

Inexorable as an amok sloth, hard-hitting as eiderdown fluff, fast-moving as the continental glaciation of your choice, DAVE LANGFORD offers a further Valium-paced issue of the semi-annual newzine about which it was once said, but not any more. Late-breaking news (we handle no other sort) and irate cancellations to 94 LONDON ROAD, READING, BERKSHIRE, RG1 5AU, UK. Still 5 issues or a lifetime subscription, whichever comes first, for £2 sterling: cheques/money orders to **Ansible**, Girobank transfer to account 24 475 4403. Or \$3.50 to US agents Mary & Bill Burns (23 Kensington Court, Hempstead, NY 11550); or \$4A to Aussie agent Irwin (For GUFF) Hirsh, 2/416 Dandenong Rd, North Caulfield, Vic 3161. Phone: Reading (0734) 665804 — please shout. Cartoon: Jackie Burns. Language Lesson: deferred. Inertia (c) Isaac Newton, 1679.

## ME

Oh, I've been fine, thanks, just a little reclusive (busy). Exciting literary news is that Baen Books want to reprint **The Space Eater**, and promise that theirs will be the first edition whose cover art doesn't seize prospective buyers by the eyeballs and hurl them violently out of the bookshop. I can hardly wait for February and my appearance alongside such favourites as David Drake and Jerry Pournelle. New creative efforts consist chiefly of outlining -- with "John Grant" -- **Guts**, a horrifying reading experience ("Inside every one of us there lurks a MONSTER!") which will make Stephen King look like Enid Blyton, or vice-versa. Alas, my best effort **Leaky Establishment** has yet again been bounced by a US editor who after lavish praise gave it the thumbs-down because the humour was "so indiginous". Will anyone direct me to a nice American publisher who (a) can spell indiginous; (b) doesn't mind British books being it?

## HUGE AND KNOBBLY, ETC.

There comes a time in every newzine editor's life when burning commitment to the Whole Truth cannot entirely eclipse the thought, "Oh God, have I got to type out sixty-three bloody Hugo nominations again?" Not much controversy, either, though the Confederation committee tried its best by notifying pro but not fan nominees in advance (the latter had to find out from newzines, and were therefore not offered the chance of refusal, which would have tempted at least one easily misspelled fan "when I heard who the nominees were in the Best Fanzine category"). But who cares, really? I sense 90% of my readership preparing to skip the following....

569 ballots cast: **NOVEL Blood Music/Bear (yay), Cuckoo's Egg/Cherryh, Ender's Game/Card, Nuke 'Em Till They Glow, Then Shoot 'Em In The Dark/Niven+Pournelle, The Postman/Brin. NOVELLA "Green Mars"/K.S.Robinson, "The Only Neat Thing To Do"/Tiptree, "Sailing to Byzantium"/Silverberg, "The Scapegoat"/Cherryh, "24 Views of Mt Fuji, by Hokusai"/Zelazny. NOVELETTE "Dogfight"/Swanwick+Gibson, "The Fringe"/Card, "A Gift from the Graylanders"/Bishop, "Paladin of the Lost Hour"/Ellison, "Portraits of His Children"/G.R.R.Martin. SHORT "Dinner in Audoghost"/Sterling, "Fermi and Frost"/Pohl, "Flying Saucer Rock and Roll"/Waldrop, "Hong's Bluff"/Wu, "Snow"/Crowley. NONFICTION **Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf/Budrys, An Edge in My Voice/Ellison, Faces of Fear/Winter, The John W. Campbell Letters, Vol.1/Chapdelaine+Hay (ed), The Pale Shadow of Science/Aldiss (nice one, Serconia Press), Science Made Stupid/Weller. DRAMATIC Back to the Future, Brazil, Cocoon, Enemy Mine, Ladyhawke. PRO EDITOR Terry Carr, Judy-Lynn del Rey, Edward L.Ferman, Shawna McCarthy, Stanley Schmidt. PRO ARTIST Kelly Freas, Don Maitz, Rowena Morrill, Barclay Shaw, Michael Whelan. FANARTIST Brad Foster, Steve Fox, Joan Hanke-Woods, William Rotsler, Stu Shiffman. SEMIPROZINE **Fantasy Review, Interzone (yay), Locus, SF Chronicle, SF Review. FANZINE Anvil, Greater Columbia Fantasy Costumers' Guild Newsletter (yeah, words fail me too), Holier Than Thou, Lan's Lantern, Universal Translator. FANWRITER Don D'Amassa, Dick Geis, Mike Glycer, Arthur Hlavaty, me, Patrick Neilsen-Hayden (sic). JWC MEMORIAL (non-Hugo) Karen Joy Fowler, Guy Cavriell Kay, Carl Sagan, Melissa Scott, Tad Williams, David Zindell.******

Wouldn't you much rather hear about the Nebulas? No, I thought not, but for the record: **NOVEL Ender's Game/Card, NOVELLA "Sailing to Byzantium"/Silverberg, NOVELETTE "Portraits**



Jackie Burns

of His Children"/Martin, SHORT "Out of All Them Bright Stars"/Kress, GRAND MASTER LONGEVITY AWARD A.C. Clarke. "Oh God," said an unnameable SFWA source, "we all put in nominations for Card out of er politeness because he was tallying the preliminary ballots, but we never expected...."

The best associated fun came from Norman Spinrad's unbelievable full-page paid ad in **SFWA Bulletin**, headed "A Matter of Literary Principle & Personal Pique". This loftily begins "WHEREAS science fiction has come under increasing attack from the mainstream critical establishment at a time when many of us are seeking to establish its bona fides as seriously-intended literary art --" After a few more whereases we come to the meat: "I therefore hereby withdraw my future work for consideration for the Nebula Award.... To those who surmise that I am doing this out of personal pique at having not received a Nebula nomination for CHILD OF FORTUNE, I freely admit that this was a consideration. That such a work failed to be nominated proves, if nothing else, that the literary standards of the SFWA as a whole have diverged so far from my own that to accept a future Nebula would, for me, be an act of cynical hypocrisy."

Further Spinrad announcements, we are unreliably informed, will similarly shame and refute the inadequate standards of the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes.

Back in Britain, I report a mindboggling coincidence. An official announcement at last arrived, confirming the long-rumoured Arthur C. Clarke SF Award (£1000 for the best UK-SF novel of the preceding calendar year, first presentation next Easter). In the very same post came a review copy of the hardback **The Songs of Distant Earth** by Arthur C. Clarke! The "Arthur", promoted by energetic George Hay, is to be run by the BSFA, SF Foundation and for no apparent reason the International Science Policy Foundation, who will jointly prepare a shortlist of Approved Nominees. Noises have been made about the existing BSFA Awards fading away after 1987 in the face of this lucrative competition. One intermittently successful purpose of the BSFA Award was to publicize the name "BSFA". I couldn't get to Albacon to ask how much useful publicity the BSFA thinks it will gain from the new award's name....

Interest declared: 1986 BSFA awards went to Brian Aldiss's **Helliconia Winter**, my own **Interzone** short "Cube Root", **Brazil (media)** and Jim Burns (best drunken artist).

As for fan awards, the Independent British Poll was nearly as ill-supported as **Ansible's** last. **Still Life and Stomach Pump** tied for Best UK Fanzine, while Simon Ounsley's mythopoeic **Novacon 14** report (TNH) was deservedly Best Article.

#### LETTERS AND THINGS

**Ian Watson** has been succouring his fellow men: "We entertained a tramp to tea, though he would only come in out of the sub-zero after we papered the carpet with copies of **Tribune**. Perhaps he was reluctant to yield to our genteel persuasions since he was aware that warmth brought out The Smell (back to horror fiction). This smell was interesting because it migrated around the house for untold hours in the form of discrete mobile pockets, like solid invisible balloons, which you as a physicist will recognize as quanta of smell. Discretion stopped us from asking the obvious question: 'Were you once a science fiction writer?'" [IW]

**Marise Morland-Chapman** is outraged: "The short story 'Tangents' by Greg Bear in **Omni** [Feb or March] is a direct pinch from Hal Clement's short story 'Star, Bright' published circa 1968. I'm sure you've read it so I won't document a list of parallels -- believe me, they're there. Assuming that Bear & Clement haven't done some sort of a deal, I think this sort of thing's very unfair...." [MMC] Haven't read either, but these arguments tend to be fruitless. (Unconscious imitation? Independent creation? Who fished the murex up? What porridge had John Keats?) Let's see who, if anybody, sues....

