

**A Readercon Committee
Recommended Reading List
For Readercon 12
July 21-23, 2000**

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Scott Bradfield, *The Secret Life of Houses*, Unwin Hyman, 1988 and Unwin Paperbacks, 1989 or *Dream of the Wolf: Stories*, Knopf, 1990 and Vintage Books, 1992 (These collections are similar.)

Hindsight is easy. Looking back over any legendary career, we can all say that we knew that the author was meant for greatness (it was so obvious!). This conveniently ignores the Scott Bradfields of the world.

During the last Boston Worldcon, I stated on a panel that if Scott Bradfield were not on top of the field in five years, I would buy any audience member lunch if they asked. What made me so confident was reading his stories in the early issues of *Interzone*, and the fact that I could conceive of no other fate for him than world domination (at least as far as this field was concerned). Those stories had everything; wild energy and fabulous concepts wrapped in wonderfully fresh language. It was a lock!

So what the hell happened? Just about everything is out of print now. If ever a body of work was due for rediscovery, this is it.

Jay Cantor, *Krazy Kat: A Novel in Five Panels*, Collier Books, 1988 and Knopf, 1988

Most people ascribe the 1945 disappearance of George Herriman's exquisite Krazy Kat strip from newspapers to the death of its creator. Here we learn the truth: Ignatz Mouse took Krazy to see the A-bomb test at nearby Alomogordo, and she was so traumatized by this ultimate loving brick to the head that she quit work. Now the desperate cast will do anything to get her back on the job—even invent psychotherapy. This is one of those novels that is so jaw-droppingly audacious and successful that you want to pinch yourself every few pages. If "slipstream" didn't exist as a literary category, this tour de force would be sufficient to establish it. Out of print, but not impossible to find.

Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*, Chatto & Windus, 1995, Penguin Books, 1995 and later editions

This is the kind of writer who would have fit wonderfully into Readercon's purview; she died far too young. Her prose style and imagination are famously lush, fervid, erotic, morbid, playful, and macabre, and the short story is where she sparkled most. I dare you to try a few at random and prevent yourself from going back over particular phrases and whole sentences, saying them aloud and marveling at the word magic Carter wrought. The images and ideas are the kind that make you think you must have fallen off into dreamland, no matter how wide open your eyes.

Thomas M. Disch, *Camp Concentration*, Hart-Davis, 1968, Doubleday, 1969 and later editions

A study of people in extreme conditions, living imprisoned as experimental subjects. Disch's bright, egotistical protagonist grows far beyond his beginnings, in one of SF's most convincing portraits of transhuman intelligence.

Molly Gloss, *Wildlife*, Simon & Schuster, forthcoming 2000

Legend becomes reality for an independent-minded author and single mother, when she must attach herself to a family of Sasquatch to survive in the wilderness. Set vividly in the Pacific Northwest in 1905 and boasting a wonderfully admirable and unusual female protagonist, *Wildlife* is a clever and very thoughtful work of imaginative literature.

Nicola Griffith, *Ammonite*, Del Rey Discovery, 1993 and Grafton, 1993

A strong story of personal growth and social evolution which takes place on a single-gender world. Here "women" equal "people" of all kinds; sadly, this is still unusual in art as well as life. Griffith was presented with the 1993 Tiptree Award for this novel at Readercon 7.

Diana Wynne Jones, *The Homeward Bounders*, Greenwillow Books, 1981, Macmillan, 1981, and later editions

Detractors might argue this is just another YA novel purporting to "explain" the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, and nuclear war . . . I say it was probably my favorite read of the '90s. The main characters are heartbreakingly real and the plot sneaks up on you, plus it gets an extra star for flawless structure. "Before three of my own kind I may speak the truth." See whether this wholly imaginative tale describes *your* Reality as perfectly as it did mine.

R. A. Lafferty, *Space Chantey*, Ace Double (with *Pity About Earth* by Ernest Hill), 1968, D. Dobson, 1976

A funny retelling of the Odyssey. Let it stand here for the many worthy books that so easily disappear from current awareness.

Paul Levinson, *The Silk Code*, Tor, 1999

I met Paul Levinson at a recent Boskone panel discussing the overlap of SF and Mystery. One of the panelists summarized the difference between the genres as: Mystery is character-centered and SF is plot-centered. *The Silk Code* is an excellent example of the overlap. It features a memorable modern detective, Phil D'Amato, and a plot that goes back (literally) to the dawn of man. Settings are not neglected either. Our modern hero moves freely between New York, London, and Amish Pennsylvania while an ancient travelogue runs from the Tarim Basin to Basque Spain via an island off Africa. Meanwhile, just to spice things up, the author

has thrown in a conspiracy so convoluted that it would make Oliver Stone jealous. How do all these bits and pieces fit together to form a darn good read? Don't ask; buy the book.

