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Dicebamus Hesterna Die

On the whole, I didn't like the last issue of ASFR much. The pink cover reminded me of the Adorable Adrian Adonis, the minuscule square typeface reminded me that my eyesight is worse than I ever imagined it would become, and the Turner/Rousseau three-fall match reminded me that you can only take sides enthusiastically when you dislike one of the participants.

In the end I came down on George's side first, because he has spent far more years thinking about these issues than Yvonne has, and his thinking is backed by more experience than Yvonne has. Then I came down on Yvonne's side, because we can only think, act and write from our own knowledge and experience, and right or wrong, what we expect from our elders is wisdom, not imperatives. Thanks all the same for the wisdom, we'll work out its application.

Almost thirty years ago I was as me-deep in the conflict of wisdom, imperatives and applications as George and Yvonne were last issue - and their discussion of pacifism brought it all vividly back to mind. As pacifist, George, with his experience of war behind him, seems in a better position to argue the matter than Yvonne, but I'm not so sure. The good thing is that they more or less finish up agreeing (except that George says we have to go beyond pacifism, and he's a bit pessimistic about how far beyond we can get). George went to his war, along with my father and quite a few men and women I have admired. Men younger than me have gone to their wars, our wars, and more than I care to think of not returned. But say there was a war and you didn't want to go. Say there wasn't even a war at the time.

I stood in the dock in a court in Melbourne in 1959 and said I would not fight, would not serve in a noncombatant capacity, and would go to jail rather than be conscripted into the armed services. The Crown prosecutor quoted the New Testament at me, and I quoted straight back, in English and Greek. The Greek threw him a bit. I'd already thrown the court a bit by refusing to swear on the Bible, and quoting the Bible to support my refusal. The magistrate had had a long day - umpteen deferrals (mostly refused), a few pleas for noncombatant duties (all granted), and last of all, a solitary conscientious objector - and he sparked-up a bit when I came on, but wilted when I started throwing New Testament Greek around, and soon knocked me down as a fair-dinkum religious-nut pacifist.

And as far as I know, that's my legal status to this day: a certified pacifist, tried and found conscientious in a court of law. That the law of the time recognized the pronouncements on the matter of certain religious bodies (such as the Churches of Christ, of which I was still a member, which had come out against conscription) did not concern me, but probably influenced the court.

One of my favourite poems is Tennyson's 'Audley Court', in which that most-unfashionable poet says so much that I feel these days,

that perhaps bears on the present discussion. For Alfred and his friend Francis the great discussion was not pacifism (though that came into it, in a way) but the Corn Laws - 'where we split,/and came again together on the king/with heated faces' - 'but let me live my life', they agreed, 'and we were glad at heart'. JB 22.6.86

Our Collective Ways

On the collection of grotesques

If reincarnation exists, one undesirable former life would have been that of a sixteenth-century Spanish Infanta. The position involved inbreeding (for one was obliged to marry either an uncle or a cousin), piety and a life as tightly constricted as if foot-bound, to say nothing of the clothes of which more anon. About the only perks of the job were collecting grotesques.

For those with a taste for curiosa, amassing it is a harmless hobby, and linguistic examples are scattered throughout this issue. The Infanta, unlike this editor, could acquire living specimens like dwarves, zanies and other departures from the norm. While without doubt an ideologically unsound pursuit, at least the collection got fed and housed in return for keeping the Infanta happy. The disadvantages of the job included being second-class citizens (well, so was the Infanta), going to chapel a lot and court dress.

Spanish fashion, as it was termed, was either designed by a fetishist or for the mortification of the flesh. Consider such tortures as busks, bombast, the supportasse and the farthingale. The first was pieces of wood worn in the bodice to make it rigid and the second layers of glued-together parchment worn in the sleeve for the same purpose. The supportasse and the farthingale were wire contraptions, the former supporting the starched ruff, the latter a wheel-shaped hoop worn underneath the skirt. It was held in place by a bolster, called the bum-roll, which was attached to the corset with staples (only joking there!).

Mention of historical costume leads one to Joseph Nicholas (ideologically sound British agent for this mag.) who recently appeared in our sister fanzine FTT as a 'Leveller Cavalier'. Joseph is hereby convicted of oxymoron as, to quote 1066 And All That, the Cavaliers were wrong but wromantic and the Roundheads were right and repulsive. As often happens, the ones wearing black hats (beaver, with feathers) had all the style.

Before Joseph writes ASFR one of his paint-stripping letters, some mitigating circumstances should be tendered in his defence. Cavalier costume aka Dutch fashion postdated Spanish dress and was a darned sight more comfortable. It was also part of a National Liberation Movement, as the Spanish were at that time in a heavy colonial-type situation in Holland, right? The Dutch kicked out the Spanish, kicked off their farthingales (or maybe took bolt-cutters to them) and adopted the clothing of the peasants. Seldom has a fashion been so ideologically sound.

The true collector of grotesques should perhaps have a farthingale hanging in the cupboard. However, those not beaten into Dutch ploughshares are prohibitively priced these days, and better value would be Charles Platt's Dream Makers in which skiffy writers prove to be zany indeed. Beware, though: I asked C. J. Cherryh (name dropped, clunk) if Piers Anthony was really like that and she said no, curtly.

Please Jenny take this farthingale off me and I'll never write a frivolous editorial again. LS 29.5.86

The Long View 3

John Foyster

(Previous instalments of The Long View have introduced the project - to present an analysis of science fiction as seen through its magazines considered at decade intervals from 1943, relying as much as is possible on contemporary evidence - and begun the analysis by examining Astounding Science Fiction for 1943.)

Van Vogt's 'The Weapon Makers', as indicated in the previous instalment, is a work of fiction qualitatively different from the stories previously considered. It is not appropriate to consider it on an episode-by-episode basis, and accordingly all three episodes, which appeared February-April 1943 in Astounding, will be described together - though not all in this instalment of The Long View.

The carelessness with which issues of Astounding were put together has been referred to previously. In the February 1943 edition the interchange of two illustrations by Kramer - those appearing on pages 14 and 30 - restores sanity to the layout in that the illustrations are then adjacent to the text they illustrate. Over the years I suppose it is fair to say that Campbell acquired quite a reputation for careless use of illustrations, although it must also be said that at other times the illustrations in Astounding were powerfully used - but this mismanagement may be significant when later we come to look at the text: how 'authentic' is it? We shall see that the text is flawed, yet be unable to locate the origin of the flaw.

As has already been remarked, the book version bears little resemblance to the original serial. For the most part there will be little reference to the book version, but from time to time this will be useful, since most readers will have access only to the book version.

Another question aroused by the text is that of its status; when we write about science fiction we are, generally, aware that our subject is an ephemeral one. We do not, as a rule, make claims about the eternal significance of pulp novels. Why then is so much time to be devoted to a single work of this genre?

Umberto Eco in 'Casablanca. or the Clichés Are Having a Ball' (now available in English in Marshall Blonsky's On Signs) points out that 'Casablanca is a very mediocre film. It is a comic strip, a hotch-potch, low on psychological credibility, and with little continuity in its dramatic effects. And we know the reason for this: the film was made up as the shooting went along.' We know that these general statements may also be made about 'The Weapon Makers'. But the makers of Casablanca had an advantage over A. E. Van Vogt: Eco describes the way the clichés or archetypal situations permeate the film, making it what it became - 'But precisely because all the archetypes are here, precisely because Casablanca cites countless other films, and each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, the resonance of intertextuality plays upon the spectator'. The difference, for Van Vogt, is that although in many senses he does cite the clichés of the past, his inventiveness drives the reader's thinking through a range of new situations - ones which could become, in his own later work or the work of others, archetypes. Too much is unfamiliar, and this imposes a need for careful technique.