**Martin Morse Wooster** has his finger on the pulse of something or other: "I've just returned from Corflu. It was full of appalling spectacle, such as the grisly bidding scene where the 'clean' Langford stack, full of character-building issues of **Extro** and the **Omni Book of the Future**, went for a paltry \$10, while the 'dirty' Langford stack -- two issues of **Knave**, full of lewd women wearing what mid-Atlantic fan Ms A. Carol explained were 'not garter belts, but suspender belts' -- fetched a full \$15.... The **John W. Campbell Letters** have just been published. Perhaps the most curious is one of March 4, 1959 to Heinlein's agent rejecting **Starship Troopers**. 'You could produce a profound anti-Nazi feeling in the readers by telling a story 100% from the viewpoint of a dedicated, fervent Nazi. I hear Bob [Heinlein]'s going to induce considerable anti-patriotism in a lot of readers by telling a story from the viewpoint of a 100% dedicated patriot.' Don't tell Joseph Nicholas.... R.I. Barycz goofed in his description of the Lucasfilm suit. High Frontier, a militarization-of-space lobby affiliated with Baen Books, Heinlein, and Jerry Pournelle, produced one commercial, a child's drawing that showed evil Soviet missiles melting like antacids against the firm protection of the, er, 'Peace Shield'. Lucasfilm's suit was thrown out of court, so anyone can call satellite systems 'Star Wars' or whatever." [MMW]

**D.M. Sherwood** was at Albacon: "The meeting for a possible constitution for Eastercons has been referred to a subcommittee; such scraps as I caught suggest that Talmudic exegesis lives (there seems no facing of the question of how enforcement would work; apparently we're all supposed to write to **Locus** and say what naughty boys & girls people have been). The big Bob (fake) Shaw confrontation scene at the registration desk was defused by a brilliant ploy -- they let him in. Hyper-brilliant counterploit on his part: he did fuck-all, just sat in the bar and conducted a genial court-in-exile (except he wasn't in exile...). Innovative question session by GoH Joe Haldeman -- his wife wrote the questions." [DMS]

(I had some outraged prior correspondence copied to me by "Harrogeightyseven" person Andrew R. Bennett [some relation], with Albacon diplomatically writing "Nyahh nyahh, we're not letting Shaw into the con except maybe for the bidding session, so there," and the putative Eastercon bid replying with equal mature dignity, "Yah boo sucks, we're cancelling our bid and our memberships then.")

FGoH **John Jarrold** was there too: "I had a great time. Met Joe & Gay Haldeman on Thursday lunchtime in the bar (where else?) after a boozy trip up overnight, drinking beer with some Scottish sailors. Didn't go to bed on Friday or Saturday but eventually gave up the ghost around 7am Monday morning. Sang every night in the bar (aren't you glad you weren't there?) with the Haldemans, Toby Roxburgh, Neil Gaiman and other worthies. My throat is just recovering. Major surprise of the con was being asked for an autograph: this was after reading a Harlan Ellison story during a horror reading that also included Clive Barker and Ramsey Campbell. A young fan came up to me in the bar with a copy of the **Books of Blood** and asked me to sign it. I didn't believe he was serious, so I questioned him closely, but he really meant it. Talk about

a sense of wonder. I haven't mentioned this to Clive yet. I will, during some quiet moment, when there are several yards and a sturdy door between us." [JJ]

**Dave Wood** sends bizarre local headlines (**New Riddle As Body Is Found/LAKE: WAS IT MURDER?/Nicholas fires the guns**) and another **Magical Albacon Moment**: "...the story of Greg P. being found snoring behind a locked toilet door up in Glasgow. He was identified by Mal Ashworth crawling on his hands and knees across the toilet floor and peering under the door. 'I realized it was Pickersgill when I saw the glasses on the floor,' he told me. Sad that the only way to recognize a trouserless P. is by his bi-focals...." [DW] Prospective Confederation members please note.

**Lisa Tuttle** pleads: "No more **Stardate** submissions from anybody, please. Sigh." All is about to be explained:

#### LETTER FROM AMERICA: Steve Brown

**Stardate** has achieved extinction. It is a long and depressing story. In the proverbial nutshell, our financier was a black sheep member of the DuPont family. He was born to the purple, and spent his life as a giddy wastrel. We have been calling him Arthur, after the Dudley Moore character. Arthur owns a \$400 million trust fund, which his family won't allow him to touch because he is such a flake. He is allowed by the family to eke out an existence on the interest from the fund -- \$57 million annually.

Now I don't think that you or I would have much trouble making ends meet on \$57 million per year, but it is indicative of Arthur's financial acumen that he was continually running short and had to borrow on the forthcoming year's interest. Arthur loves to play with businesses. He owns hundreds of small businesses in a bewilderingly interlocked rat's nest of finances, yet his entire accounting dept. consists of one little old lady without a computer.

Arthur was certainly sincere about **Stardate**, and we did spend about half a million of his dollars, but the experience of prying more loose from him became so byzantine that it killed us. Arthur never could understand that other people needed money on a regular basis, to fill the refrigerator, pay the rent, and other wastrel expenses. To Arthur, money is like air. It is always there, and if you need some, you just reach out and grab it. We came to a point where our phones were going to be shut off, the office staff worked for six weeks without pay, etc., while Arthur was taking an extended cruise of Antigua.

So, we had to die. We tried for a quick sale, but what passed for Arthur's people were incapable of getting the paperwork in order to allow a sale. It is possible that we may resurface by the end of the year, under a different name. Now that we have four issues to show investors, things look possible. Dana, our energetic publisher, is shuttling from coast to coast right now trying to interest investors. But I'll believe it when I see it.

For your troubles, I enclose a copy of the final issue. This may become a valuable collector's item someday, if only because of the Gibson story. The magazine was an infuriating mix of the ridiculous and the sublime, due to Arthur's indiscriminate contract signing before he found us. All that gaming stuff and the low-grade media material was contracted for, down to the very name of the magazine, which is a word copyrighted by Paramount Pictures (it is a **Star Trek** word). We had hoped that the quality of fiction would offset the erosion of credibility that sixteen pages of deadly dull gaming material would foster.

If you see Lisa Tuttle (**Stardate's** Person in the UK) wandering the streets of Soho, keening softly to herself, please comfort her. She was doing a great job, and had just sent us a truly brilliant Dave Garnett story that I would have killed to be allowed to publish. Now she, too, must make many embarrassing phone calls. As our office person, Heather, said when it had become apparent that **Stardate** was no longer viable: "Brown, do you realize that we have to contact over 3,000 people, from artists and writers to distributors, printers, store owners, advertisers, etc. and depressingly etc?."

Sic Transit Gloria Fictum.

...Your definition of that problematic word "cyberpunk" is the best one I've seen yet. "Praised in **Cheap Truth** and agented by Chris Priest," indeed. Not to blow my own horn too much, I'm in a better position to comment on this movement

than most anybody. More by coincidence than anything, I know all the writers grouped under that label personally. Bruce Sterling and I have been corresponding for ten years, I met and befriended Gibson before he ever wrote a word of fiction, and I am guilty of having known John Shirley for 15 years, and even sharing a house with him in the early 70s. Thus, I've known from the beginning just what an inaccurate label "cyberpunk" is. Shirley is certainly punky enough, but he hasn't a cybernetic chip in his body. Bruce is cybernetic as hell, but is a comfortable family man who writes superb, but "traditional", hard SF. Rudy Rucker is neither cybernetic nor punky, but he is a friend of Bill, Bruce and John, and shares some attitudes. His own fiction is kind of cartoonlike, and about as cybernetic as Bugs Bunny. That leaves Bill, who does fit the definition, but more or less stands alone, except for the emerging crop of imitators. Gardner Dozois coined that Term in the *Washington Post* a year ago, and like all labels it drastically simplified and pigeonholed a group of quite disparate writers whose main connection with each other is mutual friendship and the odd collaboration. Lord release us from the artistic bonds placed about our thighs by critics hunting for a quick and easy phrase! [SB]

#### "A TRIUMPH OF STYLE OVER CONTENT"

...thus Greg Pickersgill's heart-warming TAFF victory statement. 249 votes were cast: J.Hanna 61, S.Ounsley 84, GP 98, Hold Over Funds and write-ins 6, leading to eliminations and a second ballot with SO 114, GP 125, HOF 7. Greg therefore gets a chance to demonstrate how TAFF delegates should properly comport themselves (see my trip report, page 27), while the Pickersgill manse (7a Lawrence Rd, S.Ealing, London, W5 4XJ) becomes the throbbing centre of UK TAFF activity and fund-raising for the next two years....

(Speaking of the trip report, still available from this address at a trifling £2.25 post free, I note with vast gratitude and deep smugness that TAFF got \$500 from the LA-Con coffers and \$50 from Massachusetts Convention Fandom Inc as a reward for actually getting a report into print. Preen.)

