



**READERCON 14**

# Readercon 14

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Editor: Michael Matthew

Design and Production: David G. Shaw, Belm Design

Bibliographies: Bob Ingria

Copyediting/Proofreading: Anita Roy Dobbs, George  
Flynn, Shoshanna Green, Diane M. Kurilecz, Amy  
West

Advertising: Lois Powers

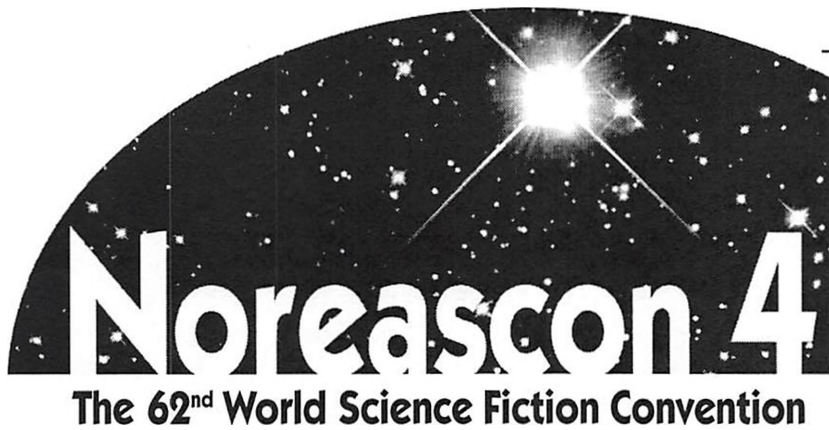
Details: Body text set in ITC Slimbach, Titles set in In-  
signia. Pages produced in Adobe InDesign 2.0 on a  
Macintosh G4. Printing by Northstar Reprographics.

Cover: Martha Chatelain, "Watchful" (detail). Handmade  
paper, twigs; 50" x 28" x 4" copyright © 1990

Tiptree Award Illustration: Freddie Baer, copyright ©  
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# An Introduction: Octavia E. Butler

by Sandra Y. Govan

For those unfamiliar with the life and work of Octavia Butler, we provide this capsule sketch of her history. Born in California, Octavia E. Butler was the daughter of Laurice and Octavia M. (Guy) Butler. She has one published short story collection and eleven novels to her credit since her first publication in 1971. Additionally, she has earned several major awards including multiple Hugo and Nebula awards plus a 1995 five-year MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, or “genius,” award for her exceptional contributions to the humanities through literature. As an individual, Ms. Butler is thoughtful, observant, personable, generous, honest, plain spoken and direct. A news addict, she listens to National Public Radio and still reads voraciously — from newspapers and reports on various scientific discoveries to new science fiction. A dedicated, powerful, hard-working writer, she does not drive a vehicle; while tolerant, she does not suffer fools easily. She currently resides in Seattle, Washington.

Because of her achievements, including the 1999 Nebula Award for the sweeping epic, *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia E. Butler requires a fuller introduction. The thumbnail sketch above cannot do her justice. Although her family’s roots are in the South, specifically Louisiana, she was born in 1947 and raised in small town Pasadena. An only child, she was raised by her very Baptist mother and grandmother; her father died young. She was also a shy, introverted, introspective, solitary child, the perfect personality mix to develop into an avid, indiscriminate, inveterate reader.

During her childhood Butler consumed a variety of stories and books, including fairy tales, westerns, the inevitable romances, *Mad* magazine, and comics, yet science fiction attracted her attention early and she retained an abiding interest in the form. She read the stories in such science fiction journals as *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Amazing*, and *Galaxy*. As importantly, Butler began to write. Although the fantasies and romances she penned at ages ten through twelve never reached matu-

riety, her interest in science fiction as the genre “without walls” continued to develop. It is as a science fiction writer that an international community of readers knows and celebrates her work.

As noted by the MacArthur Foundation, Octavia E. Butler is a writer of unusual merit and exceptional creative ability. She is an African-American writer who chose the “exceptional” path of taking on a genre few people typically associate with black Americans, science fiction. Since 1971 Butler has published just five short stories, all collected in the 1995 volume *Bloodchild*. Three of the five stories in this collection were recognized as major achievements by the science fiction readership and the science fiction writers’ community. “Speech Sounds,” a resonant story which first appeared in the December 1983 issue of *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* won a Hugo Award in 1984; in 1985, she won both a Hugo and the Nebula Award for “Bloodchild.” She has twice been anthologized in the annual *The Year’s*

*Best Science Fiction* collection. Her infamous “Bloodchild,” appeared in the second volume, and “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” appeared in the fifth annual collection (1988).

However, Butler’s major emphasis is the elaborate longer text; as she declared in the preface to *Bloodchild*, “I am essentially a novelist.” The evidence for that claim clearly shows in the five novels comprising the Patternist cycle, *Wild Seed* (1980), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Clay’s Ark* (1984), *Patternmaster* (1976), and *Survivor* (1978); the three books of the Xenogenesis trilogy, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites*

(1988), and *Imago* (1989); and the two novels, thus far, shaping the Parable cycle—*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). In 1999, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America awarded Butler her first Nebula in the “best novel” category for her monumental *Parable of Talents*. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), is a stand alone “grim fantasy.” A quasi-historical novel, *Kindred* pulls Dana Franklin, a black woman, and Kevin, her white husband, from 1975 California across time



Photo by Octavia Butler

and geography to arrive in Maryland, landing them on a southern plantation in an era where chattel slavery was the norm.

Like all of Butler's fiction *Kindred* asks the most basic question of all good speculative or science fiction—"what if?" What if an interracial couple was pulled back to the antebellum south? How would they survive? In the *Patternist* books the question becomes, "what if" biology is destiny and survival of the fittest becomes a matter of genetic manipulation? What if those with special heightened telekinetic powers, became the "haves" of society and those barren of such selectively mutated genes became the "have nots?" The premise of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy asks "what if" the world suffered a third World War, a nuclear war? How would survivors be impacted by the catastrophic changes, not only to human life but also to the world's ecological systems, wrought by a global nuclear holocaust? Further, what if wayfaring aliens, passing through our solar system, saw the wreckage of the planet and stopped to "salvage" what remains of humanity? How would we respond?

These are some of the questions Butler's fiction probes. She constantly examines issues of community, power, social structure, change, and adaptation in forms accessible to readers. But as she noted in a May 2000 *Essence* article, "The one thing that I and my characters never do when contemplating the future is give up hope." Butler generates new thinking about important issues from the perspectives of anthropology, biology, environmentalism, and sociology in order to study the human condition. The *Parable* novels, her latest series, raises questions about environment, technology, theology and metaphysics.

Octavia Butler has developed a substantial following, an ever-increasing loyal audience composed of uniquely constituent parts. Her readers come from several differing, though sometimes overlapping, areas. One audience is the black women who champion her work. In her novels Butler has given black women heroines they can respect. Black women's reading groups all over the country read and discuss her latest novels with avid interest. Her second audience may be said to be the feminist community. Here again women, irrespective of ethnicity or color, praise her work for projecting strong and powerful heroines who manage quite capably despite the changes occurring around them. Butler's third primary audience has been the general science fiction readership and the genre's critics. Although this substantial audience is too often perceived as largely adolescent white males, it is a much larger and broader audience which diligently searches out Butler's fiction and regularly reads and critiques her work in precisely the same manner it treats the work of all other highly regarded science fiction writers. In a 1992 review for *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Orson Scott Card commented, "Octavia Butler is far too important a novelist ... to be languishing out of print in the United States. While it's true that her *Xenogenesis* books are more satisfying as hard science fiction, and

show how much power her storytelling has gained in the years of her career, the fact remains that [the novels of the *Patternist* saga] are wonderful, inventive novels that deserve to be read. They are worth hunting down...." The same is equally true of her *Parable* books.

As her reputation for outstanding work has grown, Butler has reached two additional audiences. There is now a more general African American readership which searches out and devours her books. She has been profiled in Oprah's *O*, in *Essence*, in *The Black Scholar*; the 1999 premiere issue of *Black Issues Book Review Digest* featured Butler on its front cover. Further, since the mid-1980's Butler has also attracted the attention of both students and literary scholars. She has been profiled in such academic journals as *Black American Literature Forum*, *Callaloo*, *Extrapolation*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*, and *MELUS*. She is now included in major library reference texts including *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Notable Black American Women*; *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing*, and *The Oxford Companion to African American Writers*.

Signs of Octavia E. Butler's "arrival" as a writer no longer "marginalized" by race, gender, or genre are everywhere apparent. Because she writes nuanced "literary" science fiction with an emphasis on character, theme, and narrative technique rather than "action" alone, the teaching of her work in colleges and universities across the nation has become commonplace. Additionally, not only has Butler become the subject of undergraduate research projects, journal articles, Masters' theses, and Ph.D. dissertations, she is featured on radio talk-show programs and also on the Internet—in unofficial web-sites, chatrooms and forums. And finally, in a hallmark event for students and teachers alike, "Bloodchild," her ultimate feminist story which asks "what if" a man had to be impregnated and bear the young of an alien species, was included in one of the most prestigious of college literary anthologies, the 1997 *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.

# Octavia E. Butler: A Profile

by Tananarive Due

*"Octavia's writing is not smooth, it's not aluminum, it's not shiny and glossy; there is a texture to it. I like the grit, because I think that reflects struggle and struggle reflects passion, and passion reflects the challenge of having to go into your own burning core to find the stuff we avoid so easily all day in our relationships. ...She has had the life experience that permits her to confront the difficult stuff in her nature, and I suppose that's where the truth lies."*

— Harlan Ellison

When you are an African-American woman who is six feet tall, there are few places to hide—but for science fiction icon Octavia E. Butler, the world of science fiction where she has demonstrated so much mastery has always provided sanctuary and salvation.

Nothing has come easily to Butler, making hers a literary Cinderella story: One of her early mentors was Harlan Ellison. Writing itself is work enough, but she also worked soul-killing jobs early in her career, jobs where she and other employees were considered "nonpeople," in her own words. Butler's first novel, *Patternmaster*, was published in 1976, and she was introduced to the lack of immediate reward that so many writers face. Her work was respected, but the writer's life proved a struggle. Luckily for all of us, it was a struggle she has been determined to see through wherever it will lead her.

Where has it led thus far?

Today, Butler is the author of 11 acclaimed novels and a fine short-story collection. In 1995, she was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship. In 2000, her novel *Parable of the Talents* won science fiction's coveted Nebula award, and she had previously been awarded two Hugos and a Nebula award for her shorter fiction. Butler has been a quiet, accidental pioneer, winning rabid readers in the science fiction, feminist and African-American book markets, blazing a trail for others to follow.

Butler's stories are unblinkingly honest in the questions they raise: What kind of world are we going to build? What are the responsibilities of those with power? How can we better respect the environment and creatures around us? "What I've been harping on for the past five novels is how we can be a survivable species," Butler says.

She is a visionary who only wants to write a good story, a human who examines our humanity at its deepest levels, and a music lover who likes to crank it up. Butler's assessment of herself: "[I'm a] pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist always, a Black, a quiet egoist, a former Baptist, and an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty and drive."

My first introduction to Octavia Butler, like most people, was through her words. A friend suggested I should read *Kindred* (1979), a fantasy novel about a contemporary black woman whisked back into the antebellum slavery era. I was electrified, heart and soul.

My next introduction was on my first book tour, when a bookseller in Oakland presented me with a copy of my first novel and asked me to sign it to Butler. As I inscribed my book, I spilled gratitude, hardly knowing what to say to this woman who was a giant in my mind.

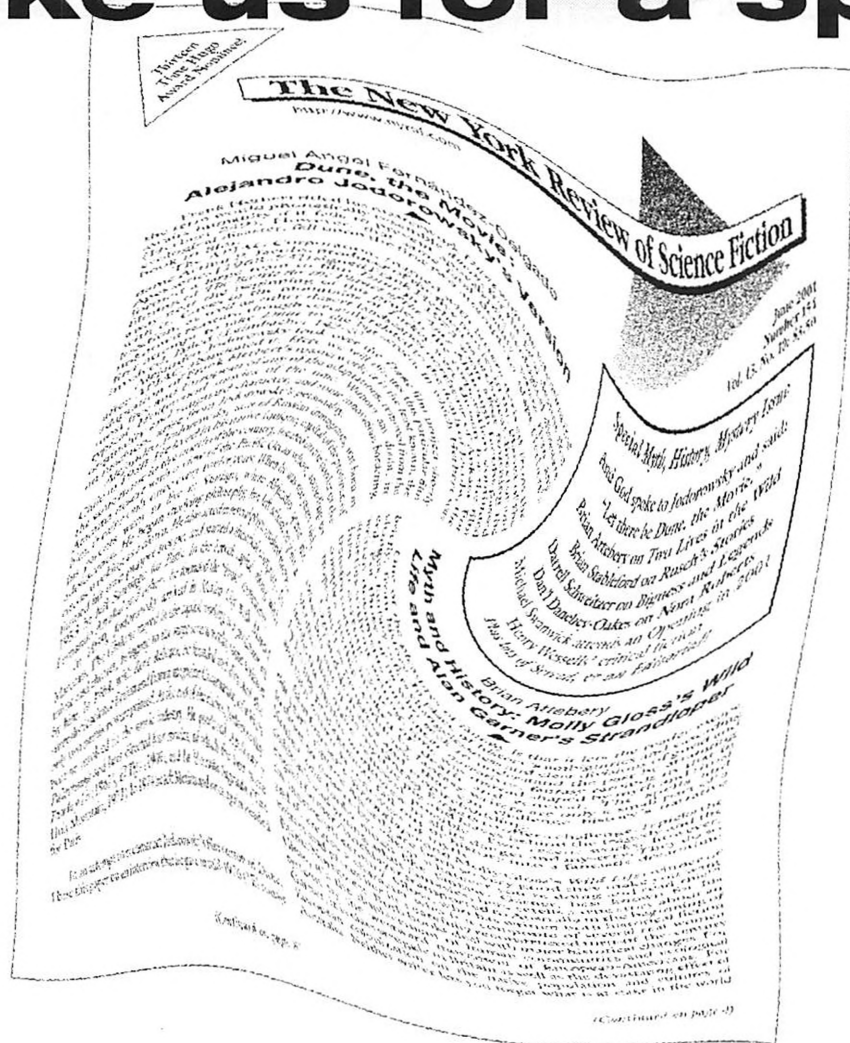
In 1997, Clark Atlanta University sponsored a conference on "The African-American Fantastic Imagination: Explorations in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror." I was honored to be invited, along with Butler, Steven Barnes, Samuel R. Delany and Jewelle Gomez. There, I was able to meet Butler in person, to hear her own voice, to see her laugh and smile—all of which made for an enchanting time. Upon meeting her, you will be similarly enchanted by her unassuming manner.

At a recent reading at a bookstore, a young reader asked me, "Do you think Octavia Butler would have been more popular in the beginning if she had been published today?"

My answer: "I think it's more likely that if there had not been an Octavia Butler, *my* books might not have been published at all."

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# The Old World and the New

## Visions of a better future at the end of the world in the novels of Octavia Butler and Severna Park

by Elizabeth Billinger

A quick browse around the mythologies of different nations and cultures reveals a vast body of stories explaining the origins of the world, humans, animals, as if in answer to a constant questioning as to the meaning of existence and where we came from. It is noticeable that there are far fewer myths offering a vision of the *end* of the world and all that is familiar. Perhaps the end of the world is too terrifying a prospect for many of us to contemplate, or humans are so self-obsessed they can only confront a personal end.

The Bible destroys the world twice—by flood in Genesis, and by fire in Revelation—and yet, in both cases the story is of a new beginning. In Genesis, having created the world, populated it with the descendants of Adam (and presumably of Eve, though this seems not to merit mention) and allowed inter-species breeding between human women and supernatural beings, God notices how wicked everyone on earth has become and decides that a fresh start is needed. Noah has no faults and thus God selects him and his family to survive the extermination of life on earth. But what begins as a tale of the end of everything, brought about by the degeneracy of humanity, ends as a tale of hope and new beginnings as the inhabitants of Noah's Ark find dry land again and recommence the process of spreading across the globe.

The Revelation to John is the warning of another end in which God takes things a step further, not only destroying the living who displease him, but also judging the dead and consigning to a lake of fire and sulphur all those whose names are not written in the book of the living. The earth is subject to many torments: a plague of terrible sores, the death of the oceans, rivers running with blood, a burning, fiery sun, darkness, thunder and lightning, hail and earthquake. From all this destruction, however, a new world is born. The new Jerusalem, a city of beautiful symmetry and glorious precious stones descends from Heaven to provide a world in which there will be no more grief, pain or death. Once again, the tale of death and destruction becomes a shining vision of a future in which corruption and pain have been eliminated.

The Norse myth of Ragnarök predicts an end to the world very similar to John's revelation, in which the times leading up to destruction are identifiable by the prevalence of wars and the moral breakdown of society. There will be earthquakes and fire and the earth will sink into the sea but, just as the new Jerusalem descends

from Heaven, a new earth will rise from the sea. The new earth will quickly be repopulated and will flourish.

Both Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-9) and Severna Park's novel *The Annunciate* (1999) contemplate turning points at which the destruction of the old and recognisable way of life is inevitable, but a future in which the loss of (what is perceived as) humanity offers a means of survival and the creation of a new world.

In *Dawn*, the first *Xenogenesis* novel, Lilith finally awakens on an alien spaceship 250 years after the Earth came close to complete destruction as the result of a nuclear war, and the human race almost destroyed itself in riots that "began shortly after the last missile exchange. Thousands had been killed even before it began to get cold. Thousands had simply trampled one another or torn one another apart in panic" (129).

The Oankali travel the universe entering into genetic exchanges with other species, always searching out trade partners with characteristics that will enhance the Oankali race. They see humanity as an especially attractive partner since there are humans who have "a talent for cancer". Cancer may be a curse to humans who have never been able to control it, but to the Oankali whose third sex, the ooloi, analyse and manipulate genetic material within their bodies, cancer has enormous potential and may enable them to fashion a race who can regenerate lost limbs and reshape themselves at will. They also see that the war was "only the quickest of the many destructions that faced humanity" (*Adulthood Rites*, 200), observing that humans had come to their own end as a result of genetic flaws and overspecialisation: humanity is condemned by its mismatched genetic characteristics to destroy itself, being both intelligent (a relatively new characteristic) and hierarchical (an ancient trait common to Earth animals).

Lilith is the first human to be Awakened and has been chosen by the Oankali to be the first of those humans who will return to Earth and begin to live there again. The Oankali have recreated a habitable environment on Earth, using both original and modified plants and animals, and once Lilith, and those who come after, have learned the skills necessary to survive in a rainforest-like environment they will be able to found a new community.

It does not take her long to work out that there will be more to the trade than the exchange of the potentials of cancer for a rehabilitated Earth. She realises that what the Oankali are driven to do is a kind of cross-breeding, that the next generation will be neither fully human nor completely Oankali. "What will our children be?" she



cries, accusing the Oankali of finishing what the war began, of intending to wipe out what remains of humanity in just a single generation. This problematic issue of what precisely it is that defines humanity, and whether the interference from Oankali represents an ending or, as they themselves insist, a rebirth of humanity, remains unresolved throughout the whole of Butler's trilogy.

All the surviving humans struggle with the impulse to reject the alien and to protect the "purity" of the human species, despite the advantages of accepting the Oankali. The ooloi offer pleasure—sex—healing, the correction of genetic defects and enhancement of human physical and mental capacity. And for those humans who do mate with Oankali, there is the opportunity to have children, albeit construct children, mixed from genetic material of both species by the ooloi. The resisting humans, however, have been made sterile by the Oankali.

Rejection of the alien is so complete that resister humans are prepared to die rather than seek the healing that can be given with pleasure and without pain by the ooloi. Rejection of the advice and warnings given by the Oankali and "first parents" like Lilith means that the resisters struggle to feed and support themselves. There are raids between resister villages born of the failures to sustain themselves, of boredom, bitterness and lack of hope. Without the Oankali humanity is again dying.

The resisters are, eventually, offered a terraformed Mars as an exclusively human colony. It is not possible for them to remain on Earth because it has been seeded with spaceships which will take sustenance from the planet and then, when both the ships and the human/Oankali descendants are ready, the Earth will be abandoned, leaving a small, cold waste on which nothing will survive. Thus, by the end of the second book *Adulthood Rites*, the end of the world has been averted by the intervention of the Oankali, but for many humans the reprieve is only temporary, for the exchange of genetic material demanded by their rescuers will destroy all that was definitively human at the point of rescue. And in the future there will be yet another end to the Earth when everything usable has been devoured.

Butler moves on, however, in the final novel, *Imago*, to offer a new beginning in exchange for the end of the world as we know it. In this novel, a century on from the first recolonisation, a pair of ooloi constructs have been created, even though this has been forbidden. As predicted, the talent for cancer that has been included in their heritage endows them with the ability to change their appearance, though this seems to be an involuntary reaction in which they reshape themselves to please those humans who please them. Jodahs, one of these ooloi constructs, restless and struggling to discover his nature as the first of his kind, roams until he discovers two fertile humans. The humans are a brother and sister who, as a result of inbreeding, are afflicted with disfiguring tumours and have other hereditary defects. (The brother/sister pairing is the same relationship as the male/female pair in an Oankali mating.) Jodahs is en-

tranced by the pair, by their difference from the humans he is familiar with and in particular by their fertility; he bonds with them.

Although the settlement of fertile humans is as fiercely prejudiced against the Oankali as the resister villages, the seductive persuasion of the construct ooloi wins the people over, some wanting to join the Mars colony, but many ready to stay on Earth and mate with the Oankali. By the time Jodahs's family and other Oankali arrive at the settlement the successful bonding between the fertile humans and the construct ooloi convinces the Oankali that the construct ooloi are not dangerous and do not have to be exiled to the home ship. Instead they will be joined by other willing Oankali to plant a new town, a town that will be allowed to grow into a ship.

Butler thus presents the final elimination of humans in their completely unaltered state, not as an ending to be mourned but as a joyful new beginning. The new species which results from the human/Oankali exchange has matured with the creation of individuals of all three sexes and the combination with the newly discovered human settlement indicates by its success and depth of pleasure that it is the next, correct step in the evolution of the species.

Severna Park's novel, *The Annunciate*, is set not on Earth but in some other universe, a place where there are three types of human: the ordinary or Jackless, the Jacked who have access to information via implanted sockets, and the Meshed who can access the pervasive information system sustained by propagats (nanotechnology) just by closing their eyes. There has been an uprising to eliminate the Meshed who were perceived as a threat by the others. As a result of the prolonged war, the worlds of this system have descended to a deprived and unstable feudal society. It is another universe (like Butler's Earth) in which the telltale signs of the approaching end of the world can be discerned.