The reader coming to 'The Weapon Makers' brought with him (the pronoun may safely be chosen) probably some recollection of the earlier pieces which were to compose, along with the eponymous novelette in the February 1948 Thrilling Wonder Stories. 'The Weapon Shops of Isher', but possibly more importantly substantial recollections of Van Vogt's archetypal superman novel 'Slan'.

In the previous instalment of this series, passing reference was made, by way of introduction, to the kind of society within which 'The Weapon Makers' takes place. But it is as generous to describe 'The Weapon Makers' as being set in a society as it would have been to describe 'Opposites - React!' in that way. The society is essentially a magical one, in which events are driven externally, not from within; the puppet master's hands are, moreover, often visible. But what of the show?

Even before the novel begins Campbell tells us that the novel is the scene for a struggle between one man - Robert Hedrock - and two empires, that of Isher (mostly bad guys) and that of the Weapon Shops (mostly good guys). But the novel does not start there nor does it finish there (in fact its structure matches that of the full length version of 'The Weapon Shops of Isher'). It begins with a man named Dan Neelan - though the reader waits pages to find out his given name - who is returning from mining an ~~asteroid~~ (whoops, a) meteorite with only a couple of weeks' wages in his pocket.

Neelan is in a plane flying over the surface of an Earth he has not seen for a decade. As he gazes down he asks himself why he moved away from the familiar and beautiful to the strange and inhospitable worlds of Mars and Jupiter - the very worlds which attract the science fiction reader. Van Vogt is deceptive here, for of course this passage has been written as a bridge between our world and Neelan's; the reader is not returning to a familiar and loved world but rather is venturing into a new one. Van Vogt strikes swiftly now, and in two paragraphs establishes that this

is an alien world - the Empire of Isher - and that he, Neelan, has limited telepathic powers.

This limitation - to contact with his now-dead brother, whose death was the reason for Dan Neelan's return to Earth - Van Vogt uses to tell us about Neelan's past, for as he gazes down on the green Earth below him he muses about his earlier life and his brother. A potted biography is interrupted as he thinks about Gil's death. 'Reverie ended' is what Van Vogt writes. And now he shifts the focus to what Neelan can see; all the tension built up by the stressful recollection of his brother's death is dissipated as 'Neelan's tautness faded before the spectacle that was unfolding below - the beginning of Imperial City'. This is clever, for it is tension - 'neural pressure' - which had linked him with his brother.

Van Vogt describes the city - miles of suburbs set in parks (but with a total area of only 600 square miles as we later learn) - and then, suddenly, Neelan's disembarkation and rapid contact with the commerce of the city as he seeks and finds his brother's last known address bring the first chapter to a close.

None of this appears in the book version of 'The Weapon Makers'. Some of the sentences are recycled as part of a conversation, but the book version begins with what is, in the serial version, the third chapter.

The second chapter, like the first, follows the actions of Dan Neelan. Its sentences, like those of the first, are subject to exhumation and revision in the book version. But the first section of the chapter vanishes.

Dan Neelan goes to the address he has for his brother; there he meets the landlady: 'a fine-looking, buxom young woman of about thirty-five'. He asks for information about his brother - she suggests that he should take a room himself: 'He'd enjoy staying there. There was a constant coming and going of new roomers; had been ever since she was widowed three years ago. Life was too rich, too wonderful to spend it in mourning. She liked change, variety - '.

Neelan does not understand this merry widow's invitation (one speculates that John W. Campbell didn't either), dismissing her as 'a vague-minded creature to whom every boarder was a person dimly seen, important only in that such and such a room paid its way'. Yet the separation between Dan and his brother Gil was, we have been told (more explicitly in the book version), partly precipitated by Dan's sophistication with women!

Dan Neelan does not hear her words - once again he is musing about Gil and his death - but he is brought back from the speculative world by the widow's talking. She now remembers his brother, who used this address as a blind, to meet the Empire's 'home-address regulations'. Gil left, it seems, on the day Dan felt him die. And we have learned something more about life in the Empire.

Now, in rapid succession, Van Vogt introduces us to some of the institutions of the Empire: the Eugenics Institute, where Dan was raised with his brother, which cannot help him quickly; the police, who have a publicity agent whose unfeeling reaction is 'Forget it!'; a bank account exists in an out-of-town bank, in Gil's name, to which he cannot have access for six months; Gil's former employer, the Atomic Research Corporation, has no record of what happened to him after he left two years before.

Some of these institutions are familiar to the reader, but Van Vogt now wrenches us from the familiar with great speed. Up to this point we have been moving along inside Dan Neelan's mind, more or less in real time, but three weeks pass in the course of the next paragraph, in which Dan spends most of his money in advertising for the lost brother.

At this point Dan Neelan begins to interact with the world around him; up to this point he has been almost entirely a spectator, and the change is surprising. By coincidence after these three weeks Neelan suddenly starts to seek work on the day he receives a call from the Eugenics Institute. When he seeks work we learn more about Isher society.

Public Ad machines (see illustration on page 30 while reading text on page 14) are coin-operated personal systems for job-hunting; computers have no role in this society. Neelan describes his experience but does not want a regular job. The clerk points out that contracts are contracts, and are difficult to avoid: 'Besides, the powerful Engineer's Guild would not permit employment except under such terms'. (The clerk is speaking to us, not to Dan Neelan, when he uses the word 'powerful'.)

By chance there is a job which exactly fits his needs (and by chance it is the job from which his brother vanished). His visit to the Eugenics Institute brings only the advice that he should visit the Weapon Shops. Dan carries a Weapon Shop (defensive) gun, so he knows all about THE RIGHT TO BUY WEAPONS IS THE RIGHT TO BE FREE, but he has never realized previously that the Weapon Shops did more than supply weapons.

In the Weapon Shop Dan is given an address via pre-typewriter technology; as Dan walks back to Mrs Dendley's lodging-house Van Vogt is given an opportunity to describe more of the ways of Imperial City and its Empress. The city is lit at night by energy absorbed by the pavements during the day, and from his lodgings Dan can see both the Palace and the bright lights of 'downtown'.

On the next day he visits the address given at which the 'likely' job is. It turns out to be a blind, and Dan is redirected via picturephone to another address which is - and here 'it seemed to him that there was a fatal flaw in the physical structure of his brain; and that flaw was now cracking under pressure' - the address is the one given him by the Weapon Shop. Dan now understands why, during the interview at the blind, his interrogator hesitated at times; he recognized Dan (who is, after all, his brother's twin) and did not know what to make of him.
(TO BE CONTINUED)

Forms of Power in Recent Australian Science Fiction

Sneja Gunew

This article is reprinted from Meanjin 41, June 1982. We are reprinting it because we want to bring it to the attention of the sf world, not all of which reads Meanjin. We are hoping that Sneja will write an update for ASFR.

The books reviewed in it are: Lee Harding (ed.), Rooms of Paradise. Penguin, 1978; Lee Harding (ed.), The Altered I. Norstrilia, 1976; George Turner (ed.), The View from the Edge. Norstrilia, 1977; George Turner, Beloved Son. Sphere, 1979; Lee Harding, Displaced Person. Penguin, 1981; Damien Broderick, The Dreaming Dragons. Penguin, 1980; John Bailey, The Moon Baby. Angus & Robertson, 1978.]

Science fiction is a big boy now
- George Turner [1]

A recent conference at the Humanities Research Centre in Canberra (Speculative Fiction: The Australian Context, 18-19 July 1981) ended with the resolution that more stringent editorial criticism was required to ensure the correct growth of the still fledgling (after thirty years?) talents of Australian sf. Not only editors but critics in general were needed. At present two critical outlets exist in this country: Bruce Gillespie's pioneering but at present barely surviving SF Commentary, and Van Ikin's Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature. As George Turner stated in a paper delivered at the conference [2], the fact that the Literature Board had funded several sf projects indicated that the genre commanded a certain respect, but questions were raised as to whether this respect was well-founded and whether it was being expressed systematically. What exactly can one say about Australian sf? What genre definitions do Australian critics and writers recognize? Is there anything particularly indigenous about the use to which they put the genre?

