time and concentration a book that I don't read, so I have to reconcile myself to not reading 20–30 books if I write the Fritz Leiber



essay. A couple of years ago I finally constructed a timeline of what I knew about Leiber's life and works. *The Green Millennium* goes from being an amusing bagatelle to a work by a borderline alcoholic written while drinking about how good it would be if the whole world were drunk. In another vein, there's a certain sort of gloating biographer who would thrill to Leiber admitting he didn't even know how to masturbate to climax until his early 20s, but I think it's more interesting that Leiber's habitual self-analysis leads him to believe that this is something he should share with his readers. Of course, are these things readers really want to know?

Maybe later this year I shall produce another few e-books collecting old articles, essays, and reviews. Not Avram Davidson this time. My nephew skypes me for an hour most days, and it's nice to take an interest while he's going on and on, playing Minecraft, Fortnite, and Roblox, but it does require no more than about 60–70 per cent of my attention, so scanning old magazines, photocopies, and printouts makes good use of the other 30 per cent. I suppose that's a kind of warning to you to think about changing emails.

(3 September 2022)

THOMAS BULL
Doncaster VIC 3108

Thank you for your letter, and your fanzines, and your news. I did lose personal internet access for a while, although that's not why I refrained from attending the MSFC's 70th Anniversary meeting.

Due to my place of work having been acquired



by another company with a separate intranet, I currently need to use two different work laptops on a daily basis. It's been a hassle to shut them down, unplug them, transport them, and set them up again at the start and end of the day on the relatively few workdays that I haven't been working from home recently. It didn't seem fair to attend a large gathering after using concern about the coronavirus as a reason for not attending a sparsely populated office.

My relatives over in Perth have supplied me with plenty of face masks and continue to advise caution as regards the virus.

(6 September 2022)

DAVID RUSSELL
196 Russell Street, Dennington VIC 3280

Thank you for *SF Commentary* 110. I do appreciate how difficult it must have been for you to type so many words with sitting in one position being so painful for you for any length of time.

[*brg* You really brought me up short with that comment. I hadn't realised that you did not know that most of the non-Gillespie content arrives as Word attachments to emails. I simply take in the text, edit it, and then lay out the pages in Ventura. I'm sorry to disillusion you. Of course it's true that I typed every word in the days of duplicated fanzines, including those typeset on the old IBM Composer. I was a better, faster typist then.*]

Like most fans I ego-scanned for my own name and work first, and was pleased with the frequency of me-me-me in your zine. Plus I'll be sure to get a sympathetic mention in a future zine of yours because of the non-printing of a cartoon on page 47.

It's okay, Bruce. There are a gazillion details you have to deal with in producing *SFC*. The occasional slip-up could easily have happened at your printer in Greensborough.

You are getting better at matching cartoons to text. I was very pleased that you ran page 54's cartoon on Xmas alien invasions with Mark Plummer's feature letter, since it ends with him talking about the looming Christmas season (he wrote on 24 December 2021).

I was also pleased that you listened to my begging you not to crop the bottom of the snow in the 'Weather Bureau The Early Years' double cartoon. It allowed fans to see visually that the two medieval peasant types were up to their chins in the cold stuff, which undercut nicely their words.



**Jill Eastlake, John Hertz, Mary Robinette Kowal (centre to viewer's right in the photo). The Workmanship Judges were Miri Barker, Leslie Johnston (viewer's left, and second from left, in the photo).
(Photo: Chris Barkley.)**

Perhaps I'd better mention someone else, otherwise this letter will come across as tremendously self-centred. It is, of course, but if I leaven the letter with other names, it might stop fans skipping to a less egotistical missive. You are correct in thinking Alan White had H. P. Lovecraft in mind rather than Edgar Allan Poe, as Leanne Frahm suggests, for the inspiration behind his cover, *A Night in Innsmouth*. I know this, because H. P. wrote a story called 'The Shadow over Innsmouth'. Perhaps Leanne hasn't encountered Lovecraft's revival a few years back, with quite a few anthologies paying homage to his creations?

I've ordered a couple of books from reading about them in Colin Steele's review column, so thank you for running his words and thoughts on books in *SF Commentary*. His writings are of use. I often wonder if publishers can trace a surge in copies sold to one particular review.

(20 September 2022)

TONY THOMAS

PO Box 1215, Elwood VIC 3184

Not only John Sturgis is in favour of short books. Me, too. And it turns out the two shortest Booker

short-list books are by far the best of a not very good lot this year. I couldn't even finish *Glory* by NoViolet Bulawayo, which translates *Animal Farm* to Zimbabwean politics. and goes on and on and on, without much wit. And I'm still at the first moon of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* which (rather unfortunately) infuses magic realism into Sri Lankan politics. Likewise, *The Trees* takes on lynching and (again rather unfortunately) magics it up and goes nowhere fast.

But I disagree with Sturgis about Larry McMurtry, whom he really should have heard of, and who at least has an involving story to tell.

I've been reading old stuff recently: Keith Roberts, Kate Wilhelm, Robert Aickman, Kingsley Amis, and enjoying it much more.

(13 October 2022)

JOHN HERTZ

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

At an Internet-access machine today I looked up *SF Commentary* 110 and saw my letter:

<https://efanzines.com/SFC.SFC110.P.pdf> —
p. 85

<https://efanzines.com/SFC.SFC110.L.pdf> —
p. 125.

Thanks for printing it, although it still had the typos 'publicity' for 'publicly', and 'rhymed' for 'unrhymed'.

(Received 22 September 2022)

Chris Barkley's photo of us DisCon III Masquerade judges is at: <https://file770.com/barkley-discon-iii-the-third-day/#jp-carousel-89782>

The judges were Jill Eastlake, me, Mary Robinette Kowal (centre to viewer's right in the photo). The Workmanship Judges were Miri Barker, Leslie Johnston (viewer's left, and second from left, in the photo).

Masquerade judges often dress up; Eastlake and I, Baker & Johnston, did. This is in no way required; Kowal did not.

Two particular points of applause for Kowal. She took the chair of the con after many difficulties had beset it; it's rare for a pro to chair a Worldcon, all the more achievement in these circumstances. It's rare for a Worldcon chair to serve as a Masquerade judge, adding a time-consuming and fiendishly difficult task to a greater responsibility which is far more so; she was a good judge, too (not only have I often been a Worldcon Masq judge, I've been the Judge in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* and sung those very words).

Photos. Richard Man (rhymes with 'Don' and 'Ron') was there; he's one of our best photographers. You'll want his email address, which I don't have. I'll see if I can put him in touch with you.

(Received 28 September 2022)

STEPHEN CAMPBELL

**Flat 7, 4 Sturt Street, Koroit, VIC 3282
(coa)**

Numerology aside, today is an auspicious one because I am finally moving from the caravan here in Warrnambool to a unit in Koroit, which is close to the rim of the extinct (hopefully) volcano about 15 kilometres from here. David Russell and I are attempting the move tomorrow, weather permitting. This is a great relief to me, because now I will be able to resume oil painting on canvas, which is an active purge of my mental protuberance, and I'll be able to experiment with ideas that have been broiling within me, but had no outlet in the graphic novellas I've been doing here (using pens and paper folios). Exodus from a type of paradise (a cell) to a different type of paradise.

Tyranny notwithstanding, I can imagine the future as the present and generally at peace with itself (or am I just projecting?). Your work is a product of that peace. I read the thoughts of people from all over the world who use your fanzine as a hub of conversation. The wonder of this is equal to any vision that Philip K. Dick expressed, only this has the gravity of the mundane, therefore its truth.

In *SFC 110*, thanks for another good photo of Andrew Brown, the one with Marc Ortlieb that I remember from all those years ago. I always enjoy the letters and photos from Giampaolo Cossato. His Venice looks extraordinary.

Colin Steele clearly knows the extent of the 'field'. Re his review of Enid Blyton biography: I always remember with great joy the 'Noddy' books. They were published years before the modern criticisms, which only showed me something about the critics. With a child's arrogance, I knew that Toytown was only a simple model of the town I lived in, but it wasn't until dad brought a television set home that I realised the world was much bigger than I imagined, and still is. The world is expanding, with the universe in tow.

(20 September; received 10 October 2022)

Letters to SFC 111

Feature letter: Don Ashby's life after the bushfires

DON ASHBY

8 Stanley Avenue, Mallacoota VIC 3892

Available time and the requisite memory jog from

Carey Handfield have conspired to finally get a letter happening to you. Thank you for *SFC 108*, a dip into your brain is always exhilarating and instructive.



Two of Yolande Oakley's page-size paintings that illustrate *When the Fire Comes By*.

Michel Bishop's list of his A100 Books illustrated to me the impossibility of getting a meaningful grasp on literature — contemporary and/or historical. I have only read about a dozen of them and never even heard of about half of the rest.