Against this backdrop three surviving Meshed – Eve, Annmarie and Corey – wander between the worlds peddling a drug, Staze, that only they are able to make. Staze is powerfully addictive, giving users dreams of one of a limited number of beautiful and peaceful places, but unlike the Meshed who create whole new virtual worlds for themselves in Mesh, the Staze addict is in stasis, unable to move within the dream.

The three travel to an uninhabited planet, Paradise, hoping to find a place to establish a secret base. This planet was the first one in the system to be colonised, three thousand years earlier, but it has been blown out of orbit in the uprising against the Meshed. Hidden by an old breed of propagats and thought to be destroyed, it seems to be the perfect hiding place for mass production of Staze. The drug can then be distributed across the system, subduing the Jacked and Jackless, giving power and wealth to the surviving Meshed.

Exploring the abandoned, unwelcoming Paradise the three discover some forms of life: a fungus, moss and wormlike organisms that they christen "grubs". Studying

these organisms in the lab they discover that although the fungus is an aggressive coloniser, when it starts to attack the grubs and moss they disable and absorb it. The grubs and the moss analyse the fungus, gathering genetic information and then send out their own genetic information until the fungus loses its biological identity and the threat is gone. Annmarie sums this up as “co-dependency instead of competition. And it makes perfect sense in a place with such limited resources. None of these organisms have the energy to waste fighting to the death” (131).

In their virtual world of Mesh, they find a parallel situation. There is a presence in Mesh, an intruder, the succubus, a presence which can access all their carefully protected individual virtual worlds. Eventually they deduce that the grubs are interconnected, part of a single entity, of which the succubus is the Mesh manifestation. The succubus is analysing them in the same way that the grubs analysed the fungus before assimilating it. It seeks information and understanding, and from Corey it demands an explanation of reproduction.

The grubs and the succubus seem to present the same kind of threat to the people of this universe as the Oankali do to humans in Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy: there is a biological imperative to assimilate any new life form and an inevitability of change on both sides.

This evolutionary process is accelerated and expanded by two events: the contamination of the grubs, and thus the succubus, by Staze and an accidental impregnation with one of the grubs. The Staze contamination leads to a transformation of Staze dreams which have always been constant and static. Now the images are changing, and changing in the same way for everyone. Because the foetal incarnation of the succubus is carried by a Jacked woman, the being has access to Jack. The people claim the alien baby as the legendary Unknown Child, a saviour, “a being without aggression – a break from our genetic past. The gates between Jack and Mesh and Staze are open. The social and technical separations are disappearing because of her” (228).

Park seems to be addressing the same dilemma as Butler, that, left to their own devices, humans will inevitably destroy themselves through violence. The only way the species will survive is if its nature is compromised, and as Butler shows, there are many who will view compromise as an evil greater than destruction.

In Butler’s novels the benign tyranny of the Oankali is seductive. There are moments when their actions seem questionable, especially their habit of gently forcing humans to do something that the humans desire but do not accept, as when Lilith is made pregnant for the first time without warning or consent. This tactic is justified as giving her what she wants and is ready for but will never be willing to ask for. Although such actions complicate the reader’s response to the aliens, there is so much that is positive about them — their need to heal, to eliminate pain and suffering, their lack of violence — that it is hard

to reject them and see them as destroyers of the human race.

Park makes her means of salvation much harder to like. Its invasiveness is highlighted as it spreads from the world of Mesh, to Jack and to the Staze dreams of the Jackless. Eve, seen by the succubus as its Mother, and Naverdi, unwilling carrier of the Unknown Child, reject the alien as an ugly, aggressive force that consumes humans. For the rest of the addicts it represents a way forward, something that rescues them from the isolation of their frozen Staze dreams and allows them to move around within the dreams, to interact with each other after years of isolation. What this means for the Jackless, is that they suddenly have a virtual community and access to information in a way hitherto available only to the privileged Meshed. Again the conclusion is complex and contradictory, contact with the alien succubus will change the human race forever and this change cannot be undone; for some this seems to be a disastrous ending of the world, for others it is a welcome rescue for a world already at the end of its life.

There seems to be an optimistic thread woven into these stories of the end of the world, both the old myths and the new stories, a reluctance to accept either the spiral of decay or the sudden eruption of destruction which leads inescapably to the end of the world. Rather these stories cleave to the thought that while there’s life there’s hope, hope of a new and better world to replace the old one that just ended.

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# Power and Possession (Butler on Butler)

Andrew M. Butler

There's an image of the notional sf reader: white, male, twenty-something going on thirteen and straight (honest, guv). As sf writers are quite often fans made good, there is a corresponding predominance of writers who are white, male, thirty-something going on thirteen and straight (honest, guv). Whilst in the 1960s and 70s women writers became noticeable (refusing to hide behind initials in some cases), the genre is overwhelmingly white. One of the exceptions is Octavia Estelle Butler.

As a woman and an African-American, Butler can be considered as alien twice over, at the bottom of the social heap. Born on 22 June 1947, in Pasadena, California, she was educated at Pasadena College and then California State University. It was in the 1970s that she came to prominence, as a product first of a workshop taught by Harlan Ellison at the Screen Writers' Guild of America and then a Clarion Workshop. A series of novels followed – the "Patternist" series, starting with *Patternmaster* (1976) and ending with *Clay's Ark* (1984). This is an impressive history and future history of power, psychic powers, possession, slavery and oppression. This fear of possession was to obsess her before her visit to the Peruvian jungles to research the "Xenogenesis" books. In particular she was afraid of blood-sucking insects. To exorcise the fear, she wrote "Bloodchild," published in *Asimov's* in 1984.

1984 and 1985 should have been breakthrough years. She was attracting mainstream attention with *Kindred* (1979), and was written about in the summer 84 issue of *Black American Literature Forum*, alongside Samuel R. Delany. "Bloodchild" won both Nebula and Hugo awards, and "Speech Sounds" also won a 1984 Hugo. But her double win was eclipsed by a certain white, male author called William Gibson and *Neuromancer*. Whilst Butler's works have been read as representing the differences

– both racial and gendered – at the heart of America, Gibson's novels became caught up in a Zeitgeist which erased differences and posited a global culture.

Of course this global culture is a Californicated (in Zoline's choice phrase – and ironic given Butler's birthplace), silicon-valleyed, microserfed, McDollared one, which sweeps all others before it. Cyberpunk, with its huddled Asian masses and Rastafarian zombie clichés, stands implicated in a peculiar type of racism.

I have already noted, in *Matrix*, the words of a delegate at "Speaking Science Fiction" (a 1996 conference in Liverpool), who suggested that Butler was only of interest to southern Californian, politically correct hippies, and that we should go away and research *Jurassic Park* and its ilk instead. Yes, one is at the margins and one is the central, dominant culture; but the white, male critic spoke from a position of his own power. Butler has something to say to African-Americans, females and even white, male, twenty-somethings. As she herself says: "I began writing about power, because I had so little."

It remains to be seen whether she can continue to claim this. In 1995 she was awarded a "Genius Grant" by the MacArthur Foundation: \$295,000 over five years. It might free her to take more risks. Certainly she will work as hard as ever. The work ethic is at the heart of her philosophy of writing: "There are three things to forget about. First, talent. I used to worry that I had no talent, and it compelled me to work harder. Second, inspiration. Habit will serve you a lot better. And, third, imagination., Don't worry, you have it."

A widespread and appreciative audience – and the praise heaped upon *Parable of the Sower* (1993) – can testify to Butler's Abundance of the latter.

© Andrew M. Butler 1997, first appeared in *Matrix* 124, Mar/Apr 1997.

# The Monophobic Response

by Octavia E. Butler

For all but the first ten years of my life, writing has always been my way of journeying from incomprehension, confusion, and emotional upheaval to some sort of order, or at least to an orderly list of questions and considerations. For instance....

At the moment there are no true aliens in our lives—no Martians, Tau Cetians to swoop down in advanced spaceships, their attentions firmly fixed on the all important Us, no gods or devils, no spirits, angels, or gnomes.

Some of us know this. Deep within ourselves we know it. We're on our own, the focus of no interest except our consuming interest in ourselves.

Is this too much reality? It is. Yes. No one is watching, caring, extending a hand or taking a little demonic blame. If we are adults and past the age of having our parents come running when we cry, our only help is ourselves and one another.

Yes. This is far too much reality.

No wonder we need aliens.

No wonder we're so good at creating aliens.

No wonder we so often project alienness onto one another.

This last, of course, has been the worst of our problems—the “human alien” from another culture, country, gender, ethnicity, race. This is the tangible alien who can be hurt or killed.

There is a vast and terrible sibling rivalry going on within the human family as we satisfy our desires for territory, dominance and exclusivity. How strange: In our ongoing eagerness to create aliens, we express our need for them, and we express our deep fear of being alone in a universe that cares no more for us than it does for stones or suns or any other fragments of itself. And yet

we are unable to get along with those aliens who are closest to us, those aliens who are, of course, ourselves.

All the more need, then, to create more cooperative aliens—supernatural beings or intelligences from the stars. Sometimes we just need someone to talk to, someone we can trust to listen and care, someone who knows us as we really are, and as we rarely get to know one another, someone whose whole agenda, is 100 per cent *US*. Like children, we still need great and powerful parent figures, and we need invisible friends. What is adult behavior, after all, but modified, disguised, excused childhood behavior. The more educated, the more sophisticated, the more thoughtful we are, the more able we are to conceal the child within us.

No matter. The child persists. And it's lonely.

Perhaps someday we will have truly alien company. Perhaps we will eventually communicate with other life elsewhere in the universe or at least become aware of other life elsewhere, distant, different, but real, existing with or without our belief, with or without our permission.

How will we be able to endure such a slight? The universe has other children. There they are—distant siblings that we've longed for. What will we feel? Hostility? Terror? Suspicion? Relief?

No doubt.

New siblings to rival. Perhaps for a moment, only a moment, this affront will bring us together, all human, all much more alike than different, all much more alike than is good for our prickly pride. Humanity, “*E pluribus unum*” at last, a oneness focused on and fertilized by certain knowledge of alien others.

What will be born of that brief, strange, and ironic union?

Reprinted from *Journeys*, PEN Faulkner, 1994.

# Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy:

## A Biologist's Response

by Joan Slonczewski

Octavia E. Butler's novels share with readers her extraordinary vision of what it means to be "other," based on intelligent biological speculation. Her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, now retitled *Lilith's Brood* for reissue by Warner, creates a stunning vision of abduction and seduction by an alien species. This vision is presented in terms remarkably consistent with modern molecular biology, even predicting developments that have occurred since the novels were written.

As the trilogy's first book, *Dawn*, opens, the human race has nearly destroyed itself by nuclear war—"humanicide," as Butler calls it—a fate that seemed all too plausible in the eighties, when the book was written, and that remains a distinct possibility if the effects of humanity on our environment are not reversed. The few humans who survive the war are rescued and captured by the Oankali, a nomadic alien species that travels through the universe seeking partner species with whom to "trade" their own genes. The story is told from the viewpoint of Lilith Iyapo, a human woman whom the Oankali adopt into their family and try to enlist in recruiting other humans. Lilith is torn between accepting the medical enhancements and the sexual advances of her captors and trying to help other humans escape.

Unlike the vast majority of alien abduction tales, *Dawn* actually presents a biologically plausible explanation for why the Oankali need to interbreed with humans—despite their own abhorrence for the human race, which to them appears monstrous for its combination of high intelligence and self-destructive violence, the "human contradiction." The Oankali have evolved specialized organs and subcellular structures which manipulate their own genes to maximize their fitness in their environment, a self-sustaining starship which is itself a living organism. Paradoxically, because the Oankali are such successful genetic engineers, they tend to engineer themselves into an evolutionary dead end; losing all genetic diversity, they lose the ability to adapt to change. The only way they can recover genetic diversity is to interbreed with an entirely new species, which contributes new genetic strengths—and weaknesses.

Butler's story evokes the experience of an African woman swept into slavery in the eighteenth century. Lilith's "Awakening" among the Oankali evokes the dehumanization of slave conditions—she is naked, has to beg for clothing, and is denied reading materials and other access to her own culture and history. The theme of slavery appears frequently in Butler's books, most notably *Kindred*, in which a Black woman travels back through time to rescue a white man who becomes her ancestor. The heroine of *Kindred* struggles with the fact

that she owes her own existence as an individual to the oppressive cultural system in which Black women could bear children only by submitting to the advances of their white masters. In a remarkable update, today's descendants of master and slave can use DNA analysis to go back and confront their Jeffersonian ancestors.

In *Dawn*, Lilith faces the choice of "trading" with the Oankali to produce half-human children, or having no family at all. Like the slaves who bore their masters' children, Lilith obtains privileges of enhanced health and security for herself and her future children, who will be genetically half Oankali. The Oankali lecture her about the superiority of their egalitarian, nonviolent lifestyle, as opposed to the hierarchical, violent tendencies of humans—just as Americans told their African slaves they were fortunate to be rescued from barbarism by their "democratic" masters.

Like the slaves and their descendants, Lilith and her children feel enormous ambivalence about her choice. In *Adulthood Rites*, Part 2 of the trilogy, Lilith's half-Oankali son chooses for a while to live apart with the human "resisters," those who choose sterility rather than joining the Oankali. He at last convinces the Oankali to provide a new home for the resisters, where they can breed again and regenerate the human species. The home provided is the planet Mars; reshaped for habitability, to be sure, but all of humanity is outcast from their own homeland, like Native Americans forced onto a reservation. Lilith's son risks his life to allow humans to choose humanity; yet he himself returns to his own hybrid heritage among the Oankali. Throughout Butler's work, people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds struggle to make such choices.

Lilith's ambivalence about the Oankali, and about her own genetic heritage, echoes Butler's own experience in the community of writers. For many years, Butler was one of only a few Black female writers of science fiction. Her gifts were embraced and appreciated by many fellow writers, and found success with supportive publishers. Yet for publication, she had to accept cover illustrations depicting her Black characters as Caucasian. Butler's success required denial of her own racial identity, just as some of the early women writers of science fiction had to deny their gender by writing under male pseudonyms. Thus, she shared Lilith's dilemma by accepting literary success at the cost of part of her own identity.

In the *Xenogenesis* books, the transformation of humanity is accomplished by alien biotechnology, performed by genetic engineers called ooloi, who participate in the mating of human and Oankali. Until recently, genetic crossing of unrelated animals was considered impossible from the standpoint of biology. Yet in the past decade, biologists have discovered profound sources of

genetic commonality between organisms as distant as humans and fruit flies. Reproductive technology has led to chimeric combinations such as sheep and goat; and an early human embryo has been generated from the egg of a cow. Researchers of the Primate Genome Project seriously propose to introduce the chimpanzee's "superior" disease resistance genes into human chromosomes. Thus, a science fiction writer can now propose alien interbreeding based on reasonable biological speculation; but few writers in fact develop the biological basis as soundly as Butler does.

How could a species naturally evolve a lifestyle requiring the acquisition of genes from unrelated species? In the years since *Dawn* was published, research has revealed interesting parallels to the Oankali in the population dynamics of living organisms on Earth. Microbes and plants have been shown to possess surprising capacities for "genetic trade" with other species, even taking up naked DNA released by dead organisms and incorporating it into their own chromosomes. Our current view of bacteria is that, like the Oankali, these single-celled organisms evolve so as to keep only the limited set of genes they need for their current environment, but retain a nearly endless capacity to acquire new genes, such as genes for antibiotic resistance, from DNA "out there." Similarly, plants in the natural environment have shown an unexpected capacity to acquire herbicide resistance genes from crop plants genetically engineered for resistance, a discouraging sign for the future of weed control.

Butler is one of the few science fiction writers to explore the positive potential of "bad" genes. Genetic variants which seem defective under current conditions may confer benefits when conditions change; for example, a rare defect in the structure of white blood cells confers immunity to AIDS. Butler's Oankali are particularly interested in human mutations that cause cancer. Cancer results from a series of mutational "steps" in a few cells of the body, leading to loss of control of growth. Yet the genes in which these mutations occur are some of the most critical genes of the body, vital for normal processes of growth and development. Furthermore, some of the viruses which cause cancer-inducing mutations have now been developed into "vectors" of gene therapy, used to correct or ameliorate genetic defects in human patients. Thus, in Butler's story, it makes sense that the Oankali consider cancer genes to be some of the most valuable genes for which they "trade."

From the Oankali embrace of human cancer genes, Butler draws a broader message, that we humans need to embrace "otherness" in ethnicities and cultures foreign to our own, even if at first they seem to violate our own values. But how far can—or should—our embrace reach? Butler does not provide easy answers.

Which leads us to the question: Is there a downside to Butler's Oankali saviors of humanity? Do the Oankali really represent a positive solution to the problem of human "hierarchical tendencies," as implied by the first

book, *Dawn*? Is the "non-hierarchical" way of the Oankali an absolute improvement; or is it at once salvation and the damnation we self-destructive humans deserve?

The concluding book of the trilogy, *Imago*, depicts human-Oankali ooloi as the ultimate post-colonialists, consummate genetic engineers who sample the genes of all different organisms for their "interesting taste," rather as Americans choose to dine at ethnic restaurants. The fact that all of Earth's species will ultimately vanish, as the Oankali consume the planet, does not disturb them. A similar genetic consumerism can be seen today as biotech companies search the dwindling rainforests for rare species, storing their genes for useful pharmaceuticals before the organisms vanish. Some research programs even target indigenous human populations—ethnic groups whose rare genes might enhance the health of Americans long after their own races are gone. Such research understandably draws indignant responses from those facing extinction.

In fact, the closer one looks, the more the Oankali seem to be not our opposites, but rather an extension of some of humanity's most extreme tendencies. Humans disturb and pollute our ecosystem; the Oankali will literally consume every organic molecule of it. Humans, in the traditional Western Christian view, consider procreation the sole function of sexuality. The Oankali—despite Butler's critical stance toward Christian religions—basically share this view.

Oankali sex with humans is depicted as at once super-orgasmic and super-procreative. Oankali-human families are expected to produce children upon children; hence the new title, *Lilith's Brood*. Nowhere is there a role for non-procreative forms of sexuality, such as gay or lesbian relationships. While Butler's characters occasionally take a critical view of homophobia, it is interesting that the Oankali "third sex," the ooloi, always take a male form to seduce a female human, but a female form to seduce a male human. To a biologist, ironically, this social dynamic seems overly conservative. Recent research (and older research recently acknowledged!) reveals that a wide array of mammals and birds, including all species of higher apes, engage in many kinds of sexually diverse relations with non-procreative functions (see Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance*, St. Martin's Press, 1999). One might perhaps feel disappointed by the absence of this dimension in Butler's three books depicting the Oankali.

Meanwhile, the Oankali "gene trade," which seems so fearsome in *Dawn*, may be less unthinkable than we suppose. Would middle-class Americans today ever actually trade away their own genes, let alone their future children, as Lilith does? One need only look to the notice boards of Ivy League colleges, where students are invited to sell their own eggs to infertile strangers; and many do so, to help pay their tuition. The recipients who buy the eggs inquire into the donors' genetic and personal backgrounds, as obsessively as the Oankali analyze Lilith. Ironically, the medical process of induced ovulation

jeopardizes the future fertility of “egg donors,” who may someday require similar services to produce children of their own. The business of egg banks and sperm banks has become totally consumerized, with recipients shopping for particular traits in pursuit of perfect offspring.

The Oankali, with their alien genetic engineering, have become hauntingly familiar.

Presented at SFRA, Cleveland, June 30, 2000

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## The Jedi Fan

by Paul Levinson

In June of 2000, I travelled down to Philadelphia, as President of SFWA, to personally give M. Night Shyamalan the Dramatic Nebula he had won a few weeks earlier in New York City for *The Sixth Sense*. Much to my surprise, and delight, I was ushered on to the set of *Unbreakable*, then being filmed. Much to my surprise but not especially my delight, I was asked to give an impromptu little speech. I said a few words about the importance of movies, radio, and television to science fiction. I mentioned *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *12 Monkeys*, Welles and his Mercury Theater, *Captain Video*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Star Trek*, and more. Everyone smiled and applauded, including the entire camera crew.

But right after the ceremony, Samuel L. Jackson — on the set in his role as “Mr. Glass” — came up to me. “Hey, that was one lousy speech,” he said. “You didn’t even mention Octavia Butler.”

“Well, what do you expect,” I shot back. “I don’t have your scriptwriters.” And then I told him how many times his performances had made movies sing for me, most recently “Jackie Brown,” which I had just seen again on some cable station the night before.

But here is what I *would* have said about Octavia Butler, if I had thought in time to talk about her, then:

She had just won the Nebula for best novel, *Parable of the Talents*, that year. But what was most in my mind about her then was a Guest of Honor speech I had heard her deliver at Balticon a few weeks earlier.

Ever since I was a kid, I have been annoyed, turned off, by the discrepancy you sometimes find between a creator of great works, and what they say about themselves and their works, at least in public. It seems cool, in some quarters, to substitute a studied nonchalance for a serious discussion of one’s work. Almost as if an abdication of responsibility, the illusion that creative work is effortless, somehow enhances the creator.

Not so, Octavia Butler. For better than an hour on that stage in Baltimore, she detailed for the audience her struggle to find a voice, to write something that was both entertaining and important, to express ideas that were quintessentially hers and yet resonated with general human interest. As any writer well knows, it’s not easy. The negotiations with plot, the refinement of characters all too prone to melt like snowflakes to the touch, all of this can wear a writer down. But Octavia seemed energized, even thrilled, by the process.

I think of her, once in a while, up on that stage, talking to the point that she needed water, dissecting the undissectible, and finding inspiration from that, whenever I’m in need of a little of that myself. That’s what I call unbreakable.

# Big Stuff

by Suzy McKee Charnas

Some writers in our field take on big, hard concepts and problems that are so far from solved as to seem completely intractable, and out of those concepts they make strong, provocative, serious stories that stick in the mind in ways that can be pretty damned uncomfortable for a long time after. Octavia Butler is such a writer, creator of a body of work built around such complicated questions. How do people respond to being controlled by others? How do belief systems evolve to work with cultural experience, and for or against necessary change? What is “necessary change,” anyway, and who decides? How do power and ethics relate to each other (when and if they do), and what makes history jig and jag and dogleg across time the way it does? Questions about sex (and how weird it can get), gender (well, ditto), race, destiny, belief, and the genetic and psychological boundaries of humanity and of alienness are at the heart of her work.