Meanwhile, the declared 1987 TAFF candidates (Bill Bowers, Brian Earl Brown, Mike Glicksohn, Jeanne Gomoll) had been mostly sold on attending the '87 Eastercon as being more typical of UK fandom than a tacky old Worldcon. This determination wavered "in view of the way that Eastercon and the British Worldcon later in the year are respectively shaping up" (P. Nielsen Hayden, *Taffluvia* 6), and all four now wish to attend Conspiracy. Because the latter looks so wonderful, or because of wicked rumours about Beccon's fan programme? Can there be a connection with Steve Green's and Kev Clarke's withdrawal of their offer to run silly Eastercon games? My current low profile precludes me from knowing the answers.

Finally, 1976 NA-to-UK TAFF delegate Roy Tackett still has a soft spot for us, as evidenced in *Anvil* 40: "There is, somehow, something attractive about the thought of sitting back and watching the English get nuked."

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The Ansible Educational Supplement presents:  
**THE WELL-TEMPERED PLOT DEVICE** by Nick Lowe

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Perhaps once in a generation, the science of criticism is shaken by a conceptual breakthrough so revolutionary that the literary establishment can only dismiss it as deluded quackery. Such a breakthrough is described in these pages. If I draw comparisons with Darwin, Einstein, Lysenko, the sceptical reader may smile. Yet they laughed at Leavis; they creased themselves pink at Edmund Wilson; they barfed up gobs of lung tissue at Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. To all such shallow-minded so-called "scientists" I say: go ahead and hoot! The High Speed Train of progress makes no unscheduled stops to pick up late travellers, nor can it be tilted in its tracks.

The failure of the old paradigm is simple. There's a curious bias in the vernacular of critical discussion towards the qualities that make a book good. Most of the language traditionally used to describe a book's achievement has to do with its positive qualities: the plot, characterization, style, ideas, significance. Moreover, it's a bias that carries over into all those gruesome handbooks on How To Write

Totally Brilliant Novels and Win Big Cash Literary Prizes. The reason nobody's yet become a big time novelist by reading up on Diane Doubtfire is just that all the advice in such booklets is directed towards getting you to write a book full of plot, characterization, style, ideas, significance. In short, a good book.

Now, it strikes me that this is completely misconceived. You've only got to look around you to realize that most books that get published are not good. This simple point makes a nonsense of conventional criticism, which lacks any sort of vocabulary to discuss badness in any meaningful way. And yet badness is the dominant quality of contemporary literature, and certainly of SF. All orthodox criticism can say of a truly awful book is that the characterization is terrible, or the use of the English language makes your bowels move of themselves. It fails completely to grasp that bad writing is governed by subtle rules and conventions of its own, every bit as difficult to learn and taxing to apply as those that shape good writing. But do you ever find workshops offering instruction in how to write the sort of really atrocious garbage that leers at you from every railway bookstall?

Already you can begin to understand why my theories are scoffed at by the neanderthal proponents of orthodox so-called "criticism". History will judge who has the final chuckle. In the following pages I will reveal:

- a whole new language of criticism
- the secret of success in science fiction writing
- and a revolutionary new technique of interpretation that will grant you instant and total understanding of *Star Wars*, the *Lord of the Rings*, the *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and many far less reputable works.

And while I'm about it I'll propose a new definition of magic, account for the existence of Lionel Fanthorpe, and show you a way to derive pleasure from Stephen Donaldson books. (Needless to say, it doesn't involve reading them. But neither does it involve burying them under six foot of badger manure and napalming the lot, which you might think the obvious answer.)

In principle, these secrets can be exploited by anyone; but you may be interested before we start in testing your native aptitude through a couple of simple and deceptively irrelevant exercises.

**I. COMPLETE THE POEM.** Leonard Nimoy, currently\* directing his own resurrection in *Star Trek III: the Search for Spock*, is the author of two books of poems rightly considered too hot for bookshops to handle. They're distributed solely through Athena poster shops, in the same series of icky little volumes with tinted pages and silhouettes of weeds that has given the world the if anything even more deathless works of the legendary Susan Polis Schutz, the Colorado Sappho. (You must know the stuff: "Our relationship / is beautiful / because / it is ours / because / it relates / to us.")

All you have to do is read through the following (genuine) sample poem, and then use your skill and judgement to supply the missing lines from the ones that follow. (These include about 80% of the text of Nimoy's second book of poems, which by a novel inspiration consists almost entirely of excerpts from the first.) Then turn to the end of the article to find out how you scored. First, the specimen:

- "Rocket ships / Are exciting / But so are roses / On a birthday  
"Computers are exciting / But so is a sunset  
"And logic / Will never replace / Love  
"Sometimes I wonder / Where I belong / In the future / Or / In the past  
"I guess I'm just / An old-fashioned / Space-man."  
And now it's over to you:  
(i) I love you not for what I want you to be... (2 points for the missing line.)  
(ii) I loved you then for what you were... (3 points.)  
(iii) My love for you is not a gift to you... (1 point.)  
-- and the hardest one: here you have two lines to guess of a three-line poem.  
(v) I am me... (2+4 points.)

**2. CLENCH RACING.** This is a social and competitive sport, that can be played over and over with renewed pleasure. Playing equipment currently on the market restricts the number of players to six, but the manufacturers may yet issue

the series of proposed supplements to raise the maximum eventually to nine.

The rules are simple. Each player takes a different volume of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, and at the word "go" all open their books at random and start leafing through, scanning the pages. The winner is the first player to find the word "clench". It's a fast, exciting game -- sixty seconds is unusually drawn-out -- and can be varied, if players get too good, with other favourite Donaldson words like wince, flinch, gag, rasp, exigency, mendacity, articulate, macerate, mien, limn, vertigo, cynosure.... It's a great way to get thrown out of bookshops. Good racing!

Let me explain the tenuous relevance of these modest exercises to my main subject. Here we have two of the most accomplished of contemporary bad writers inadvertently showing off one of the most valued qualities in their art. I refer, of course, to **predictability**. Donaldson's use of language is so repetitive and his characterization so limited to a few clumsy responses that he finds himself coming back again and again to the same beloved words, to the extent that you can predict their occurrence reliably enough to be able to leaf through and be sure of finding one almost immediately. Nimoy is even more adept in this esoteric art: his banal thought falls so naturally into clichés that you can predict whole lines at a time.

You think I'm jesting when I speak of an Art of the Predictable, but if you think about it it is an art. The grammar of cliché is a language all of its own that's never had the study it deserves. How is it that we learn to spot the ending in advance? how do we **know** when a particular creaky old line is about to get trotted out? how do we come to anticipate the obvious platitudinous moral the story's setting up? In the same way as we learn a language, by exposure to so many examples of usage that our brains construct, unknown to our conscious minds, an internal grammar of how they're used in practice. After you've seen enough 50s SF films on the box, you come to **expect** the professor's Faustian dabblings to destroy him in the end, while the young journalist hero clasps the daughter as they gaze on the smouldering wreckage of the laboratory. ("Oh Rick, it's -- horrible...." -- "It's all right, Jean, it's over now. The nightmare is over forever.")

And this is what I mean when I say there are rules governing bad writing that you simply have to learn if you're to become a successful manufacturer of exploitation fiction. Perhaps I ought to clarify what I mean by that last category as applied to SF: I'm thinking principally of escapist adventure stories with no particular pretensions to engage the higher cortical functions and consisting chiefly of well-worn ideas and storytelling techniques recycled more or less formulaically. But in a way that's the least interesting quarter of the field under survey, because you'll find in practice that the techniques of shoddy fiction have permeated SF to such an extent that you can observe these same rules in operation even in some jolly good books, and many more with pretensions to being jolly good. I'll be drawing illustrations from all these categories, but obviously it's the last one that intrigues me most. Predictability, you see, even though we use the term disparagingly, has become in recent years a very bankable commodity in SF and fantasy publishing. The publishers know the public knows what it wants: it wants more of the same. Safe books. No surprises. Familiar surroundings from page one. And this means that even writers with considerable literary pretensions have had to learn the Art of the Predictable as part of the basic equipment of their trade. In Gene Wolfe, who is rather a subtle writer, this only results in the occasional irritating embarrassment; in Stephen Donaldson, who is about as subtle as a lead brick, it results in contemptible gaseous claptrap. Examples follow in due course.

Well, by this stage, you're probably bouncing up and down in your seat with barely-continent excitement, thinking, "Wow, am I really going to learn to write like **Stephen Donaldson**?" I have to let you down as gently as I can and say no, it's not quite as easy as that. You have to remember that Mr Donaldson's spent years learning to produce a book so flatulent you have to be careful not to squeeze it in a public place. All I can do in the time available is to offer instruction on the first and most important element of crummy writing, which is (as my title suggests) bad plotting. I can't promise that by the time you've read these pages you'll have

learned to write significantly more stereotyped characters, or that your style will have become significantly more leaden and clichéd. But I do promise that you'll be fully conversant with the many varieties of plot device, their use and function, and you'll be able to recognize and admire their handling in the works of the masters: Lionel Fanthorpe, A.E. van Vogt, and the early sword-and-sorcery novels of Michael Moorcock, to name only some of the virtuosi of the plot device I haven't space to mention in what follows.