There is a podcast presented by John Mitchinson and Andy Miller called *Backlisted*. You probably have at least heard of it and may even be a listener. They are mixed up with Unbound, which is a publisher of out-of-print books selected and crowd-funded by their subscribers — a great enterprise. The podcast features much entertaining chat and features a particular work or author from the past and mostly out of print. Occasionally it features contemporary work, notably lately Alan Garner's *Boneland* and *Treacle Walker*, two books that would certainly be on my Hottest Hundred. They have put me in touch with or reminded me of some great reads. I commend it to your readers.

Some great backlisted work I have been rereading lately has included *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky Bros, various titles by Thomas Pynchon, and a swag of R. A. Lafferty.

I have recently read Jessie Greengrass's *The*

High House, which I enjoyed. It got a superficial lacklustre review in the *Guardian*, which annoyed me. It reminded me of a John Wyndham novel with its simple but effective prose and narrative style. My environmental preoccupation guides my reading a great deal these days; Australian novels such as James Bradley's *Ghost Species* and Alice Robinson's *The Glad Shout* impressed me. I have recently reread Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, which should be compulsory reading (along with *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells) for every school leaver, parliamentarian/politician and free-market capitalist on the planet. It has been clear to me for a long time now that any enterprise that doesn't in some way revolve around the environmental/climate emergency is irresponsible.

I was ambushed and amazed by the hundredth anniversary of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, the reading of which was formative in my taking up poetry as a lifelong preoccupation and very influential in much of my philosophical thinking. One of those events that strikes home very boldly how old I am now.

I am glad you enjoyed *When the Fire Comes By*, the

book that Yolande and I put together. The writing came out of some personally deep places, and is some of the best I have done. It's the first time I have ever gone to print in a serious fashion. It has never been a preoccupation with me. I've been far too busy doing the next thing. It all started when I showed Yolande Oakley (one of our best local artists) some of the poems and she produced works relentlessly. Over nine months she produced a huge body of work based on the poems. It was her that pushed for publication. It was published with funding from some post-fire organisations that saw it as a possibly healing work for all of us who went through the fires. I called it *When the Fire Comes By*, a title I kind of nicked from a book about the Great Siberian Explosion at Tungaska.

Of course, circumstances have caught up with us, and Covid and the floods have obliterated much of the memory of that catastrophe from the rest of the population. Because it was printed privately we have no distribution network but have published it as best we can. Proceeds from the sale of books is going towards funding art initiatives within the areas affected by natural disaster.

We give copies away to anyone locally who has lost their house in the fires (about 120).

I got an unexpected phone call on Friday from a woman whose name is, surprisingly, Rita Ashby. She called me from Eugowra, one of the small towns obliterated by the floods in NSW central west. She had heard an interview we did on ABC RN where I had read some of the work and she wanted copies for her community. It took a while to find a post office that wasn't washed away, and eventually we sent some off to the closest community we could find, which was Orange in NSW. Rita will pick them up from there. She, like everyone else in the town, had pretty much lost everything. Locally we are looking into trying to organise a benefit.

It is deeply depressing listening to the inane media chatter and the obfuscation and snake-oil from politicians and capitalists who are trying to promote the idea that it's really business as usual (especially big business) and we can 'grow' out of this. The idea of offsetting carbon emissions is so blatantly dishonest but 'there are none so blind' etc. It's like taking a fatal dose of poison and then getting some more and burying it in a hole in the ground to make you all better. The only way to tackle this is through a radical rethink internationally, nationally, and personally on how we do business and live. The central core of this must be no more fossil fuels! An 'interesting' statistic is that tourists burn over half a million litres a year

of fuel to come to Mallacoota to enjoy our 'wilderness'. Go figure.

We still do not have a house after nearly three years. Coalition policies have banjaxed the building industry. Voter greed took reform off the table for the housing market. We think we might have something up in two more years, providing inflation doesn't completely erode us financially.

Max has been looking after her mother in Melbourne pretty much full time and only comes home every now and then to touch base and recharge. Her mother has been very difficult and stubborn. Since we had our near-fatal accident, Max could no longer do the hour's drive over the Drummer to Cann River where she used to teach, so she hasn't had an income. This has been a challenge. Thank heavens for the pension. Max's mum has finally agreed to go into care, so Max will be a bit freer to help with the rebuild. I am currently doing an owner-builder's course. It will save us enough money, we hope, to enable us to continue our build. I am now the proud owner of a mudbrick-making machine.

Anyway, though we do not have a house we have a garden, and we are working towards some sort of food security. Dirt is marvellous stuff, and making it is very satisfying. A mixed, but very welcome, blessing is that we are increasingly having to net everything we grow to keep off birds and animals. We have watched the birds come back in greater and greater numbers, which is very healing. We really do have kangaroos in our Main Street, and I saw my first emu since the fires a month ago. The biggest threat is introduced species. Deer are wreaking havoc, and the sparrows are competing with our small native birds. It's a salutary thought that in the end, maybe the only way to control the deer will be to introduce wolves, which might also keep the tourists down. Of course, crocodiles moving south, as everything warms up further, will also help maybe.

I will include a pix of the cover of the book that you requested. I would appreciate it if you could give us a bit of a plug. Not that it has anything at all to do with science fiction.

[*brg* Really? I think many readers — and Kim Stanley Robinson and Richard Powers — would agree with me that everything you have said is at the centre of what real science fiction authors are tackling these days.*]

We have a social enterprise that I and others have set up that we call *Open Page*. This book is our first project, and we are about to launch into preparing a local anthology of writing and illustration. We will have a limited edition of handmade

books and a downloadable PDF version. Proceeds from the book will go to local environmental causes — notably fighting against Vic Forest who want to log the bits of our forest that have not been burnt.

Things are difficult, but not as difficult for us as for others. Floods are far more horrific than fires. There are always art, gardening, and people.

As I say in the first poem of *When the Fire Came By*: 'I will ride off through the zero into tomorrow' or something.

Onwards and Upside Down

Love and Rage

Don

(20 November 2022)

Feature letter: Leigh Edmonds's life and times

[*brg* Leigh's letter was sent to me well before the death of his wife Valma Brown in April 2023.*]

LEIGH EDMONDS

46 Hocking Avenue, Mount Clear VIC 3350

I could no longer resist the temptation to read and loc the latest issue of Nic Farey's *This Here...* and also drop a note to Perry about his latest issue. And then I open Facebook, and what do I find? You are placing a lot of temptation in my way.

So, just a quick note to tell you that I've downloaded the latest *SFC*. It looks as impressive as always with lots of meat. Whether or not I get the opportunity to read any of it I cannot tell, but I thought I would let you know that I'm always appreciative of the work and energy you put into *SFC*. It is also good to see the names of some good old friends among your letter writers.

You mention that you've already closed down your little company and, by coincidence, I was talking today with our accountant about closing down the little company that Valma and I first set up at the beginning of the 1990s. Since I don't publish a big fat fanzine that costs a fortune to post I won't feel the loss of an external income the way that you do, but it still feels like the end of a productive period and, perhaps, an admission that encroaching old age is taking its toll. I just don't have the stamina that I used to have and which is necessary to complete long and difficult projects.

Speaking of which, I've now completed drafting all of the *History of Australian Fandom* up to about 1960, with the exception of a short chapter about Graham Stone that needs to go at the end of this part because there is nowhere else to put it. I had reckoned on no more than 5000 words, but then I hoped that would be the length of the history of

'The Sydney Futurians before the War', but the first draft ran to about 20,000 words. At the moment I'm redrafting the chapter about Australian fandom from about 1953 to the end of the decade, and it's going well but slowly. On the third draft, the flaws in the structure are starting to show themselves and will need to be worked out. Of course, if I were working on that I wouldn't be writing this, and this is more fun at the moment. It is good to see the story starting to emerge from the evidence.

I'm not sure that it is a good idea to put all the obituaries right there at the front. Ten people is too many. Of those ten I've known three. Christine — who could forget Christine? Erik Harding: I recall kicking a footy with him in Lee's backyard at The Patch. Jeremy I recall talking to at Murdoch Uni around the time that he and Jonathan were about to launch *Eidolon* (I may have contributed to the first or second issue). I've also corresponded with Robert Litchman and Frank Denton, but not had any active relationships with the other five. The way they are written about, I kinda wish that I had.

(21 November 2022)

You're right, I did notice how cheerful you were at the beginning of this issue. Then I forgot about that after fighting my way through all the obituaries. In a way I thought the obits were cheerful too, because they reminded us of the many good, bright, and fun people we've known over the years. Fandom does have some very good points, and its people are the main one.

Fancy hearing from Don Ashby. I missed seeing him on the TV show about the fires that hit Mallacoota, probably because we don't watch TV any more. Streaming stuff or watching DVDs is about all we do these days. Partly this is to avoid having to endure the news and current affairs that inhabit television. There's not much good stuff

going on in the mundane world these days to cheer us up, so we ignore it and cheer ourselves up. And, of course, the occasional dose of *SFC* is very cheering too. It's a bit like *Portable Storage*, one of those fanzines I dip into with the hope that in my dotage I will be able to come back and meander through the issue properly. Sadly, there's no egoboo in that for you, but perhaps you get a warm rosy glow occasionally thinking about all the good karma stored up in all those issues of *SFC*.