George Turner, a long-time reviewer of sf in the Melbourne Age, is an advocate of certain forms of prescriptive criticism, as is Bruce Gillespie. In a recent anthology of sf criticism (The Stellar Gauge, Norstrilia, 1980), edited by Michael Tolley (University of Adelaide) and Kirpal Singh (University of Singapore), Turner, who elsewhere has vehemently denied any allegiance to what he sees as generic obsessions, reveals his critical premises to the extent of defining sf as the 'fiction of change and the effects of change on modern society'. [3] His corollary is that sf writers have a responsibility to acquaint themselves with the relevant fields of knowledge or run the risk of encouraging 'future shock and alienation by their dissemination of doubtfully arguable conclusions'. [4] In the same anthology Gillespie pleads similarly for novels which concern themselves with 'future possibilities' instead of trading in 'cheap wish fulfilment', and argues further that writers need to learn from

the nineteenth-century realist novel's development of 'character' as a fictional staple. [5]

Defining sf as a genre has been a favourite parlour game amongst critics ever since Brian Aldiss's Billion Year Spree (1973) fixed the first sf novel proper as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818). Robert Scholes's Structural Fabulation (1975) was a landmark in this hinterland of critical theory when he defined 'fabulation' as 'a fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way'. [6] But when it came to defining 'structural fabulation' the entranced reader was merely left with a vague notion that the genre derived from 'didactic romance' but was a 'didactical antithesis of dogmatic fabulation'. [7] The emphasis on the didactic (if not the dogmatic) would seem to be in accord with both Turner and Gillespie.

More recently Darko Suvin (founding editor of the influential French-Canadian journal Science-Fiction Studies) has located two fundamental and conflicting impulses in the genre which are, roughly speaking, a cognitive one and an anti-rationalist escapist one. The former comprises the critical and the radical, the latter the unthinking and reactionary. The former is 'allied to the rise of the subversive social classes' and is found by Suvin in Eastern, particularly Russian, sf. It is a favourite genre for notes from underground. The second impulse in sf is that of a 'mystifying escapism' which takes pleasure in 'surface sensationalism' [8], and is linked by Suvin and others with the decline of the bourgeoisie. [9] Both writers and readers in this second area are seen as deriving pleasure from semi-mystical apocalyptical modes, destroying a world they can no longer control with impunity. The radical element in sf has not, according to these critics, been substantially practised by Western exponents. For Suvin the future survival and strengths of the genre lie in its ability to stand outside and to criticize social patterns and institutions:

> SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. [10]

Patrick Parrinder's Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching (1980) echoes these sentiments and devotes a whole chapter to the analysis of sf as a consumer product, but unlike Suvin concentrates on the English-speaking scene:

> The sociologist may approach an SF story in one of three ways: as a product, bearing the imprint of social forces at every level from fundamental narrative structures to the precise forms in which it is manufactured, distributed and sold; as a communication, or message, with a particular function for a particular audience; and, finally, as a document articulating and passing judgment upon the social situation from which it emerges. [11]

His conclusions about this aspect of sf are the following:

> The exact paraliterary role of science fiction at its various stages of development has still to be defined. What is clear, however, is that if we wish to understand this genre we must consider it not as a formulaic 'sub-literature', but as an autonomous mode of writing with a history and traditions at variance with, and partly suppressed by, the dominant literary forms. [12]

Parrinder thus echoes Suvin in seeing sf as hovering between consolation and criticism but essentially at odds with 'dominant literary forms', presumably realist mimetic literary conventions. This last factor would appear to be at variance with approaches taken by Turner and Gillespie. Understandably, one becomes suspicious of such huge generalizations but when used with circumspection they can serve as a useful starting point for surveying a particular body of writing, in this case a motley collection of books which have appeared under publishers' rubrics as Australian science fiction. That conventional forms invariably convey conventional ideas is as much a half-truth of literary criticism as its converse, that non-realist modes are a guarantee of radical content. To what extent is either true of recent Australian sf? Is there radical form and/or content? To what extent has a particular Australian idiom developed?

In some aspects the second is more easily answered than the first. All the novels being reviewed here have Australian settings. In some, however, this amounts more to 'local colour' than in others. Those, like Broderick's novel, which rely on setting give one the impression that Australian features are used to signify the mythic, to incorporate those vestigial remains that all literature shares, according to Northrop Frye, who claims that all literature is displaced myth. Those mythic paradigms of literature are seen by Suvin as being essentially anti-rationalist and hence at variance with sf's prime function, the cognitive:

> Where the myth claims to explain once and for all the essence of phenomena, SF first posits them as problems and then explores where they lead; it sees the mythical static identity as an illusion, usually as fraud, at best only as a temporary realization of potentially limitless contingencies. It does not ask about The Man or The World, but which man?: in which kind of world?: and why such a man in such a kind of world? As a literary genre, SF is fully as opposed to supernatural or metaphysical estrangement as it is to naturalism or empiricism. [13]

According to those prescriptive terms of reference, Broderick's manner of using specific Australian elements means that he is not, strictly speaking, writing sf, but we will return to this point later. That some writers cash in on unmistakably Australian idioms is shown by such stories as Kevin McKay's 'Pie Row Joe' in Harding's anthology _Rooms of Paradise_, and in some of the stories-in-process in the anthologies _The Altered I_ and _The View from the Edge_, both the results of workshops held in Melbourne.

The appeal is limited, a kind of Jindyworobak of sf. Turner uses the Australian idiom to greater advantage in his own first venture into sf, Beloved Son. But Australian-ness can, after all, be measured in less obvious and more interesting ways, such as the manner in which institutions and ideologies creep into this 'future' fiction. This returns us to our first question, whether recent Australian sf can usefully be seen as predominantly 'radical' or 'reactionary'.

The books being surveyed here converge in one important area: all are preoccupied with certain kinds of power structures which seem familiar in spite of the futuristic trappings. But to what extent they offer a critique of the familiar remains debatable. Turner's Beloved Son foregrounds the ambiguities inherent in the exercise of power in a post-catastrophe setting. His is in many ways a meditation on the adage plus ca change ... Lee Harding's book, Displaced Person, aimed at the adolescent market, illustrates the frustrations of political impotence and social invisibility for young adults. This poignant contemporary theme suggests that one of Suvin's 'subversive social classes' may well include our disaffected youth, who will find a congenial fictional form in future sf. Damien Broderick's The Dreaming Dragons takes up the power theme by locating received truth for our future alienated society in a 'mentally retarded' child and an educated Aboriginal. Reassurances are found in a Laingian reverence for those who have abjured institutional reality. John Bailey's The Moon Baby is about power structures as they relate to women, or, rather, men's fears about women. In the last case one worries with Turner about the need for more editorial surveillance: the mysteries of the politics of publishing in this field require a separate study.

Although not so recently published, two books from Norstrilia Press, appearing in 1976 and 1977 respectively, examine power structures in perhaps the most challenging way, as they operate on, rather than within the writing process: The Altered I, edited by Lee Harding and The View from the Edge, edited by George Turner. Each, in quite different ways, is the record of a workshop. The former was conducted by Ursula Le Guin and is very much a record of writing as process, which makes it highly useful for both students and teachers. In The Altered I authority operates in various and mediated ways ranging from the authority of the 'author' to that of the 'reader' in producing meaning; George Turner's anthology is a more polished piece of work, based on a workshop conducted by himself together with Christopher Priest and Vonda McIntyre. Each story has been edited and in several cases re-written for publication, and each piece is followed by Turner's own assessing comments. Hence the immediacy of process is to some extent lost and the stories are indeed 'processed'. The collection demonstrates in part, one presumes, the kind of editorial authority that was being solicited at the 1981 HRC conference.