I choose plotting as the focus of my discussion for two compelling reasons. One is that it's been a persistently underrated art in all kinds of narrative all down the ages, and has rarely come in for any kind of analysis. I think the last person to say anything respectable about the art of plotting was Aristotle, who besides some famous remarks about beginning-middle-and-end laid down a few elementary precepts like events in the story having to follow in a relationship of internal logic, and having to appear to arise out of the interactions between characters rather than being obviously imposed from above by an author. Otherwise, nobody's ever tried to explain how to plot tightly or elegantly, and the whole skill of it's tended to be treated as a rather low form of creative activity, more appropriate to Feydeau farces and TV sitcoms than to high narrative art.

There's a reason for this, I think. Up until very recently, really elaborate plotting has only been possible in comedy, where you don't mind being reminded of the existence of an author by the absurd artificiality of the structure of events. Real life isn't, only the whole, especially well plotted, and as soon as the good plotting in a story begins to get obtrusive we lose that essential impression of a purely internal logic governing the progress of events within the story. It's only in the last few decades that serious fiction has begun to make serious reference to its own fictitiousness, which is how novels like *The Affirmation*, *Little Big*, or *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* can come into being. Even so, you'll find that most of the highly plotted, highly self-conscious novels within and without the genre tend to be funny -- as the various works of John Barth, William Gaddis, and John Sladek. It's significant that Sladek finds himself so attracted to the detective genre, about the only non-comic non-artsy-fartsy fictional tradition that still makes play with the reader's awareness of the plot as something basically artificial.

The other reason I've chosen plotting to talk about is that it's the ideal topic to illustrate my point about rules of bad writing; because, while it's comparatively difficult to formulate any very definite procedure for constructing a good plot, I hope to be able to show that there are all sorts of little rules you can follow to give you an easy, step-by-step recipe for a really creaky one.

This is the point to introduce you to the manual. In my experience, the book that has most to teach about the mistakes to avoid in good fantasy writing, and by that token the one that can tell you most about the rules of hacking, is itself a work of fiction. It's not one that's likely to be familiar to all, and I'd like to take this chance to bring it to notice; because while there may be other books I don't know about that could serve equally well, this is the one I've found to stand head and shoulders above all comparable handbooks of instruction.

It's Lin Carter's novel *The Black Star*. For all I know, every other Lin Carter book may be exactly the same. I don't know; this is the only one I've ever finished. But I've read it more times than I can say, because practically any point you could wish to make about techniques of hackwork can be illustrated from the pages of this remarkable novel, to which I'll be making quite a lot of reference in what follows. It's hard to give any idea of the flavour of this astonishing text from just a few short citations, but here by way of introduction are four passages about the same character from different parts of the book.

Niane fled down the jungle path on frantic, stumbling feet. Her gown was torn. Her slim white legs were scratched and bleeding. She panted for breath, young breasts heaving and straining against the fabric of her gown....

He hastened to untie the girl. She was in a sorry state; most of her clothing had been torn from her, although she did not seem to have suffered any injury save

the insulting touch of cold, sly hands...

"Tush, girl!" the old fellow said, blushing a little at the warmth of her words and averting his keen old eyes reluctantly from the generous glimpses of her maiden flesh rendered visible by the sorry condition of her gown...

In the crude intimacy of the cell they had shared, the temptation to touch her, to allow a comforting, soothing hand to venture an overt caress, to permit his eyes to taste the soft slenderness of her body so artlessly revealed through the sorry condition of her garments, had often been well nigh irresistible. Where another man would have yielded, perhaps reluctantly, to his need -- which she as well felt -- he but stiffened and grew colder, wrenching his thoughts aside from this insidious channel with distaste....

Unfortunately, I'm limited to discussing the plot. The storyline of **The Black Star** is simple enough -- one might say, puerile. In the last age of fabled Atlantis, before the gods pulled the plug and sank beneath the waves that prehistoric continent that had linked Britain and the Falklands while the dagoes were still struggling with their Linguaphone courses in proto-Indo-European, Diodric the Warrior, Niane the Nymphet, and Nephog Thoon the Wizard with the Silliest Name in All Prehistory struggle against troglodytes, sorcerers, and militant anarchists to save the fabled jewel The Black Star from falling into the wrong hands, since the Gods seem to have a bit of a thing about it and will destroy civilization if it's lost. What relieves this at best "routine" (in the technical sense coined by the **SF Encyclopaedia**) story from total tedium is the fascinating use that Carter makes of plot devices in order to get the whole preposterous rattletrap of a story moving along its dried-up watercourse of a road.

Here I'd better pause and clarify what I mean by a plot device. In normal usage, when people talk of a plot device they mean something in the story that's just a little bit too obviously functional to be taken seriously. The most famous plot device in recent SF is the Babel fish, the joke about which is that it's such an obvious plot device that it implies the existence of an author. But the term is a flexible one, and I'm going to use a number of more specialized terms for some of the more specialized varieties of device. The Babel fish is an instance of the plot device at its simplest: a little bit of technology or whatever introduced into the story's world for the sole point of overcoming a little technical difficulty like the fact the characters can't speak to one another. All these FTL drives, instant translators, oxygen pills, and so forth: contrivances so basic to getting interplanetary stories off the ground that we no longer really worry about their implausibility.

This is a fairly innocuous kind of plot device, often quite institutionalized, and nothing you could fairly call a sophisticated hacking technique. For that, you have to move a level up....

No time for words now, girl. I am sped, but ere I go down to the Kingdom of Darkness I must pass a terrible burden into your hands: alas, that it be so, but thus it must be, for I am near the end of my strength and there is none other here to take up That which I may no longer shield," he panted, and she wondered at his strange, portentous words....

(And this goes on for a page or so, then:)

He plucked Something from the bosom of his robes and thrust it under her eyes. At the sight of the Thing which he held she voiced a small cry and would have recoiled in holy awe, save that his other hand grasped her wrist again, and dragged her near. "Girl! You know the meaning of this Thing? I read it within thine eyes.... Then take It, child."

Well, of course, the Thing in question is the legendary Black Star, as we learn a hundred pages later: "While this Thing rested in the possession of the Divine Dynasty" (ie. the good guys) "the favour of the Gods shone upon Atlantis. No Emperor could hold the throne unless he also held the Black Star...." which means that the wicked Trotskyite rebels that have temporarily overrun the kingdom will be overcome so long as the goodies retain the Black Star. Notice that the only causal connection between possession of the Black Star and victory is that enforced by "the Gods", for whom of course read "the

author", and you perhaps begin to see why I like to term this kind of thing **Collect-the-Coupons** plotting. It would be much too complicated to have three goodies overcome the whole usurping army, or at any rate it would be far beyond the plotting powers of a Lin Carter. So what you do instead is write into the scenario one or more **Plot Coupons** which happen to be "supernaturally" linked to the outcome of the larger action; and then all your character have to do is save up the tokens till it's time to cash them in.

Obviously, this is an artifice which lends itself particularly well to fantasy writing, and is capable of widely varying subtlety of application. I think **The Lord of the Rings**, or **Lord of the Plot Coupons**, is the chief villain here, unless you want to trace it back to Wagner and his traditional sources. Tolkien, on the whole, gets away with the trick by minimizing the arbitrariness of the ring's plot-power and putting more stress than his imitators on the way the ring's power moulds the character of its wielder and vice-versa. But even so it's a pretty creaky apparatus, and one whose influence has been wholly disastrous. It's so **easy**, they all cry; you save so much energy by just smuggling a few choice plot coupons up and down the map.

Probably the most distinguished practitioner of collect-the-coupons plotting is Susan Cooper in those awful **Dark is Rising** books, in the course of which the hapless goodies have to run down no fewer than nine different plot tokens before they can send off to the author for the ending. I quote from the end of volume two: "Each of the Things of Power was made at a different point in Time by a different craftsman of the Light" (odd how these discussions of the plot always seem to be signalled by bursts of capitalization), "to await the day when it would be needed. There is a golden chalice, called a grail; there is the Circle of Signs" (of which there are six separate components -- very busy book, that one); "there is a sword of crystal, and a harp of gold. The grail, like the Signs, is safely found. The other two we must yet achieve, other quests for other times." (Read: two more sequels.) "But once we have added to these, then when the Dark comes rising for its final and most dreadful onslaught, we shall have hope and assurance that we can overcome."