You're right on another point; neither of us can live on the pension with our exotic and expensive tastes and habits. Sadly we have to. I guess you have many books in your house that you have to

read, as do I. A problem there is that new books that people mention to us seem to push their way in at the head of the queue. (On my account it's the same with new plastic model kits.)

I've started on my contribution to ANZAPA. Unlike you, I write mailing comments as I read rather than going back and writing them after I've read the entire mailing. How embarrassing to have been voted President in the same mailing that I tell everyone I'm cutting back on my contributions for the time being. No more '*encourager les autres*' from me right now.

(23 November 2022)

Feature letter:

Henry and Judy — from North Carlton to Paynesville

[*brg* Paynesville is a town on the Victorian coast a few hundred kilometres east of Melbourne, where the Gippsland Lakes meet Bass Strait. It is reported to be an idyllic place to live, but Elaine and I have not been there, because we do not have a car.*]

HENRY GASKO

Paynesville VIC 3880 (recent re-location)

Thanks very much for *SFC* 111. I'm just making my way through it now, and was distressed to see that a large proportion of it these days consists of obituaries. It was particularly sad to see Christine Ashby in the list.

Christine was actually the first Aussie I met when I decided to come to Australia in 1976. I was living in Vancouver and had just accepted a job offer from an Australian computer firm who were recruiting there. After accepting the position, I went back to my flat and thought, 'What the hell have I done?'

I was on the fringe of SF fandom, so I went to a meeting of the local club and asked if anyone had any contacts down under. 'Yes,' said someone. 'And not only that, we have a real live Australian sitting in the corner.' And that is how I met Christine McGowan. We talked for most of the evening. (I distinctly remember carrying Christine out to the car she was leaving in). And through her I met Carey Handfield who was also in Vancouver at the time.

I was about to drive back east before leaving for Melbourne, to sell my car and say goodbye to my parents, and Carey said he was heading for

Regina. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to go to Regina in November (and I still can't). But for a couple of days we drove together across the country before I dropped him with some other fans there.

So I left for Melbourne happy knowing that I at least had a couple of names and addresses, but still dreaded stepping off that plane into a foreign country — a real stranger in a strange land. But I needn't have worried. When I'd retrieved my luggage and came out of the gate, there was a boisterous crew of SF fans there to meet me: Christine and Carey, along with Derrick and Don Ashby, and Maz, who was Don's girlfriend at the time. I think Keith Taylor might have been there as well, and possibly Ken Ford — my memory is a bit hazy about the details. Carey and Don could tell you more.

So rather than having to wander friendless in a strange city looking for a place to stay, they took me back to Maz's house in Fitzroy — Maz's parents were on some kind of extended study trip to South America, I recall, and the house consisted of her and Don and an assortment of people quite different than the ones I had ever met in my limited experience to that point. But I had a home and a dozen new friends, and before long Carey and Keith and I were sharing a house on Amess Street, North Carlton, and I was well on the way to becoming an Aussie.

Thanks for publishing the little piece about writing 'Flight of the Brolga'. I wonder if anyone else will notice that I said 'peak' when I meant 'pique'? This might be a sign that senility is no longer merely encroaching but has knocked down

the door and taken up residence. By the way, are you interested in any other stuff from me? I have a lot of reviews of SF and other books that I have done for my own benefit — you're more than welcome to use some of them if you like. I've attached a couple: *Aurora* by Kim Stanley Robinson (in preparation for the novel I am writing about a generation star ship), and *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes, which won a Booker Prize but which I found to be one of the weakest novels I have ever read.

Glad to hear that your knee is getting better. Judy's is also improving but very slowly — it's been four weeks since the knee replacement and she is getting quite bored and grumpy about it taking so long. But we met someone a few days ago who said that he had had his done seven weeks ago, and he might have to go back and have it re-done because he didn't do enough exercises. Judy hates exercise, but that has given her a bit of a scare and she is now doing them diligently.

I am not sure if you have heard the latest from Anne, our daughter. She will be back in Brisbane next week and then Tasmania on the last leg of the tour. She has actually been onstage for about one-third of the shows, which is far more than she expected when she took the 'swing' role, thanks to one lady breaking her leg and another having her gall bladder removed.

It was great to catch up with yourself and Elaine a few weeks ago. We are heading back to the caravan in Paynesville after Judy's follow-up with the surgeon next week, so it might be a while before we can catch up again.

(23 November 2022)

[*brg* Thanks very much for the story of how you met fans while moving to Australia, especially how you met Christine for the first time.

I remember clearly that one of the first places that you visited after your arrival was my upstairs flat in Carlton Street, Carlton. I assume now that Carey Handfield was escorting you around so that you could meet most of the fans in Melbourne. You probably caught on that my main activity was printing and publishing my own magazine, using an ink duplicator.

The reason Carey felt he had to visit Regina was to catch up with the mighty Susan Wood, who not long after your visit moved to

Vancouver. Although she died more than 40 years ago, she still has her own Group on Facebook, and most her fanzine writings are available on a CD ROM that was primarily devoted to the works of Mike Glicksohn, to whom she was probably still married in 1976. (She and Mike had been chosen to be co-Fan Guests of Honour at the first Aussiecon in 1975, but were already split up by the convention and travelled with different partners. Both of them were still ideal Fan Guests of Honour, in different ways. Among the vast numbers of DVD records of the first Aussiecon is a panel discussion between three people all of whom are now long dead — Susan Wood (died 1979), John Foyster (d. 2003) and George Turner (d. 1997).)

No wonder *SFC* features too many Tributes these days.

I remember Amess Street, with a great hole in the floor of one of the rooms. Like any of the other slanshacks of the period, the flat seemed always to be filled with busy people. The same goes with the household that Don Ashby set up on Punt Road — I think Carey lived there as well, as well as a bloke named Chris Gregory and a few others. I'm not sure whether you went there, or had already met Judy and decided to set up house in St Kilda.

I always welcome your reviews, which very much suited the tone of *SFC*. In particular, I remember a killer review of a Michael Bishop novel that came out in 1980 (*Tranfigurations*, which led to the title of your article, 'Bishop Can't Transfigure It Out'). I'm glad Michael didn't remember this review when eventually I got in touch with him only a few years ago. He has been hit by cancer since then, taking away much of his energy. But he has been able to issue new editions of most of his books. I always thought his talent was best shown in his novellas and short stories.

Similarly, Robinson's early short fiction is brilliant, and so are his first few novels. But with the 'Mars' books he hit upon a preachy, discursive style that pleased the Hugo voters at the time, and he had continued in this vein ever since. A great pity, although his concepts are well worked out. His lectures at Aussiecon 4 (2010) were magnificent, but he has never collected his speeches and presentations into one volume. *]

(23 November 2011)

Feature letter: Patrick McGuire's life and times — and a review of a Harry Turtledove novel

PATRICK MCGUIRE

**7541-D Weather Worn Way,
Columbia MD 21046, USA**

My sympathies on your income drop. I know I've been promising for a while, but I will make every effort to get a loc off in January. For the rest of the current week, alas, I will be seeing how much of backlogged tax-related stuff I can get through. I did make a start on the tax stuff, but I hit seasonal burnout several days before Christmas.

Columbia MD was spared the worst of the current winter storm, but it got down to 5°F (−15°C), which is cold but not unprecedented even in my time here, and is at the moment up to a balmy 18°F (about −8°C). We're due for gradual warming from here. Of course in much of populated North America, even 5°F is a perfectly normal temperature. This area is just not equipped to handle it gracefully.

The subject of death never seems to be far from people our age. The cousin I was closest to recently died of cancer. The day after he was buried, I learned of Martin Wooster's death in a hit-and-run. I expect you learned about the latter as fast as I did, since you both were in Fictionmags, as I believe is Kyle McAbee, from whom I got the news. Martin and I did not see each other a lot, especially in recent years, but we spoke on the phone at least monthly and emailed one or several times a week. I'm still processing those deaths.

(27 December 2022)

I can at least partly blame various mundane factors for my delay. Even today I'm dragging a bit from vaccination after effects, not from vax for Covid (already up to date) but from more routine vaccinations. I already had earlier versions (possibly expired by now) against the diseases in question, but it seems the vax world is new and improved.

The sfnal things I've done lately mostly have to do with the local sf book club. The January book was **Harry Turtledove's *Three Miles Down***. The meeting on that was divided, with a majority disliking it and a minority (including me) acknow-

ledging that it had problems, but finding counterbalancing virtues.