George Turner's Beloved Son appeared some years ago and makes a welcome return in paperback. It is an intelligent, if at times somewhat earnest roman philosophique or thesis novel. Borrowing from Turner's own prescriptive remarks on fictional form in The View from the Edge, character is indeed expressed through action

and the post-catastrophe world is visualized in multi-dimensional ways. The space voyage is important only in the sense of allowing for the return by a former generation to function as the sceptical observers standard in utopian and dystopian fiction. Their main purpose is to qualify the new-born utopia and to reveal it as its own diabolic double. Turner's brave new earthlings are all youthful and are watched over by a benevolent 'security force' whose radical nature consists of appearing to deprive that term of irony. They really are meant to secure individual freedoms. What in fact occurs is that the irony surrounding the term 'security' becomes doubled.

The novel's central thesis, implicitly, is an age-old fear whose structure has been clarified for us by Lèvi-Strauss: that culture's tampering with nature engenders many forms of guilt which need to be exorcised or mediated in diverse ways. Culture in Turner's book is exemplified by biological engineering and nature by youth's organic maturing; the mediator is 'Security'. The picture becomes more complex when we note that since Oedipus the culture-nature anxiety has been visualized in terms of the 'family romance', or rather gothic horror tale. Thus we have the configuration Earth-Mother-Nature versus Science-Father-Culture with, in this case, sf as the mediating fictional offspring. One cannot, per se, take exception to Turner's use of the nature--culture formula, in terms of these oppositions; in some respects it is used in all of the books reviewed here and provides a useful perspective for testing the radical-reactionary axis. What one does note, however, is that in spite of the epigraph heading this essay, sf is not, in some ways, a very big boy after all. Let me explain.

Ever since Mary Shelley's Frankenstein the traditional fiction that exemplifies the control of nature by culture has been the male creation story. Turner's cloning motif follows this pattern in which the creature turns back on the anxious male mother, ranging from policemen to ombudsmen who anxiously watch over the birth of the new world where every step of parturition is rigidly controlled. But wait a minute, the real villain in this novel is in fact a woman (The Lady) who absolves culture, the male mother, by being the archetypal bad mother, nature. The lady becomes the scapegoat for supporting culture (male birth) because she thereby reneges on her 'natural' role and, being caught in a double bind, runs amok. She appears to be a reactionary anomaly in an otherwise intelligent book, but at the same time signals certain blind spots in the author.

Another slight weakness in the book and one that is inherent to the unified didactic impulse of the thesis novel, is that Turner's attempt to use multiple perspective does not really succeed. In the long run all the various voices are cloned from the same authorial omniscient perspective, preaching a particular lesson. In so far as reliable narrators are an issue, the endorsed didactic direction is proclaimed by the fathers rather than the sons. The refrain uttered by the sons is 'We're guided; we don't evolve.' (p. 222). The fathers in turn proffer the sobering advice that:

> 'The permissive, superficially easygoing world possessed every weapon needed to turn it into a concentration camp.' (p. 132)

In other words, it is too late to allow for 'natural' growth. Power between men (fathers and sons) is dexterously presented and the conclusion is suitably ambiguous: one is encouraged to question whether the end ever justifies the means. But the prevailing voice of conscience, the anachronistically humanistic psychologist Lindley, is to some extent undermined, so far as reliability is concerned (at least for some readers), when he indulges in such throwaway speculations as the following:

> The voice came from the level of their feet, from a freckled girl who rested her elbows on the edge of the platform and gazed up at them with too much seriousness spoiling emerging good looks. (p. 349)

Indeed, this could be said of the novel in general where didacticism jostles with emerging realism. Some of us quite enjoy the combination. Turner's story 'In a Petri Dish Upstairs' in Rooms of Paradise rings some entertaining changes on the theme of power games between 'soft' and 'hard' worlds: the story is given added piquancy by his playing with dialect to indicate an effete society of 'orbiters'. It is something Turner does to a lesser extent in the novel, where self-conscious use of language rests mainly on the employment of outmoded figures of Australian idiomatic speech by the space voyagers to provide humour for the new society. In the short story we are again presented with patriarchal custodians and a hierarchical structure common to both worlds: the bottom of the heap in both cases is occupied by women, who are rendered capable of revenge but not of reversals. The real power-brokers continue on their uninterrupted paternalistic way in spite of the deaths of 'children'.

Damien Broderick's The Dreaming Dragons departs in most obvious ways from fictional mimetic norms and this makes for challenging reading, but the content is ultimately no match for this form of narrative courageousness. As we have seen, according to Suvin's fictional orientation points, it is myth rather than sf. One is also reminded of a recent critic's statement that 'more and more writers are taking refuge in quasi-mystical solutions which eliminate man'. [14] Essentially Broderick's novel revolves around the search for man's gnostic self. Like Turner's book, it takes us literally underground, the traditional locus where psychic fears are both confronted and overcome. The here-be--dragons terrain is poetically constructed in richly allusive language. In this case the multiple narrators really do offer multiple perspectives.Paradoxically, since one has fed on diversity, this renders the final confrontation with reductive Jungian archetypes even more of a disappointment. The central symbol of Rainbow Serpent/Dragon turns out to be the Edenic serpent and yes, the bad mother:

> She waited in the vaults with her wiles and power, and Bill knew finally that he would never escape her. (p. 215)

But at least in Broderick's case the archetypes of the family romance are examined and labelled. The snake is balanced by the male centaur as nurturing but also threatening father. In this case the children, or at least the sons, do inherit this earth and the policeman, or, more specifically, the generals are reduced to babbling incoherence. The answer is theosophy rather than science:

> 'The brain and nervous system,' he tells them, expanding the glowing display into a giant web of light, 'is an indexing system, a file of coding procedures, a folded aerial a million metres in length. The deep structures of thought and language are a common property, spread with massive redundancy through the brains of every human alive on the planet. We are one another.' (p. 240)

The parallel evolution of _saurus sapiens_ and _homo sapiens_ is ingenious but the final messianic 'answer' seems to be unqualified; we are meant to take it straight. Nature or supernature triumphs over culture. The cosmic power struggle is visualized once again in terms of the family romance with nurturing qualities being the preserve of males who play out a range of variations on the father-son relationship. One point of interest in this respect is the eighth chapter, in which for tenuous plot motives we are presented with a clever pastiche _à la_ Solzhenitsyn in which the ultimate humiliation experienced by a Russian dissenter occurs when he is reduced by drugs to a state of childhood. His agony of powerlessness forms a clever balance to the powerfulness of the other child, the messianic holy fool, called Mouse.

Broderick's 'A Passage in Earth' in _Rooms of Paradise_ is a less ambitious but in several ways more radically critical disruption of both narrative and social norms. The story is told from the point of view of a bisexual spaceship which spawns a 'virgin' to bring the messiah to a warring humanity exemplified by twin tyrants who struggle for supremacy in a baroque setting. That particular messiah finally turns out to be twin girls, and on the way Broderick reveals his humorous awareness of gender ambiguities and complexities within certain kinds of schematized power structures.

Lee Harding's _Displaced Person_ is centrally concerned with the humiliation and oppression of children. The adolescent narrator occupies a no-man's-land between childhood and adulthood before he inherits his patrimony. Inner anxieties about invisibility and powerlessness are projected outwards to form an aura of unreality; the psychological torments of adolescence structure the physical outer world. Within his twilight world, the narrator encounters two guides: a delinquent girl and an old tramp reminiscent of those in Celtic fairytales. The relationship between the two adolescents is well conveyed, the sentimentality credible. The old man is a little too fey.

The book's strongest feature is its evocation of adolescent consciousness solipsistically projected outwards. The fall into normality, the conventional, is presented as being a mixture of both relief and nostalgia for a displacement from reality in

which a rose is only that. In the unfallen world objects and events are focused in detailed and heightened clarity without being qualified by their contexts; they are not part of a mundane continuum. But in spite of the skilled writing, it is possible to ignore the sf component in this book almost completely. So the question, as with Broderick's novel, is whether this work draws upon the considerable strengths of the sf genre.