It’s all Big Stuff like that, made into vivid, uncompromising, elegantly written books and stories that remind us that you don’t have to have The Answer in order to be entitled to raise a bunch of massive questions. We have here a tall-standing, serious SF author, someone whose work says, “Damn the stupid literary disdain for our genre, damn the editorial assumption that it’s only escapism for White adolescent boys—full speed ahead!” and carries her readers confidently into some of the strangest and most challenging territory ever met with in our field. (I’m thinking in particular of the *Patternist* books or the *Xenogenesis* series, but in its own way this

is as true of the *Parable* books too, and of just about everything from Butler’s pen.) You never know what to expect, although you do know from the outset that it’s going to be highly unusual and uniquely voiced, and there are going to be characters in it who make sense as complex people relating to each other rather than tokens rattling round on a game board; and that they’re going to be people left out of a lot of other accounts of dream (or nightmare) futures, and that they’re going to leave your ideas of the world and how it works (and should work) altered in unexpected ways—and these are the things we get to say, proudly, about the work of our very best SF writers.

On a more personal note, I am pleased to admit that it was kind of a shock, lo these many years ago now—a happy surprise—to find Octavia Butler in person to be not only a relentless explorer of knotty problems, not only an imposing figure of dignity and poise, but a woman of robust and playful humor and opinion. I’ve heard her speak publicly a number of times, and I’ve been strongly impressed by her straightforward use of elements of her own experience to illustrate her beliefs and ideas, and by her generous aura of personal warmth. This warmth and openness somehow goes perfectly with her air of deliberate reserve; I wish to heck I knew how she does that.

Octavia Butler is a dandy writer and a spinner of intense and startling yarns that we couldn’t begin to imagine without her help. We’re damned lucky to have her books, and her presence, to remind us of the breadth and the powerful capacities of the creative, speculative mind playing at the top of its game.



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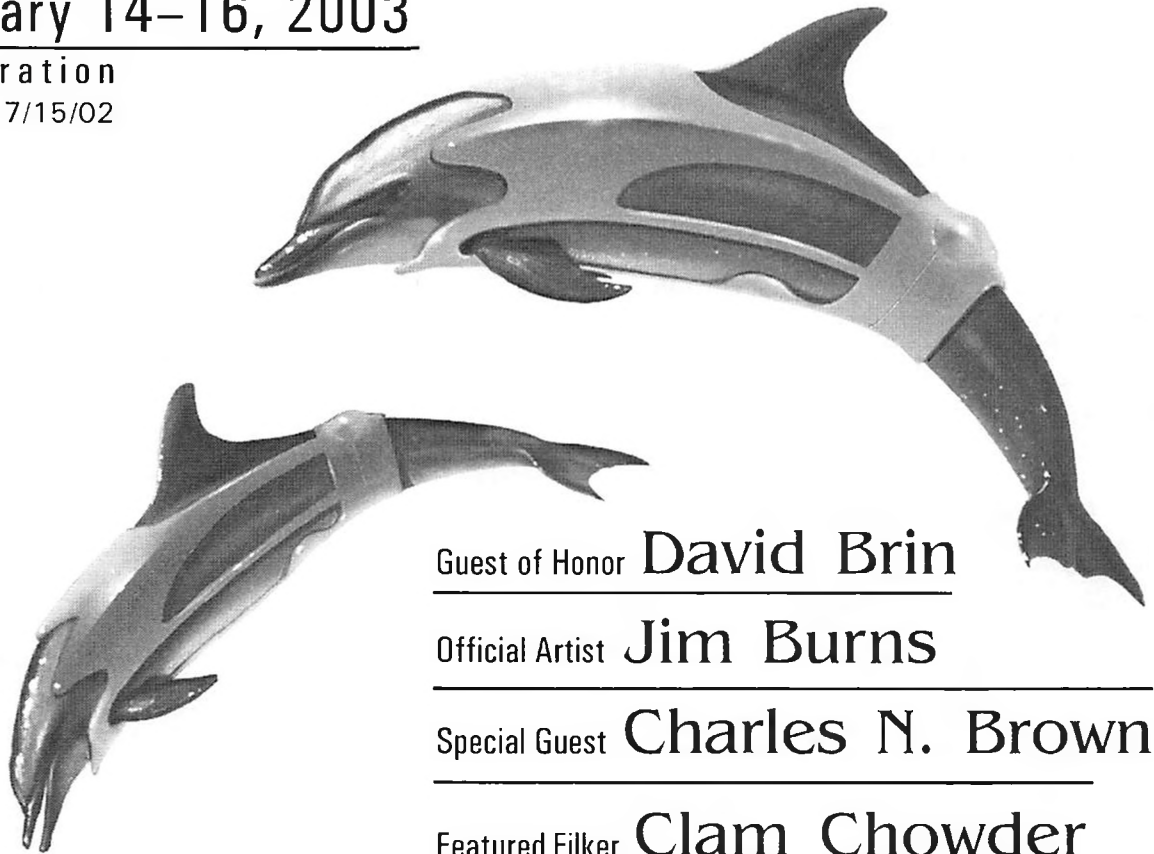
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# Aliens and Others in the Work of Octavia Butler and Gwyneth Jones

by Jenny Wolmark

To be different, or alien, is a significant if familiar cultural metaphor that marks the boundaries and limits of social identity. It allows difference to be marginalized and any dissonance to be smoothed away. As Jonathan Rutherford suggests,

The centre invests the Other with its terrors. It is the threat of the dissolution of self that ignites the irrational hatred and hostility as the centre struggles to assert and secure its boundaries, that construct self from not-self. (11)

Those who are different are objectified and thus are denied the capacity to be active agents in the creation of their own subjectivity: in taking on a sense of their own otherness, they are disempowered. In some of the most intelligent and powerful SF written in recent years, Octavia Butler and Gwyneth Jones hold up to critical scrutiny the way in which otherness is manifested in the deeply divisive dichotomies of race and gender. Using the science fiction metaphor of the alien, both writers examine the way that those dichotomies are embedded in repressive social and psychic structures and relations of dominance and subordination. When Butler and Jones were writing in the 1970s and '80s, they occupied a relatively marginal position as feminist writers in what was still a fiercely masculinist genre. This gives added significance to the exploration of the experience of subordination that can be found in their work, and it makes the narratives even more subversive.

The figure of the alien has often been used within SF to reproduce repressive structures rather than question them, and as Ursula Le Guin has pointed out,

If you deny affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself—as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation—you may hate it or defy it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. (85)

In the work of Butler and Jones, the notion of being “alien” carries an alternative set of resonances that challenge the unequal power relationship described by Le Guin. The narratives contain a sense of slippage between sameness and difference, between center and margins, so that the boundaries blur and become indecisive. The limits of cultural identity are tested when those who are different are depicted as active subjects capable of

resisting both the hierarchical relation between center and margins and the imposition of repressive definitions of difference. The work of these two writers gives the definition of the “alien” other inflections and meanings than those with which we are familiar, and in so doing they confront the “terrors” of the center and the ways in which those terrors are attributed to the other.

As a black feminist science fiction writer, Octavia Butler has made it clear that she situates her writing in opposition to the way in which both race and gender have been treated in SF, where the alien has been used to represent Otherness. In a debate in *Future Life*, Butler argues that

Science fiction has long treated people who might or might not exist—extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, however, many of the same science fiction writers who started us thinking about the possibility of extraterrestrial life did nothing to make us think about here-at-home variation—women, blacks, Indians, Asians, Hispanics etc. (Elliot, 1980: 60)

The allusions to and reworking of slave narratives in Butler's work are often mediated through the metaphor of the alien, and the emphasis on difference in Butler's fiction challenges readers to rethink definitions of both race and gender. Indeed, the production and reproduction of relations of power in terms of race and gender are major issues in her work.

Butler consciously writes “against the grain,” as is made clear by her comment that “Science fiction has always been nearly all white, just as until recently, it's been nearly all male” (Salvaggio, 7). Much of her fiction is concerned with strong black female characters who struggle against repressive power structures, and Butler has described her own position as a black feminist science fiction writer in terms that reflect those structures. As she puts it, “I began writing about power because I had so little” (Govan, 96).

Her fiction is also about identity and the dimensions of the “other,” and many of the narratives demonstrate a concern with transformation, difference, and the transgression of boundaries. Butler's novels persistently call into question the way in which the dominant discourses of race and gender attempt to fix definitions of “alien” and “other.” This is especially clear in early work such as “Bloodchild” (1984), *Mind of My Mind* (1978) and the Xenogenesis trilogy—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).

Butler's fiction is centrally concerned with the exploration of transitional states in which the boundaries between self and other become fluid, and in which the desire for homogeneity is resisted as difference is seen

to fulfill rather than to diminish the self. It implies connection rather than severance, by suggesting that sameness and difference are integral parts of a whole rather than binary opposites. These are themes that have been developed in work as varied as *Clay's Ark* (1985) and the more recent *Parable of the Sower* (1993). Butler's narratives explore transformed and hybrid forms of identity that undermine the cultural authority which the ideologies of race and gender claim for themselves. At the same time, however, she consistently refuses to offer easy or "magical" solutions to the complex problems thrown up by such transformations. As Butler herself has explained:

The idea of change seems to me to be one of the biggest challenges I face as a writer — and the inability to face this is a big problem in a lot of SF. Some kind of important change is pretty much what SF is about. (McCaffery, 64)

Gwyneth Jones is also interested in the transformative potential of the interactions between self and other in the contemporary post-industrial and post-colonial environment. In her Aleutian trilogy — *White Queen* (1991), *North Wind* (1994), and *Phoenix Café* (1997) — Jones examines the difficulties inherent in such transformations, particularly where assumptions about race and gender are concerned. The familiar SF motif of the human-alien encounter is used to explore the cultural construction of otherness and the contradictory fear of and desire for the other. In contrast to Butler, however, Jones uses the familiar narrative device of the alien against the genre itself. In *White Queen*, for example, the process of first contact is parodied in order to undermine common-sense definitions of what it means to be human or alien. Instead of stressing the differences between human and alien, Jones ironically reverses the emphasis and stresses the similarities. As both humans and aliens struggle to establish some form of meaningful communication, the narrative moves between the human and the Aleutian interpretations of events, and, not surprisingly, none of those interpretations fully coincide. All the viewpoints in the narrative are shown to be both limited and provisional, with the result that no narrative voice or perspective emerges as dominant.

Throughout the trilogy, Jones ensures that definitions of difference and otherness constantly shift from the human to the alien until precise definitions of either category become unsustainable. In the encounters between humans and Aleutians, Jones exposes the way in which the SF metaphor of the alien is fed by and feeds into a range of social and cultural myths about the other. By presenting both the human and the Aleutian versions of the same events, the narratives explore the way in which every human-alien encounter is skewed by a framework of assumptions about race and gender. Jones also emphasizes the way in which narratives of difference are necessarily constructed from the material to hand, in other words, from whatever cultural and

political imperatives are dominant. In *White Queen*, for example, humans immediately believe the aliens to be telepathic superbeings because "It was a truism that the aliens who landed, whoever they were, *had to be superior*. Or else we'd be visiting them" (*WQ*, 69). The assumptions that are built into many SF narratives about the inevitably hierarchical relations that must ensue in human-alien encounters are ironically revealed here, as is the way in which SF is itself implicated in the reproduction of such hierarchies.

Since the narrative perspective moves between human and alien throughout the trilogy, and since each considers the other to be "alien," Jones has a great deal of fun at the expense of expectations about identity and difference. Much of this stems from the particular trouble the aliens have in making sense of the way in which humans are designated as "females" and "males." When the Aleutians announce their presence on Earth, for example, it is to a world conference on women's issues that they have mistakenly assumed is the world's governing body. The accidental elevation of a women's agenda leads to the creation of a men's agenda, which culminates in the gender wars. In the ensuing poverty and devastation, differences that are incomprehensible to the aliens not only become hardened, but they also become more diverse. Women, biological and non-biological, become known as the reformers. Men, biological and non-biological, become known as the traditionalists. The heretics refuse to have any gender, and the half-castes physically alter their appearance to emulate the Aleutians. The narrative thus presents a complex and contradictory set of circumstances in which assumptions about either identity or gender cannot be taken for granted.

The trilogy as a whole focuses on the difficulties of sharing an environment with others that are perceived as alien and/or different. Attempts made by humans and aliens to negotiate their differences occasionally have disastrous consequences, but such attempts also indicate the necessity both to recognize and to accept difference. By the end of the trilogy, when the FTL technology that allows the Aleutians to return home is finally developed, the unsatisfactory state of human-Aleutian relations means that both groups are glad to see the back of each other. The note of cautious optimism underlying the narrative, however, indicates that the real success of the encounter is that a measure of recognition and acceptance of difference has, finally, been achieved.

Octavia Butler and Gwyneth Jones write demanding and often difficult narratives that challenge preconceptions about identity and difference. Since their novels also challenge the way in which the conventions of SF all too often reiterate such preconceptions, reading their work can be a discomfiting experience. There can be little doubt, however, that both writers have succeeded in carving out a distinctive creative and critical space for themselves within SF, and for that they deserve particular recognition.

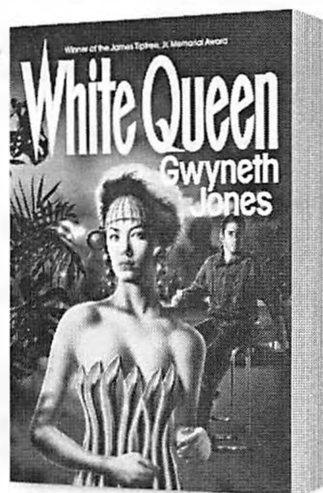
[This contribution is based on chapter 2 of my *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994).]

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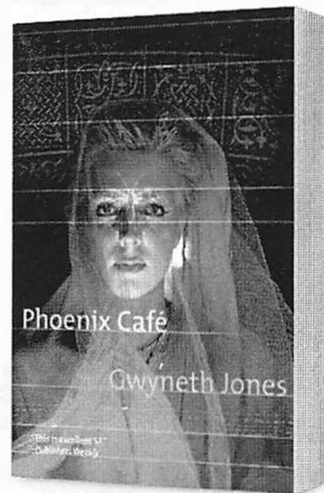
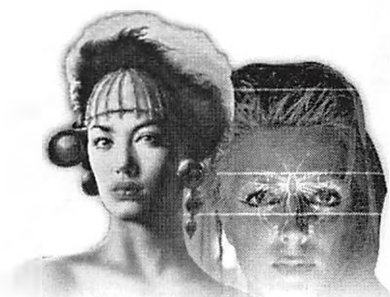
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—*The New York Times*

# Gwyneth Jones

by David G. Hartwell

Her website (last general update 1999) says: "Gwyneth Jones b. 14.2.52 Manchester, England, writer and critic of science fiction and fantasy; also known as Ann Halam writer of teenage horror fiction. Lives in Brighton, England with her husband, son, a Tonkinese cat called Ginger and two fish called Ruby and Fantail."

Gwyneth Jones is the heir to the out-on-a-limb, no-bullshit feminist tradition of Joanna Russ in science fiction, a tough-minded, well-read, thoughtful and thought-provoking writer and public figure who is not afraid of



saying difficult things in fiction or in her criticism or in public. Let's include Judith Merril, Ursula K. Le Guin and Suzy McKee Charnas in that tradition, James Tiptree, Jr., Samuel R. Delany, and maybe Marge Piercy. Not that she is much like any of them in person, any more than they were like each other. It is a tradition of unique individual writers and intellectuals. She is also Ann Halam (a sepa-

rate identity who is an award-winning writer of childrens and young adult books, mostly what are called chillers in the UK—ghost stories, etc.). Her bibliography lists sixteen books in the Childrens category through 1998 as by Halam (some are bylined Jones).

I recommend a visit to her website <<http://www.homeusers.prestel.co.uk/dreamer/>> to get some idea of the range of her work. You might read, for instance, her essay on Ursula K. Le Guin. You should note her collection of criticism, *Deconstructing the Starships* (1999). You might make a list of things you want to look for in the dealers' room. I would certainly recommend the World Fantasy Award winning collection, *Seven Tales and a Fable* (1995). You perhaps ought to read some of her work in back issues of NYRSF to get an even deeper understanding of who she is and where she's been.

She lives in Brighton with her husband, Peter, and their son, Gabriel. She has seen more of the world than most writers, especially the Third World. Like her friends and peers, Kim Stanley Robinson and Bruce Sterling, she is able to inject an unusual amount of political conversation and controversy into her novels, based upon knowledge of political theory, well-considered historical parallels, and acute observation of present-day situations. She started her first SF novel while living in Singapore.

That book, *Divine Endurance* (1984), came out in England without an SF label the same year as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Robinson's *The Wild Shore*, and I am still convinced it is at least as good a science fiction book as either of the others. I bought it and read it while travelling in England with Charles N. Brown the month it came out, and called the publisher and asked to meet the author, who by good chance lived in the same city that Eastercon was to be in on the weekend, Brighton. I took her and Peter and her big tummy (soon to yield Gabriel) out to eat, went back to the US and purchased the US rights for Tor. *Divine Endurance* is an immortal android cat who is definitely not cute, who accompanies her immortal human android companion, Chosen Among the Beautiful (Cho), on a journey through a future Malaysia, an SF world that is unique and original and uncanny. There is a revolution brewing, perhaps. Or perhaps the end of the world. This book was too demanding for most readers whom I strong-armed into reading it at the time.

I felt the way I had in 1969 trying to get people to understand Randy Newman's music. Good people, bright ones who cared. They kept telling me "I don't understand it and don't understand why you like it so much, why you think it is at all special." Now I do not deny that Gibson's book was revolutionary in its way, and influential, but I am not convinced even today that *Divine Endurance* is any less so. If you haven't read it, go find it and read it. And if you really like it, there is another book written in a bit of the same world, that fits somewhere in

the middle of *Divine Endurance*, *Flowerdust* (1993). It is a good strong book too. Gwyneth Jones is not attempting to write ephemeral commercial entertainments but serious, politically charged novels as SF. Her novels *Escape Plans* (1986) and *Kairos* (1988) are ambitious SF novels that have never been published in the US.

Her fourth novel, *White Queen* (1991), is still in print in the US and is an even better book than her first. It won the Tiptree Award. It is the first of three books that chronicle an alien invasion of earth by a mysterious shipload of technologically-superior humanoid aliens who worship TV recordings of their ancestors, mistake an international feminist conference in Asia for the government of Earth, and are here to make money off the natives and exploit their resources (an uneasy parallel to the British in India). This is a shocking, uncanny SF novel and certainly one of the best of its decade. They leave in 200 years (chronicled in two sequels, *North Wind* (1994) and *Phoenix Cafe* (1998, revised for the US edition), having messed up human civilization fairly thoroughly. This is not a message we want to hear, but it is one we need.

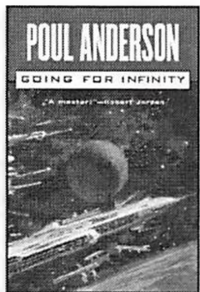
Her latest novel, *Bold as Love* (2001), is an SF novel nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, out in the US from a mainstream publisher. Consider for a moment a rock star who is politically active, and who decides to use his command of media to run for public office, and who wins. And shows the way for other stars who have political aspirations to win office and change the world. Actually this is quite a plausible SF scenario for the near future. (Older fans will remember how we used to laugh at Ronald Reagan, the movie star governor of California in the 1960s.)

Gwyneth Jones is one of the best SF writers in the world today, and Readercon is wise to have chosen her as a guest, and fortunate to have her attend. She is charming and articulate, and you will have the opportunity to experience that in person this weekend. Her stories offer the finest pleasures of SF: Disturbing ideas, surprises, new vistas of the imagination, graceful writing. Read them.

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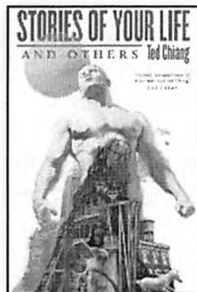


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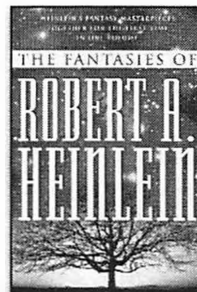
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# The Near Future: Prediction and Magic

## (Are We There Yet?)

by Gwyneth Jones

This article is a revised version of a speech I gave as Guest of Honour at Novacon, Walsall, UK, November 2001

### The Future of Now

The year 2001 might be considered embarrassing for science fiction prediction, because it's the year of the Kubrick movie *2001*: which makes this, by some reckoning, the defining moment when we *did not reach* the future promised by classic sf. There may be something in that piece of synchronicity, and I intend to examine the idea that the world has changed track, significantly, since the space race days. But I see no need to feel embarrassed. Waltzing tinfoil ships and a talking computer: that's not at all bad, considering the actuality of our computers, and our space programme. When you strip out the large element of metaphor and fairytale, and always remembering that the writer's preoccupations are the preoccupations of *now*, science fiction can be genuinely good futurology for the real world — Arthur C. Clarke himself (the text-fiction progenitor of the story "The Sentinel" that became *2001*) being the prime example of an sf futurologist whose contribution is universally recognised.

Modern sf writers are often eager to make it clear that they don't want to predict, that they are only holding up a mirror—a distorting, exaggerating fairground mirror—to their own present day, and this is an understandable reaction to the criticism that science fiction futures never come true. Thus, all those galactic empires of the golden age were really a metaphor, see, for the way there will always be never-ending "new worlds" of commerce and success, for mankind to conquer... (You got that)? In fact, it isn't really difficult to predict the future accurately, in the short term, in terms of technology and society—but this kind of prediction usually plays a minor role in the story. Let me give you a couple of examples from my own work.

In *White Queen*, a novel which is basically about an alien invasion, about questions of self and otherness, and about the deep meaning that the gender divide has for human society, I have a human scientist pottering away in the background, inventing a faster-than-light drive. She's discovered a means to translate her consciousness to another point in the simultaneity of space-time, with the useful feature that when she "gets there" her body is instantly re-created (vanishing at the point of origin) out of the common elements required. She needs destinations, to test it out. So she steals time on one of the big space telescopes of her present day (supposedly around

2038) and identifies a few Earth-type planets, with the requisite elements in good supply and liquid water, by a cunning spectral analysis of the light from planet-bearing stars. I was writing this in 1989. I knew that the existence of possible planets could be inferred, from little discrepancies indicating that a tiny body was passing across the face of a fairly distant star. The idea of checking for the chemical signatures of planetary atmospheres I made up, on the theory that the information has to be there, you just have to analyse the star's emissions really, really carefully. Shortly after *White Queen* was published, I spotted an article in *New Scientist*, describing a plan to search for Earth-like planets using exactly this method. I don't know if the idea will ever *work* (and if it does, inferring the existence of a planet with breathable atmosphere etc. is a whole lot different from getting there), but I had managed to predict the science and the technology, and what more can you ask? The rest is story.