I think it is no spoiler, but more like essential knowledge, to know going in that for purposes of this novel (as opposed to any sequels), the alien spaceship mentioned in the jacket copy is pretty much a maguffin. As you probably know by now, the book is an alt-hist novel where, in typical Turtledove fashion, history takes a grossly improbable swerve that the author then attempts to develop in a plausible, realistic-sounding fashion. Here, it's 1974 and the *Glomar Explorer* is preparing to sail off and recover not the Soviet submarine *K-129* (which here is merely is the second-layer cover story), but an alien spaceship on the seabed (possibly disabled) that on this timeline evidently destroyed the sub.

In my opinion, the book, like so many these days, is under-edited. The manuscript should have been kicked back to Harry for revision. Among other things, he should have been told to somehow hint early on that this was a book about getting to the alien ship, and about the international ramifications when mere word of its existence gets out, and not about the ship per se. As best I can see, this would have entailed some sort of introduction, whether in the form of a fictional encyclopedia article or the like, or of an introduction supposedly written on the alt timeline, that would have made it clear that this was not going to be a book about what was found on the alien ship. Negative reactions from the book club and in book reviews that I've seen have been so often based on this misapprehension about where the book was going that I don't see how an editor could have failed to anticipate it. At the meeting, even those of us who on balance liked the book found it better on rereading, when we knew where it was going, than we had the first time through.

Turtledove also should have been encouraged to shore up the novel's Hollywood-cliché depiction of covert operations. Under the fig leaf of this being, after all, an alternate universe, we are also asked to swallow a blatantly stupid Hollywood view of how secrets are kept (or not) and how intelligence organisations operate.

Does Harry think there is the least dollop of verisimilitude in supposing that the phrase ‘termination with extreme prejudice’ could ever find its way into the phrasing of an official document? Even Tom Clancy did better. When an author is trying to make readers suspend disbelief about alien artifacts showing up in 1974, he has to put in some effort. Sf readers think harder than the average moviegoer. Harry may have lost enough critical distance on his book not to see what he had gotten himself into, but telling him unwelcome news is part of what editors and even literary agents are for, or should be.

So why did I like the book on balance? One plus is that in depicting the voyage of the *Glomar Explorer*, Harry stays close to the actuality of our timeline, and a lot more has come to light about that expedition than had the last time I paid it any attention. A lot of it is fascinating. Another plus is the re-creation of the mid 1970s, a time when not only his protagonist Jerry, but Harry himself was a grad student. As was I, and as probably were a number of other SFC readers and a fairly large chunk of the increasingly greying readership for sf as opposed to fantasy (and as opposed to those consuming even sf in screen media or gaming). I could elaborate, and probably should, but not today, since I’m running out of free time, and if I’m going to send this in January even by US time, it has to be on its way soon.

I hope this finds all humans and animals at your place well, Bruce.

(1 February 2023)

Sorry to hear about your leg hassle. It’s frustrating when they can’t figure out what’s wrong with you. Some years ago a strange mark appeared on my chest. The doctors soon decided it wasn’t cancerous, my major worry, but never did figure out what it was. One theory was a spider bite. I can’t recall if it had symptoms other than visual when it started, but if so they weren’t bad and soon departed. I still have some discoloration and the small biopsy scar. You clearly have, at the very

least, a bigger annoyance since the leg is still swollen and perhaps might point to a serious problem. It’s likely a good thing that it’s seemingly not DVT, at least.

I’d hoped to be past the vax after-effects by today. No such luck, although they’ve lessened. They’re consistent with those listed as frequent in the handouts I was given, and no cause for alarm. They should be gone in another day or two. (Muscle aches and tiredness, mostly. And a sore shoulder when touched where injected, which in my experience may take a little longer to go away.)

I hear you about slowing down. Some of that may just be due to stress from your medical hassles. I’m not sure if I myself am slowing down from age or just have grown undisciplined after nearly three years of Covid, when very few of my activities had to be done by a specified time. I find that I have to put a lot of effort into getting somewhere on time, such as arriving at appointments or just getting to church before the service starts. Covid and flu dangers for seniors are still appreciable locally, although largely past for younger people. I’m still wearing a mask in public indoors, as are many others.

Once we were past the cold snap I mentioned in December, the winter weather turned abnormally warm. We’ll see what the rest of winter brings. Very heavy snow in February and even March sometimes happens, but sometimes we get an early spring. I’m not sure whether you would like Turtledove, but some of his work might appeal to you. If you were American I’d recommend starting with *Guns of the South*, but it may be too tied to the American Civil War to make the impression on an Australian that it did on many American readers. I’ll give it some thought. His best work shows lots of historical research, logic in drawing out the consequences of the changes he has introduced, good characterisation, and tight plots with satisfying resolutions. Not everything of his fully measures up, alas.

(2 February 2023)

Feature letter: The many bridges of Venice

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

Almost before the clock struck midnight on New

Year’s Eve (at least here in Italy).

I am still alive but as for kicking — for more than a year (the first symptoms have appeared gradually without much of a fanfare long before that) walking has become a perilous enterprise,

especially with the steps of the many bridges Venice is proud to flaunt. And I have a wonky knee (the right) because of a fall. Two injections of hyaluronic acid have not helped much.

Anaemia has also 'come to the rescue' by enriching the list of my, by now, canonical ailments. I have tried to patch it up with a couple of intravenous iron supplements — so far. More are on schedule.

As for Covid (which I have avoided), I had the fifth vaccination last October (Pfizer bivalent), along with the flu vaccine, which I have regularly taken for the past 20 and more years. In Italy, after a disastrous beginning, most of the population has been vaccinated more than once. Waiting for the next variant, of course.

Recently I have been dabbling in the kitchen, specifically trying cakes and pies. The picture shows one of my recent 'masterpieces': a pie of apples and blueberries, which I am contemplating.

Something about Venice: The lagoon has been invaded by exotic creatures that have displaced the native ones to the point that restaurants have been forced to change some of the items on their menu. We used to have the local, and beloved by the Venetians (the few remaining), young crabs. Now the blue crabs have become the dominant

species; at least they appear to be appealing to the palate.

And the sparrows, which used to be a presence (albeit a bit arrogant but in a nice way) asking for crumbs if you were sitting outside at a cafe in some *campo* (square), are only surviving in gardens among the branches of big trees that protect them from the very voracious seagulls, known as *magoghe*: big, strong, and aggressive even towards us humans. If you happen to be in the open and have a sandwich in your hands they are going to snatch it away in a matter of seconds. It happened to my daughter too, and there was even a small

Giampaolo with his latest masterpiece.



poster outside the place where she had bought the sandwich: *Attenti alle magoghe* (*Beware of the seagulls*). Thankfully she was not hurt.

And the Mose (the barrier that protects Venice from the high water) works.

About the printed copies. You did mention the costs first in your email of December 28th (2021) and also pointed out how you could not cash the notes because of the lack of travel between Australia and overseas.

As I said in my following mail of 31 December 2021 (the year's end again), digital copies are more than fine, and the notes are yours. Therefore you can use them any way you want. On December 23rd I have sent you a registered letter. Fingers crossed about the chances it has to reach you. Before you file it away at the bottom of your rubble overflow tray, you should be able to recognise it by the sheet inside used as a wrapper for the content. It shows images of cats, seagulls, and a pigeon. Sample underneath.

2023? A very large dose of hope and luck.
(1 January 2023)

Thanks for the steady flow of your remarkable efforts to keep the flame alive. I wonder how you manage not to be overwhelmed. I lost the knack for doing it many years ago. And most of the Italian First Fandom SF people with whom I used to correspond are no longer. Sad to say, I am one of the few still around.

[*brg* I am overwhelmed this year, as you will see from the non-schedule afflicting SFCs 112 and 113. Thanks very much for the contributions to funds.*]

About the Euro currency in Britain: Mark Plummer might have some problem. Brexit has complicated things enormously. I am sorry for the Brits who have been deceived by the like of Johnson and Farage into believing that they would have regained their 'sovereignty'. As member of the EU, the UK had the power to influence the decisions taken by the European parliament or even block them in certain circumstances, but the

two mentioned above (and others of the same ilk) did all they could not to explain it to the British electorate and denigrate it any possible way. Mind you, the EU is not perfect, but nothing of such a scope has been attempted before and it might still succeed (Ukraine and the Russian Federation notwithstanding). In a small way I am aware of it, as a much more complicated procedure is now needed if I still want to receive my UK pension.

Here is an example of how sometimes the EU makes things easier. From this year I no longer need to prove with a specific certificate that I am still alive to receive the Swiss pension. The DB of the corresponding agencies have been integrated (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein are not EU countries but are associated with the 27). The UK has surely lost more advantages than they have gained.

My daughter, who works for the European Commission as an interpreter, has now added a seventh language (Danish) to those she is already familiar with.

About *New Worlds*. I'm happy to know that you find yourself in possession of a coveted copy of that edition from 1967. I had met Moorcock for the first time at the end of 1964 during one of the Thursday's meeting at the Globe Tavern in London. In those days my friend Sandro Sandrelli (scientific journalist for the Venice newspaper *Il Gazzettino*, and SF writer in his own right) was looking for SF stories by foreign authors to be published in the sixth volume of the anthologies *Interplanet* he was then editing. I asked Moorcock if *New Worlds* (still the old Carnell format) had some titles available. He told me to pay him a visit in his basement flat in Ladbroke Grove. I did and he gave me some 20 issues of *New Worlds* (of the format mentioned above) to pick from, assuming the rights were available.