The narrator of John Bailey's The Moon Baby describes himself in the following terms:

> I'm like a jellyfish that floats in the water out there. I'm a parasite on society and go wherever its tide and time may take me. Society is just too big, too complex; there's too many people, too many masters. What can I do? I drug my mind, I eat and then I live and I die. I have no causes, no morals, no beliefs. (p. 117)

One supposes that this is designed to disarm any reader seeking a reliable position from which to judge the Weltanschauung of the novel. The book, in spite of this strategy, emerges as an obsessive and oppressive study in misogyny. The plot is loosely structured around the machinations to organize an illegal beauty contest by the 'Members of Male Defiance'. The prime candidate is the narrator's sister/lover, Sarah. All the women in the book seem fixated on male castration; at the same time that woman is represented as being synonymous with sex, sex in turn signifies the vagina dentata. Interfemale relationships are outside the natural, and the nastiest creation in the book is a quasi-female 'unisex' whose perversions consist of limited forms of so-called lesbianism. Sarah the sex goddess is just like the doll perved on by dear old dad. The futuristic element, which is often seen as the definitive component of sf, becomes an excuse for unloading all the prejudices and fascism that would not be tolerated in realist mainstream fiction, at least not above the counter. In short the book constitutes pornography. In Angela Carter's terms, 'flesh' is turned into 'meat'. [15] It is, however, an excellent example of the reactionary element in sf in which the 'future' becomes a camouflage for perpetuating the political and social obscenities of the 'past'. But fortunately this is not the whole story. The shape of sf to come is exemplified in the two workshop anthologies already mentioned where writers like David Grigg, Philippa Maddern and Micheline Cyna-Tang seem more than capable of perpetuating the solid contribution made by the established authors like Turner, Broderick, and Harding. But they need encouragement, and it is a sad fact that Norstrilia Press have published no further such anthologies.

Thus sf in Australia has in some measure approached adulthood but is not yet confident in the role. Certain insecurities are manifested in the 'big boy' syndrome which is exemplified in several ways: first, by the reactionary and sometimes downright nasty attitudes to women displayed by some of the practitioners, which is symptomatic of the fact that futuristic extrapolation can cope with only a limited number of conservative launching pads; second, by the conservative tastes assumed to exist in the readers of the genre by local publishers. Whether or not Australian readers of sf are ready for experimental fictional forms to

house this literature of social experiment remains conjectural, because publishers who supply the Australian market are taking few chances. In both form and content Australian science fiction takes 'change' only so far.

Notes

1 George Turner (ed.), The View from the Edge, Norstrilia, Melbourne, 1977, p. 24
2 George Turner, 'Australian SF . . . 1950-1980', Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature, April, 1982.
3 George Turner, 'Frederik Pohl as a Creator of Future Societies', in The Stellar Gauge, Norstrilia, Melbourne, 1980, p. 112.
4 ibid., p. 131
5 Bruce Gillespie, 'Literature Which Awakens Us: The Science Fiction of Brian W. Aldiss', in The Stellar Gauge, p. 164.
6 Robert Scholes, Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1975, p. 29
7 ibid., p. 102.
8 Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics of a Literary Genre, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979, p. ix.
9 Gérard Klein, 'Discontents in American Science Fiction', Science-Fiction Studies 11, March 1977; Charles Elkins, 'An Approach to the Social Functions of American Science Fiction', Science-Fiction Studies 13, November 1977.
10 Suvin, pp. 7-8.
11 Patrick Parrinder, Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching, Methuen, London, 1980, p. 29.
12 ibid., p. 47.
13 Suvin, p. 7.
14 Elkins, p. 231.
15 Angela Carter, The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography, Pantheon, New York, 1978, ch. 5.

Sf and the Dirty Little Virgin

Yvonne Rousseau

In Ursula Le Guin's Wild Angels, there is a 'Song' with the following ending:

> More inward than sex or even womb,
> inmost in woman is the girl intact,
> the dirty little virgin who sits and dreams
> and has nothing to do with fact.

Any experienced reader knows fact about the virgins of Western civilization - they are clean, tall and wistfully maternal towards imperfect humankind; their hands lie folded in one another, except when blessing the bowed necks of surrendering unicorns. They can have nothing to do with the first lines of 'Song':

> O when I was a dirty little virgin

I'd sit and pick my scabby knees ...

Typically, scabby-kneed little virgins grow up to be initiated into 'fact' by men. John Ruskin is the only man recorded to have told his wife the fact that women have no pubic hair; yet young women often find themselves receiving equally disconcerting fact, which directly contradicts their own knowledge of their sensations and intentions. An extreme case is Sigmund Freud's fact that female victims of incest had only imagined their plight - they were hysterics, who fitted into a new fact called 'the Electra complex'. That fact - like Aristotle's fact that women grow fewer teeth than men do - has had to be drastically modified, because of opposing statistical evidence. Yet a neoFreudian belief persists among certain (indeed, extremely certain) men: that women have comparatively little conscious knowledge or control of themselves - that a man's interpretation of what a woman feels or wants is more authoritative than her own. Science fiction devotees have a parallel experience; they get kindly told about themselves by an authority who first announces that he never reads science fiction and then explains to them exactly what they like about it and what is the matter with it.

But the science fiction devotees are in a far less complicated situation than the young woman who is told by a man what 'all women' are. Human beings - male and female alike - are partly mysterious to themselves; they sometimes discover that they have deluded themselves about their own motivations; and they can be astonished by capacities or proclivities that suddenly emerge when they are exposed to unusual pressures or opportunities. Thus, it seems only prudent to listen when outside opinions of oneself are offered; and being explained to oneself by a member of the opposite sex can have the same illicit lure as listening to a chiromancer - who likewise proposes to diagnose and prophesy from observing one's physical characteristics. The charm lies in the challenge of fitting things that seem irrelevant or outright wrong into the picture of oneself that one has already constructed. But sometimes fact about 'all women' cannot be made to fit and then, like Effie Ruskin considering her pubic hair, the woman must conclude either that she is a freak - an outcast from all other women - or else that her informant is wrong.

Gallium-based life forms (or old-fashioned Martians) might be puzzled by our young woman's hesitancy about dismissing an account of her feelings that comes from someone who has never been a young woman and that contradicts the evidence of her own senses. These observers might find it all too obvious that such accounts are projections, enlightening us only about the fears and desires of the man devising them. But, from the young woman's viewpoint, the man's account is a fact about the society she has to survive in; a fact about the interpretations and expectations of her that many men will have, regardless of her actual nature. Moreover, during her childhood, like other human beings, she will have attempted to learn from adults how to behave and what she can be. One way of learning is to read books; and she will have found, in reading mainstream fiction with adult characters, that overwhelmingly she has to identify with men (and thus with a male viewpoint) if she wants vicarious

adventures where bravery, skill, endurance and resourcefulness can be rehearsed in spirit by the reader. Heroines are likely to exemplify just youth and beauty - qualities which cannot be rehearsed, and which time and practice will not enlarge. Above all, these adult heroines exist only if there are heroes to see and esteem them; they teach that a young woman's essence is her image, as reflected in the eyes of a man.