Another example—much more practical. In the mid-nineties, I wrote a story about a molecular biologist. Anna works in human fertility, a very controversial area in her near-future present. At one point in the story, she's brooding on whether her successful and money-spinning field has ever done more good than harm. They can clone human babies safely in Anna's world, for instance (it's known as nuclear transfer, to avoid the *c* word), but, er, were we short of human babies? Then she thinks about the way children in England are now (Anna's now) routinely vaccinated against tooth decay... I was actually imagining an injection, because I'm a bit old-fashioned, me. I should have realised, the genetically modified bacteria that will permanently protect a child from tooth decay can be administered by rubbing a paste on the gums. The treatment will take about five minutes, they say, and cost about £100 a child. It's ready now. I do hope they get the price down. This is the kind of thing I do all the time, and so do most sf writers. We don't get the main picture of the future right, because even if it were possible we're more interested in a story we have to tell. But we're often ace at the details.

Here's a third example, this one more story than science. It dates from the one and only time I was hired as a futurologist. In 1988, UK sf writer and scholar Brian Stableford was asked by BT (British Telecom) to recruit a group of science fictioners for a consultation on future consumer trends. My brief was to imagine the future of leisure activities. Well, I'm no Arthur C. Clarke, but one of the ideas I had was... I'd noticed how confused the mass market audience was becoming about tv soaps — tabloid journalism treats the events in the soaps like real news, that sort of thing. I decided the next development would be for some enterprising company to cut out the middleman. People would sign up to a soap-net-

work, and watch other people on the network, instead of actors on a set. You'd get your house wired, and your life wired (little invisible detectors following you around), so your world would be like the world of the fellow in the black comic Jim Carrey movie, except that the spectator-sport of ordinary life would be, er, consensual. You'd be watching your network-mates, and they'd be watching you. I think the catch would be that ordinary life is likely to be immensely dull (who would have watched more than one episode of the *Truman Show*?). As the soaps themselves have discovered, you have to develop ever-more-baroque, psychopathic or heart-rending storylines, just to keep your network-mates interested. (It would be mayhem. There'd be hackers, sneaking peeks. There'd be bizarre performance art, there'd be cut-throat competition...There's some great possibilities for stories in the interactive-soap idea.) But I was predicting a future trend, and the trend I predicted was towards more and more confessional forms of entertainment, and a belated *consumer*-driven exploitation of the spying opportunities provided by tv-technology. I was right about that.

Actually, I was right but I wasn't first. In 1948, notoriously, George Orwell invented a world where the tv in the corner would be the means for the State to spy on your every move. He just didn't imagine that the all-powerful State of the near future would take the form of the spending choices of the feckless masses, in a feedback loop with the profit motive. It's in his memory that the now classic spy-tv format is called *Big Brother* in the UK. Maybe the poor man is turning in his grave. But though there's certainly a dark side to the real-world dictatorship of the proletariat, *Big Brother* as an idiotic form of minor-celebrity bashing is preferable to Orwell's vision.

So that's the way it goes. You can easily make accurate near-market predictions about technology and society. You just keep in touch with the possibilities in the popular science press, take a scattergun approach, and some of your guesses will be right. Or you can muse on the *Zeitgeist* of your times, decide where it's heading, and how technology might help things along. The real-world version will be totally different, but there will be uncanny points of similarity. Our memorial Guest of Honour, John Brunner, among many uncanny predictions, once described a world blighted by over-population (*Stand on Zanzibar*). A lot of people were afraid of over-population in the sixties, and then stopped being afraid because it didn't seem to happen. But the blight is with us now, in the collapse of fish-stocks, loss of arable land, ominous water shortages: in the plunging literacy rates and the collapse of the middle classes, even in what we call "the developed world." It just doesn't look the way we thought it would... Science fiction prediction is blindsight. We see the future through the double lens of our story, and of the present day's concerns: through a glass, darkly (an expression which in itself enshrines a mistaken assumption about the future of technology. Glass is transparent when it wants to be, these days).

Then again, sometimes you just take a wild guess, and the future says Yes! Pure intuition (which is what we call our knowledge, when it's embedded deeper than our transient, conscious figuring-out) can provide flashes of impressive off-the-cuff clairvoyance. In 1988 Lisa Tuttle and I were on a panel at a library festival at Gateshead, Tyne and Wear. The moderators asked us to make a prediction, and we answered, with one voice, there's going to be a lot more fantasy on tv. *Sf* in print is a minority taste, okay, but if *Star Trek* is mass-market, popular folklore, household names, there is surely an untapped appetite out there for the other side of the genre coin. Weirdness in a contemporary setting! In a few years, we said, there is sure to be a massively popular teen soap-opera in which a cute-looking young woman battles incessantly with vampires and demons —

And it worked.

I'm joking, of course. Really, we invented the Lara Croft sports bra, before anyone had *any idea* that young women with massive busts were going to sweep the board in fantasy adventure games. We expect a substantial cash payment, when Eidos has come to terms with our thaumaturgical lawyers.

I'm reminded of something Alan Garner said (the UK writer of renowned, dark and thrilling young-adult fantasies of the seventies, like *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift*), about his own form of "prediction." The source material he used was Celtic Mythology. If he couldn't find an episode that fitted into his scheme, he would make one up. Then often, months or years later, when he was researching something else, he'd have the strange experience of discovering exactly the episode he thought he'd invented, recounted about some mythic characters in a twelfth-century Welsh epic, or some such thing. The history of the future is like the history of the past. Fictional or "real," it's all story, just as our own personal experience is a story that we tell ourselves. There are recurring patterns, there are clich...s, there are cycles that repeat, inevitably, whenever the significant conditions come together again—though of course never exactly. Time (as Samuel Delany put it, long ago) is a helix. It moves, it's dynamic, but it isn't random. When you're familiar with the material—which is to say, popular science and current affairs—you can get a feel for the patterns of technology and society, for history itself; and that's how *sf* writers can have the fun of being almost, sort-of, profoundly *right*. Even while, er, on the face of it, they're getting most of the facts wrong...

### Magic

**A**ctually it's the silliest anecdote, the one about me and Lisa Tuttle conjuring up the whole "Buffy" phenomenon, that is most relevant to the rest of my talk. Having been asked to discuss "What's Really Going To Happen Next," I've decided I have to talk to you about magic. Here's a quote from the novel I've already mentioned, *White Queen*:

“She thought how strangely the whole world spiralled back towards the mindset of old Africa. No weather anymore, only the effects of human villainy. No death except by witchcraft...”

I wrote that in 1989. The reference is to a highly influential anthropology paper of the sixties, which was a required text when I was an undergraduate. It was based on field work in West Africa, and stated that the magical worldview, once displaced by contact with outsiders, can never return. Essentially, it doesn't matter if the outsiders are telling you that microbes rather than malign influence cause disease, or if they're convinced that spacemen caused human civilisation. It's the *relativism* that does the damage. The magical world is a closed system. As soon as there are alternative beliefs, alternative interpretations of events, the whole thing collapses. Well, in real life, and outside anthropology journals, the magical worldview isn't as fragile as all that. Far from it. What struck me when I was writing *White Queen*, which is partially set in West Africa (the place where white men used to go to find their heart of darkness), was that the return of the magical view was already upon us, disguised as environmental science. You think that bad weather is caused by malign human agency, rather than innocent, or at least morally neutral, natural forces? You're absolutely right. The devastating floods and storms and droughts of our times are fueled by wilful human greed; the overcrowding and resource starvation that pushes whole nations over the edge, likewise. You think that death and disease are preventable accidents, or attacks, which can be held at bay, possibly indefinitely, by money and power? You're absolutely right there, too. You think that some people are gifted from birth with charms to ward off such misfortune? Dead right. Maybe nothing has really changed, since the days when science had the answer to everything. We may believe that the microbes are still busy... But it doesn't matter if the part that human activity plays in global warming is not proven (I'm not going to try and convince you differently); or if death is actually *not* a preventable misfortune. What I'm saying is that these supposedly false and primitive “magical” ideas have wide currency in the twenty-first century. After three hundred years or so in eclipse, in what is known as “the developed world,” magic is back, with a vengeance. What are the implications (a science fiction writer asks herself)? What's it going to be like, living in a magical future? I want to look at different interpretations of that term “magic,” and see if I can come up with some answers.

The famous Arthur C. Clarke dictum which says that “any sufficiently advanced technology will be indistinguishable from magic” is long out of date, and Clarke himself is partly responsible—because of course nowadays the term for bizarrely advanced or imaginary science is “science fiction.” But maybe this is fair enough, because historically the terms “magic” and “science fiction” have often been interchangeable. In legends,

fairytales, hero-tales, and also in attempts at accurate reportage through the ages, “magic” was the word most often used, before “science” was coined, to describe marvels—feats and tricks beyond the understanding of the layperson—done by skill or craft. The grasp of “the layperson” is always shifting. Before literacy became widespread, reading and writing were held to be magical operations. Before literacy, oratory was an exercise of uncanny, supernatural power. In the Arab world, this history is still enshrined in a word for poetry: *sir halal*, legitimate magic. Nowadays people switch on their tvs and computers with confidence, and have ceased to regard the arcane, unintelligible things that happen inside the casing of these conveniences as “science fiction:” equally, once a lot of people could read and write, the *mystery* of reading and writing vanished from public consciousness (though the arcane neurological operations involved are as mysterious as ever). Nowadays we regard the alchemist, with his dusty tomes and bubbling retorts full of strange-coloured noxious liquids, as the forerunner of all our fictional wizards, the fantasy figures of power, from Gandalf the Grey to Harry Potter. But in seventeenth-century Europe, when this figure first hit the public stage, he wasn't a fantasy: he was a satirical rendering of the real-world situation in a cutting-edge technology. He was a science fiction character.

But magic isn't just an old-fashioned term of respect, and wariness, (and cynicism) used for new technologies and their practitioners. There are other parallels, showing how closely the two “opposing” views of the world are linked. In magic, the knowing of names is held to give practitioners power over the things named—which is exactly what modern taxonomy has taught for three hundred years: to *define* something means you've captured it, you have it in your power. In science desperate attempts to trap exotic neutrinos, or capture gravity waves, may be pursued by individuals and groups locked into their own closed worlds, and unaware of their own motivations. But the interpretation of these strange adventures (whether in science fiction or in some other form of popular science text) cannot avoid the spiritual dimension which has always been an aspect of the craft of marvels. In real life the alchemists failed (or, at least, so I am reliably informed) to turn base metal into gold, or to discover the philosopher's stone that grants eternal youth. Their arcane operations became metaphor for a quest of self-realisation. In real-life science, the term “pure knowledge” is substituted, but perhaps the quest is the same.

The idea that “magic” is the false and primitive version, and “science” is the truth about the world, has further ironies. Fictional representations of magic (those wizards and witches with their dusty tomes and bubbling potions) are not only, arguably, simply lab science in seventeenth-century dress: they invariably show the magic working *the way science is supposed to work*. The established authorities are reliable, the obscure demon is accurately identified. You work hard, you find the right

formula, put the ingredients together, and hey presto! The machine goes into gear. In real life, meanwhile, whether it's a schooldays repetition of an experiment in the textbook or something highly esoteric and devastatingly expensive at CERN, most often the machine flat-out refuses to go into gear. You don't know what you did wrong, some trivial mistake in the ritual, some tiny infraction of the laws that the sub-atomic particles know, but they won't tell you; and the demons refuse to obey. Fantasy magicians get the kind of results golden age sf awarded to the noble scientists in their white coats. Real-world scientists spend their time behaving for all the world as if they are doing business with malign and capricious spirits — and this "magical" behaviour becomes more and more pronounced, as the number-crunching power of modern computing brings scientists closer to the truly colossal number-crunching that underpins the whole observable world (whereas, previously, they've only been dealing with the small fraction of the phenomena that will condescend to respond to, say, Newtonian mechanics).

If magic is fiction about science, "science" is equally a fiction, a dumbing-down, an idealisation of what really happens in the craft of the marvellous — a dumbing-down sanctioned by the extraordinary material success of the phenomenon known as the "scientific worldview." Just to remind you, the story goes something like this... The human world used to be sunk in barbarism. Protestant Christianity offered a more enlightened viewpoint, but still most people's lives were dominated by their abject fear of ghosts and demons, and craven trust in saints and angels. Then the scientific worldview was born (René Descartes is one of the usual suspects held responsible). The demons and the saints were discovered to be morally neutral natural forces, whose powers could be defeated or harnessed for the good of all, by impersonal technologies that anyone could learn to handle. Ever since then, and with increasing speed over the last century, "science" has been working hand in hand with global capitalism, to spread peace and plenty over the world. Of course this was always a techno-fairy-story, even before the invention of technophile sf. The magicians never went away. Just because you can switch on a tv doesn't mean you are in control of the technology. That area is still, as it always was, the preserve of some very special, strangely talented individuals — and the kings and chieftans of commerce who employ them. Plus, the crucial idea of a *questioning* of the world, with no preconceptions about the answers you might get, vanished entirely in the mass-market version of Descartes *et al.* — making "science" logically indistinguishable from someone waving a magic wand. Of course, there were always casualties. But no one at the sweet end of the system was seriously worried about the deception, not until quite recently. Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, as the supply of raw material dwindles, while the number of human beings able to claim a share of the benefits soars, the real costs of white-coat mastery over the forces of nature be-

come visible: and then we start to wonder, were we ever in charge? Have the demons and the angels been there all along, waiting to be rediscovered? Was this haunted universe just *playing* with us?

But there's something else to consider. Confusingly, the word "magic" is currently used in some contexts as a term for the craft of the marvellous, interchangeable with the word "science," in some contexts as a metaphor for spiritual development techniques, but it is also used as a blanket term for all kinds of animist practice and belief. This is a very significant, and rather ominous, misunderstanding. Animism, the world over and throughout human history, is the practice of treating the world as *animate*: that is to say, of behaving as if a tree, a mountain, night, death, were personalities, like ourselves. In some sense it is the natural religion, the ancestor from which all the others have diverged. In existential terms (can I say *existential* at a science fiction convention? Well, I just did. I promise I won't say semiotic...) it makes a lot of sense. We are self-conscious. Our intelligence was honed into the amazing tool it has become, by communicating with other self-conscious beings — with the family, with the tribe. By imbuing the environment with self-consciousness, we're acknowledging something that happens in our mental processes anyway, whether we like it or not. When your prize cell-culture up\$ and dies on you, or that pesky neutrino sneaks past you again, you can try to be "rational" about it, but somewhere, deep in your heart, even if your name is Richard Dawkins, you say *bastard*. Or, if you have an angelic temperament, you might say, *please*, dear little neutrino... We can't help it. That's the way we're wired. So far so good. But what people forget when they conflate magic and animism is that animist practice isn't supposed to be "effective;" it's supposed to be maintenance. We live in a haunted world (the haunting is actually happening in our minds, but that doesn't make it less real). We feel comfortable if we deal with the "spirits" the way we deal with human neighbours, using little rituals of courtesy. It would be offensive *not* to leave a gift of rice and flowers for the spirit of the river, when you cross over; or for the house you live in, when you get up in the morning from your warm, dry bed — same as it would be offensive not to send your gran a birthday card. But making the offering is routine. You don't expect any special reward. Where animism is genuinely practiced, magic is always known (where there is Christianity, for instance — a deeply animist religion of the developed world — there is Satanism), but it is not regarded as normal. Magic is emergency intervention. Witchcraft (compelling the spirits for a criminal purpose) is often a false accusation — an accusation frequently used, even today, as a tool of political oppression — but nobody disputes that it's a crime.

My favourite fiction about the return of the magical worldview is Rachel Pollack's contemporary-fantasy novel *Unquenchable Fire*, which won the Arthur C. Clarke award in 1989. The hegemony of Science and Progress has been overturned in a mysterious "revolution," and

denizens of New York City and State are all devout animists. It's amazing how little has to be changed, to turn the yuppie urban scene into a magical world. The lucky shoes you wear for the job interview. The murky coffee mug that you treat as if it's the home of your familiar spirit (your "fetish" as the Catholic Portuguese in Africa used to say). The little gestures of respect and greeting, touch wood, cross fingers, that have survived, make it easy to envisage life in a spirit-filled city... A few years down the line, none of the everyday rituals described in *Unquenchable Fire* would raise an eyebrow. The revolution has happened. You probably have a colleague who is a practicing animist of some kind. But that's *not* magic: and it's not the kind of magical worldview that has captured the public imagination.

Someone can correct me if I'm wrong, but I've watched *Buffy* faithfully, and I'm fairly sure there are no shrines, no holy springs, no beloved trees, no sacred places; there are no daily prayers. There's a shop where you can *buy* magic. There are young middle-class witches who practise magic as a hobby, something they get together and do once a week, like quilting maybe: but in practice or in earnest, they are performing rituals of coercion. That's what magic is. You call up the forces of nature, and you compel them to do your will. It may be in a good cause, but it's coercion... Well, we could say that this is a special case. Sunnydale is a battlefield: of course the emphasis is on violence. We could say that if "magic" and "science" are interchangeable terms, the model of coercion is nothing new—people have always spoken of "harnessing" natural forces. But it's something to think about. If this is the (somewhat delayed) dawning of the Age of Aquarius, it doesn't seem to have much to do with peace and love, harmony or understanding.

Magic and science are complementary, not interchangeable, terms. There is a difference of *Gestalt*. Different people look at the same state of affairs and interpret it differently, while the state of affairs itself remains inclusive, containing both meanings. The scientific worldview can be a saving grace, that takes the fear out of people's lives, and gives them the happy illusion that, under God (or some other macroscale concept like evolution), we are forging onward, together, all several billion of us, towards an agreed and blissful goal. The animist world is closer to nature, and in some sense closer to reality, because it's closer to the way our minds work. But seen through the dark lens of our times, it is a fearsome place. Every day and every hour, we are beset by spirits, by demons, by the unquiet dead, who must be placated or defeated: inimical powers who make a mockery of the concept that anyone has a right to *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*; who can ravage our happiness or make our dreams come true, completely at their whim.

## High Anxiety

The idea that the real world is stranger than the one we're supposed to live in has always resonated with me. When I was a child, there was an older girl who lived across the street who later became a Wiccan High Priestess. I won't tell you her name, but she was the consort of Alex Sanders at one time, if that means anything. She was, even at the age of ten or twelve, when I knew her, impressively weird. Looking back, I can think of other explanations besides magical talent for her weirdness: but she intrigued me. Later, I became interested in science fiction and *not* interested in post-Tolkien genre fantasy, because the magic in the fantasy epics seemed like a dilute, feeble version of the real-world outer limits of physics and cosmology. But I liked ghost stories, and all kinds of classic supernatural horror: Sheridan Le Fanu, Arthur Machen, Walter de la Mare, M.R. James. Maybe I've been slightly too interested in all that spooky stuff: not a believer, but a fellow-traveller. But I've been wary of the power trip. If there's really such a thing as supernatural magic that's effective on the crass, material plane, it hasn't made much of a stir in the world, compared to, say, particle physics... Still, I've always had a feeling people shouldn't fool around with the stuff. I know that for many people, and significantly for women, returning to animist and magical belief, especially if it's non-white, feels like reclaiming stolen territory. I know that self-identifying with the word "witch" can feel empowering. I also know that the practice of ritual magic flourishes in refugee camps, alongside the most rigid revival of misogynist "traditions;" it flourished in the ghettos of European Jewry before the Holocaust; it thrived in slave compounds. People don't turn to this kind of medicine unless they're in trouble.

As well as writing science fiction as Gwyneth Jones, I write for teenagers using the pseudonym Ann Halam. Ann Halam writes ghost stories, so when I started visiting schools in the nineteen-eighties, I would ask the children did any of them believe in ghosts. A couple of hands would go up. If the twelve-year-olds of those days believed in ghosts, most of them kept quiet about it. They knew the world they lived in was supposed to be a rational place, with very little room left for the supernatural. A few years later, and there'd be a forest of hands. Nowadays, I don't bother. The question is no longer interesting, ghosts are part of the landscape. The occult is like sex. It's no longer extraordinary, and it's no longer "occult." It's not hidden, it's everywhere. Even the fierce resistance of the Christian Right to Harry Potter's wish-fulfillment wizardry is part of the same *Gestalt* shift. Whether viewed as a threat or an empowerment, coercive magic is important again. I don't know if this kind of regression (because that's what it seems like to me) involves the same kind of belief as existed in pre-industrial isolated societies. I don't know if the people in pre-industrial isolated societies had the kind of monolithic belief awarded to them by visiting anthropologists.

I suspect that cynicism, and scepticism, and plain indifference, are as old as magic itself. But there has certainly been a dramatic change, and though I know it looks romantic, I can't see the return of magic as a hopeful sign. It's a psychological and maybe even physiological response (the origins of ritual are close to compulsive behaviours, that develop in stressful situations and then become inescapable) to a world that seems, once more, to be filled with inimical powers.

In *Buffy* the vampires and the demons invade Sunnydale by night, while by day prosperous, and overwhelmingly white, suburban life goes on, bizarrely unaffected. Nobody seems perturbed by the vampire attacks, or the "disappearances" that must be a frequent occurrence. Nobody thinks to up the security, hire armed guards, put up steel barricades; take any of the precautions that are by now familiar in some of the real suburbs of California... That's the way we've been living, we privileged middle-class citizens of global capitalism: in blinkered comfort, while the have-nots, those dangerous aliens, are hammering at the gates. Maybe one aspect of the rising tide of magical belief is our repressed, guilty acknowledgement that things can't go on this way.

What does all this mean for science fictions of the near future? Maybe not much. There has always been room for a wide spectrum of beliefs in the genre, from mysticism to technophile entertainment. I'm sure people will go on writing, and reading, noirish near-future thrillers, and big, block-busting space operas—possibly with a token witch around; or a vampire infestation. But I think it's not surprising that two of the most thoughtful, most talked-about books in the UK in 2001 dealt head-on with the issue of science as magic, science versus magic; and the return of a culture of fear. In China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, a blundering scientist lets loose a monstrous plague of mind-eating moths on a Chormenghastified fantasy London. In Mary Gentle's *Ash*, the mediaeval warrior heroine tangles with some Elder Beings who have taken objection to the human propensity for changing the world, and she's forced to switch everything onto a different timeline, our timeline, where miracles can't happen. You can read *Perdido Street* as an entertaining disaster movie: you can also discern a future where magic and science are interchangeable and equally corrupt, equally grotesque. You can read *Ash* as re-enactment fantasy, and heroic romance: but the end of the age of miracles is arguably the place where we are standing now, and I was struck by the fact that our heroine's paradise, the best life she can hope to live, is an everlasting battlefield.