We'll come back to Susan Cooper later on. A collect-the-coupons plotter who runs her close, though, is the inimitable Stephen Donaldson. He tends to pad more than Ms Cooper, so it takes rather more pages to collect each token; but I should think by volume nine of the trilogy he may well outstrip her for sheer multitude of the wretched things. Here's the crucial passage of insight and revelation from **The Wounded Land**, in which Thomas Covenant in a flash of wisdom perceives the whole point of volumes four to six. I've changed just one word throughout; see if you can spot what it is.

Covenant saw.

The Staff of Plot. Destroyed.

For the Staff of Plot had been formed by Berek Halfhand as a tool to serve and uphold the Plot. He had fashioned the Staff from a limb of the One Tree as a way to wield Earthpower in defence of the health of the Land, in support of the natural order of life. And because Earthpower was the strength of mystery and spirit, the Staff became the thing it served. It was the Plot; the Plot was incarnate in the Staff. The tool and its purpose were one.

And the Staff had been destroyed.

That loss had weakened the very fibre of the Plot. A crucial support was withdrawn, and the Plot faltered. Of course, the word "Plot" in all this replaces Donaldson's "Law" (with one of those significant initial capitals), and of course all Covenant has to do now, in a Lensmanesque escalation of the same basic routine he went through in previous volumes, is go chugging off to cut himself a new Staff of Plot from the jolly old One Tree. I don't know how he does; four volumes was quite enough, though I hear there's an amazingly silly bit with limpet mines in the fifth. Another fantasy first.

At any rate, there's another variety of ingenious plot device that's closely related to collecting the coupons, and that's **Saving the Vouchers**. As the name suggests, it's an activity that can amount to the same thing if your plot tokens happen to have an effective power of their own. A Plot Voucher is one of those useful items that is presented to the hero at the start of his adventure with a purpose totally

unspecified, that turns out at an arbitrary point later in the story to be exactly what's needed to get him out of a sticky and otherwise unresolvable situation. ("This voucher valid for one [1] awkward scrape. Not transferable." Young Dirk stared at the object in bewilderment. "But what does it do?", he asked, putting it reluctantly away in his pouch. "Ah," said the old sage, "I am not at liberty to tell you that. But when the time comes, you will know its purpose.") There's a glorious chapter in *The Wounded Land* again where Thomas Covenant is visited by a rapid succession of ghostly characters from previous volumes "to give you gifts, as the law permits". Some of the gifts are a bit of a cheat, as they consist only in explaining bits of the story that don't make an awful lot of sense. But there are two authentic plot vouchers thrown in. "When the time comes," says one character, "you will find the means to unlock my gift." "He may be commanded once," says another of the handy sidekick with whom he saddles the hapless Covenant. "Once only, but I pray it may suffice. When your need is upon you, and there is no other help." Ho-hum. In the event, of course, the ink is scarcely dry on the page before Donaldson decides Covenant's need is upon him and there is no other help. He also turns out to take a decidedly flexible interpretation of this once-and-once-only clause.

I do recommend the use of plot vouchers to your attention if you're at all interested in writing multi-volume epics of quest and adventure, because they're terrifically easy to use and the readers never complain. You can issue your hero with a handy talisman of unspecified powers at the beginning of volume one, and have him conveniently remember it at various points over the succeeding volumes when he finds himself surrounded by slaving troglodytes or whatever, with no obligation to explain it until the series proves unsuccessful enough to require winding up and the loose ends tying. Lest anyone begin to suspect a veiled allusion to certain 1982 Nebula-winning novels, I'd better rip away the veil and confirm their suspicions; because if the Claw of the Conciliator is anything more than a general-purpose plot voucher I'm buggered if I can see what. I confess I haven't got on to the *Citadel* yet\*, but can it really explain this kind of thing?

My lungs were bursting; I lifted my face to the surface, and they were upon me.

No doubt there comes a time for every man when by rights he should die. This, I have always felt, was mine. I have counted all the life I have held since as pure profit, an undeserved gift. I had no weapon, and my right arm was numbed and torn. The man-apes were bold now. That boldness gave me a moment more of life, for so many crowded forward to kill me that they obstructed one another. I kicked one in the face. A second grasped my boot; there was a flash of light, and I (moved by what instinct of inspiration I do not know) snatched at it. I held the Claw.

And then the Claw bathes the scene in its wondrous radiance and Severian slips away while the beasties are held rapt. What a let-down, eh?

Even so, there are looser and lazier plot devices even than the voucher system. Don't forget that if you're absolutely stuck for anything for your characters to do, you can always issue them with little plot algorithms prescribing a sequence of more or less pointless tasks that they have to fulfil in order to achieve their end. Again, this is particularly easy to do in fantasy: an ancient prophecy, more often than not couched in mock-archaic verse, is quite sufficient. Susan Cooper is good at this; she's got a little rhyme to summarize the whole series in twelve lines, a shopping-list of plot tokens that encapsulates in a mnemonic nutshell the entire plot of the story, such as it is.

But perhaps the supreme manifestation of the plot deviser's art, and the point where hackwork shades over into genius by virtue of the sheer inspired brilliance with which the unwritten rules of short-cut plot creation are exploited, is what I call the **Universal Plot Generator**. A Plot Generator is a device written into your scenario that will create further stories as often as required, while laying no restrictions whatever on the kind of story produced.

What I think have to be the two most brilliantly conceived specimens of this rarest and most sophisticated of all plot devices came up in the DC comics of my childhood. I don't

think this is any accident. The comics have always been a kind of elephant's graveyard of antiquated plot devices, because they've always existed under the three ideal conditions for the genesis of bad plotlines: serial format with regular publishing schedules, an audience of adolescent Americans (arguably the lowest form of intelligence in the galaxy), and truly terrible writers. DC Comics in the middle sixties were a particularly golden age in this respect, because while other comics publishers like Marvel and Warren were making tentative sallies into character drama and the adult market, DC were still resolutely plumbng away in search of the lowest common denominator of all narrative art, under such marvellous hacks as the legendary Gardner F. Fox (whose novel *Kothar — Barbarian Swordsman* ranks among the classics of contemporary prose sculpture).

Anyway, the first of DC's great plot generators is almost too famous to warrant discussion, except that the sheer artistry of the concept is rarely appreciated in full. I'd like you to think for a moment about **red kryptonite**. There was a time when the hues and varieties of kryptonite were being boosted daily by new kryptonological discoveries, but I think green and red were the only ones that really lasted the course. The effects of red kryptonite, you remember, were as follows. Each individual chunk would affect Superman, but no one else, with a completely unpredictable effect that would last exactly forty-eight hours. He would then revert to normal and that particular chunk of red K could never affect him again. The brilliance of this only becomes fully apparent when you translate it all into plot terms; because forty-eight hours happens to be the average timespan of a story in a DC comic. What red kryptonite amounts to is a random element in your scenario that can be brought on at any time and introduce any daft plot idea the writer happens to have kicking about; and at the end of the story it will disappear from the continuity as if it had never been. It's hardly any wonder that the series, at its peak, got through chunks of red kryptonite so frequently that someone calculated that, for that amount of planetary debris to arrive on Earth by chance alone, the original planet Krypton must have been about the size of a galactic supercluster.

There was only ever one plot generator among the many in DC's repertoire that ran red K close for sheer elegance (though others like *Dial H for Hero* proved more durable), and that's the little-remembered *Idol-Head of Diabolu*. The *Idol-Head* appeared for a couple of years as the continuity in the *Martian Manhunter* stories, and the way it worked was this. The *Idol-Head of Diabolu* was an ancient bust created by an evil sorcerer way back in the mists of flashback, and I think it got unearthed by an unfortunate archaeologist or something. Thereafter, it would drift around from owner to owner or float around in the ocean and get washed up from time to time (which was odd, since the *Head* was carved from stone); and every full moon the top of the head would flip open like a Terry Gilliam cartoon and a new evil would be loosed on the world. Invariably these magical banes would find themselves being tackled by the *Martian Manhunter*, till eventually he managed to run the *Idol-Head* to ground and destroy it. What I so admire about this invention is that "every full moon" corresponds almost exactly to **the publishing schedule of a monthly comic book**; so that you had, written into the set-up, a device that would generate a guaranteed new villain or disaster every issue while leaving the scripter total freedom to fill in the details.

Sometimes, however, even the *Universal Plot Generator* breaks down. You may find, in the course of hacking forth your masterpiece from the living pulp, that none of the plot devices hitherto catalogued, none of these little enemies to the Muse, will keep the story flowing; that you can think of no earthly reason why the characters should have to go through with this absurd sequence of actions save that you want them to, and no earthly reason why they should succeed save that it's in the plot. Despair not. If you follow the handbook, you'll find there's a plot device even for this -- when the author has no choice but to intervene in person.