Both sexes can find novels in which their unglamorous counterparts enact the mundane ordeals of suburban life. But, as Robert Sheckley has said, in 'The Search fór the Marvellous' (in Peter Nicholls (ed.), Science Fiction At Large, Gollancz, London, 1976):

> we do not quite believe in this prosaic world. Continually we are reminded of the strangeness of birth and death, the vastness of time and space, the unknowability of ourselves .... We understand our ethical duties very well, we believe in them and try to follow them. But there is the secret sadness still remaining, the sense that we were born to quest, that our essence is unknowable, that we are plant and phantom, creatures of unknown dimensions. But all we come face to face with is our actual condition: we are ghosts smothered in bread and butter. (pp. 192-3)

This is the spirit within all of us that 'has nothing to do with fact' and, apart from reading sf, a man can solace it a little by reading The Prisoner of Zenda, or other stories where the male hero battles evil incarnate instead of boardroom manoeuvres and trends in the economy. But the dirty-little-virgin element in women looks in vain for mainstream fiction of this kind with adult exemplars that are neither male, like heroes, nor secondary and passive, like heroines. Thus, her 'secret sadness' lingers on even in Zenda, thrill though she may to Rudolf Rassendyll's high determination that honour be held dearer than every other good. But somewhere in sf, where any aspect of the world can be changed, perhaps she will find direct expression at last?

Writers of either sex can comprehend the dirty little virgin and her predicament - as is shown by my first sf exemplar, Z for Zachariah (1975). It was written by American author Robert O'Brien (1922-73), whose most widely known novel is probably Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH (1971), since this has been made into a film (The Secret of NIMH). In Z for Zachariah, the world has been changed by a week-long war involving nuclear weapons, bacteria and nerve gas. A year later, sixteen-year-old Ann Burden, whose diary we are reading, lives on alone in the valley containing the Burdens' house and farm, the local store, and a small church. All around, the landscape is grey and lifeless. The valley has escaped this fate because it is a 'meteorological enclave'. Straight after the war, the second time Ann's family and the storekeeper and his wife drove out to investigate, they did not return. The last radio station stopped broadcasting months ago; it revealed terrible things happening among the few people left near Boston - towards the end, the commentator cried and raved and 'sounded crazy'. Remembering the frightening way the commentator sounded, Ann has mixed feelings now when she sees a man (in a strange plastic suit) slowly approaching the valley.

By removing the rest of the population, and by giving Ann nowhere to be except the valley, O'Brien has removed the fact of the normal judgemental context that Joanna Russ illuminates in The Female Man (Bantam, New York, 1975) when she contrasts Earth with the fictional all-female planet of Whileaway:

> There's no being out too late in Whileaway, or up too early, or in the wrong part of town, or unescorted ... In all of Whileaway there is ... no one who will follow you and try to embarrass you by whispering obscenities in your ear, no one who will attempt to rape you, no one who will warn you of the dangers of the street, no one who will stand on street corners, hot-eyed and vicious, jingling loose change in his pants pocket, bitterly bitterly sure that you're a cheap floozy, hot and wild, who likes it, who can't say no, who's making a mint off it, who inspires him with nothing but disgust, and who wants to drive him crazy. (pp. 81-2)

Because of this context, Joanna Russ's Earthcity character, Jeannine Dadier, spends 'nights and nights alone. ("You can't," says the stairwell. "You can't," says the street.)'. By contrast, Ann Burden has grown up on a farm, and knows the facts of breeding, but not of city life. She is a churchgoer who has intended to be an English teacher; she plays the piano (agreeably, but not at an advanced level) and cares about both fiction and poetry. In her solitude, she labours hard, cultivating and planting without the aid of the tractor (since she cannot get petrol for it), tending the cattle and poultry, assessing and planning for the future. Like Le Guin's dirty little virgin, she might 'dream about some man of thirty' - but her only real 'date' has been at a highschool dance when she was thirteen.

The man moving into the valley grew up in a no-frills low-income household, and has spent his adult life doing chemistry - first at college, then for four years in the Navy, then in graduate school, and finally in an underground Air Force laboratory, designing a 'safe-suit' in which soldiers could safely move about where atom bombs had fallen. He and a colleague were alone in the laboratory with the prototype when the bombing began.

The events of the novel are suspenseful, and I shall not reveal them here - except to say that the reader remains in doubt whether the man really is criminally insane, as his actions suggest, or whether his actions are rational, given the insane assumptions of the overspecialized and fragmented culture he has grown up in. He is unmarried, about thirty years old, has no small talk, and is not a novel-reader. Myths about 'all women' may be all that he has to guide him. He intends to initiate Ann Burden into fact; from his viewpoint, her resistance amounts to behaving 'like a schoolgirl'. And he is used to conducting personal relations as (according to Ann's private assessment) 'a game of move-counter-move, like a chess game'.

In Z for Zachariah, the liberties that sf can take with the world have allowed the dirty little virgin to act as hero - to be resourceful, courageous and independent without incurring blame. An equally resourceful young woman, but with an even more restricted habitat, is the hero of my second sf exemplar: 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' (1979), a short story by Australian

writer Philippa Maddern (in Van Ikin (ed.), Australian Science Fiction. UQP, St Lucia, 1982).

Maddern has placed her young woman in a bureaucratic future world where office work comes in regulation twenty-day shifts with regulation forty-day lay-offs and people move 'endlessly from city to city, following the miniscule regional rises in job placements, restless, anonymous conglomerate crowds'. In childhood, the young woman - 'she' - 'had wept and begged not to grow up'; she has longed for stability and, inspired by 'a small poem about mice and men living in the spaces left vacant by each other', she has disappeared from the regulation world and now remains in the same office building, spending her days hiding in ceilings or in a 'three-cornered cave behind the display boards stacked against the conference room wall'. At night, using a lumi-torch, she roams the building in darkness, stealing and caching food from the fridges and desk-drawers, reading memos and letters for hints of threatening change, sometimes washing because 'a person depending heavily on their sense of smell cannot afford the distraction of their own stink'. Her furtive lifestyle keeps her thin - almost certainly amenhorrhoeal - so that, whether or not she has ever been initiated sexually, her present physical condition is essentially that of a dirty little virgin with a territory of her own; precariously held, and obtained only by a complete retreat from 'fact'.

This young woman's refuge (like Ann Burden's) is threatened when a man discovers her presence. The man (Jorgensen) claims to be only a 'researcher' - a helpful person, warning her of new security mechanisms (soon to be installed) which will inevitably mean discovery and capture. But she knows that he belongs to 'a different world' - the world of power - and can 'safely lie to her'. Inside her own domain, in darkness, she can run around him 'in beautiful clever circles' and go up the stairs 'as quickly and silently as a draught'. But, successfully flushed out of her territory by the information he gives her, she is filled with terror by the space outside and by the pre-dawn light. Jorgensen (the 'researcher') has been waiting outside, and now he keeps in step with her, his cheek still marked where she had slashed at him with a chisel. 'Soon be daylight,' he tells her: an exceedingly ominous ending to the story.

In both these works, sf has given temporary scope to a female hero by isolating her from a world controlled by men. She has had the chance to exist unobserved - as an active being, independent of other people's images of her. But people do exist, in part, as the images that other people have of them. Getting to know one another involves the interplay and mutual adaptation of images that were constructed from first impressions and preconceived ideas. For the dirty little virgin - persisting 'inmost in woman' - the problem, therefore, is not just that a man's image of her inner life may be discordant with her own sense of it. The true problem is the imbalance in the degrees to which his viewpoint and hers have been expressed. Men's viewpoints have long been known, and accepted as objective, with women adapting their expectations accordingly - until the context makes a woman's complementary viewpoint so difficult to express that men's attempts at enquiry are typically met with silence or

evasion. Perhaps sf at the borderline of fantasy (with its special opportunities) can redress this imbalance - to everyone's advantage.