### Red Pill/Blue Pill

**T**oo much information gives a grey scale, an intimidating blur. When people's first certainties are taken away from them they tend to look for some other certainty, rather than deciding (which might be the rational course) that perhaps the world is an uncertain place.

It's easier to decide that black equals white, than to pore over every pixel trying to make out the real picture. Technically, the aliens haven't invaded yet: the outsiders have not arrived, to break down the walls of our psychological home. But events like the 11<sup>th</sup> September—not to mention the slower attrition of urban violence, floods of economic migrants, rumours of apocalyptic environmental damage—show us that Science and Progress are no longer the unchallenged divinities we thought they were. To a significant proportion of the world's population the values of "our" society are meaningless—and that's a shocking discovery. What kind of stories do people want, in times like these?

I think most of you are probably familiar with the cyberthiller movie *The Matrix*. It's one of those texts, like *Buffy*, that can be referred to at sf conventions; and you're more likely to be generally understood than if you referred to any particular book. Anyway, to recap. *The Matrix* is a fable in which human beings are kept enslaved by a huge faceless corporation (known as "the machines") and fed comforting illusions, while the real world has become a devastated wilderness. The climactic moment comes when our hero, who has started to doubt the faux reality of his enslavement, is offered a choice. Take the red pill, and you have to live with the ugly truth. Take the blue pill, and you return to a seamless virtual environment where you can be very comfortable (in a facsimile of Sydney in the nineties, for some reason I never worked out). So which is it to be? Red pill, blue pill? Take the red pill, and you're in a ruined desert where you're doomed to struggle against impossible odds. Take the blue pill, and everything's fine, as long as you can close your eyes to the fact that you have nothing to believe in. Of course in the movie the dice are loaded. We know from the moment we meet our hero that when Neo chooses the red pill he's going to turn out to be Muad'Dib or one of those people. He's the Chosen One, he has nothing to fear. The choice is not the same if you're just some ordinary corporate slave. Or some ordinary science fiction writer.

Quite frankly, if the situation in the real twenty-first century were as hopeless as the set-up in *The Matrix*, I would be taking the blue pill. I'd be handing out blue pills. Tell the people what they want to hear. Give them comforting horror stories (it's not for nothing that Stephen King is the Dickens of our time). Assure them that greed is good and fear is God, and "goodness" is merely a sentimental plot-device. For us, happily, things aren't black and white. This is a greyscale world, of detailed solutions and marginal advantages. It might be possible to get through this bottleneck without plunging into the dark ages, and learn, like Trinity and Neo, to walk on air and dance with the bullets, and make this battered mother-world, this environment that only "the corporate machines" can control, our playground. But, on the other hand, it isn't going to be easy, and I wouldn't want to be writing fairystories about the arbitrary triumph of the individual at a time like this.

Is there such a thing as a purple pill? Or a striped pill, red and blue?

### Magic Technology

I don't know if magic (in the popular sense) ever works. At various points in my career, as I've said, I've been interested, I've looked into it. I've found no convincing evidence. But I know that there is something in me, something in all of us perhaps, that *wants* to interact directly with the environment; and with other minds. There's something in me that actively, furiously strives to hurry things along, when a big file is downloading or uploading on my computer; or to get the ball into the net, if I'm watching a football match I care about on the tv. There's something in me that hands out curses and blessings... and there are people in this world who'd better hope I *don't* have emergent psychic powers. Sometimes I think these immemorial human feelings are the forward echo of a science fiction future that might become real, one day.

It's not totally implausible. In my new novel, a near-future fantasy called *Bold As Love*, there's a scientist who is seeking (with the help of some crazed Welsh hippies and a few rockstar labrats) to achieve the Holy Grail of her world's neuroscience. She's trying to create, or develop, or discover, someone like Neo, only in the world outside the Matrix. Someone whose consciousness can manipulate the physical environment directly. On the way to this goal, the Zen Self quest throws up nifty alternative technologies (the Teflon effect). One of them involves transgenic tissue infusions that turn people into human powerhouses: you use the energy of your own cell metabolism, amplified and flowing through the pores of your fingertips, to run your computer, boil a kettle, cook a meal. In case anyone was wondering, I don't think this makes sense. But in the fifties a major computer filled a suite of rooms. Nowadays it's possible to envisage fairly powerful processors that keep going on the excess energy we generate just moving around... Already we talk to each other (incessantly) using tiny, voice-activated, hands-free mobile phones. It's not such a big step from that to a radio implant, or a camera on a chip, that you can wear in your eye like a contact lens. Or hey, why not be imaginative? Why not a radio or a camera built of engineered neural DNA, infused directly into the brain...? One of the reasons why I call my new novel *Bold As Love* a fantasy, and I wrote it as a fantasy, is that so many extraordinary things are becoming possible, just now, when nobody believes in science or progress anymore. I felt I had to leapfrog over all the near-market speculation I used to enjoy. To give a real feeling of *the future* today, you have to get fantastic. You have to throw away the learned journals and the glimpses of lab procedure, and just purely use your imagination. Use your wildest dreams.

When Brian Stableford organised a group of British science fiction writers into a team of futurologists for

BT, we all hoped we'd found a long-term consultancy. It didn't happen. I think we *worried* them. There was too much meaning in our ideas, not enough advertising. But when I wrote for them on the future of "leisure," I used as one of my models the history of the rock music industry... an example of technology driven by the consumer: sixties rock and roll musicians, at the height of their feckless power, taking the tech into their own hands, *playing* with the machinery. I said that's what people would be wanting to do, in the near future. The return of magical belief and practice is in many ways, I believe, an ominous symptom. It's a crisis of faith, a reaction that is in itself a measure of fear and anxiety. But one of the things that "magic" can mean is that each of us has a personal relationship with the spirits that shape this world: with the forces of nature. The astonishing technology of the twenty-first century will not solve any of our terrible problems on its own. All the designer babies money can buy will not save a single child from dying of AIDS in Africa. A seamless virtual environment that you can access by sticking a contact lens in your eye will not halt the collapse of fish stocks in the North Atlantic, or do anything for soil fertility. But the magical metaphor that says we can and must take power into our own hands: that each of us must be individually responsible for the balance of forces that keeps this planet alive... well, if everyone took that spiritual-technological quest seriously, then who knows? We might achieve the holy grail of a genuine, human civilisation.

# Total Internal Reflection

For Kim Stanley Robinson

by Gwyneth Jones

They walk among us. They don't look *young*, you'd place them around twenty-five to thirty: but the astonishing truth is that they are all (maybe half a million of them, world wide) over six hundred years old. They have been talking to journalists, appearing on our screens: they've convinced us that this is no hoax. But why have they decided to leave earth? That was the question I most wanted to ask, when I was offered the chance to interview our own, local, Thames Valley immortal. Why quit now, just when they don't need to hide anymore?

I met Tamsin in the garden of her house in a quiet Middlesex village: a light-skinned, dark-haired woman of average height, dressed in the dateless human uniform of bluejeans and a white teeshirt. She reminded me that I'd agreed not to make a live broadcast. I let her check the output setting on my eyesocket ConjurMac; and we got down to business. "So," I said (never one to avoid the obvious) "How does it feel to be six hundred and fifty?" Tamsin laughed. "How old are *you*?"—I am ninety-seven and I said so. "So why ask me? You'll find out soon enough." I put it to her that if I survived—and no longevity treatment can actually guarantee survival—it was a long time to wait for an answer. "When I first took 'rem'," she said. "It was 2039 CE. It doesn't seem long ago at all. Trust me: the years will fly." Their perception of time is different from ours... I stared, transfixed, at the woman who had lived through the squalor of the Population Pulse, survived five 'World Wars', kept her impossible secret since the fifteenth century after the Prophet (Praise And Blessings Of Allah Be Upon Him). If I hadn't known, I would never have guessed. She looked so normal.

In the mid-twentyfirst century CE, a new drug treatment for memory impairment went into clinical trials. It was meant to strengthen associative memory: in fact it gave patients bursts of recall so intense they were stopped in their tracks, lost in ecstatic re-experience of some childhood joy. Bootlegged 'rem' quickly reached the streets, and became fashionable. This was the midst of World War Three: reckless times. It didn't worry the users that the heart-stopping delight of a rem high was, in a few cases, literally heart-stopping. But the damage mounted. Prodromal schizophrenic symptoms, untreatable depression, vegetative coma... The clinical trials were dropped. All recreationals were legal by then, at least throughout Europe and most of the USA, but rem's reputation made it a poor business prospect. It vanished. The dosage given to the clinical subjects had been too low for the effect to emerge. When those who had taken

it habitually realised what was happening to them, they kept quiet. So no one knew, except the immortals themselves. They were wise to keep quiet. In those days and for a long time afterwards, the Population Pulse was a terrifying force. Longevity research had been abandoned: it was just too sensitive an issue. 'Rem' itself had not been intended to prolong life, only to ameliorate dementia and confusion. But the Pulse is over, and other things have changed. It's not just the Lagrange colonies and the moon, and the gruelling labour of love that is transforming Mars. Crucially, in a few months' time, the first colony ships will leave Deep Space (our waystation on the brink of the heliopause), and travel, at speeds believed logically impossible when Tamsin was young, to a remote-surveyed, uninhabited, earth-type planet. This year, 2108 (2688 by the CE count), we are free, at last. The treatments came too late for me. I may live to be six hundred, but I will grow old. For younger generations there are no known limits.

But rem immortality is still different.

We chatted for two hours, sitting under an apple tree; the murmur of the Fleet (which runs by her garden) in the background. She talked about her son, so long dead, and her husband, killed in a climbing accident last century (immortality is not proof against blunt instruments, lynch mobs or equipment failure). She tried to explain how it feels to have your entire life available to you, so you can *be there*, again and again, in every moment. How you start with the good moments, then gather courage, until you have taken possession of the whole, and your entire existence becomes coherent, like laser light in a perfect optical computer.

"But why are you leaving?" I insisted. "You have so much to teach us—"

"It isn't a decision," she said. "It was a process of conversion."

She stood up, smiling, and walked away from me. The air around her shimmered.

Next moment, I was alone.

First published in *Nature* 403, 707 (2000)



# OUT OF THIS WORLD



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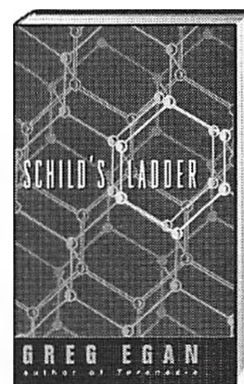
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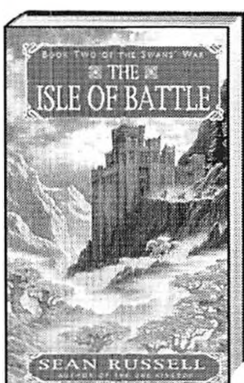
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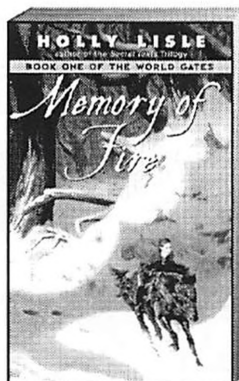
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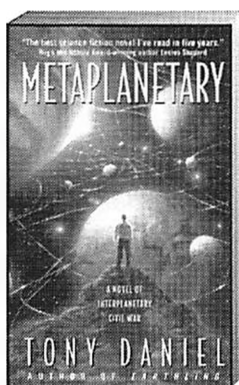
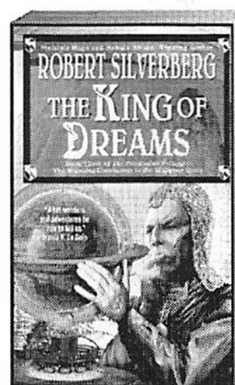
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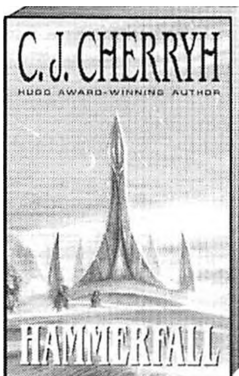
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# The Tiptree Award: A Personal History

by Karen Joy Fowler

I'm going to start this by telling a story that I think is true. A few years ago I was watching the Oscar cast when Geena Davis opened the show with a long speech about Hollywood and the year of the woman. (Remember the year of the woman! Were those good times, or what!)

Somewhere during this long speech, I think I remember, I'm pretty darn sure I heard Geena Davis saying that Hollywood had taught us how to be women. She rattled off a list of the various options Hollywood had created for us. Thanks to Hollywood, we could be sexy or smart or brassy or innocent and waiflike. And there were many, many more possibilities for us!, all illustrated with clips of Lillian Gish and Betty Davis and Joan Crawford and Mae West and, of course, the very sad Marilyn Monroe.

Does anyone else remember this? Because, to be perfectly honest, I was quite distracted the whole time by Geena Davis's neckline. It zigzagged about like the streak in the Bride of Frankenstein's hair. And so I was thinking, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, now there was a movie that really expanded our options, except for those times I was wondering if a breast was about to break free, and how should I interpret this, if one did—pro patriarchy or against! It was the sort of *décolletage* that functions through suspense and so with one thing and another, I missed some of the speech.

But I still think she said what I just said she said, and I've never been able to feel the same about Geena Davis again. I just loved her in *Thelma and Louise*, but I didn't even go see her pirate movie.

Now this idea that we learn our roles, that without help, we wouldn't even know how to be women, is really a very profound one, with broad epistemological implications. Geena Davis expanded on Rousseau and Feuerbach, right there on prime-time TV, and I would have been proud to see a woman do this, except for the neckline.

\*\*\*

Just ask yourself, if we weren't taught to be women, what would we be? (Ask yourself this question even if you're a man, and don't cheat by changing the words.)

The Tiptree Award is supposed to honor people who try to answer that question—people who try to help us unlearn what television and the movies and books and comics and advertisements for automobiles and cigarettes have taught us. Because even though Hollywood has given us all those options, we desperately need to examine the old ones and imagine some new ones.

In creating the Tiptree Award, Pat Murphy and I expanded our personal behaviors geometrically. We are both the kind of women who like people to like us, but in establishing the Tiptree, we had, as an acknowledged

goal, trouble. We hoped to annoy. We thought we would dip a few pigtailed into the inkwell.

Why us? Think of the hubris involved! Pat and I handpick the jury every year, including the coveted token male slot. We make sweeping executive decisions and we make them in minutes, in brief phone calls. "What do you think!" we ask each other and, just like that, we lay down policy. Nothing either Pat or I has accomplished to date entitles us to any of this. Is this how women behave?

And then there's the money raising. Pat has a black belt and a science degree (what movie is that from!) and one day she calls me up and points out that, we start the Tiptree Award, and suddenly she is baking cookies and stitching quilt squares and trying to take tiny little stitches. I've been in PTAs and on Little League boards most of my adult life, but for Pat, this is the final frontier. And here's a Tiptree image I love: Jeanne Gomoll, computer wizard, seated at her terminal, writing a program to design the Tiptree quilt. Preceding Sandra Bullock in *The Net* by a good three years. (Does Bullock seem like a good name for a woman to you? just asking.)

But the best thing about the Tiptree Award is that it got a lot bigger than me and Pat. It did this really quickly. And all the things I like best about it now, are all the things that other people have added to it:

- The fact that we publish the short list and the winner simultaneously so as not to transform the people honored on the short list into losers. We did this on Vonda McIntyre's insistence and it was one of the best ideas we were ever given.
- Freddie Baer's t-shirts
- The quilt, the quilt, the quilt
- The cookies baked by Science Fiction Eye's Steve Brown and sold to the cyberpunks at Armadillocon
- The trophies, edible and un-, the artists who created them, and the artists who eat them. Especially the photo montage of Ursula devouring hers.
- The cookbooks
- The Loud Women and the auctions
- The Australian women and their cakestalls
- The juries' constant reinventing of the name-Tiptrites, Tiytristes, Tripteases, Triptitrus
- Susan Casper's rendition of "There is Nothing like a Dame," at ReaderCon. Susan was backed in this famous performance by the Tips
- The women of WisCon, who made it happen from the very beginning.
- The books, the stories. Most especially the books and the stories.

Reprinted from the WisCon 20 Souvenir Book, 1996

# The 2001 James Tiptree, Jr. Award: Short List

by Joan Haran (chair), Anna Patterson,

Peter Halasz, Kathleen Goonan, and

Suzy McKee Charnas

*The Kappa Child*, by Hiromi Goto, Red Deer Press

*The Kappa Child* is a beautiful book, beautifully written, about the girlhood of a Japanese immigrant living on the Canadian prairie and how she eventually grows to incorporate and transcend the mental boundaries instilled by an abusive father and a spectacularly dysfunctional family. The protagonist is pregnant with her own new being—a Kappa Child. She is replenished rather than depleted by this pregnancy. It strikes me as a rather Jungian book, if Jung and his thoughts are not entirely out of fashion or actively disliked by a lot of people. An original and wonderful book. KG

This captivating magic realist novel is, from start to finish, a pure delight to read. Although clearly fantastic it is written with a “mainstream” sensibility so that emphasis is placed on the protagonists, their growth and their inner worlds rather than on an action-driven plot with which genre readers are more familiar. This book pulls no emotional punches yet remains both a loving and a positive work.

Goto's warm, delicate and humorous touch had me, a straight and sometime conservative male, effortlessly identifying with the alienation felt by four Japanese-Canadian sisters, one of them queer, growing up within the confines of a strict, paternalistic family on the Canadian prairie. Quite a feat, that.

Add an immaculate conception, alien abductions and a kappa to the blend and you have an irresistible charmer of a book. PH

Goto creates a complex emotional landscape for her protagonist, woven from Japanese mythology, the *Little House* books of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and the complexities of filial and sibling relationships in a dysfunctional family. A collector of abandoned shopping trolleys, she has attempted to close the book of her childhood, but it insists on returning to haunt her. Also haunted by a phantom pregnancy after an encounter with a mythical stranger, she restarts her stalled life as she gestates her Kappa Child, coming to understand that the story she has told of herself is somewhat at odds with the stories of those with whom she shared her childhood and the few friends with whom she has tentative arms-length relationships.

This is a lyrically beautiful book which blends fairytale and narratives grounded in the everyday experience of Japanese-Canadians struggling to grow Japanese

rice on the dry Canadian prairies. Without shrinking from exploring the ways in which familial violence can damage both victims and perpetrators, *The Kappa Child* is nonetheless a story of healing. JH

*The Kappa Child* is a delightful, wholly original book, a multi-layered story of dysfunctional family life, unexpected pregnancy, true friendship, alien abduction, budding romance and intimate encounters with mythical creatures.

It is a beautifully, gracefully told story. The prose glides from the narrator's real-time (shopping cart collections, poor self-image, cucumber binges, halting, if not downright painful interactions with family and friends), to her childhood recollections (presented in hilarious, heartbreaking contrast to *Little House on the Prairie*), to her recent encounters with the Stranger/Kappa, to brief meditations about water, birth, growth, identity (as told by the Kappa? the magically conceived fetus? the narrator's nascent self? all of the above?) There's so much vivid imagery here: lots of water, lots of green; and many oppositional references to American television and Japanese mythology.

This is definitely a trickster's tale; things are not what they seem. The narrator's subservient, long-suffering mother is revealed as an alien abductee quite capable of self-actualization and self-defense. The narrator finds that she herself is not as isolated as she'd believed and that her sisters are not as shallow, spacey or damaged. The kappa itself is a genderless entity, no nipples or navel, for all that it first appears as a woman in a red silk wedding dress. This trickster is a loving one; by the book's conclusion, there's reconciliation, friendship, romance and rain. AP

*Half Known Lives*, by Joan Givner, New Star Books

I'm just as impressed as all get-out. Beautifully written, paced with a breezy confidence that takes my breath away, this book is about maternity, motherhood in many forms, without suggesting that it's \*just\* a female matter. Questions are raised about the course of women's lives in the absence of blood-children, but also about the lives of women raising their own kids. The apparently inescapable centrality of reproduction (or its lack) to the lives of women is tackled head-on in a very imaginative way. On the downside, the SF plot-pivot is very scantily envisioned and realized, more of a maguffin than a serious event, and it leads to nothing beyond the personal for the women involved (although the male surrogate mom manages to turn everything to his advantage in a way that women seldom seem to be able or willing to do). I wanted less sure-handed writing and characteriza-

tion, and more exploration — which is not usual with me at all. Watch this author. SC

*Half Known Lives* shows people at their best and at their worst—brave, innovative, and adventurous, and at the same time manipulative, secretive, selfish, and destructive. The characters are brought forward by Givner in their interactions, but ultimately recede frustratingly into the mist, elusive and unknowable. Pregnancy is inflicted on a male politician whose views concerning women have always been . . . half-baked. All of the women involved in this scheme have their own reasons for participating, some of which are not revealed for years past the birth of the child. This book is intricately woven, and, ultimately, the man who went through the pregnancy is the character who is most changed. KG

*Half Known Lives* is arguably the book with the most complex women depicted in any of this short list. Ostensibly a recounting of the conspiracy to kidnap and impregnate a male-chauvinist, anti-abortionist lawyer and his subsequent confinement by a coterie of feminists it works better as an exploration of the sequelae left on all by this outrageous action.

It isn't often that heroines, let alone heroes, are depicted warts and all. Givner refreshingly, fearlessly, paints her characters in living colour. They are not uniformly static "black hats" or "white hats," rather they are complex emotional human beings who undergo changes in their lives. In other words villains can and do turn into a semblance of heroines or heroes and even the best of us have clay feet. PH

I'm really not sure what to make of this book. It's exquisitely written but it felt emotionally barren to me—but that may be the point. I'm sure Joan Givner finds it tiresome to be compared to Margaret Atwood, but it struck me that there was a very similar sensibility of female misogyny to the feeling I get when I read Atwood's work. The science-fictional premise of using a right-to-life conservative male to gestate a fetus to term is shared with *The Fresco*, but it seems implausible in the context of this novel. The *Half Known Lives* of the female characters whose lives criss-cross in the course of this narrative invited no real empathy or sympathy from this reader, and seemed at times to be simply occasions take cheap shots at various moments in feminism. To me this novel seems like a series of vignettes around which a plot has been loosely wrapped—I really didn't feel like I'd reached the end of a journey when I reached the last page. JH

Although the plot of *Half Known Lives* turns on the impregnation of an anti-abortion male politician, the real story here is the relationships and interactions between the female co-conspirators and their associates—all brilliant, damaged and intriguing characters. These are the "half-known lives" of the title, revealed in a subtle,

understated narration that sharply contrasts with the tragedies and transcendences of their experiences. AP

#### *Dark Light*, by Ken MacLeod, Tor Books

This lively, intelligent, and politically sophisticated novel is really "about" manipulative, revolutionary politics conducted by a crew of spacefarers who have become more or less immortal; it's not "about" gender, and so for me falls outside the purview of central Tiptree concerns. I was delighted to see a question of gender roles lightly folded into the mix here as if it were at last part of an ongoing conversation instead of a great thumping elephant dropped into the middle of a central discourse concerning everything but; yet maybe the folding is a bit too light. What I missed in this aspect of *Dark Light* was—why? What has led this culture to align gender identities with outside work/inside work, meaning what *advantage* does this confer or appear to confer, socially and economically, that would lead a society to adopt it? SC

*Dark Light* is the second volume in Ken MacLeod's *Engines of Light* series. This series of Space Operas does not set out to explore traditional Tiptree territory and even *Dark Light* itself is not, primarily, about gender-bending.