Ken MacLeod, *The Star Fraction*, Legend, 1995

The first in MacLeod's sort-of-future-history. Full of speculative (and satirical) political and social extrapolation, and in many ways quite funny; a knowledge of radical politics helps.

Alastair Reynolds, *Revelation Space*, Gollancz, 2000

This is an outstanding example of the recent flowering of literate space opera.

Lewis Shiner, *Glimpses*, W. Morrow, 1993 and Avon Books, 1995

A stereo repairman discovers he has the ability to bring into existence, by a sort of psychic time-travel, the great unfinished rock albums of the 1960s (most notably, The Beach Boys' "Smile"). Maybe you're waiting to read this World Fantasy Award-winning novel because you're not a huge music fan. You should know that the heart of the book (literally and figuratively) has nothing directly to do with music at all; our hero takes a sabbatical and quite by accident finds himself in a devastatingly intense (and stunningly portrayed) love affair. The music story is clearly central, and yet it still revolves around the love story. And isn't that the way the world is, anyway?

Sean Stewart, *Galveston*, Ace Books, 2000

A novel of the struggle to retain civilization in a world where magic has returned to overcome science. Strong, colorful characters, and more plot than usual for Stewart's books.

Jane Wagner, *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Harper & Row, 1986 and HarperCollins, 1990

"Reality is a primitive crowd-control method that got out of hand." If Wagner hasn't read a good bit of Philip K. Dick, then she reinvented his worldview. Space aliens (cleverly disguised as hallucinations) play a key role. This hilarious and wise one-woman play written for Lily Tomlin really deserves a variorum edition; the version I saw a decade or so ago had numerous changes from the text here, and what was cut was just as good as what was added. Read it and see it (it's reportedly about to be revived).

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, Little Brown, 1996 and Abacus, 1997

This is the novel many of us would write if only we were gifted writers. I suspect the vast majority of copies of this novel have never been read past page 200, but copies owned by committee members have received a much harder workout. The theme of *Infinite Jest* is compulsion and addiction, but the joy of reading *Infinite Jest* is to be found in exploring an intricate and fascinating

near-future Boston and its denizens. And of course the film that could destroy all humanity.

Don Webb, *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book*, Illinois State University/Fiction Collective, 1988

Part literary stunt, part dream diary, part reflections on society, and part necromantic incantation, this book is a collection of short segments (or "metamorphoses"), each of which creates in the space of a few lines a world which other authors spin out into a novel. And then the story unfolds and climaxes with such a rush that it seems more like recollection than reading.

Kate Wilhelm, *Margaret and I*, Little Brown, 1971 and later editions, and *Oh, Susannah!*, Houghton Mifflin, 1982 and later editions

Both novels are "voyages of discovery" with female heroines and well-handled supernatural elements. Otherwise they're completely different from each other: the former is starkly dramatic and the latter is laugh-out-loud funny. Wilhelm writes well, wasting not a word. I nominate them both to stand for the many excellent "original paperback" novels published by our guests and friends, that disappeared too soon, that deserve to be sought out and savored.

Gene Wolfe, *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories: and Other Stories*, Pocket Books, 1980 and later editions

Like to mess with people's preconceptions? I sure do. And one of the preconceptions that's always bugged me is one that's held by literate, style-conscious non-SF readers, and that's that this field (whatever its other merits or demerits) has no prose stylists that can hold a candle to their favorite mainstream authors.

So once you have this book, here's what you do. Rather than trying to engage them in all the old arguments concerning SF-in-general, ask them if they have the patience to try *one paragraph* (they won't want to seem unreasonable). Open the book to the title story, and ask them to read the first paragraph of the first page. Observe the dropping of the jaw. Fun!

Jack Womack, *Let's Put the Future Behind Us*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996, Grove Press, 1996 and later editions

Jack Womack's other books (*Ambient*, *Terraplane*, *Elvissey*, *Heathern*, and *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*) are highly recommended as well, but this book is unique among Womack's for not being set in the same universe as the others. The other books take place in a near-future New York where society has broken down and is dominated by criminals and multinationals; whereas *Let's Put the Future...* takes place in modern-day Moscow, where we see that society has broken down and is dominated by criminals and multinationals. Hmm, maybe the universes aren't so different after all.

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