One possible exemplar is The Hieros Gamos of Sam and An Smith (1969) by British writer Josephine Saxton. 'Hieros gamos' means 'sacred marriage', and the novel perhaps represents a dream-construction of the Smiths' marriage by their baby daughter, Miriam - a dirty little virgin who is 'dreaming many dreams'. (Or perhaps Miriam herself is the 'sacred marriage' of parental cells.) At first the novel seems to be set in a post-holocaust world. A boy, travelling alone, comes upon a woman, bloodied and dead, with a newborn baby girl wailing beside her. Despite his feeling that 'he should have nothing to do with the baby, it would bring sorrow for him, death, perhaps disease, suffering, all the bad things that came with people', the boy takes the baby with him and cares for her in a deserted 'Universal Store'. When she is a little girl, he teaches her to talk, so that she can understand him; the result is that 'he for his part now understood many more things about her, and she understood less about him.' They travel on together, the girl becoming aware that 'one ought to face facts and truth, although there seemed to be something in her, growing as she got older, that more and more made up untruths that were pleasanter to live with than reality ... It was as if she had always been awake, but as the years passed she was going slowly to sleep.' She grows up, they marry and have a baby, and return to the Universal Store, where they clean up the rubbish left during An's babyhood, as well as caring for their own baby. At last they catch a bus back to their suburban home, and Miriam is put to bed in her Swedish wooden cot.

The boy in this novel has initiated the dirty little virgin into many facts. And, although he is before her with knowledge, the absence of reality in their world removes the more drastic power-inequality that distorts the relationships in the other two works. Meanwhile - and lastly - Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve (1977) is a brilliant illumination of the images the world has now. It is a first-person account of the adventures in future America of the sadistic Englishman, Evelyn, who is transformed against his will into Eve - a Playboy centrefold incarnate - and who meets (in a glass mansion in the desert) with Tristessa, the supreme Garbo-like movie star, whose image is the opposite of the dirty little virgin's self-image - who demonstrates, with 'incomparable tears, every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity', thus provoking the exclamation: 'Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion. Woman? Ah!' This, too, is sf employed in the service of the dirty little virgin.

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Genders in the Koorie language consist of masculine, feminine, edible and neuter.

Whiteford Writes Back!

Wynne Whiteford

Two things triggered this article. One was Russell Blackford's analysis of practically everything I've written since Aussiecon One (ASFR # 1), which is the most penetrating and comprehensive review I've ever had. Russell actually seems to have read every word of all the books and stories he's mentioned. He even pointed out things I hadn't realized myself, but generally had to agree with after I'd seen them. Comparing his thoroughness with that of most of the rest of us reviewers, I think he's in line for nomination for the William Atheling Award, or at least the Guinness Book of Records! But more about Russell later.

The immediate cause of this response was the editorial in ASFR # 2, where John Bangsund gave such a scintillating eulogy for me that it read like an obituary. I've been compelled to reply, if only to show everyone I'm still around. (When I read John's piece I was tempted to look in a mirror to check up.)

John ignited a lot of memories. He was intensely stimulating to work with. One of our joint creations that comes to mind was the Lodbrog Saga. One day John chanced to mention a historical character, Lodbrok (which I misheard as Lodbrog). We both had a knack of making quick cartoon-type sketches, and while John's back was turned I drew a monstrous, scaly alien on his desk-pad, and gave it the caption A LODBROG. Returning, John looked at me in mock amazement, and said 'What? You mean you haven't heard of the great Ragnar Lodbrok who took his longboats up the Seine and held Paris to ransom, then later invaded Northumbria?'

This was doubly true: (1) I hadn't, and (2) he did, back in the 9th century. This produced an amended version of Lodbrog, slightly more human, complete with Viking horns on his hat, a sort of prototype Hagar the Horrible. Drawn by us alternately, he went through a series of adventures that made Conan's look like boyish fun. Incidentally, it was characteristic of John's civilized discretion that he stuck to my misspelling of Lodbrog, although as a confirmed Scandiaphile (try that on your Funk & Wagnall) he obviously knew the correct spelling. John, who is of Norwegian descent, has a great enthusiasm for things Norse. This even extended to his Tandberg taperecorder, Norwegian-made, which he thought unexcelled. In his study was a painting of the old bay steamer Reliance, which had been captained by his Norwegian grandfather.

At the time, I knew little about Norway. Years later, when I was driving through it, I kept running across strange little quirks of Norse humour that gave me a sense of déjà vu, and kept throwing my mind back to John. It all fell into place in a town in the mountains east of Oslo, where someone has built a combined tourist bureau and real estate office, two stories high, inside a Titanic statue of a mythical troll, towering at the end of the

town square with a gap-toothed grin. It looked just like one of John Bangsund's creations grown gigantic.

But to return to Russell's commentary, most of his criticisms I agree with and have noted. A few, though, seem to warrant a little more examination. He says, for instance (ASFR # 1, p. 30): 'War is never treated ... as a technological impetus (in what may be an example of wishful thinking).' Going back a step, I think the main driving force is international competition. In the past, war was its most dramatic expression, but this is something you can't directly extrapolate into the future, as it becomes more widely obvious that another world war between the major powers would finish human civilization as effectively as something cancelled the dinosaurs. In the future, I think, other aspects of international competition will become dominant - trade supremacy, the struggle for markets. In the past two decades, the space race has provided a major thrust to development, especially in the electronic and computer explosion, with spin-offs ranging from teflon frypans to solar power-cells, from pocket calculators to key finders that play little tunes when you whistle, each device unimportant in itself, yet contributing one more bit to an overall picture that's changing our civilization at a greater rate of acceleration than at any time in the past.

Russell made a point, quite valid, about the use of similar names in different stories. Yes, guilty as charged, although in many cases I hadn't noticed it until I read Russell's article, even though Paul Collins once pointed out that I had a fairly central character called Max in three different stories.

Then there's the succession of names with a 'k' sound at the beginning. Kranson, Kranzen, Connor, Kosaka - and the kesrii - I think that sprang from the old advertising recipe - 'the krisp krack of the K'. (Well, see what it did for Kodak, Kellogg's and K-mart.)

Now that this has been pointed out to me, I've got over the problem in my next novel, Lake of the Sun, by having a couple of important characters called Paul and Russell. Also, the commander of a Martian base is called George.

Another point that Russell brought to light was the similarity of incidents in quite unrelated stories. This will be something to watch. I have on file a large number of disjointed scenes that have been typed out as I visualized them, intended for future use. Sometimes they lie around for years, then the chance arises to fit them into some story under construction. Sometimes, alas, I seem to have doubled up on one. The things many readers remember about a story, even if unconsciously, are vivid scenes that can be visualized. From the writer's point of view, I think these are worth typing out as soon as possible after they occur to him, even though he can see no use for them at the moment. One instance of this is in Thor's Hammer, where the central characters are trapped on the surface of an asteroid which has been deflected from its orbit, and which is about to crash into another asteroid. I first wrote this scene as the climax of a short story in about 1957 or '58 in New York. I didn't submit the story, because I thought the scene was strong enough to

become the climax of a longer novella (I wasn't thinking in terms of novels then). The idea of looking up and seeing the inverted surface of another world moving down on you like an elevator gave me goose-bumps. So the story went into a 'hold' file. Finally, it became the genoblast of Thor's Hammer, with the rest of the plot constructed forward and backward from that scene. (Of course, the idea of the Dyson whip being used around an asteroid with a highly inclined orbit was the other idea that fertilized it.)

Russell has pointed out that the aliens invading the planet of the Thekkar in 'Sawdust Supermen' are very like - or could be - the kesrii of the series starting with 'Beyond Aldebaran'. This is true, but its damn hard to create a believable alien. You can think up all sorts of fantastic beings if you don't have to worry about details like internal structure or evolutionary development, or what they breathe and eat. But if you try to stay within the scientifically plausible, it takes a lot of work.

I remember once seeing a re-enactment of what must have been the creation of a centaur. Over 30 years ago, my wife and I had parked by the beach at Ricketts Point to watch a blazing orange and saffron sunset, with Venus high in the west and below it, just discernible in the glare if you knew where to look, the fainter, pinkish speck of Mercury. A black sand-bar stretched across the metallic water, and along it came a girl riding a horse. As she turned its head shoreward, the head disappeared against the black silhouette of the body, and Laurel and I simultaneously said 'Centaur!'. 'Perhaps,' she added, 'there were centaurs.' 'Only like that,' I said. 'Someone in Greece saw something just like that.' When you try to work out the skeletal details of a centaur - heart/s, lungs, oesophagus - forget it!