Obviously, this requires a disguise, unless you're terribly postmodernist. The disguise favoured by most writers, not unnaturally, tends to be God, since you get the omnipotence while reserving the right to move in mysterious ways and to remain invisible to mortal eyes. There aren't all that

many *deus ex machina* scenes where the Deity actually rolls up in person to explain the plot to the bewildered characters, though Stephen Donaldson permits an extended interview at the end of **The Power that Preserves**. What tends to happen instead is the kind of coy allusiveness coupled with total transparency of motive you meet, for example, in **The Black Star**, where our heroes most improbably find a light aircraft in which to escape the overrun city:

It was by the most incredible stroke of fortune that Diodric and the Lady Niane should have stumbled upon so rare and priceless a memento of the eons.

Or perhaps it was not Blind Fortune, but the inscrutable Will of the Gods.

One thinks irresistibly of Gandalf's famous words to Frodo when explaining the logic of **The Lord of the Plot Devices**: "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker." Frodo, unfortunately, fails to respond with the obvious question, to which the answer is "by the author".

But actually, it's not always necessary for the author to put in an appearance himself, if only he can smuggle the Plot itself into the story disguised as one of the characters. Naturally, it tends not to look like most of the other characters, chiefly on account of its omnipresence and lack of physical body. It'll call itself something like the Visualization of the Cosmic All, or Seldon's Plan, or **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, or the Law, or the Light, or the Will of the Gods; or, in perhaps its most famous avatar, the Force. Credit for this justly celebrated interpretation of **Star Wars** belongs to Phil Palmer; I'd only like to point out the way it makes sudden and perfect sense of everything that happens in the film. "The time has come, young man, for you to learn about the Plot." "Darth Vader is a servant of the dark side of the Plot." When Ben Kenobi gets written out, he becomes one with the Plot and can speak inside the hero's head. When a whole planet of good guys gets blown up, Ben senses "a great disturbance in the Plot."

If this is beginning to sound like a silly little verbal game, think again. The reason you can play this sort of game in the first place is that the Force is one of those arbitrary, general-purpose, all-powerful plot devices that can be invoked whenever convenient to effect whatever happens to be necessary at the time. The only ends it serves within the logic of the story are those of the storyteller. And the reason you can decode so much of SF in this kind of way is that SF is absolutely addicted to crappiness; and while science fiction may not offer any more opportunities than any other kind of fiction for crappy character-drawing or crappy prose, the scope for crappy plotting is virtually limitless.

For instance, Lionel Fanthorpe could never have existed in any genre but SF. Everyone knows, I imagine, the story of the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray, perhaps the most outrageous *deus ex machina* ending in all literature. There the heroes were, stranded deep in an enemy sector of space, surrounded by an entire enemy fleet with the guns trained on them, when the maestro realized all of a sudden he had only one page left to finish the book. Quick as a flash, the captain barks out: "It's no use, men. We'll have to use the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray." "Not -- not the Flaz Gaz Heat Ray!" So they open up this cupboard, and there's this weapon that just blasts the entire fleet into interstellar dust. One almighty zap and the thousand remaining loose ends are quietly incinerated. Where, but in SF, could you do that?

So this is your challenge. I hope that in revealing to you, for the first time in cosmic history, these precious secrets of how to tune and play your very own plot devices, I've given you some idea of the opportunities that exist for the talentless hack to abuse, short-change and exploit the mindless masses who put up with this garbage. Armed with this knowledge, you are now equipped to go out into the world and create science fiction stories worse than any that have gone before them. The earth will tremble; railway bookstalls will burst with the fruits of your typewriters; small-time hacks like the vermin who write for **IASFPM**\* will be swept away by the new torrent of drive! From this moment on, the universe is yours. The only thing that could possibly stand in your way would be a united resistance from those contemptible snot-gobbed arthropods the readers themselves, crying out against cheapskate exploitation fiction and demanding stories

that can hold the road without the author stepping in every five pages to crank the bloody things up. Small chance of that, eh?

I leave the future of SF in your hands. May the Plot be with you. [Nick Lowe]

Answers to **COMPLETE THE POEM** quiz:

- (i) ...but for what you are.
- (ii) ...I love you now for what you have become.
- (iii) ...I miss what I am when you are here.
- (iv) ...it is a gift to me.
- (v) ...You are you. / Our love is us.

**RATE YOUR SCORE...** 13-15 Excellent. The nation's greetings cards manufacturers need you. 9-12 Not bad, but damaging traces of poetic sensibility probably bar you from the big time. Try ghosting for Patience Strong. 5-8 Could do well in vanity publishing. Don't despair. 1-4 Alas! better stay dead.

\* **All-purpose Editorial Footnote:** This piece started as a talk (Fencon, 1982) in rather different format -- eg. Clench-Searching was demonstrated in real time. Aeons later, Nick recast it as above for **Drilkjis**, and galactic cycles after that it became apparent that **D7** would not appear. My asterisks are to remind you of time's winged chariot, and that (eg.) **IASFPM** is much improved under Gardner Dozois. [DRL]

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The Fiction/Good Taste Supplement:  
**BRAD BERRY (1920-1986)** by David S.Garnett  
=====

The death has been reported of noted sci-fi writer Brad Berry, shortly after the publication of his first novel for over 20 years, **Bombing is a Lonely Business**.

Mr Berry cancelled a European trip recently because of anticipated unfavourable reviews. He refused to visit Britain, believing it had become an editorial target after a **Readers Disgust** subscription campaign against Libya had been launched from bases in England. Mr Berry also called off a visit to France, as a protest against French publishers who had refused to allow mail shots to overfly their territory -- they were concerned about possible readership losses in the home market.

Although its population is only one percent of that of the U.S.A., Libya's influence as a centre of worldwide literary subversion is well known: their notorious sponsorship of "Number One International Bestsellers", for example, although for security reasons evidence of the responsibility for the 1984 Booker Prize atrocity must be kept secret.

Editor-in-Chief of Libyan House is Colonel "Mad Pencil" Qadhafi, who does not subscribe to **Readers Disgust** or its values, and who was attempting to set up an alternative magazine. Because the **Readers Disgust** special offer campaign had resulted in circulation cuts among readers of his own publication, Editor Qadhafi was believed to be considering a new publicity drive, using famous personalities to endorse his global policies.

Regarding Mr Berry as a representative of decent American Mid-Western values, it was rumoured that a special decommissioning editor would cancel his contract while he was in London. All Mr Berry's books would have been set on fire -- a gesture designed as an ironic parody of his movie novelization **Burn, Commie, Burn** -- and the author himself was to have received the ultimate censorship and been remaindered.

By refusing to leave the safety of his native country, Mr Berry avoided the devastating critical massacre at the Royal Connaught public house in London, which left the cream of Britain's sci-fi authors suffering from severe writer's block. Mr Berry was scheduled to be the special guest of the Supper Club, but he withdrew when he discovered that the date set for the meeting was May 1, the infamous pagan holiday. However, another American celebrity had arrived in London a few days earlier, and she graciously accepted the role of substitute. Wallis Simpson, better known under her pseudonym the Duchess of Windsor, had no fear of being terminally edited. As she was already dead, instead of giving a speech her final royalty statement was read out by a ghost writer.

Ironically, it was on the very same day that Mr Berry was mugged and shot dead a few yards from his own home, becoming

one of the 10,000 Americans who are sacrificed each year to the Second Amendment. Mr Berry seems to have been the victim of one of the annoying mistakes which so bedevilled his own published works -- a typo. Recent research shows that the 1791 Constitutional Amendment contained a misprint: the right to "bear" arms should have been "bare" arms. Alas, instead of having his sleeves rolled up Mr Berry's attacker was democratically armed with a handgun.

Mr Berry was arguably the world's most famous sci-fi writer. Everyone has heard of him, although nobody has read any of his books. He will probably be best remembered for his contributions to the visual media. As well as novelizing **Burn, Commie, Burn**, he scripted the famous video nasty **Moby Sick**. He reached his peak in 1953 with the release of two memorable movies based on his short stories: **It Came From Out of Hollywood** and **The Beast from Washington DC**. Mr Berry will also never be forgotten for the television mini-series of his book **The Farcical Chronicles**, which raised model making technology to heights which had not been achieved since the heady days of **Thunderbirds**.

His penultimate novel, **Nothing Wicked from America Comes**, was made into another movie by Ricky Rat Studios; but until what will sadly be his last novel, Mr Berry had for two decades confined himself to short stories. Many of these appeared within the pages of **Masturbator**, the short story being an ideal length for the attention span of "readers" of this journal. A number of these were stuck together (as indeed were so many pages of **Masturbator**) into yet another film, **The Ignorant Man**, linked by the plot device of having the narratives written on the walls of a rest room.