But, and it's a big "but," in *Dark Light* MacLeod offhandedly introduces a society wherein sexual identity is conferred by societal/occupational roles rather than by gender as we are used to. Thus, with no fanfare at all, and with no "explanation" until fairly late in the book, we are introduced to characters who are variously referred to as male in one context and female in another. My eyes suffered from whiplash the first several times I found a character referred to as "he" or "him" on one page and "she" or "her" on the next. This lack of exposition is an insidiously effective way of getting the reader to do the real work of speculation.

Months later, I find myself still occasionally going back and reflecting about the possible dynamics of such a scenario. I worry away at it like an itch that just will not go away. How could this have developed, how would it affect relationships (of all kinds), why did this society develop in this way as opposed to... and what... well, you get the idea. Since none of this was "spelled-out" in *Dark Light* I get to fill in the blanks—and think about it in the process. Mind-bending as well as gender-bending. PH

#### *The Song of the Earth*, by Hugh Nissenson, Algonquin Books

Definitely about the major matter of the Tiptree, in the characters' efforts to reconcile at least two pairs of essential opposites (maybe more, but I may have missed some)—male/female and life/death. In its deployment

of more than competent and sometimes very fine art and poetry, and a lively if machine-gun verbal delivery, *The Song of the Earth* strikes me as pretty damn brilliant. This is a book from a clever, sly, talented author that takes the gender divide as its central theme and runs with it. Some of the SF elements—future climatic changes, very fancy genetic tinkering, domed residential “keeps” and their effects—are well presented, and the blending of volitional hermaphroditism with Gaia theory is interesting and provocative. But the characters, whom I found thin, glib, and mostly all talking in the same voice, kept putting me off, and their story ended without the surprise or revelation I had hoped for. SC

*The Song of the Earth* is breathtakingly ambitious. It could be construed as a cautionary tale concerning genetic manipulation—but only if one assumes that such manipulation would eliminate the fact that humans are complex, multifaceted individuals and will probably continue to be so even if genetically engineered. My reading is that it hinges much more on the destructive aspects of parental expectations, as well as the angst of being inflicted with an artistic sensibility and drive, but the future of gender is also an issue in this fine, complex novel. KG

This “epistolary” biography will, sadly, never appeal to a mass audience. Not only is the epistolary mode a difficult one to pull off, but Nissenson’s highly cerebral approach is not the stuff of mass best-sellerdom. In this instance at least that’s a pity.

Near future speculation is used to explore such disparate things as what it means to be an artist, gender reassignment and the “war” between the sexes. Incredibly, Nissenson makes it work.

In a way *The Song of the Earth* is the polar opposite of *The Kappa Child*. They come from different places, the one from brilliant intellect and the other from lucid emotion. They employ radically differing vehicles, the one an epistolary biography and the other a traditional novel to travel to, and arrive at, the same destination—a further, better and less simplistic exploration of central Tiptree issues.

Make no mistake, this is a bravura writerly performance stunning in its accomplishment. PH

What would a “post-gender” society look like? What would be the cultural effect if people could freely select the gender (and other traits) of their unborn, could pick and choose from the full menu of human physiology? These are some of the questions Hugh Nissenson explores, to great effect, in *The Song of the Earth*.

*Song* presents a fully imagined future, rich in detail, encompassing credible changes in the natural and social environments (floods, dust storms, extreme inflation, and phallocrat vs. gynarchist terrorism). Advancements in medicine, bioengineering and genetics have rendered

gender and sexuality (as well as other natural physical traits) secondary to ideology and belief.

These are the times of John Firth Baker, the world’s first genetically engineered visual artist. His story, from birth to violent death allows extensive meditation on art, creativity, love, sexuality, religion and faith.

*Song* is such a “complete” work. I loved the epistolary biographical format, and found the shifts between commentaries, poetry, interviews, journal entries etc. truly engaging. The color plates at the end are the icing on the cake. The book itself is beautiful-- a fully realized artistic vision. AP

*The Fresco*, by Sheri S. Tepper, Harper Collins/Eos

This is a real mulligan stew of a book, rocketing all over the place and offering a nifty alternative to those stuffy, class-ridden Galactic Empires we get so much of in space opera SF, along with about a ton of other stuff in a lively mixed bag. It all has a hurried and slightly superficial feel, perhaps due to cramming in so much activity, several different (and often very funny) types of aliens, and all that (ahem) richly deserved retribution (go, girl!).

I wanted to slow down and play more with all that, to savor it fully, and I felt that matters fell into line a little too easily for our heroine, much as I liked her and was rooting for her. But the story sure does rip along, and I read eagerly and enjoyed the ride: all rickety and galumphing with irony, savagery, slapstick, and truculent politics, a kind of portmanteau-Tepper with lots of cartoon characters and a couple you really care about and a whirlwind of events. There’s plenty of momentum once you get past a somewhat slow start.

As is often the case at the end of a Tepper novel, I am struck by how consistently her plot-resolutions hinge on somebody taking an action that simply FORCES people to “reform” and behave. Alas, if it were only so easy... SC

One of the great virtues of *The Fresco* is its wicked sense of humor. Tepper goes after the roots of gender hypocrisy with a red-hot icepick. Using the time-honored methods of satire and wit, she hoists on their own petard those who attempt to oppress and control women. *The Fresco* draws the reader through quickly, with smooth professional aplomb, and the reader is often laughing out loud—but is just as often rightly disturbed by the truth embedded in the narrative. KG

*The Fresco* is a superb example of Sheri Tepper’s acerbic wit and her global take on female oppression. Benita is a somewhat flawed heroine, unless you’re an admirer of passive aggressive women, but she has clearly suffered at the hands of her drunken, violent slob of a husband, so perhaps hers is a reasonable survival strategy. However, once the friendly shape-changing aliens

have done her a “welcome reversal,” she reshapes her life in somewhat more positive ways—if only we could all have aliens *ex machina* to provide the funds and the psychic clarity to put our houses in order!

Familiar Tepper themes of ends justifying means and of the iniquities of patriarchal religion infuse this novel, but some very dark humour is employed in the devising of ingenious and pointed solutions, like the Ugly plague in Afghanistan and the disappearance of the contested city of Jerusalem into a large virtual hole in the ground. The opportunity given to right-to-life conservative patri-archs to embody their own philosophy also provides a bitter chuckle for the reader who can remain convinced they would not wish this experience on their worst enemy.

The eponymous Fresco is an interesting metaphor for the founding mythologies of a society, and is a tool for reflecting on the need for convincing rationales for behaving in a neighbourly fashion, locally and globally. Polemical, like all Tepper’s works, *The Fresco* is nonetheless a fast-paced, rattling good read—and the polemics are well worth pondering over. JH

Tepper has created a likable, sympathetic character in Benita Alvarez-Shipton, and it is Benita’s physical and personal journey which propels the plot of *The Fresco*. Tepper takes on extraterrestrials, abusive husbands, pro-life politicians and religious fundamentalists of all stripes in this fast-paced feminist parable, while also exploring the relationship between art and artifice, religion and belief. AP

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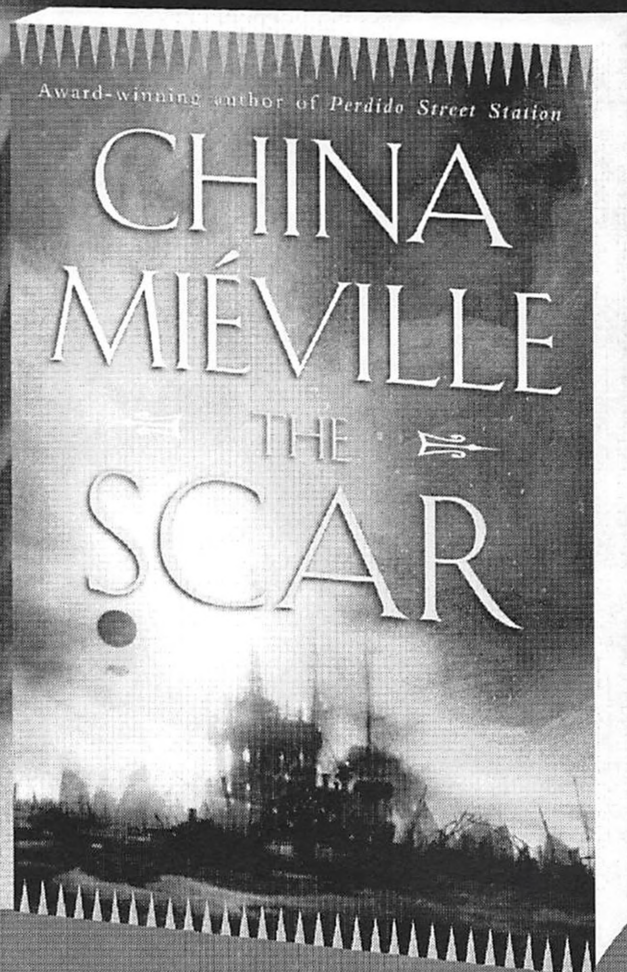
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# John Brunner

by John Clute

This is a revised and augmented version of an obituary written in 1995; a short form of the original obituary appeared in the *Guardian* at that time.

The manner of his leaving the world was as dramatic as the life he led within it. John Brunner died of a stroke, at the age of 60, in a hotel in Glasgow, at the beginning of the 53rd World Science Fiction Convention, an event in which he was due to have figured largely, for he had been an author of high repute within the field for 40 years. At the same time—as those who loved him knew—he was an emblem of the terribleness of the fate of the writer whose career has died.

Readers of science fiction are deeply attentive to the history of their genre, and at least 5000 of them had come together in Glasgow to confer and to celebrate that shared history. Many of them knew Brunner by sight; almost all of them knew him by reputation. Many of us there caught sight of him in a corridor a few hours before his death—his slightly pigeon-toed walk was unmistakable dozens of yards away—and many of us had spoken with him. Brunner's sudden death—the first ever to occur during a WorldCon—generated in consequence a strong sense of shared, abrupt loss. To the world outside, this may have seemed surprising. Brunner's career had been in shambles for years, though as recently as 1973 he had won the Prix Apollo; and he had become an invisible man as far as publishers were concerned. His bitterness at this invisibility was intense, devouring, and publicly expressed, even during that last day.

For the many men and women at Glasgow who had known him personally, therefore, John Brunner's life and career had the lineaments of a formal tragedy—or, a sacred melodrama. The tragedy is clear: He rose high; he had a tragic flaw (excessive trust in the formidable but humanly narrow powers of his intellect, which expressed itself as an inability to suffer fools on the part of a mind which could not safely distinguish fools from not-fools); and he fell. The melodrama was afterwards: the ups and downs of the last decade or so of his life, as he became increasingly unpublishable, for reasons which did neither Brunner nor his publishers a huge amount of credit, and increasingly Timonesque about his travails.

For the world at large, on the other hand, John Brunner's complicated latter career is of perhaps less interest than the work which survived it. Over and above his significant contributions to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament movement, Brunner was, in fact, one of the most acutely intelligent men ever to write science fiction, and (not incidentally) one of the two or three best writers of space opera Ace Books ever published. And the searing dystopias he created in his prime are among

the most comprehensive analyses of the malaise of the twentieth century yet crafted.

John Kilian Houston Brunner was born in Oxfordshire, in 1934; attended Cheltenham School; became something of a black sheep for the rest of his well-to-do and well-placed family. He married Marjorie Sauer in 1958; she died in 1986. He married Liyi Tan in 1991; she survives him. The first of his 80 or so books appeared in 1951. He was seventeen, and for decades he tried to suppress all memories of that first novel, which was called *Galactic Storm*, and was written as by Gill Hunt for a paperback publisher. By the end of the 1950s, working almost exclusively for Donald A. Wollheim's Ace Books, he had become a central crafter of space operas, some of which remain among the sharpest examples of how to write adventure fiction set in the stars without being simply an entertainer. He published at least 30 novels of this sort by about 1965, four of them as by Keith Woodcott. If he had continued to write them, and to create sequences and Future Histories within which to embed new stories, he might have prospered until this day. Certainly the stress could have been less; and the enjoyment conveyed—I am not alone in thinking of "entertainments" like *The Atlantic Abomination* (1960) or *Sargasso of Space* (1960) as among the most highly energized and sophisticated adventures of their era—might have been sustained for decades. But his intelligence and ambition were too corrosive for the format, certainly for space opera or planetary romance as they were then conceived, before the pomp days of Frank Herbert, or Larry Niven, or Dan Simmons, or Vernor Vinge, or.... His last "entertainments," some of which were written solely and conspicuously to pay bills, were so uneasy and embarrassed that they conveyed little to his old readers but precisely unease and embarrassment.

But his own pomp days were just beginning. In the 1960s he took a calculated gamble, one which in the short term paid off magnificently. From 1968 through 1975, he focused almost all his energy on four large novels. Together these dystopian visions constitute a kind of *summa*, a comprehensive presentation of the outcomes humans are likely to face as the century closes. Their reputation for cognitive prescience has only grown in the decades since they were first published. The most famous of them, *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), a vast Dos Passos-like canvas of a tale which deals with overpopulation, won a Hugo Award. The best of them, *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), describes the effects of environmental pollution in arguments so ineluctably sound that the book is almost intolerable to read today: because it is right. And the last of them, *The Shockwave Rider* (1975), predicts the computer virus, and in other ways anticipates cyberspace long before anyone else was ready to imagine surfing the VR innards of the world we have become.



Each of these books was acute, definitive, racily told, and in immediate sales terms no more popular than the truths Cassandra speaks. They established John Brunner's reputation as a writer capable of embodying hard thoughts in vivid prose; they did not make him a potential bestseller. His second career mistake—the first being his refusal to continue to believe his sf entertainments were worthy of more than self-conscious deprecation—was to assume otherwise. The last 20 or so years of his life, during which period he was bedevilled by ill health, and increasingly trapped in acrimonious disputes with publishers who increasingly resented his dismissive way with those he seemed to consider his social or intellectual inferiors, were the years of bitterness.

## John Brunner

by Ian Watson

In the climax to *The Sheep Look Up*, published in 1972, the citizens of America set fire to their country so as to purge the obscenity of a runaway capitalism which has raped and poisoned the environment and the citizens themselves.

Here we are 30 years later. At world economic summits anti-globalization protesters riot. America consumes an ever larger slice of the cake of resources and firmly asserts its right to do so. The World Trade Center has fallen because terrorists from the Third World perceive America as an imperialist Satan.

Whatever your take on capitalism, or on America by now being the only global super-power, John Brunner's major novels are of utter relevance today, with their fierce dystopian critiques, their pleas for togetherness and sanity.

*Stand on Zanzibar*, John's cutting-edge masterpiece about overpopulation, has come back into print, yet that's about it as regards an *oeuvre* of dozens of books.

The twin limbos of out-of-print and unable-to-find-a-publisher haunted John during his final decade. Even before that, to adapt the title of one of his books, you might call him A Writer at The Wrong End of Time. Ahead of his time, he fell behind.

His innovative novel about a South American dictatorship, modeled on a chess game, *The Squares of the City*, took 5 years to reach print. Penguin Books rejected *Stand on Zanzibar*, the longest SF novel hitherto, with scope and vision to match its size. Doubleday paid peanuts for it, \$1500. A decade later, feeding frenzy for big SF would have attracted bids of \$1.5 million. Later, John tried to make his fortune with a historical saga set on the Mississippi. By then he was ill. He took too long researching then writing. George Martin's *Fevre Dream*, intersecting steamboats with vampires, was a best-seller. John's own *Steamboats on the River* fell flat and wasn't even published in his own country.

In those last years, the intensity of his wrath alienated many of his readers and friends. But (sadly) from the moment of his death it began to become possible to see him, once again, in the clear. His readers can recollect the joy of the early space adventures; and the arduousness and ardor of the great novels live, always, in the mind. It is possible to remember with affection the extraordinary (but touchingly vulnerable) *embonpoint* of his physical presence, in the years when he flourished; to remember with love the difficult, irascible, intensely generous man who never died until his overstressed body, in the middle of the woods, called a sudden halt.

John was so utterly in key with the happening world intellectually and emotionally, yet so far as his career is concerned he was sadly out of synch. This did not prevent him from being a *bon viveur* and a wonderful presence at conventions throughout Europe—a bit, I often thought, like King Babar. When Marjorie was alive, my wife and daughter and I would spend Christmas with the Brunners, alternately at their place then at ours. John was such great company. Certain, shall we say, idiosyncracies could present problems at times, not least in his search for a replacement consort and its disastrous outcome. Yet these were Brunnerisms, traits of a unique and very special individual—one who wrote many very special books. Even his “entertainments” were very respectable accomplishments.

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by Gwyneth Jones

John Brunner was one of the elders of British Science Fiction when I was starting out. I used to run into him at conventions, and he (he had no idea I was a writer, at that time) would always stop me and say a few friendly words, because I would be wearing a CND button (Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament); and so would he. I remember him also in his later years, holding forth and dominating a room party of young people, late at night at a writers' convention. I think he was a natural teacher, not only a writer but someone who wanted to pass on his craft, and his ideas, to the younger generation. I never really got to know him personally, but I knew of him as a man of strong opinions, and a writer of challenging, innovative science fiction that was sometimes, to his professional cost at the time, very far ahead of the pack.

# Utopia Limited or The Flower of Progress

by Barry N. Malzberg

Brunner's tragedy was the outcome of a prank; it was the same prank which circumstance if not God Himself played on Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900). Sullivan wanted to be a great composer. He wrote oratorios, cantatas, at the Queen's urging (he was her favorite) a grand opera, *Ivanhoe*. They were acclaimed, in their time. All of them vanished. (Deservedly.) Sullivan chafed at the collaboration with W. S. Gilbert (1836–1911). "I can no longer be Schwenck's organ grinder," he wrote. When he broke up the partnership after *The Gondoliers* (1889), it was to write that grand opera, *Ivanhoe*. "I must do my own work now, I have grand and serious ambitions." *Ivanhoe* ran for 140 performances, bankrupted D'Oyly Carte, was not heard anywhere for fifty years after its premiere in 1891. It still doesn't get around much.

John Brunner, unwilling slave to markets and editors who would not appreciate his greatness—author of Ace Doubles, Ace singles, Ballantine originals, short stories for *Analog*, *Galaxy*, *F & SF*—wanted to be a major writer. He *was* a major writer, he insisted. In 1968 his major novel *Stand on Zanzibar*, sold to Doubleday for an advance of \$1500 (Brunner called it "derisory"), won a Hugo, all 250,000 words of it. Brunner felt confirmed in his ambition; he was after all a Major Writer. He proceeded to write Major Novels almost as awful as *Stand on Zanzibar: The Sheep Look Up*, work like that. Having failed to bring the world of literature quite to heel, he declared that the problem was writing science fiction at all and turned to *The Great Steamboat Race*. 200,000 words by a Londoner about a Mississippi steamboat race in the Civil War period. Took him eight years to deliver that masterpiece (he wrote nothing else during this time). Judy-Lynn del Rey, mercifully, published it invisibly as a trade paperback. It sold three copies. Brunner continued to complain that he was misunderstood.

Well, sure he was misunderstood. John Brunner was a brilliant genre writer; a man of haunting gifts, like Sullivan shaped by Gilbert (Sullivan called it "controlled"), Brunner wrote beautifully formed genre novels, some of which are masterpieces. *Quicksand*, *The Productions of Time*, notably *The Squares of the City*. The short story "The Totally Rich." Science fiction was his metiér but science fiction, he was sure, could no more contain him than the Savoy Theatre could contain the great Arthur Sullivan. His career then became as monumentally misguided as Sullivan's.

Still, what the heck. (This is being published in New England; I wish to write in a decent, modest, Victorian vein.) What the heck: *The Productions of Time* and *The Squares of the City* are still there, available thanks to ABE Books and eBay to the most mildly energetic; the collection *The Best of John Brunner; op. cit.* "The Totally Rich" gets itself re-anthologized every decade. Just as Sullivan and Gilbert can be found in performance somewhere in this world every night, the modest (if resentful) Brunner is being read at this moment all over the world. Sullivan's future looks pretty good; the operettas, having initially dated, have now become canonic. His work will provide love and cheer long after all of us (including the stern Victoria, who thought that Sir Arthur should Better Himself) are gone. The same is true of Brunner. Self-deluded and not particularly smart but, almost against himself, again like Sir Arthur, a great artist. But stay away from *The Great Steamboat Race*.

Victoria skipped *Ivanhoe*'s opening night and all the others, by the way.

April 16, 2002

# An Interview with John Brunner

by Darrell Schweitzer

**Q:** You have been quoted as saying that since we're all being dragged into the future, the purpose of science fiction is to make one a tourist there, rather than an exile. Is SF then, for you, a matter of looking ahead to the probable future, or of trying to *prevent* the probable future?

**Brunner:** A little bit of both, of course. During the time that I've been selling professionally, since the 1950s, much science fiction has been dystopic. The age of the utopia seems to have gone by the board. In fact, it is the one remaining challenge that I have never dared to set myself: to write a utopia. I'm convinced that any utopia I created would be regarded by a large portion of the human species as unutterable and indescribable *hell*. But, apart from the actual dystopic elements of science fiction, I tend to think that our *genre* can provide a kind of laboratory of the mind in which one can conduct thought-experiments, freed from the sloganizing and *parti pris* [French for "side having been taken," i.e. committed or prejudiced, —J.B.] positions of the real world. All the best science fiction stories that I can recall have had some element of serious speculation underlying the action. And, even though the history of the 20th century has been a history of how more and more of the attractive futures have been closed off from us for good and all, this does remain one of the principal functions, I think, of science fiction.

**Q:** Mightn't the problem with writing a utopia also have to do with the more common difficulty that if it's a utopia, and everything is wonderful, there's no conflict and the book is boring?