But I have digressed. Given that Smith & Sons (and other outlets) were not selling *New Worlds* (because of the censorship), Moorcock was doing it during the meetings at the Globe. And that's where I bought them.

(21 March 2023)

Feature letter: Are books busily dying?

KIM HUETT
PO Box 735, Civic Square ACT 2608

I did use the street address for a very long time, but then for reasons unknown to me I began to have increasing problems with parcel deliveries. Letters sent via Australia Post were no problem,

but everybody else struggled to find me. That's when I decided to rent a post office box and get parcels sent there. Of course that plan is now torpedoed, so it's back to the street address until I move.

Not that I know where I will be moving to. I've been searching the Canberra property market quite closely the past couple of months without finding anywhere I was ready to commit to. I'll keep searching, but if I can't find the perfect place in a couple of months then I'll have to lower my standards. We shall see.

Oh, and thank you for the copy of *SFC*, which looks as interesting as always. In response you will be interested to learn that I'm assembling another John Brosnan collection. This will include all my favourite Brosnan material, but as some of it isn't sufficiently polished for a general audience I'll be confining it to ANZAPA. Currently the PDF is at 87,000 words.

(2 January 2023)

You might like to know that a question in regards to the death of books came up on BBC Radio's World Service recently. More specifically the *More Or Less* program took a look at the claim that half of all new books sell less than twelve copies. This claim originates with a court case regarding Penguin-Random House, the largest publisher in the US, wanting to buy Simon & Schuster, the third largest publisher in the US. The US Department of Justice initiated a court case in an attempt to stop this merger taking place. During the court case Department of Justice lawyer Mel Schwartz made the claim that of 58,000 trade titles published, about half sell only around a dozen copies, while questioning an economics expert employed by the defence, Edward Schneider. Unfortunately Mr Schneider did not know if the quoted figures were correct. Nobody thought to ask Mr Schwartz where he had obtained his information and neither did anybody enter into evidence any documentation supporting the claim. Consequently it's impossible to say where this information came from or how reliable the source is. Given the claim doesn't make clear what time period these 58,000 trade titles cover or what their status is, only new or new and reprint, I'm not willing to set much store by it.

Not surprisingly, the *More Or Less* presenters thought this claim was as annoyingly vague as I did and so decided to do what they do best and looked for an expert opinion, in this case Kristen McLean, who is the executive director of business development and the primary industry analyst at NPD Books. According to Kristen her research was that in the last 52 weeks there were 45,000 unique

new titles published in the USA by the top ten publishers (by volume of books sold annually).

Exactly which 52 weeks she based this figure on she didn't say, but as she conducted this survey after Mr Schwartz's claim did the rounds it seems reasonable to assume that the period covered is quite recent.

Of those 45,000 titles, her research suggested that only 15 per cent sold twelve copies or less. However, she also mentioned that 5000 copies sold is considered the break-even point for the average new title in the US, and that 86 per cent of those 45,000 US titles sold less than 5000 copies. So while the initial claim is greatly exaggerated, the figures provided by Kristen do add some credence to the idea that the death of books is upon us.

However, Bruce, while I'm sure you will want to joyfully pounce upon the above figures in order to wallow in a serious bout of Eeyore-like despair, I see these numbers as needing to be given some context. The fact that US publishers published 45,000 new titles in a 52-week period suggests to me that poor sales are not due to a lack of willing readers but a side effect of how the publishing industry continues to operate on a throw-everything-against-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks system. The mere fact that 45,000 unique new titles were published in what is a 12-month period suggests to me that this is true. Or am I alone in thinking 45,000 unique new titles in twelve months is an insane quantity?

Getting back to Kristen, she made it clear she counted all new titles, which means the 45,000 must include everything the ten publishers published. Which leads me to suspect that most of these titles weren't fiction, but every category from picture books for toddlers, cookbooks, hobby and craft manuals, travel guides, biographies, history texts, to coffee table photo collections. It's also important to remember that these books aren't being sold directly to the public but via retailers.

This is important, because while I would assume most people who like reading fiction need to keep replenishing their stock of unread books, I doubt this is true for most non-fiction categories. Consequently while the average retailer will be buying replacement books for the fiction sections every month I imagine they get far pickier when it comes to books about travel or cooking. In fact, many years ago when I worked in a coffee lounge the owner of an adjacent bookshop would come in every now and again with publisher's representatives so they could leaf through big folders of book covers. The representatives would flip

through these soon-to-be-published titles and offer the owner additional details. I couldn't help but notice they would always start their sales pitches with the fiction categories. I asked the bookshop owner about this once, and she told me she only bought books about travel or cooking etc. when there were about to be gaps on her shelves so the reps didn't put much effort into pushing such categories.

If new titles about travel or cooking etc. rarely sell well, then why do the publishers keep turning them out? According to *More Or Less* presenter Tim Harford, book publishers work on the theory that in order to guarantee a best seller they need to publish a hundred books. By this logic then because publishers don't know when the retail market will run low on categories such as cooking and travel they need to always have new titles on hand to take advantage of the occasional upswing in purchasing.

I suspect that publishers don't actually lose all

that much on books that don't sell well either. My understanding is that the publisher's reps are taking orders before the books are actually printed. In which case, if a particular title receives few orders I would expect the publisher to reduce the print run of that title to the minimum the printer is willing to print. Which means the publisher probably only has a few hundred copies of said title to get rid of, and they can recover some of the modest amount they're out of pocket by selling those copies to a business that deals in remaindered books.

Anyway, given how little fiction I've seen for sale in remainder stores over the years I'd be willing to bet that publishers have relatively little trouble selling their novels to retailers. Even if only 14 per cent of new titles break even annually that's still 6300 unique titles, an average of 17 new titles breaking even every day.

(1 March 2023)

DAVID PRINGLE

47 Forest Road, Selkirk,
Borders TD7 5DA, Scotland

A lot of the books and authors discussed are unfamiliar to me, but I was drawn into the review of a new biography of Richmal Crompton, author the 'William' books (I didn't know that was out). Your reviewer keeps referring to them as the William novels, but they weren't — they were collections of short stories (all bar one, which was the novelisation of a film script), reprinted from British magazines such as *The Happy Mag*. Among notable William fans, unmentioned by the reviewer, I would add two: J. G. Ballard, who read the books in the late 1930s, early 1940s, and Michael Moorcock, who read them in the late 1940s, early 1950s, and actually started his own writing career with his publication of a Crompton/William fanzine, *The Outlaw's Own*. (Et moi, of course, in the late 1950s.)

MIKE ASHLEY wrote to me: 'Your mention of Richmal Crompton reminds me that there's a new collection of some of her lesser known stories, including several weird tales: *The House in the Wood*, compiled and published by David Schutte. It's on my reading pile, but I've yet to get to it. A handsome volume, 26 stories.'

(22 November 2022)

TARAL WAYNE

Toronto, Canada

I always download your zines from eFanzines, though with so much material in every issue I don't often find mentions. Now I'll have to look for them specifically.

For a gallery of my art:

- <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/saara/>
- <http://taralwayne.deviantart.com/>

To download my fanzines:

- <http://efanzines.com/Taral/index.htm>
- <http://fanac.org/fanzines/BrokenToys/>

(24 December 2022)

ROB GERRAND

11 Robe Street, St Kilda VIC 3182

Thanks so much for *SFC* 111. As usual, a treasure trove of good reading. I've skimmed through it, (re-)reading John Bangsund's pieces, reading the sad obits — it seems to be that time of our lives where twigs are growing aplenty for people to drop off — and reading the Bryce/Thomas reviews.

I noticed on Facebook your suggestion to Jenny Blackford about poetry. Would you be interested in the attached?

(23 November 2022)

[*brg* See next page.*]

Stranded by Rob Gerrand

Will she come to me? he thought
And lay back in his bed of sand
Thinking of the times he'd lost
And won with her. He'd been out-manned.
Overhead the violet sky
Lightened as his memories darkened.
He raised his suited left arm slowly,
Brushed the visor. When they'd sparked ...
Time had disappeared. The moment
Endless. Yes, entire evenings
Could only be recaptured later
In concentrated memory. Leavenings
They were, or did become, such times.
When joined they breathed together, both
as one
A flood of feeling flowing through them
Not ceasing when together they had come.
The timeless moments, he reflected,
Came less often as they grew
Together. Yet the separating
In parallel had commenced, he knew.

He strained his eyes then, through the
visor.
Could he see her well-known form?
But as he looked, the far horizon
Made no motion. Then, forlorn,
He wondered at their separation
And, wondering, looked around again.
The sand, his body trapped, immobile —
She was years ago. Now when
He needed help, the unlocked memory
Brought her forth. In gasps he sighed.
A hazy floating feeling took him.
From wettened cheeks he knew he'd cried.