Mr Berry had been planning to visit Britain next year, by which time he hoped that his bad reviews would have been forgotten, and that editor Qadhafi would have been sacked, thereby reducing the threat of literary agents to innocent authors everywhere. The World SF Convention is being held in September 1987, in Brighton -- the English seaside town where one of the main hotels was the scene of an IRA structuralist critique during a recent annual conference of Conservative Press, resulting in several early redundancies. In a unique joint publishing venture, the Irish Readers Association is reported to receive many of its manuscripts from Libyan House, while publication of such novels is financed by voluntary contributions from freedom loving American patriots.

It is for this spirit of peaceful co-operation, international tolerance and world friendship that Brad Berry will be remembered as long as there are late night movies. [DSC]

[Your Editor Adds: This must be some kind of allegory. I certainly didn't see any famous American author failing to attend the SF Supper Club at the Royal Connaught. **Ansible** is as always completely irresponsible, for everything.]

#### C.O.A. (not all recent!)

MICHAEL ABBOTT, Flat 7, Bryanstone Rd, Talbot Woods, Bourne-mouth, BH3 7JE :: PAUL BARNETT, 17 Polsloe Rd, Exeter, Devon, EX1 2HL :: MERV BINNS (& **Australian SF News**), PO Box 491, Elsternwick, Vic 3185, Australia :: TERRY BROOME, 23 Claremont St, Lincoln, LN2 5BN :: DENICE & BRIAN EARL BROWN, 11675 Beaconsfield, Detroit, MI 48224, USA :: PETER COLLEY, 7 Sumatra Rd, West Hampstead, London, NW6 :: JONATHAN COXHEAD, 92 Histon Rd, Cambridge, CB4 3JP :: GAMES WORKSHOP (where erst-while **Imagine** boss Paul Cockburn is now in charge of everything interesting, Ian Marsh and most of the old mob having been expunged from the histories for unwillingness to move north), Enfield Chambers, 16-18 Low Pavement, Nottingham, NG1 7DL :: ROY HILL, 8 Windsor Rd, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 3UN :: TERRY & MARGARET HILL, 42 Chaplin Drive, Headcorn, Kent, TN27 9TN :: PHIL JAMES, GSOC/MARCOL Team, DFVLR, D-8031 Oberpfaffenhofen, West Germany :: LEIGH KENNEDY, 2 Alma Place, Marlborough, Wilts, SN8 1AF :: KEITH KNIGHT, 164 Goldhurst Tce, West Hampstead, London, NW6 3HP :: CHRIS LEWIS, UWIST, Redwood Bldg, King Edward VII Ave, Cardiff :: MATT MACKULIN, 8 Upper Ashmount, Cloughfold, Rawtenstall, Rossendale, Lancs, BB4 7PS :: IAN MARSH, Top Flat, 19 Rusholme Rd, London, SW15 3JX :: TOM PERRY, PO Box E, Sugar Loaf, NY 10981, USA :: DARRROLL & RO PARDOE, 38 Marina Village, Preston Brook, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 3BQ :: MAUREEN PORTER, 114 Guildhall St, Folkestone, Kent, CT20 1ES :: ANDY SAWYER, 1 The Flaxyard, Woodfall Lane, Little Neston, S.Wirral, Cheshire, L64 4BT :: JOHN SLADEK, Apt 2, 15201 Scenic Heights Rd, Eden Prairie, MN 55344, USA

:: KEVIN & DIANA SMITH, 19 Millford, Goldsworth Park, Woking, Surrey, GU21 3LH :: SPHERE BOOKS, 27 Wrights Lane, London, W8 5TZ (NB: lovable editor Colin Murray has left, seeking new worlds to conquer) :: ALEX STEWART, 47 St Johns Green, Colchester, Essex, CO2 7EZ :: KEV & SUE WILLIAMS (temporary, pending permanent settlement in the civilized South), c/o Richardson Vicks Ltd, R&D Labs, Rusham Park, Whitehall Lane, Egham, Surrey, TW20 9NW :: STEVE WOOLHOUSE, 19 Jaunty Mount, Sheffield, South Yorks, S12 3DR :: Bob Lichtman adds a footnote: "Walter Willis of Stanford, California, recognizing the confusion he's been inadvertently causing among 6th fandom fans everywhere, has voluntarily changed his name. He is sure his new name, Lee Hoffman, will rectify this problem."

#### CONVENTION NOTES (or, More Boring Bits)

Consept/Unicon 7 (8-10 Aug, Guildford) has GoH Tanith Lee; £4 supp £8 att; 9 Graham Rd, Wealdstone, Harrow, Middlesex, HA3 5RP. (They call it "Un7con", perhaps meaning "Not Unicon 7.")

Rubicon (22-25 Aug, Newbury) is Not Quite Silicon: £5 to Bishop's Cottage, Park House Lane, Reading, Berks, RG3 2AH.

Confederation (Worldcon, 28 Aug - 2 Sept, Atlanta): just too late to book in advance, and it's \$65 at the door. GoH Ray Bradbury, FGOH Terry Carr. (Suite 1986, 3277 Roswell Rd, Atlanta, GA 30305, USA.)

Fantasycon XI (26-28 Sept, Brum) claims its "high point" is a banquet cum awards ceremony, but this is probably a plot to deter undesirables. £2 supp £10 att to 15 Stanley Rd, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DE.

XIIcon (26-29 Sept, Glasgow): GoH Harry Harrison. £3 supp £9 att; "Beachfield", Calmuir Rd, Lenzie, Glasgow, G66 3JJ.

Beneluxcon 1986: there is no Beneluxcon 1986.

Nicon '86 (26 Oct, Belfast) purports to be the First Northern Ireland SF Convention, with GoH Anne McCaffrey. One day only; £1 supp £2 att, cheques to "Queen's Clubs & Societies". Thomas Ferguson, SF Soc, c/o QUBSU Bldg, University Rd, Belfast BT7 1PE. (Despite stiff competition from Mike Sherwood, Thomas F. has the worst handwriting of any **Ansible** correspondent. Our cryptanalysts are working on several letters from him, some of which may even be arranged into words.)

Novacon 16 (31 Oct - 2 Nov, Coventry): GoH Ted Tubb, who will dictate a Dumarest book as the first third of his speech, plus Chris Evans. £8 to 86 Berwood Farm Rd, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield, W Midlands. 5,271,009 fans claim to be "skipping Novacon" following a slightly over-the-top Chairman's Warning in PRL, but most will doubtless relent. (The warning? Usual stuff: castration and eviction for anyone caught importing booze, holding room parties, going barefoot, sleeping on floors, annoying hotel staff, etc. Chairman Tony Berry has not mastered the subtle art of at least appearing to be on the side of the fans rather than the hotel....)

Conception (13-15 Feb, Leeds) celebrates 50 years since a certain famous Leeds convention and aims to recreate intervening history, omitting the 1937 Temperance Hall theme. £6 to 12 Fearnville Tce, Oakwood, Leeds, LS8 3DU. To pinch a phrase from V.Omniveritas, this one is so ideologically sound it should be mailed in a sealed train to Moscow.

Oricon (6-8 March, Essex) claims to be an Irwin Allen cum General Media con. Who's Irwin Allen? (I can probably live on without this information, actually.) £12 plus -- chiz chiz -- 3 SAEs to 66 Burdett Ave, Westcliff on Sea, Essex, SS0 7JW.

Beccon '87 (Eastercon, NEC, Brum): GoH Keith Roberts, FGOH A.N.Other. £5 supp £10 att, rates to rise by £1 on 1 Sept.

Conspiracy '87 (27 Aug - 2 Sept, somewhere on the south coast) is still happening! Membership now £25/\$40/\$A50, firm to 30 Sept this year. The GoH list has swollen still further with the addition of Arkady & Boris Strugatsky ("dunno if they'll really come," said an unnamed chairman); persons not actually on the committee are running a "Three Fan Guests Are Not Enough, Let's Have Terry Jeeves As Well!" campaign, provoking the Conspirators to tumultuous apathy.... Pam Wells begs massive information input about fan groups worldwide -- but especially UK -- for purposes of official Fan Liaison. Ditto fanzines for fan room display: send to Pam at 24a Beech Rd, Boves Park, London, N11 2DA, marked "Conspiracy" to prevent them vanishing into the recesses of the mighty Wells archive. Ron Bennett is doing the dealers' room (tables £25/\$37.50, wall tables £30/\$45, rates for ceiling tables not given): bookings by 1 May with £10 deposit to him at 36 Harlow Park Cres, Harrogate, HG2 0AW.



## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Ideological Horror at TWP:** The editors of our all-female APA were ticked off by a resigning Joy Hibbert for their hideous gaffe of using cover artwork by one D.West, whose cryptic initial is believed to conceal the name of a m\*n....

**Paul (John Grant) Barnett** is in the throes of a definitive Walt Disney encyclopaedia (he got a free research trip to California, too): "The task is roughly equivalent to writing the entire **Encyclopaedia of SF** single-handed... or even with the help of an Australian critic and editor. Oh joy. At least I haven't had to watch **The Black Hole** or **Tron**."

**DUFF:** the ballot for who gets the coveted trip from Australia to Confederation was won by (take a deep breath) the artists' collective Lewis Morley, Marilyn Pride and Nick Stathopoulos. Good people, I'm told, but one does wonder about the precedent. Could the **Interzone** collective stand as a single candidate for TAFF? The entire BSFA for GUFF? Spung!

**A Load of Old Cabellers:** a couple of you asked after the James Branch Cabell society and its organ ("rampant in every member") **Kalki**. Try Prof Dorys C. Grover, Hall of Languages 208, East Texas State University, Commerce, TX 75428, USA. Can one deduce, in a manner not convenient to describe, that Cabell! has fallen into the hands of the academics?

**Professional Controversy!** Quite a bit of late. In the letter column of the **Grauniad**, Michael Moorcock launched a campaign to have vile John Norman banned, only to get into a fearful tangle when the W.H.Smith people started raising unfair points like "why was all censorship evil when **New Worlds** was being attacked, but not now?..." Tom Disch used the columns of **The Nation** (USA) to be doubtful about SF, Shuttles, and space militarization, modulating gleefully into an attack on Jerry Pournelle -- whose reported reply confines itself to not wholly cogent points like "My fans don't carry toy guns, that's Gordon Dickson" and "I have no special uniforms other than Boy Scouts of America".... On the fan front, Ken Lake complained at warring length about Colin Fine's term "arch-whinger" in **A45** ("Lying comments... cowardly sod... I will welcome a grovelling apology when he has the guts to make it," etc). Colin duly apologized. Enough of that.

**R.I.P:** the **Ansible Book of the Dead** is sadly outdated, but we can't omit the deaths of Robert P.Mills (7 Feb, of heart attack), **Frank Herbert** (11 Feb, of cancer: his **The Dragon in the Sea** still means a lot to me, and **Dune** has its moments), **Judy-Lynn del Rey** (20 Feb, following coma mentioned last issue), **Manly Wade Wellman** (5 April, following unspeakable experience also mentioned last issue), **Thomas N. Scottia** (28 April, of leukaemia) and **J.Allen Hynek**, one-time scientist who went barny about UFOs and got a bit part in **CE3K**. In Britain, that long-term fan and pillar of the Swansea group **Roger Gilbert** died late in June, apparently from a brain haemorrhage. Another fan group, the Birmingham-area **MisFits**, was officially pronounced dead on 28 June ("terminal membership loss," says Dr Steve Green). And **Mal Ashworth** has issued his own obituary notice: "as of now I am Out -- gafiated -- fannishly flatlined." Gosh, it's like seeing Harlan Ellison sever every connection with SF, again....

**Nebula Award Thrills!** Marvel Comics have circularized SFWA members with copies of their **Moonshadow** comic and a plea for the institution (they can't actually spell institution, but never mind) of a Nebula comics category. **Ansible** advises them to forget it. Our own far more heartfelt campaign for a Best Deaf Author category was rudely ignored.

**Pro News Column (by Garry Kilworth):** "Garry Kilworth goes semi-straight this August with a mainstream novel to be published by The Bodley Head, called **Witchwater Country**," writes Garry Kilworth. "This is a novel about fantasy, not of fantasy, with its grotesque and macabre elements, such as could delight SF and fantasy fans, incorporated as part of the realistic world of the adolescent who finds it difficult to separate the supernatural from the mundane." [GK]

**Soviet News:** "handwritten translations of Rob Holdstock's short story 'Thorn' (the Novacon 14 souvenir booklet) are currently doing the rounds in Volgograd, courtesy of the city's 'Winds of Time' SF group -- Rob's eyes clouded with visions of millions of roubles in lost royalties when given the news at Mexican II, but calmed down when he realized the readership is barely into double figures." [Steve Green]

**Everything Must Go!** Eric Bentcliffe is flogging vast numbers of SF books and mags collected over the past several

aeons: much rare stuff, much dross, want lists appreciated, confidentiality guaranteed to Philip E.High completists.... (17 Riverside Cres, Holmes Chapel, Cheshire, CW4 7NR.)

**James White Pushes Back Frontiers Of Good Taste!** In his hard-hitting new Sector General book, "E-t body wastes and bedpans are dealt with in one sentence, but it is all done in the best possible taste." [JW]

**Concrete Overcoat Fan Fund:** this may vanish after last year's ructions -- see Novacon 16's PR2 for an attempt to Finger the Pulse of Fandom. Interim voting totals circa Albacon showed only three fans with an unpopularity in double figures (all 10): Vince Docherty, Robert Sneddon, Ian Sorenson. Postal votes at 10p each may be sent to COFF's transparent **nom de plume** "Alliance & Leicester Building Society" c/o K.Clarke, 191 Valley Rd, Solihull, West Midlands. All cash to worthy causes, etc.

**Skiffy Dean Speaks!** Robert Heinlein emerged from seclusion to tell **The Wall Street Journal** his philosophy of literature: "To me the acme of prose style is exemplified by that simple, graceful clause, 'Pay to the order of....'" [MMW] Meanwhile, the 1986 **Ansible** award for Being Influenced By Famous Heinlein Narrative Hooks goes to S.Delany's **Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand**, wherein we find: "The door deliquessed." (No, really, it sort of melts into a puddle to let you in.)

**Past Cons:** Too much has already been printed about Mexican (where Iain Banks incurred the dread fandom addiction, Joe Nicholas was inverted, and your editor was put in a poncho for being too clever by half) and Corflu (where Dan Steffan hurled a pie at CoH Teresa Nielsen Hayden ["I woulda decked him" -- A.Carol], Patrick NH squirted cream up Dan's nose, and every membership badge said HELLO! I'M RICHARD BERGERON). Best bit: en route to Corflu, Rob Hansen had trouble with a US Customs thug who was deeply insulted by a certain Jim Barker cover. "Is this supposed to show that while the guy behind the desk is going through these folks' stuff he's too dumb to see the other guy sneaking stuff by him?" he asked. I smiled a sickly smile and suddenly wished I hadn't agreed to carry all those copies of Dave's trip report over...." [RH]

**The Savage Popcorn of R.I.Barycz:** "20th Century Fox is suing LA Effects Group for falling down on SFX work for **Aliens**. You can tell this is a serious bit of suing because Fox only want \$407,935.74 being their unpaid advance and \$176,000 in damages. The real kick is their also asking for a court order to say that 20th is not liable for the legal claims arising out of LA Effects' failure to complete the work. I translate this as Fox's attempt to stop the US cinema industry from suing Fox for not delivering **Aliens** on a set date (a set hour of the day, even!) in 1986 -- said industry and cinema owners having paid Fox \$25,000,000 in up-front non-returnable guarantees for the privilege of selling popcorn during the showing of **Aliens**. If they don't get what they paid for they will sue Fox for \$1000 million or whatever. Wat's that noise? Industrial Light & Magic riding to the rescue, again...."

"The flick's action takes up either 30 seconds after the end of **Alien** or 57 years later when Ripley (and her pussy) are picked up by another space ship in a state of hibernation. A still in **Screen International** shows our heroine looking fraught and armed with a piece of lethal hardware (looks good), but she's also carrying on her other hip a small female child who looks winsome rather than fraught (bodes no good -- not small winsome children in a skiffy movie)." [RIB]

**Your Mailing Label Explained.** T.Kevin Atherton speaks for you all: "I write to thank you for happy little **Ansible** and to reaffirm my unwillingness to give you so much as a penny of my hard-earned money even if you were to claim you were going to use it to ship grain to Ethiopia. Rather than give in to such 'sub overdue' taunts as you might fling in my direction, I have decided to respond in kind. Please note that your subscription for the enclosed **Cri de Loon** is so fucking overdue that when your name passes through our computer an enormous brass gong is walloped on every floor of the **Loon** building and the beepers implanted in the flesh of our roving employees wail like air-raid sirens and heat 'til they glow like fresh-poured ingots of lead. Please send your check (cheque) or money order (munny ordur) with blinding speed or prepare your soul to receive a whole matched series of puling 'sub overdue' notices written in coloured inks that pass with each new letter through the entire spectrum beginning with violet. So there and take that!" [TKA] Quite. **The End.**