**Brunner:** To some extent, yes. One of the few totally successful utopias produced by a writer actually working within the science-fiction field was Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X*, and even there he had to introduce a dramatic element — not simply describe the utopian society, but put in somebody who disagreed, argued, and sometimes quarrelled with these people. In other words, the introduction of an Achilles heel, a serpent in the garden, whatever — yes, this is absolutely true. But far more fundamental from my point of view, if I were to try to write a utopia, would be the difficulty of making certain that *my* vision of what is desirable corresponded to the maximum number of other people's visions. As you know, I was very active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for about a quarter of a century, and in CND we used to have a standard joke: If you have twelve CND supporters in one room, you have thirteen different views of how to run the world after the Bomb has been banned.

**Q:** Why is it necessary that your utopia be acceptable to the largest number of people? If this is a thought experiment, isn't this the place to work out your own, quirky personal utopia?

**Brunner:** A personal utopia for me would have a lot of factors in it that would be highly undesirable to people from different cultures, different religious backgrounds, any of that sort of thing. The nearest I've ever come to creating a utopia was in *Quicksand*, the novel I wrote immediately before *Stand on Zanzibar*, and the utopia there turns out to be ... a lie. It's sort of propaganda used as mental defense for Urchin, who has been hurled back in time; or who may *not* have been hurled back in time, but who may simply be laboring under an impenetrable delusion.

**Q:** Most of your dystopic works can be very broadly described as the world running down and slowly drowning in its own garbage. Do you think books like this have any actual potential for preventing that?

**Brunner:** I can only cite one anecdotal piece of evidence. Immediately after the publication of *The Sheep Look Up*, I was at a convention in the United States, and on the Friday evening two people came up to me and said, "We've just read *The Sheep Look Up*." It had been published, I think, the previous week. They may have had review copies. It might not even have been published yet. And they said, "We are going to *do* something. We don't know what, because we only finished it on Wednesday and today is Friday, but we're going to *do something*." If that's any kind of evidence at all, then yes, the books *do* have an influence.

**Q:** How do you balance the strictly didactic elements against the demands of the novel?

**Brunner:** Sneakily! In most of my books that deal with what I think of as close-focus science fiction, like *Stand on Zanzibar*, *The Jagged Orbit*, *The Sheep Look Up*, and *Shockwave Rider*, I have a character whose function in the story is to be right. For example, Austin Train in *The Sheep Look Up*. Or Chad Mulligan in *Stand on Zanzibar*. He performs the function of the wise man. And while I won't say that he is a mouthpiece for myself, because, after all, the opinions expressed have to be projected into the future along with the rest of the action, nonetheless I do feel that this is a way of getting around the problem of preaching directly to the audience. You have to let a character do it for you. He can present the argument. You can put characters in to oppose him. The one thing that one must at all costs avoid is speaking *directly* to the reader in the manner of a Victorian morality tale.

**Q:** I've always admired the way Chad Mulligan pontificates humorously, rather than in the manner of an insufferable wise man in a later Heinlein novel.

**Brunner:** Somebody once said that all Heinlein's characters talk alike. Heinlein's heroes speak like Heinlein's janitors and the *wives* of Heinlein's janitors. I try and avoid that kind of thing.

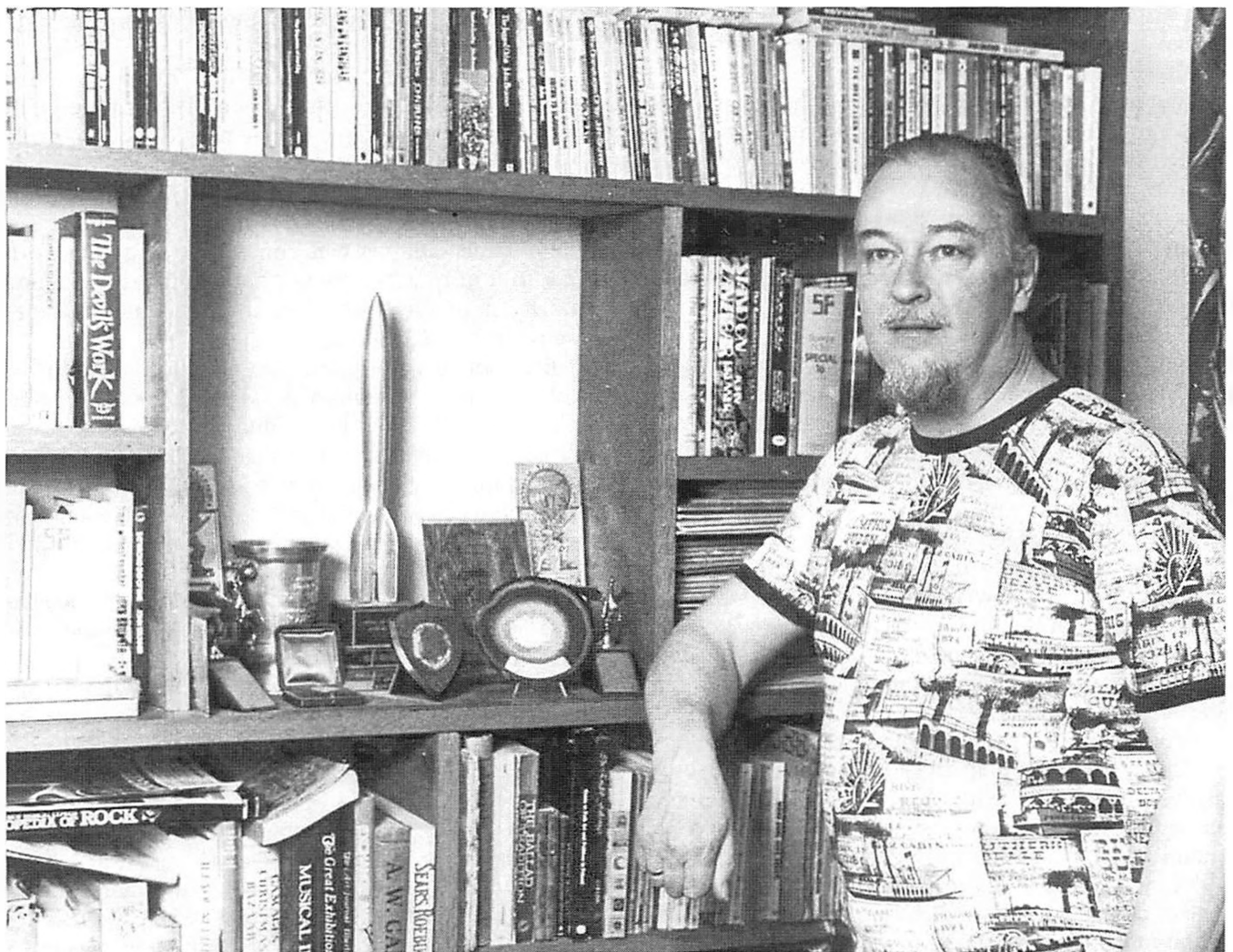
**Q:** Rumor has it that someone in a foreign country took all the Chad Mulligan sections and actually published *You're An Ignorant Idiot*. Is that true?

**Brunner:** It didn't quite work like that. I received in the post one morning—this would be, now, about seventeen or eighteen years ago—a little one-hundred-and-sixty-page paperback in Danish, a language that I can look at and puzzle about but don't understand. The title was *Du er et Uvidende Fjols, af Chad C. Mulligan*. This made me one of the only two people I know about who've had a book written by one of their characters. Fortunately on the verso of the title page there was a translation of the dedication which said, "To John Brunner, without whose unwitting aid this book would not have been written." And at that time, the guy who serviced my electric typewriter was a Dane. I showed it to him and it turned out that what had happened was somebody in Denmark, whose name I still do not know because it did not appear on the book, had decided that the Danes needed a compact summary of the problem of overpopulation and global pollution. So he borrowed the title *You're An Ignorant Idiot* from Chad Mulligan, and put Chad Mulligan's name on it. This was not actually a translation of the Chad Mulligan sections from *Stand on Zanzibar*. It was an independent work, but inspired by *Stand on Zanzibar*.

**Q:** You mentioned earlier that you, to some extent, feel overshadowed by *Stand on Zanzibar*, in that this is a book you wrote more than twenty years ago and this is the one everybody talks about. My first thought when you said that was that it's better to have written a great book—it doesn't particularly matter when in your career you do it—than not. I think, for instance, that L. Sprague de Camp's best book is his first, *Lest Darkness Fall*.

**Brunner:** It's very frustrating to discover that things one has done later on, which may be more craftsmanly, more accomplished, indeed objectively better written in a certain sense, are not at the forefront of the minds of people who want to talk about your work. In fact, when I went to the Dusseldorf SF Tage in Germany last month (in July), I made it a point to say in my public interview, "Look, in the first half hour I want to talk about what I have been writing in the past ten years, and only afterwards will I talk about what I wrote twenty years ago." Quite frankly, there's an element of boredom involved. Not only that, but *Stand On Zanzibar* in particular, which I am of course enormously proud of—the first novel by a non-American writer to win the Hugo—has almost become an albatross around my neck. I've had to talk about it so often that I cannot any longer be interest-

The Science Fiction Foundation Collection, University of Liverpool Library.



John Brunner

ing about it in front of an audience. It is terribly difficult to be equally enthusiastic and interesting about something about which you have talked maybe forty, fifty, or a hundred times. That's why in Dusseldorf I said, "I want to talk about what I've done recently." The obvious reason, of course, was that I wanted people to go out and buy some of my recent books.

**Q:** I imagine that H.G. Wells all throughout his life had people asking him about *The Time Machine*.

**Brunner:** And didn't H.G. Wells's work get bad toward the end? Was it not didactic in the worst possible way?

**Q:** Yes, in the worst possible way. He somehow lost his visionary powers quite early, and he continued writing for about another forty years, having lost his spark. Probably his best later work is non-fiction.

**Brunner:** I would be inclined to agree. Anybody who could produce that one-volume history of the world deserves admiration. It may be a flawed book. Nonetheless, it was as near to a useful compendium of the story of mankind as anybody had then achieved.

**Q:** I suppose that what happened to Wells was that he was much too busy saving the world, rather than writing vivid stories. He thought of his early science-fiction stories as fantasies and described them in terms of being gripping dreams rather than realistic projections; whereas you've got a balance between realistic projection and what is indeed a vivid dream.

**Brunner:** This brings me to an image that I use when trying to explain to people what it is like to be a writer. Everyone has had the experience of trying to recapture a dream. You have a vivid one just before you wake, and then the alarm goes off and breakfast gets in the way, and suddenly during the morning someone says something or you read something, or something happens, that reminds you that you had this dream and you try to bring it back. It's difficult. For me, writing a novel is like having to recapture the same dream every bloody day for months on end. The dream element is *extremely* important in writing fiction, and I can well see how H.G. Wells, as he became more and more involved in political movements, would have lost this dream element which was so crucial to his earlier work.

**Q:** I might suggest that there is some of this dream—or experience—in *Stand on Zanzibar*, which gives it such staying power. The events of the world are forking away from the future scenario you projected and in another generation it'll be a kind of alternate history, but it still remains vivid and valid in a way that a purely didactic work wouldn't.

**Brunner:** This is something that took me completely by surprise. I wrote it in the London of the 1960s. I wasn't really involved with the King's Road type of London scene, but it had never dawned on me that perhaps London rather than Paris might be the place that good Americans wanted to go to before they died. And the sense of change, the sense of social forces at work shifting the foundations of our ingrained assumptions, was

*enormously* vivid at the time. Not only that, but I'd also just started visiting the States. I first went there in 1964, and in fact in the late '60s I spent a full month in the United States, and that was just prior to my starting work on *Stand on Zanzibar*. What I sensed was a change in the pattern of expectation all around me. In other words, what had been taken for granted was challenged on every level from the social to the sexual—particularly the sexual, of course—and a new kind of morality seemed to be shaping up. That was one of the forces that I detected at work around me. So I threw everything that I could sense about this form of change into the book. I thought of it as very much a novel of its time. I thought that it would probably run for five years, seven if I was lucky. Ten years to the week after the book was published, my German publishers flew me to Munich to launch the German translation. It's still in print. And I'm here [in The Hague] to have a word with my Dutch publishers, because somebody brought a mint copy of it to be signed and I've had no royalties from Holland in the past several years. I'm going to have to look into that when I get home.

**Q:** I suspect that the secret of the book's survival is that it's about the process of change, not the specifics.

**Brunner:** That's a very interesting comment, and though I hadn't thought of it that way before, I must say at first blush I entirely agree. Yes.

**Q:** In your recent *Children of the Thunder*, I notice that you've mixed a realistic vision of the future, with its numerous convincing details—people carrying cards to show they've been checked for AIDS and a flourishing black market in fakes of these cards; and that sort of thing—you've mixed this with an overtly fantastic element of super-children who control people by means of scent, as it turns out. Now this book cannot be so much a projection of a realistic future as a more fantastic story set *against* a realistic future.

**Brunner:** It's still a little too close to me for me to be able to make an objective judgment about *Children of the Thunder*. I often find it difficult to talk about the success or failure of a book or the intention that I had in my mind until the book has receded into the past to the point where I can look at it as though I were coming to it fresh. *Children of the Thunder* is still too close to me and too vivid for me to pass any judgment on it.

**Q:** You say that for you writing a novel is like having the same dream for months on end. I believe you mentioned in another interview somewhere that you have a whole drawer full of aborted novel beginnings. Are these cases where you lost the dream before finishing the book?

**Brunner:** In essence, yes. I distract very easily. It's not just a drawer, by the way. It's an entire bloody cupboard full of hanging files. I think there are twenty-eight aborted novels in there now. I distract easily, and since Marjorie died in 1986, I have had many more distractions than I have had before. Indeed, when she had her stroke, I was six months into a novel that I was going to

get my biggest-ever advance for. I had taken front-money for it. I was pretty well on course. I had set nine months for it. I had done six months' work and it was two-thirds completed, and then Marjorie didn't wake up one morning. And, the following day when I had been in to visit her in the hospital, I switched on the machine; I looked at my text; and I said, "I have lost this book," because obviously for the foreseeable future it could not be in the forefront of my mind. She must be. I wound up, instead of getting the biggest advance I'd ever had for a book, owing my American publishers fifteen thousand dollars, and it took me four years to dig myself out of that hole. I had hoped to do it in two, but it has been four years. *That is the largest single abandoned novel I have. It's not hanging in the files; it's on disks, of course; but I don't think I shall ever be able to go back and look at what's on those disks again because it's too full of miserable memories.*

**Q:** How about some of the others, even in the sense of collaborating with your former self on a partial novel that earlier self had written?

**Brunner:** I don't think I'm going to be able to, because many of them were books I had started without very much enthusiasm. They were something to pay the next three months' rent, that sort of thing. If I had really been gripped by any of these projects, I wouldn't have been distracted from them so easily.

**Q:** Isn't it best then to write a novel in a great frenzy, as fast as possible, lest it be dropped?

**Brunner:** Not quite like that. Going back to *Stand on Zanzibar*, which I have to keep quoting—you're quite right; I can't get rid of this albatross around my writing neck—it took me only five months. At Doubleday's count it was 250,000 words. So most people think of this as pretty high-speed production. What they don't realize is that I had been thinking about it for two solid years before I dared set a single word of it on paper. The hard work happens in the head. The rest is typing.

**Q:** You've written so much now that it seems remarkable. You started quite young, and have been writing for almost forty years now without ever burning out. There are a lot of people in our field who sell something in their late teens, sell a great deal in their twenties, and by the time they're thirty-five they're a burnt-out husk. Somehow you've avoided this.

**Brunner:** The only way I've found to keep from going stale is to make each successive project as different as possible from the previous one. Sometimes this has been self-defeating. For example, at the present moment I have two complete novels out to market which have not sold and I suspect never will, and a certain amount of atypical short material. Each of the novels took me about nine months and the short material would have taken up a few more. So it's as if I'd written for going on two years with no pay at all. But this was because I needed to tackle something as radically different from the last project as I possibly could. I think I can often pull my readers with me, if the publishers will allow me to put the stuff

across to the readers. Often I've become very frustrated that I seem to have been typecast, in a sense.

**Q:** In the sense they want you to write a book just like the last one?

**Brunner:** I once had some dealings with a film producer, who had been frustrated in an attempt to buy the rights to A.J. Budrys's *Who?* My agent took me along to meet him, and we sat in this film company's office in London and we chatted for a while. It very shortly became obvious that what he wanted was a story *exactly* like *Who?* that didn't infringe the copyright. Exactly the same, only different, you might say. I am afraid a lot of the publishers seem to have the same kind of attitude.

**Q:** It's like television: if it worked, you keep doing it again and again until it doesn't. Then blame the writer. But at least you seem to have avoided the curse of endless sequels.

**Brunner:** Yes. People have sometimes asked me, for example, if there is going to be a sequel to *The Crucible of Time*, because they liked this book in which there are no human characters whatsoever. I'm very proud of it, but that book is in itself a series. It's in seven self-contained episodes. I don't want to go back to that planet. It's a Helliconia planet. It's the story of the important thing that happened to this non-human, intelligent race, and I've told the story of the important thing, and I'm going to leave it at that.

**Q:** We notice that sequels to famous classics seldom add much to the reputations of the authors involved. Who particularly cares about *Dune* Novel #5?

**Brunner:** I suppose I shouldn't say this, but Frank Herbert can no longer hear me. I read the original *Dune* in its serialization in the original *Analog*, and I thought, hmm, very impressive. Fascinating. Extremely vivid. So I bought the second one, and I couldn't finish it. I didn't read the rest.

**Q:** I guess then we must respect the integrity and judgment of John W. Campbell, who turned it down, despite the obviously tremendous sales he would have gotten by publishing it.

**Brunner:** I didn't know, in fact, that he had turned it down for serialization, but, yes, it would have been one of his wiser editorial decisions.

**Q:** How do marketing forces push you around? Obviously some of your publishers must secretly crave a sequel to *Stand on Zanzibar* so they can cash in on that book's classic status.

**Brunner:** If anyone attempted to persuade me to that, I would say, "Well, thank you very much for the lunch. You pay the bill."

**Q:** In addition to your science fiction, you've also written some distinguished, and very different fantasy. How does this work for you? Presumably the speculative element found in books like *Stand on Zanzibar* is absent, so you have *only* the dream.

**Brunner:** You're talking, probably, about *The Compleat Traveller In Black*.

**Q:** Or *Father of Lies* or any of the stories you had in *Science Fantasy* in the early '60s.

**Brunner:** Yes. *Science Fantasy* in those days was a wonderful market, because there was originally a small stable of writers that Ted Carnell was encouraging. It was an open market for people who came up with short stories that were well worth writing, but, much more to the point, it always ran one very long novelet or even novella as its lead story. In both science fiction and fantasy the novella is a very comfortable length, because you need the additional space to set the parameters of your background, whether fantasy or science fiction. This means that in relation to the story content, you need more wordage, more room to spread the information. It's no good saying in a foreword that runs half a page, this story takes place on a planet where magic works, there are intelligent dinosaurs, and somebody is looking for the golden ring. That kind of thing doesn't work. You need to feed the information to the reader, and whether you're talking about a future society with technology we haven't yet developed, or whether you're talking about a fantasy society with techniques that never actually existed, you do need to explain, or imply at least, an awful lot of things that don't happen to you if you walk down the street to the nearest store. *Science Fantasy* was providing, not only for me, but for Ken Bulmer, Ted Tubb, and a number of other writers more or less my contemporaries, an opportunity for experimentation in stories that did not stand up to the demands of a novel. You couldn't expand them to 70,000 words or so. One particular case that must come to mind is J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*. The original 30,000-word version appeared in *Science Fantasy*. In many respects I prefer it to the full-length novel. It had more intensity. It was more concentrated.

**Q:** Ted Carnell must have been one editor who definitely shaped the direction of your career and what you've come to write. Could you name some others?

**Brunner:** I've had very few close personal relationships with editors, because so many of my editors have been American. Ted Carnell was operating in London. I used to meet him almost weekly at the London Science Fiction Circle. So there was a much more direct contact, and I could even ask him in advance whether or not he was interested in a story I had in mind. He would say, "Yes. Sounds good. Go ahead and write it," or turn it down, saying, "No, I had something too similar to that six months ago." That kind of thing was enormously helpful to me.

**Q:** Did you have much of a working relationship with John Campbell?

**Brunner:** No. John Campbell was a man who knew how to bear a grudge. At the World Science Fiction Convention in London in 1965, we were on a panel together, and at that time he was going on—this was one of his hobbyhorses; he always had a hobbyhorse—about how the only totally immoral thing you can do to a man is order him to do the impossible. And I said, "Well, I find

that very strange in the context of the Judeo-Christian culture, because after all Jesus told his followers, 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.'" I got a laugh. Three times in the next six months, I had letters from my U.S. agent—then Scott Meredith—saying that John Campbell was going from eager to frantic in his search for short material. Each time I wrote a story. Each time John Campbell turned it down. Each story sold elsewhere, so they can't have been bad stories, but he knew how to hold a grudge.

**Q:** Why was he particularly angry at you for that?

**Brunner:** I think because of the fact that I challenged him with an unassailable counter-argument which provoked a ripple of laughter from the audience.

**Q:** A good deal of what science fiction is about is having your "everybody knows" assumptions challenged.

**Brunner:** I entirely agree with the well-known principle that *It ain't what you don't know that causes the harm, but what you do know that ain't so.*

**Q:** Which touches on a different subject. I don't know how much of this you have in Britain, but in the United States we have quite a lot of people very wrapped up in things which are not so: the New Age movement and Shirley MacLaine and so on. There's probably a science-fiction novel in there somewhere, about a future in which Shirley MacLaine wins and people slide into a new Dark Age clutching magic rocks.

**Brunner:** I sincerely hope that if *Doonesbury* is widely enough read, this will be nipped in the bud. I was highly amused by the fact that the Hunk-Ra, for whom Boopsie channels, completely ruined the prospect of her getting married. I don't know if you've been following the strip... But, in fact, this notion is not by any means new. It must be, I suppose, pushing forty years ago now that the late Arthur J. Burks was working on a novel set on a planet where astrology actually worked, and as the sun moved through the local zodiac—not ours, but the zodiac of this particular planet—groups within this society became more or less dominant. So you could, as it were, have a political weather forecast on an astrological basis. At the end of each part of the cycle, those who had been in charge during the previous three months or so would have to yield to those whose energies were just coming up because the sun was entering the correct sign. I don't think Arthur Burks ever finished this. I saw excerpts from it in George Scithers's magazine *Amra* years ago. It struck me as an idea which should have been brought to completion. I don't think anybody else has ever tackled the same theme.