A door swung shut. Another opened.
Bright lights glared, oppressed his eyes.
Interrogations: quietly questioned
Guilt swam up, despite their lies.
He thought, why is it, in these moments,
The very truthfulness confirms
And seems to stamp 'complicit' on me:
Pinned by truth see how he squirms.

He may have fudged computer records,
When their supply of food had waned.
But that had brought in extra shipments:
Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
He knew the Operations Captain
Saw him, jealously, as threat
And sought to build her own position
With anything that she could get.
The mask of friendship that she'd shown
him
(Again his cock had interfered)
Seduced him to complacency.

He'd helped her win.

It's really weird,
He told himself, how I don't care
What she has done. That's her concern.
She has to live with all that follows.
Wonder if she'll ever learn.
Reflecting on their sex attraction
He smiled — I don't learn myself.
If things had gone between us better
Perhaps she mightn't have used stealth.

A tiresome battle. Yelling at him.
Reflecting on his competence.
The lodes are there, he kept repeating.
(He should have shown some deference.)
The group had been on Lya six months,
Had built its base near Phragia's rock,
The likely place from all his assays.
The information seemed to mock.
For though they'd mined the rightful places
Not a trace of ore was found.
His colleagues with exasperation
Began to turn on him. No sound
Is quite the same as breath drawn in
Then exhaled slowly, with control.
It said what everyone was thinking —
Why'd you get us in this hole?
The Operations Captain, Elly,
Sought him out. If he had known
How she was going to use him he'd have —
Done things different? With a moan
He clenched his teeth and fists in anger
And frustration. The fine red sand
Stirred languidly around his spacesuit.
The planet Lya had played its hand.

What's caused the problem? she had said.
He was thankful for her friendly tone.
Is iron such a tricky metal?
She grinned and he felt less alone.
Those others seem a bit impatient.
He watched her face, her eyes and lips.
Perhaps our teams can pool resources.
She reached and touched his fingertips.
All the tests reveal its presence.
The iron's there. It makes no sense.
We mine the dead precise location.
Nothing there. It's not pretence,
A trick to keep it for yourself?
She asked. You'd end up very rich.
He would have sworn that she was joking,
Teasing him. The cunning bitch.
The planet's playing with us: Lya.
It's warping our magnetic fields.
Altering our meter readings:
Instead of high we get low yields.
She'd made no comment on his theory,
But smiled at him and stretched her limbs.
They'd let it drop and spent the night
Discovering each other's whims.

TIM TRAIN

8 Ballarat Street, Lalor VIC 3075

Wonderful to hear from you Bruce, and thank you so much for this latest issue of *SF Commentary*! I look forward to delving within. How was your and Elaine's Christmas? Lexi and Elspeth and I have been traipsing up and down the countryside for the past week, first just entertaining my father and brother (here for their usual two-weekly visit — it is as troublesome as it sounds), up to Warburton for Christmas with my brother and nephew (about Elspeth's age, so they're good playbuddies) and it hasn't finished yet! I'll be off to Sydney tomorrow to see Lexi's family, and coming back to Melbourne on the same night!

By strange happenstance I have a little story which I thought you might be interested in for *SFC* — it's a Keats and Chapman story, containing some very odd puns and two (or maybe just one and a half) of my poems. Would you be interested? I've been sitting on it for about a month or so to see if it does anything interesting (like disappear), and of course it hasn't; rereading it over now I don't get half the jokes but I think maybe that's the point of Keats and Chapman stories anyway?

There'll be another large Sticky Zine fair next year, on Saturday/Sunday 11–12 February at the North Melbourne Meat Market, from midday to 5 p.m. I've applied for a table, hopefully on both days, but we'll see how it pans out.

As you might have gleaned from Facebook, a poet friend of mine, Ken Smeaton, has been screening a series of documentaries about the Melbourne spoken word poetry scene, from the 1960s to the present — it's a huge achievement. We've been very privileged to see them every month at the Cherry Tree Hotel; but Ken will just be releasing those movies into the wild in the new year, on this YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@KenSmeaton/videos>. It's a fascinating glimpse into the pub poetry scene, one which seems to have also developed in parallel with Melbourne science fiction fandom.

(27 December 2022)

My Keats and Chapman story In which Chapman gets together and Keats gets apart, and a modest duo is performed

Chapman was a skilled musician, having diligently studied all the Terpsichorian arts; he knew his homophony from his polyphony from his telephony, and could at a pinch give a passably

good rendition of passages from old copies of the Yellow Pages on his flugelhorn. Never one to let little matters trip him up, when on one occasion his harpsichord and clavichord had blown their gaskets and were sent off to the automechanics for a tune up, he made do with his monochord, and in lieu of making overtures, he sent for his friend Keats so he could make overtures instead.

'Just for fun', began Chapman, *Moderato Grandioso*, to Keats, 'I often get together.'

'Together with who?' asked Keats.

'With whom,' corrected Chapman.

'He wasn't available,' countered Keats.

'I OFTEN GET TOGETHER with my-SELF!', continued Chapman, a little too *sforzando*, 'to tickle the ivories.'

'To tickle whose what when?'

'Ripple the heart strings — go the whole diapason.'

Keats was just working up the courage to say that, in certain circumstances at least, he greatly preferred them to have them on than the contrary, when Chapman, dispensing with the informalities, ran the keyboard sensuously up and down his fingers.

'Here is a little something I prepared earlier,' he uttered huskily.

'I was afraid it might come to that,' said Keats, gloomily.

'You'll know what to do,' cooed Chapman, 'When the time comes', before bursting, nightingale like, into full song:

O
Anything I can do
You can do
Better
Anything I can do
You can do
You can do
Better than me.

Keats: (sounding unutterably bored with it all):
'No I can't.'

Chapman: 'Yes you can.'

Keats: 'No I can't.'

Chapman: 'Yes you can.'

Keats: 'No I can't no I can't.'

Chapman: 'Yes you can.'

'I feel certain you've got that the wrong way round, old man', put in Keats to his friend gently.

After a brief consideration, Chapman went on

with the second verse:

O
Anything I can't do
You can't do
Better
Anything I can't do
You can't do
You can't do
Better than me.

Keats: 'No I can't.'

Chapman: 'Yes I can — or should you begin "No you can"? Oh bother, that's still not right.'

Chapman mused some more, and, after a space, launched into the third verse:

O
Anything you can't not do
I can't not do better
Anything you can't not do.

Here he broke off, uncertainly, and turned to his friend saying, 'How is that? Did I get it wrong this time?' fully expecting Keats to reply 'Right! I've never heard something more wrong in my life', or something of that nature, but by this time his friend was at the bar, stoppering his ears up with as many corks as he could find.

So, in disappointment, Chapman turned back to his instrument and contented himself with this little song:

I was having fun together
When I heard a watcher moan,
'But you can't have fun together
If you're standing on your own.'

Well, what he said was true, then,
And it stung me to the heart —
So I sadly left myself, then,
And I had my fun apart.

(30 December 2022)

IRWIN HIRSH

**Apt 207, 835 High Street, Armadale VIC
3143 (CoA)
Australian Fan Fund website:
www.ozfanfunds.com**

The attached photo is my shelf of Gillespie fanzines (and my copy of *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*). The shelf has everything I have, except for my copies of *The Incomplete Bruce Gillespie* and *American Kindness*, which are shelved with other collections and trip reports. I imagine that if I had



a copy of every Gillespie fanzine the collection would migrate onto another shelf. Nevertheless I wonder how many collections are larger than mine. Probably five or so.

(29 December 2022)

JOHN D. BERRY

**525 19th Avenue E,
Seattle WA 98112, USA**

Thanks. I am perfectly happy getting *SFC* in digital form. There's always more than I can read, but it's always very welcome. Book talk is always good!

Speaking of which, I just read a biography of Evan S. Connell, an American writer you may never have heard of, best known for his early novel *Mrs Bridge* and his bestselling, oblique book about Custer and the Battle of the Little Big Horn, *Son of the Morning Star*. He was closely involved with my favourite publishing venture of the 1980s, North Point Press; in fact, I owe it to North Point to have introduced me to Connell's writing, along with several other writers I wouldn't otherwise have discovered, such as Guy Davenport and M. F. K. Fisher. I may even try writing a blog post about reading this book, which would be a departure from the usual focus of my blog, on typography. Maybe it's time to branch out.

(6 January 2023)

EDWINA HARVEY

12 Flinders Street, Mafraville NSW 2036

Covid and lockdowns put the brakes on so many things. The original chat group on Facebook was over 20 people, many of whom — like me — were happy to daydream of *anything* that didn't relate to Covid or being in lockdown. While some seemed more serious than others about going to Uluru, for many of the serious ones, they were defeated by the cost, and the fact that Covid is still circulating in the wider community.

I'd been teasing James Allen that the ballroom

above Flinders Street Station (which I've never seen, apart from magazine articles) would be a good location to have a small SF con. Unfortunately, we're both much older and wiser to try to do anything about it, the way we might have been in our youth.

A couple of friends were showing me photos of a large property bought by a couple of their friends down at Rutherglen, with an eventual view of turning it into a ceramic studio, shop, local tourist attraction, and function centre. I looked at the photos and my immediate reaction was 'You could run a con in there!' Spotting potential con venues seems to be very much ingrained ... though I don't have the energy or resources to do any more than that these days!

I would have liked to go to Conflux in Canberra last year, and have investigated my options, but it came down to cost after the indulgence of going to Uluru the previous month. (Being held on a long weekend in Canberra, I couldn't book a room in the con hotel for only one night, and couldn't afford to pay for two nights.)

I noticed two reviews of Alastair Reynolds' books in *SFC* 111. I liked his earlier writing — particularly the way he writes about future technology — in *Pushing Ice*, but *The Glitter Band* didn't hold my attention. I must make a point of tracking down his more recent novels.

Thanks for reproducing my reflections on Ted Scribner, even if the final paragraph was transposed. Catching up with Ted's wife, Ros, is something else on my 'to do' list.

Receiving the print copies of *SF Commentary* always felt like an indulgence when I received them in the post. It was a flashback to 'The Good Old Days' when fanzines would arrive in the mail. These days it's only bills!

(9 January 2023)

CY CHAUVIN

**Somewhere in Michigan (based on a whisper that he has changed his address)
peterpumpkincat@juno.com**

I see that I missed writing to you and giving you a few 2022 worldcon comments. Never too late, perhaps. I shared a room with Jeanne Mealy and John Stanley, and an Australian fan (name unfamiliar, but older) gave us a con-sponsored orientation tour of the hotel facilities. At this point, I did see Perry Middlemiss, but since I was sans badge and masked, he didn't recognise me. It was enjoyable to meet Martin Wooster for the first time (at least in this century), who remarked how much he enjoyed sercon fanzines and *SF Commentary*,

and how he 'almost met' you at an Australian worldcon.

[*brg* We did natter for awhile, but at that stage I didn't know Martin well enough from his letters to know what to talk about. And, as happens at all large conventions, we both had to rush off somewhere.*]

Jeanne also dragged me to a dramatic presentation of Avram Davidson's story, 'Help! I Am Dr. Morris Goldpepper!', which I especially enjoyed because I had recently read the story after your interesting article in *Portable Storage* 7. I also met Fred Lerner for the first time, who said he enjoyed reading *SF Commentary*.

Finally, I was enticed to go to a DUFF 50th anniversary party, and met Lesleigh Luttrell there after perhaps 49 years. (I was surprised she remembered my name, since I had only met her once for five minutes at a Wiscon.) I had found her DUFF report while going through the attic, and reread it. It was an interesting read, quite well written, and could be taken for a literary story of a naïve young woman's travels in Australia. I was taken with the comments made in it from people she met in cafes, who were surprised she was travelling without her husband. I told Lesleigh how well I thought it read.

Back home, there have been so many distractions (i.e. real life): finally selling and completing moving from the old house, meeting with a lawyer, seeing oral surgeons and doctors, etc. Then preparing for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Although it is an environmental problem, I was glad there was little rain, since I was saved from having to cut the lawn.

More important things: I went to John King books, expecting to find *In the Wet* by Nevil Shute for you, but no luck. They did have a wide assortment of other titles (although no copies of *On The Beach* either). This was some months ago.

Thank you for your previous letter, especially all the information about Roy Orbison! No, Bruce, I never heard him before, not even 'Pretty Woman'. Our ages are close now, but in 1962 I was only ten — a little young to be interested in music. I had no radio. I can remember my parents having a grey plastic radio, but what did we listen to on it? An old rerun of the *Ed Sullivan Show* featured Roy Orbison singing 'Pretty Woman', but I never saw it at the time. If anything, it might please you: no one can say that my interest in Roy Orbison is nostalgic, since I never heard him before. If you ever doubt your taste for some things in the past, it's helpful to have outside conformation.

I just received a four-CD set of *Three Classic*

Albums plus Singles 1956–1962, but do admit I'm having second thoughts that this might contain a lot of inferior stuff. It doesn't have 'Pretty Woman' or that track you regard as the best pop song ['The Crowd'], which I'm anxious to hear.

(20 January 2023)

[*brg* As you have already discovered by listening to the albums, there are very few duds from 1956 to 1962, except a few fillers on the *Crying* album and one or two poor B sides to the singles. Wesley Rose, Roy Orbison's producer at Monument Records, was a stickler for quality, especially when issuing singles. He was distressed when Roy left Monument for MGM Records in 1965, saying: 'When it ain't broke, don't fix it.' And Roy was badly let down by MGM Records during the rest of the 1960s.]

MURRAY MOORE

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

I am surprised to see Library and Archives Canada listed online as the fifth biggest library in the world; 54 million items, only one million items fewer than the 55 million items held by the New York Public Library. Never have I been to Library and Archives Canada. I thought if I were in Ottawa I might like to take the time to see a bit of the donated papers of Judith Merrill. The finding aid to her donated papers is 104 pages.

In *SF Commentary* 111, Dennis Callegari provides a link to John M. Ford's poem 'Winter Solstice, Camelot Station'. If its lines were formatted as sentences and made into paragraphs, readers might describe 'Winter Solstice, Camelot Station' as poetic prose. For me 'Winter Solstice, Camelot Station' reads better as prose.

(2 February 2023)

JERRY KAUFMAN

P.O. Box 25075, Seattle, WA 98165 USA

Thanks for all the tributes to our friends and acquaintances who've passed away, reviews of books you've received, and so forth. Thanks, also, for your friends Tony Thomas and Jenny Bryce, who read the Booker Prize shortlisted books, so we don't have to, and to Colin Steele especially for his essays on books about books, which I find the most useful and interesting of his short reviews.

I'd thank you for the John Hertz column, were it not for the fact that John sends us *Vandemondes* and I've read all his material already.

(11 February 2023)

KENNEDY GAMMAGE

**1234 Upas Street,
San Diego, CA 92103 USA**

I've just finished *SFC* 111 and it was fantastic. So sorry for the many obituaries, but also they are tributes to lives well lived. It's an impressive literary publication with so many book reviews!

John Bangsund's Brian O'Nolan article really amused me. I read and enjoyed *At Swim Two Birds* and I need to read the *The Third Policeman*. Here's a funny quote from Myles na gCopaleen in Wikipedia:

The Plain People of Ireland: Isn't the German very like the Irish? Very guttural and so on?
Myself: Yes.

The Plain People of Ireland: People say that the German language and the Irish language is very guttural tongues.

Myself: Yes.

The Plain People of Ireland: The sounds is all guttural do you understand.

Myself: Yes.

The Plain People of Ireland: Very guttural languages the pair of them the Gaelic and the German.

(16 March 2023)