**Q:** Did you ever want to do it yourself?

**Brunner:** I'd be conscious of having read part of the Arthur Burks story, and I would probably feel a bit guilty about plagiarizing.

**Q:** It's always seemed important to me that in science-fiction we must remain skeptical about this sort of thing—astrology, channelling, magic crystals, and whatnot—simply because we are in the business of

making things up, and must know what is made-up and what isn't in order to have a solid basis in reality from which to extrapolate.

**Brunner:** Damn right. I am a long-time subscriber to *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

**Q:** So I found it a bit dismaying some years ago when I saw a prominent *Analog* contributor giving perfectly serious Tarot readings.

**Brunner:** So long as one understands what things like the Tarot and the *I-Ching* and all this ragbag of divination is actually doing, it's safe. If you think there's something supernatural about it, then it becomes dangerous. My chief experience has been with the *I-Ching*. What it does, essentially, is force you to go back and question your own assumptions. And I like that. Anything that will force me to question whether or not I have made a wrong assumption and am therefore going to make a mistaken decision—that's useful. But I think of it entirely as a kind of mental discipline. I do not think there is any intrinsic power in this. I am a complete skeptic on that level, but I recognize that human beings have needed, throughout the centuries and millennia of our evolution, something that will fix consciousness free from outside distractions so that we can really stop and take stock of what we're doing and what we know, in particular. Indeed, if I were dictator of Earth, the first thing I would probably do is say that there is going to be no more research and development for at least one generation. We're going to spend twenty-five years going back and looking at what we already know and is being forgotten.

**Q:** Can you give an example of what is being forgotten?

**Brunner:** Essentially, what I'm thinking of is our current tendency to invent the square wheel. Somebody comes along and says, "I have this problem. What are we going to do about it?" The first logical step ought to be to check the literature. You may be able to go back even to the Middle Ages and find that the problem has cropped up before. Basically, we do not have a system of data-retrieval that will enable us to stop re-inventing things. There have been many devices in the past which did excellent jobs very cheaply. For instance, I come from very close to the part of England that spearheaded the *first* industrial revolution, the one that, generally speaking, does not get taught in history courses. It wasn't the steam and iron one—it was iron to some extent—but it was the one that was powered by water. Fifty years before the advent of a successful steam engine, there was a major industry in the eastern part of my county, Somerset, which was powered by water-driven triphammers. We were supplying agricultural tools for virtually the whole of England. I say "we"—I'm adopted into the county; I've been there sixteen years. Ecologically speaking, we bloody well ought to go back to having water-driven triphammers for those jobs that water-driven triphammers are good for. Outside this building that we're in the Congresgebouw there is a child's inflatable play castle.

You've probably seen it, one of these plastic things you can jump on and bounce up and down on and so forth. It has a small, electrically-driven compressor attached to it that is running constantly. I walked past it this morning, with the sun beating down, the temperature approaching the eighties, and I said, "Why the hell are they using electricity to keep that thing inflated? There are no kids on it." In any case it should have been possible to design the bloody thing so that when the weather warms up, it would inflate and stay inflated. I do not believe in multiplying entities beyond necessity.

**Q:** Another possible example might have occurred in the design of spacesuits. I don't suppose the designers studied medieval armor to observe the marvelous articulation of the joints. Instead, they probably spent millions inventing a way to articulate the joints.

**Brunner:** Although there is one problem with a spacesuit that doesn't occur in armor, and that's the fact that because you're in vacuum, even small pressure inside the suit will tend to spring the joints straight.

**Q:** If you were dictator of Earth, what would you emphasize in education? An example might be history. Most Americans seem to have no sense of history, and therefore they repeat it. What do you think we're forgetting?

**Brunner:** Who was it that said, "History always repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce"? I forget who, but it's probably true. Okay, you're feeding my personal power dream, and I think that science-fiction writers, whether they admit it or not, have power dreams, and probably all writers of whatever stamp. I would abolish religion, because, as Shelley said, "faith is the foulest child of time." And unless we start reasoning with our brains and stop listening to our bellies and our gonads, we are done for.

**Q:** If you abolish religion, how are you going to fill the need that religion fills? It seems to me that all this New Age and flying saucer stuff is simply filling in where religion is failing. That is, mankind has always tended to populate the unknown with alternative, superior versions of the human race, be they gods, fairies, or UFO-nauts. And, today, for many people, miracle-working saints have been replaced by professional psychics. But it's the same phenomenon. So, if you abolished all extant religions, how would you prevent these same tendencies from creating more?

**Brunner:** That I do not know. I have to confess I do not know. But you did ask me what I would do rather than what I would put in its place. You just struck a slight chord of memory. There has lately been republished a dictionary—it's been updated—in which the entry for *wing* in the earlier editions said something to the effect, "The organ by which a creature may fly, as birds, bats, angels, etc." In the current edition, I am glad to see, they have taken out angel.

**Q:** Here's a bit of esoterica for you. In the writings of Isidore of Seville—7th century—there is a warning against people taking literally the idea that angels have wings. He tells us that artists draw angels with wings to



show locomotion, but we should not literally think they have wings.

**Brunner:** Absolutely. I don't recall where it was—in a science fiction magazine of perhaps twenty years ago—but somewhere I saw an engineering calculation which showed how much additional muscle an angel would need to fly with, and it turned out that the breast muscles would have to project forward about four feet.

**Q:** The theologian would counter that they're spiritual, not physical beings anyway.

**Brunner:** I say that is immaterial to the argument.

**Q:** I recall you making a comment once—in an interview, or possibly in a letter published somewhere—about our being in a “post-religious age.” I wonder if this is really true considering the way world politics are going, or even American politics. Remember Pat Robertson? He was running for president, seriously. He was and presumably still is a commercial preacher on television, and he actually believed that because he had led his congregation to pray appropriately, they had diverted a hurricane from the Carolinas. Millions of people apparently believed him. And of course religion is a frequent cause of conflict in the Middle East. So, can we possibly be in a post-religious age?

**Brunner:** What I actually said was “a post-Christian, post-Freudian age.” No, we aren't. The assumption that we have entered a post-religious age overlooks the fact that as you yourself just said, there has simply been the displacement of the religious impulse in other directions.

**Q:** I wonder if some of that displacement isn't in the direction of science fiction. The subject matter of much of the work of Olaf Stapledon or Arthur C. Clarke would, were it not in a scientific context, be distinctly religious.

**Brunner:** Yes. Between the two world wars there was an awful lot of literature of that kind, which offered an alternative vision. However, I think that most of the grandiosity of that sort of future has been closed off from us. I find it very hard to believe, as I did with almost religious fervor in my teens, in mankind's glorious future among the stars. If I have to write something set in the distant future now, I call it a far-future fantasy. I don't call it science fiction any longer, because I don't think of it as science fiction.

**Q:** Well, the Earth will probably still be here in a million years. It might even be inhabited. Quite possibly, nothing going on then will be comprehensible to us. The advocates of nanotechnology suggest that the threshold of incomprehensibility will come much sooner, because we will have so changed what human beings are that nothing those future people do will make sense in terms of our present experience.

**Brunner:** Yes. If we start meddling with our own nature, if we start altering the human genetic code—and some idiot is bound to do that; it's our monkey ancestry at work, I'm afraid—it's not impossible that we will achieve some kind of discontinuity in the evolution of humanity. I think we might very possibly be able to com-

municate with somebody from the very early Stone Age, if he were brought forward in time, because essentially what made us human is still making us human. But, well, I suppose the definitive example of this is Frederick Pohl's “Day Million,” in which he pointed out how many of the assumptions that we have today would not be shared by somebody like Attila the Hun.

**Q:** I am sure that when the possibilities arise, many people won't see it as such a bad thing to redesign the human species to make us smarter and more physically capable and maybe add a few frills, as we would see a modern car as an improvement over a Model-T. There certainly is a temptation to do this.

**Brunner:** This brings to mind the poem by Lawrence Lerner that I used in the reading I was just giving a while ago, in which the computer offers to take over from the chromosome as the driving power of evolution, and the final line is, “*Turn me on and wait for trial and terror.*”

**Q:** Most of us want to see ourselves improved, but really wouldn't like to see these improvements extended to everyone. If everyone lived for five hundred years, for example, the world would get both very crowded and very stagnant. But we individually would like to live for five hundred years.

**Brunner:** Yes and no. I think that if I had the chance to live for five hundred years, I would only take it if it were a gift to me alone, because I want to see what other people are going to do. I can't remember who wrote it, but there was a delightful, rather silly story that had an underlying core of rather painful truth to it—in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, I believe, probably in the Sixties or early Seventies—in which this guy is woken up after spending twelve thousand years in cryogenic preservation. They let him out of the hospital and a guy come to meet him and says, “Hello. I'd like to help you adjust to this new world. Suppose you come by our place about six and we'll have some dinner and we'll go out bowling afterwards.” That kind of thing. And the guy says, “Look, I've been in cold storage for twelve thousand years ... this sounds exactly like what I was doing in California in the 1960s.” The other guy says, “Yes, I know. If you know a better way to live, we'd like to hear about it. We're getting awfully bored.”

**Q:** Possibly if they'd read enough utopian novels, they might have some idea.

**Brunner:** Yes indeed. But I have a horrible suspicion, as I said before, that some of the utopias would be very unpleasant. Thomas Disch once wrote a utopia in which everybody had to go through an artificial period of schizophrenia. I don't quite understand why he thought that was utopian, but he believed that it was necessary. Perhaps it has something to do with his preference as a writer. But, frankly, I wouldn't fancy that at all. There were a lot of people in the Sixties—Timothy Leary was one—who thought you could achieve the Millennium and a perfect society just by putting LSD into the drinking water. I am glad nobody tried that on us, because that way lies William Tenn's... what was it? “The Lem-

on-Green Spaghetti-Loud Dynamite Dribble Day" I think was the title of the story.

**Q:** I believe there were a few such attempts on a smaller scale, but people who try this rapidly discover that LSD in water dissolves and breaks down.

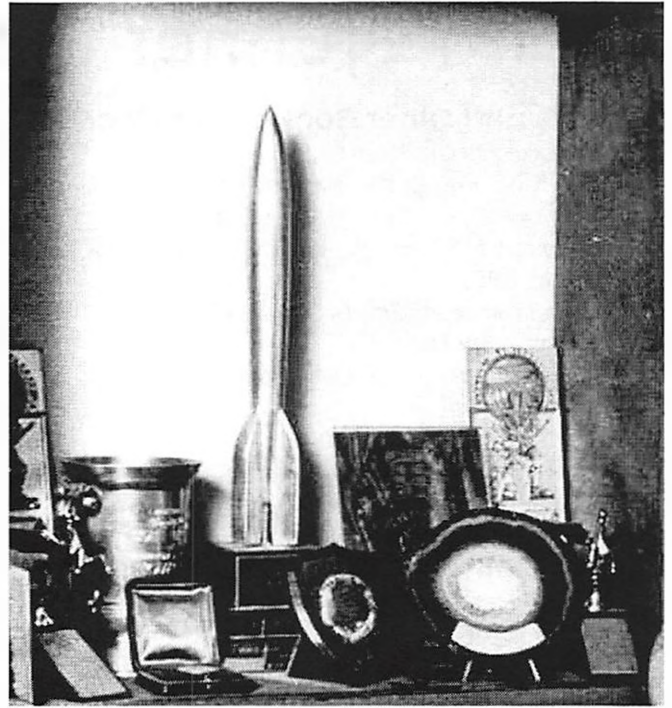
**Brunner:** Thank goodness for that.

**Q:** Do you have any project you're working on now that you'd like to talk about?

**Brunner:** After this convention I'm going home to start research on a new novel, and, as usual it's going to be about as far away from my last novel as you can possibly imagine.

**Q:** Are you one of those people who, if they talk about the novel they intend to write too much, they never will write it?

**Brunner:** Absolutely. I find that if I have talked too much about a project, when I come to write it, it feels second-hand, as if I'd used it before. I was furious with George Clayton Johnson, who at a science-fiction convention in, I suppose, the late Sixties, told me and lots of other people about a wonderful project he had. He had calculated that the people who turned up at the Woodstock Festival actually slightly outnumbered the entire voting population of the state of Nevada. So he was going to write a novel called *Free Nevada Now* in which all the Woodstock people moved to Nevada, established residency rights, and outvoted the rest of the inhabitants. I saw him again a year later — at another Westercon, this would have been — and said, "George! I want to read that book of yours. What's happened?" He said, "Oh, I didn't get around to writing it."



**Q:** So we won't talk about your next novel any further. Thank you, John.

Recorded at the 1990 World Science Fiction Convention, The Hague, Holland.

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BOOK = *The Book of John Brunner*

BoJB = *The Best of John Brunner*

CTiB = *The Compleat Traveler in Black*

EtE = *Entry to Elsewhen*

FC = *Foreign Constellations*

FTDF = *From This Day Forward*

IE = *Interstellar Empire*

NbT = *Not before Time*

NF = *No Future in It*

NoG = *No Other Gods but Me*

NT = *Now Then!*

OoMM-B = *Out of My Mind* (Ballantine edition)

OoMM-4 = *Out of My Mind* (Four Square edition)

TiB = *The Traveler in Black*

Times = *Times without Number*

TJ = *Time-Jump*

TWM = *The Whole Man*

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1970  
BOOK
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FTDF
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FTDF
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TiB, CTiB
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FC
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FTDF
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FC
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FC, BoJB
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BOOK
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BOOK
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Dropin  
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Ellay and N Virons  
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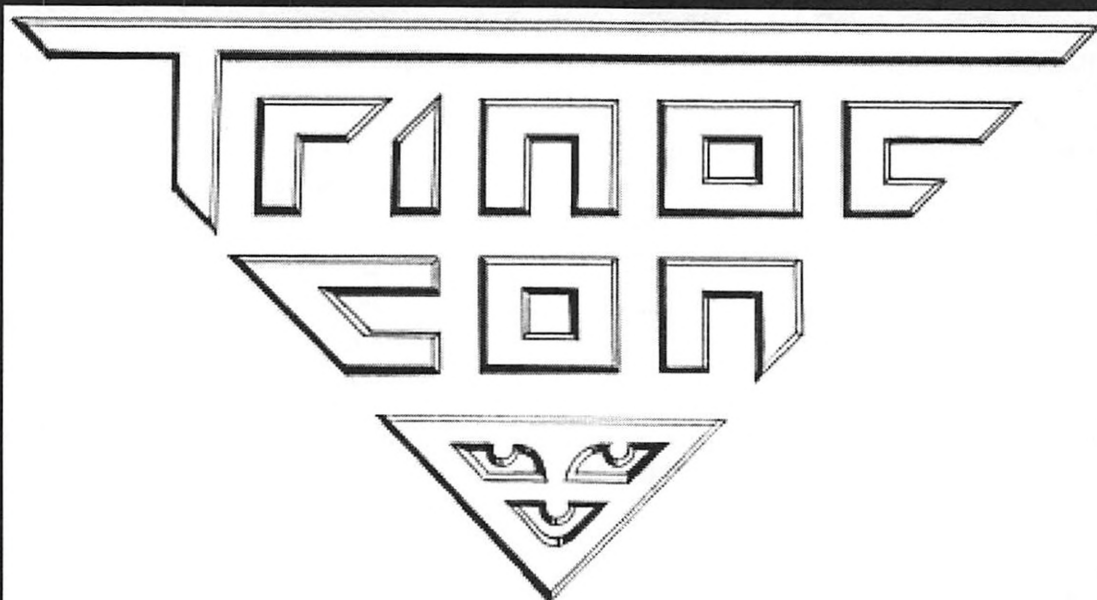
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Lois McMaster **BUJOLD**

N.C. Poet Laureate Fred **CHAPPELL**



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*and*

**Gaming GOH**

Dave Arneson,

co-creator of

*Dungeons and*

*Dragons!*

# The Readercon Committee

## **Ellen Brody:**

A member of the committee since shortly after Readercon 7, Ellen Brody drives standard, writes using Emacs, has a range of at least 3.5 octaves, dislikes mayonnaise, should do push-ups more often, and believes that the process of awakening early in the morning recapitulates phylogeny.

## **Julianne Chatelain:**

Julianne Chatelain's URLs include [www.murmurofwater.com](http://www.murmurofwater.com) ("serious" science fiction), [www.sig-o-matic.com](http://www.sig-o-matic.com) (frivolous), [www.juliannechatelain.com](http://www.juliannechatelain.com) (let's invent new art forms already!). For more on her mom's sculpture, email [julianne@acm.org](mailto:julianne@acm.org).

## **Bob Colby:**

For the first (and hopefully last) time, Readercon founder Bob Colby has to divide the weekend between his progeny (Typecon 2002 is in Toronto this weekend). Be sure to say hi at Meet the Pros(e) Friday night, as it'll be your only chance this time out!

## **Richard Duffy:**

Richard Duffy is either that incorrigible fan who has attended thirteen Readercons (all but #5), working on most of those, who eventually grew tired of missing so much great programming, some of which he helped schedule, that taking on ever bigger pre-con duties in order to justify being more sercon-fanlike at the actual event was the best solution ... or else he's a prolix impositor of the same name.

## **George Flynn:**

George Flynn proofreads and copyedits for NESFA Press, Haffner Press, and anybody else who asks, fortunately including the Real World. As usual, he is also on too damn many con committees.

## **Shoshanna Green:**

Shoshanna Green copyedits for pay, for Readercon, and for fun. She commutes from Montreal to work Registration at the con, and doesn't even ask for mileage.

## **Merryl J. Gross:**

Merryl J. Gross is larking it about this year, having gleefully foisted off most responsibilities to others on the committee! All she has to do is: Design 20 major new features for her product, edit PR 1 and PR 2, work on a workshop for the Usability Professionals' Association, catch up on her reading of Butler, Jones, and the Hugo nominees, clean her house, take care of her cats, fix the car, attend the Usability Professionals' Association meeting and get back in time for the con. Wait, wasn't I supposed to be larking it about? Oops.

## **Bob Ingria:**

Bob Ingria has recently become a gentleman of leisure. However, this has not changed his predilections. He still talks small but carries a large class library. Tea remains his favorite source of caffeine, rather than java. In his spare time, he intends to study the elemental powers of the ruby, and to learn how to properly handle the python.

## **Dawn Jones-Low, Thom Jones-Low:**

Dawn Jones-Low showed up at the first Readercon and asked how she could help. She had so much fun that she brought Thom Jones-Low to the second Readercon. They've been helping ever since, mostly in a quasi official manner. When not slaving, er working, at Readercon, they live on their farm in Vermont with an assortment of dogs, cats, horses, and books.

## **B. Diane Martin:**

B. Diane Martin is a founder of a high-tech startup company that is developing large-scale applications for nanotechnology. Her experience working with the very small and the very large has come in handy at home, where she raises a small boy and larger husband.

## **Michael Matthew:**

Since joining the Readercon committee, Michael Matthew has acquired a mortgage, a lawn, two lawn mowers, a 32.16 minute commute (average), 23,412 carpenter ants ... and has met his one true love. Who says Readercon is not a life-changing experience?

## **Lois Powers:**

Lois Powers has waited 23 years for an empty nest ... Ok, so why isn't it empty and who are all these convention people in it?

## **David G. Shaw:**

David G. Shaw has typeset books using hot lead type, photo output on waxed pasetboards, and computer page layout programs. He regrets not being able to work with letterpress or movable wood type, but looks forward to the next technology that makes creating souvenir books easier.

## **Miles Martin Shaw:**

Miles Martin Shaw is three years old. He loves books now that he has discovered that they can be stacked to form steps to extend his reach toward once-safe breakable objects.

## **Eric M. Van:**

VAN, ERIC M.(ORRIS; born MURRAY) (1954 - ), US neuroscientist, sabremetrician, rock critic and writer, whose first sf story was "VAN, ERIC M." (♣RECURSIVE SF)

in *The Readercon 14 Souvenir Book* (☞CONVENTIONS) in 2002, although signed “[JC]” (☞John CLUTE); it took the form of his own anticipated entry from the next (i.e., this current) edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, and, by beginning more or less correctly, thus became the only sf text to be quoted here at any length (albeit somewhat in paraphrase). With not unobvious affection and some skill EMV mimicked this critic’s style. EMV in fact knows JC, having edited a convention Programme Book (☞WORTHWHILE DETAILS WE OVERLOOKED COMPLETELY IN THE AFOREMENTIONED ARTICLE) to which JC, as Guest of Honor (☞EVEN MORE SO), contributed an essay “On Being Criticized,” facts immodestly (☞Piers ANTHONY) included in the original story but omitted here (☞SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY SF). The merciless and perhaps excessive spoofing of this Encyclopedia’s plethora of cross-references (☞RIGHT-POINTING ARROWS) provided opportunity for further recursive strokes. EMV seems today like a writer who desperately needs to publish some kind of sf BOOK in the last ten or fifteen years in order to have fully maximized the recursiveness (☞Eric M. VAN) of his debut (☞ONE TOO MANY OF THESE TO BE FUNNY). [JC]

**David Walrath:**

David lives with cats, books, muskets and monkeys in Stow, Mass.

**Amy West:**

Amy West works as a gallery interpreter/museum educator at the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester, MA most of the week, where she uses on a daily basis her MA in Medieval Studies from UConn. The best part of her job is trying to chop the hands off of small school-children with a variety of weapons. The rest of her time is devoted to her family and Readercon, and not necessarily in that order.

**Nicholas Wurst:**

Nicholas Wurst (age 6) likes to play with his new blue dirt bike (Troy Lee’s) and he likes to play with his Bionicles and he likes to argue with his brother and he likes to play cards and he likes to play Quest for Makuta Bionicle adventure game and he likes to build with Legos and he likes to build with his Dad’s robot Legos.

**Alexander Wurst:**

Alexander Wurst (almost 3) asks, “What are you doing?” “Typing.”

“Why?” “Because you need a bio for the Readercon souvenir book.”

“Why?” “Because you’re on the committee.”

“Why?” “Because Mommy and Daddy are chairing.”

“Why?” “Don’t ask.”

**Karl R. Wurst:**

Karl R. Wurst foolishly agreed to demo his, as yet unfinished, commedia dell’ arte-performing, three-robot/puppet team at the American Association for Artificial Intelligence Annual Meeting, held just two weeks after Readercon! He’s probably locked in his hotel room, debugging code, as you read this...

The following committee members were in New Zealand, acting in the fourth “Lord of the Rings” movie, “A New Hobbit:” Adina Adler, Anita Roy Dobbs, Diane Kurilecz, Sheila Lightsey, Kathei Logue, Susan Murosako, Nevenah Smith.



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