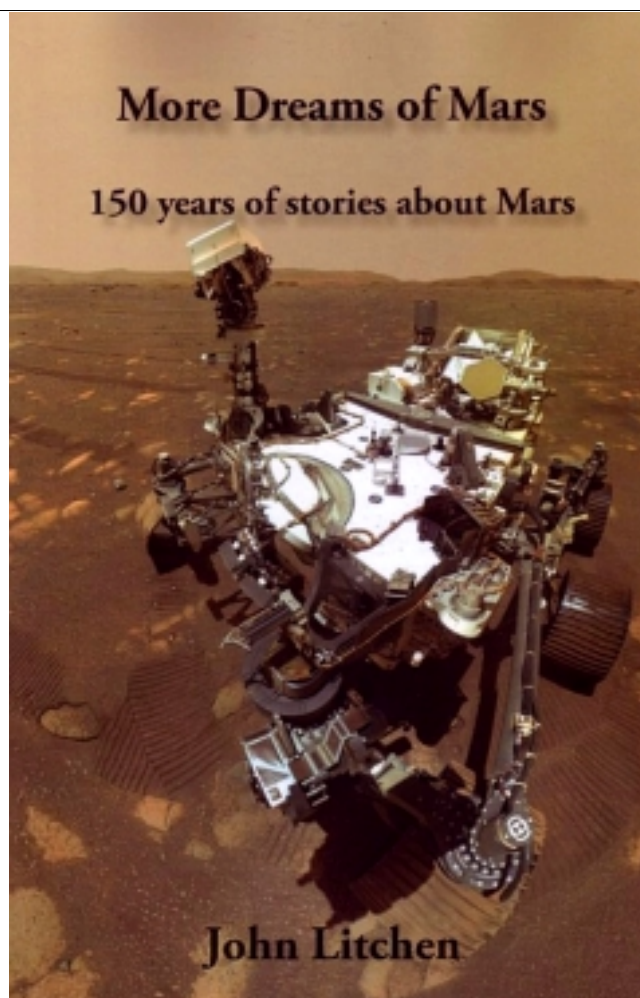
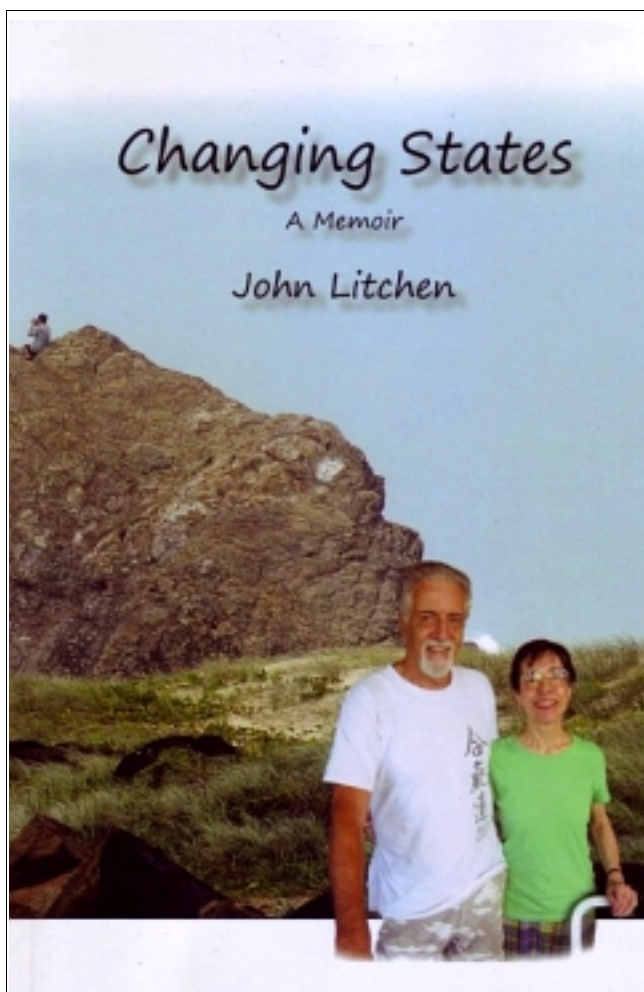
I still think of Irwin Hirsh and Perry Middlemiss as 'the *Larrikin* boys'!

I loved all the Jack Vance material — huge fan. I did read those *Demon Princes* books a few years ago. Some other titles in my bookshelf: the four *Tschai: Planet of Adventure* books: *City of the Chasch*, *Servants of the Wankh*, *The Dirdir*, and *The Pnume. Night Lamp*, with 'Robert Palmer's Star' (he was friends with the singer Robert Palmer, who I saw in concert in San Francisco's Japantown at the Kabuki Nightclub). The *Alastor Cluster* books. And my favorites: the 'Durdane' series: *The Anome*, *The Brave Free Men*, and *The Asutra*. I still have all my digest-sized SF mags, and these have been read and enjoyed many times.

I have never read Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, but I did read another related book: Boswell's *London Journal*. Recommended — it is like being there.

I would definitely enjoy reading that *Best of Myles* collection. Probably I need to pick that one up in the UK if I ever get back. Your friend John Bangsund was an international treasure. I loved what he wrote about his cat Donovan.

John Hertz on DisCon III: I was hoping to attend with my Discon II friends Tony Cvetko and Brett



How to make Bruce Gillespie feel ashamed of his low productivity. *Changing States*, 473 pages, the most recent volume of John Litchen's memoirs, arrived on 3 March 2023. *More Dreams of Mars*, John's second book about books about Mars, 406 pages, arrived 19 May. That's 879 pages of beautiful bookcraft and fascinating reading published in two months.

For copies, contact John at 3 Firestone Court, Robina QLD 4226 or email jlitchen@bigpond.net.au

Cox, but it wasn't to be. However, I did enjoy reading his con report as well as the program. I haven't been to a Con in many years and don't know what to expect, other than the fact that most everyone will be my age (65) or older. The teenagers all grew up. But that DisCon II hotel, the Sheraton Park, was dope. I'm sure the replacement hotel would not have been as inspiring.

Too bad about the Hugo voting. I was one of the people completely absorbed by *Outworlds 71/Afterworlds*.. What an amazing labour of love. And it only got 21 votes when it needed 39. C'mon people! And *Portable Storage* got 12. I've been honoured to be included in William's mag.

I loved that Denny Marshall back cover *Attack of the Space Fabric Rip*, showing a flying saucer beaming down an executive jet.

(13 April 2023)

JOHN LITCHEN

3 Firestone Court, Robina QLD 3226

Here is another 'Mars' book. The previous book, *Dreams of Mars*, was a few years ago (already!) Ninety per cent of this new book was finished a year before Monica died, but it was put on hold because of the need to look after her full-time. I've also written all the volumes of memoirs. Also, there have been many books to read.

So here it is ... to make your collection of my books complete ... up to this moment. I've done with my memoirs for the moment, but I'm currently helping my brother-in-law Fred with the next volume of his life story. It's good to have something to do.

I have no plans for more writing at the moment, but I'm sure that will change over the next 12 months. Healthwise: I'm okay, although I'm

becoming a bit athritic in the knees. They ache in the mornings when I get up, but they are great once I move around a bit. I do some basic exercises

every day, and on and off during the if I sit around too much.

(15 May 2023)

We also heard from ...

IRENE PAGRAM (Colac, Victoria): We had a conversation about the things in this envelope from a previous life — and then the plague struck! They got buried under a tall, toppling pile of many other things I was sorting through but I've just uncovered them again. I certainly know now why our art school lecturers begged us to use acid-free high-quality paper — which as students we could never afford. Therefore the adhesives and fixatives have left stains, and the papers have foxed with age. :: PS: You got me that illustration job at *The Secondary Teacher*. Thanks. (8 July 2022)

[*brg* Recently Irene sent me a parcel full of some of the original artwork she created for SFC in the 1970s. As she says, some has deteriorated over the years, but some illustrations still look okay. Thanks very much, Irene.*]

ANDY SAWYER (Chester, UK): I see that my loc mentions the marathon job of painting my fence it's about the time of year I really ought to think of putting more preservative on the patio fencing . Oh, the joys of retirement! (27 August 2022)

ROBERT ELORDIETA (Traralgon, Victoria): It has been busy at Kmart in the lead up to Christmas. The last week of Christmas was like a madhouse at Kmart. The last three movies I have seen at the cinema are DC's *Black Adam*, Marvel's *Black Panther: Wakana Forever* (Ryan Coogler), and *Violent Night*. (27 December 2022)

WERNER KOOPMANN (Buchholz, Germany): Greetings also from Ulla, just now visiting the market here in Buchholz (Saturdays and Wednesdays). We're fine; both four times inoculated. (27 August 2022)

BEN PEEK (Sydney, NSW): I actually live in Sydney, but it's fine for people to think I'm somewhere in WA. Sydney doesn't really exist for anyone in the sf world.

ELI COHEN (New York, USA): I think I owe you many years' worth of locs (the thing you published from me in *SFC* 110 wasn't actually a loc, just a quick note from an ego-scan). Alas, my loccing *SFC* 110 may be delayed — there's this Worldcon thing

we're leaving for the day after tomorrow, and I have packing to do. I'm not even discussing all these Farey zines that keep dropping into my inbox. (1 September 2022)

DAMIEN BRODERICK (recently moved to Portugal): *SFC* 111: an admirable issue, Bruce, the best for some years. Thanks for posting as a PDF. (21 November 2022)

PETE YOUNG (UK): I reckon your frequent column 'I Must Be Talking To My Friends' is a valuable repository of fannish history, gathered over decades. No way is that forgettable. (21 November 2022)

MARK PLUMMER (Croydon, London, UK): I'd already picked up *SFC* 111 when it was posted to efanzines last month, but saw it was in ANZAPA too. Incredibly cold over here in the UK, with daytime temperatures barely getting above zero for over a week now. A flurry of snow last Sunday. Nothing major, but with the low temperatures it hung around and turned to ice until finally dispelled by today's rain. What with that and train strikes and bus strikes, we're not going out much! (19 December 2022)

ROB JACKSON (Chichester, West Sussex, UK): What a kind review for *Inca* 20! Much appreciated. I am half-way through putting together *Inca* 21 right now, as it happens. As far as sheer volume (as well as quantity) of reading matter sent are concerned, you beat me hollow! (19 December 2022)

NICK THOMAS (North Coburg, Victoria) I just recalled reading *Project Hail Mary*, something Dad [Tony Thomas] got for me, which was excellent, and wondered if you'd read it. Also reading a newish Joe Haldeman, which is ok for him.

We enjoyed our cinema outing to see *Tar*. Keep smiling. (1 February 2023)

[*brg* Project Hail Mary is one of the best traditional-style SF novels I've read recently. Thanks for the cinema outing during a period when I could barely walk.*]



Dennis Callegari: 'Atomclock'.

S F Commentary 113

July 2023 * 84 pages