Once you've designed a workable alien being, I don't see anything wrong with recycling it. After all, H. G. Wells did this with his Martians. They first appeared in the short story 'The Crystal Egg', written around 1895, where a kind of television view of Mars shows octopus-like beings, round-headed, presumably large-brained, hopping about on tentacles and living by sucking blood from ape-like animals which are their cattle. (Ridiculous? The Masai use their cattle to extract milk and blood to live on.) These beings surface again in Wells's The War of the Worlds (1898), with its unforgettable curtain-raiser:

> ... across that gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.

The same type of being also appears near the very end of The Time Machine, where the Time Traveller has voyaged on almost to the end of the Earth's lifetime:

> ... I saw again the moving thing on the shoal .... against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles

> trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about.

- Wells's picture of Earth's last survivor.

John W. Campbell once laid down the dictum that in any story of alien contact the human race has to win. Since his readers presumably all belonged to the human race, this made sense. Usually this was contrived by putting the aliens at a lower level of technological development than us, as in the Bob Silverberg-Randy Garrett collaborations of the Nidor stories, The Dawning Light, et al., by 'Robert Randall'. Sometimes, they might be apparently superior, but with some fatal flaw that enables the hero to defeat them, as Dominic Flandry ultimately outmanoeuvres the space-going wolf-pack ardharziro in Poul Anderson's We Claim These Stars. Wells coped with this dilemma differently in his The War of the Worlds by making the protagonist all terrestrial life, not just the human race, so that the huge-brained, octopus-like Martians, knowing nothing of Earth life's processes of putrefaction, are defeated by unseen bacteria. So, widening the cast of characters to reach down into the microscopic, we won!

Most fictional aliens seem to have been built up from a known type of animal, because the reader has to be able to visualize something, and you have to give him a starting point. Try it the other way, and you get into the sort of trouble Lovecraft had with his cthulu. He dreamed up a five-sided thing with eyes around the top of it and tentacles to walk on, and spent three pages describing it in unbelievable detail, including its digestive and eliminative system. In the end, you still didn't believe it. Nobody believes it. Nobody talks about it much, because probably they can't pronounce it. I'm not saying Howard Lovecraft didn't evoke an eerie atmosphere - but credibility? Yuk!

When I was trying to work out an alien life-form for the 'kesrii' stories, I was trying various forms out on a typewriter with my cat curled up on the end of the desk asleep, as he often does. The thing I'd pictured looked worse than Lovecraft's cthulu when I got it down in cold type. With a loud expletive (deleted) I ripped the paper out of the typewriter. The cat raised his head, looked at me with reproachful yellow eyes as if to say 'Do you mind?', washed himself briefly, then went back to sleep. We have a good relationship. I think the only point we disagree about is which of us represents the planet's major life-form. (I'm bigger, he's quicker and more self-satisfied.) We're related, if you go far enough back. All my 206 bones are duplicated in different proportions in his body, except in our collarbones and tails, where he has around twenty vertebrae to my vestigial five. Suppose, I thought, I were to go back to that common ancestor, then work out what would happen if his line had gained the ascendancy? Actually, you have to go back nearly to the time when the dinosaurs snuffed it. All vertebrates [mammals?] were small, the biggest ferret-sized. Eventually, there appeared a thing called the miacus, weasel-like, the common ancestor of carnivores, primates, literally anyone who's anyone on the ladder. Cats, dogs, bears, dolphins, whales, the apes, us. Now, I thought, suppose he and his people had kept on the right track. Suppose

he - now leopard-sized or tiger-sized - was sitting at the equivalent of the IBM and paying income tax, while I (perhaps the size of a rhesus monkey) sat on his desk, chattered in simian fashion when he uttered a feline expletive (deleted), and was pacified by being taken out to his kitchen and given a plate of food. Possibly canned monkey-food. Well, a bit of thought about this, and a lot of checking up, evolved the kesrii, complete with emotions, drives, ambitions. The original wondered why he got an extra piece of juicy steak that night.

I can think of very few fictional aliens that are believable that have not been triggered by observation of something pre-existing. Even the sandworms of Dune are magnified versions of things that live under the loose, hot sands of the Namib desert in West Africa, surfacing to eat other things that have made tell-tale vibrations on the sand. And the monstrous thing in Alien simply plays out on a larger scale the life-cycle of the ichneumon fly.

Some that really seem to have started from scratch are creatures like Jack Williamson's almost indestructible beings in 'The Stone from the Green Star' (Amazing, 1929). And locally, a serial in the old Argus by Bernie Cronin, The Star Germs. I read only one episode of this, when I was a boy. My grandmother, who liked imaginative stories, used to cut serials out of the Argus (that's how I read Erle Cox's Out of the Silence), but only one episode of The Star Germs survived. He had an astonishing menagerie of things germinated by a scientist from dust from outer space, and one that haunted me for a while was a nocturnal thing like a tangle of spaghetti, with three eyes in a triangle, that had hypnotic power and the ability to invade bodies. I have an idea it might not have impressed me much when I was older.

One other point. Russell has pointed out that my stories tend to be 'open-ended'. This is true. Life is open-ended, in the sense that everything we experience opens out into a future, like that of Ulysses, 'whose margin fades forever and forever as I move.' The kind of ending where the hero and heroine settle down to a long (and probably boring) life where they have no further unhappiness, no taxes to pay, no clouds in the sky, not even things like blown light globes or a broken fan belt, seems to me utterly artificial and unbelievable. Life doesn't supply us with chapter-endings like that. Fortunately.

Reviews

Rudy Rucker, MASTER OF SPACE AND TIME, Bluejay Books, 1984, 229 pp., US$14.95

reviewed by Russell Blackford

Confession: I have not read any other of Rudy Rucker's novels, although I know that Rucker has been grinding out books that have hit the frying pan of world sf with a sizzle. This particular one is a bit of a silly sausage, but with enough sizzle in it (blander than you think, however, considering the packaging,

which emphasizes its 'madcap', 'zany', 'whacky', and 'batty' aspects).

Master of Space and Time takes us on a Sheckleyan regression through increasingly ludicrous altered realities, products of successively fulfilled wishes - the characters fulfil them using Harry Gerber's invention, a kind of refrigerated torture machine powered by raw gluons. On each occasion that it is used, the 'blunzer' machine temporarily makes its user master of universal reality. For obscure reasons, the machine, which works essentially by stretching quantum indeterminacy onto the macro-level, can be used only three times. For Rucker's purposes, it is a post-Heisenbergian version of the genie who grants three wishes.

Rucker introduces some considerations of the difficulty of making effective wishes, explaining in playful style the sorts of problems that arise when you ask the genie (or whatever) for extra wishes, and drawing amusement from stories of wasted wishes. In particular, he serves up 'The Peasant and the Sausage': little man offers peasant three wishes; peasant considers with wife; wife inadvertently says, 'I wish I had a nice big sausage'; aghast and enraged at the squandering of the first wish, peasant exclaims, 'I wish that sausage would grow onto your nose!'; third wish is required to get the sausage off her nose - so they gain nothing more than an overgrown bratwurst from their three wishes. The whole book is an elaborate version of this kind of story, except that it factors in the characters' awareness of such outcomes - they strive desperately to avoid being left holding nothing but a cylindrical bag of mince, fat, and gristle.

So it all gets complicated and, yes, a little on the zany side. Rucker has inventive ideas, the most notable being Gerber's initial demonstration of his omnipotence. Instead of indulging in an obvious demonstration of power - hurling his protégé through space and time, disintegrating things, levitating buildings, or whatever - Gerber places Joe Fletcher within an infinite regress of Fletchers. Fletcher finds a toy-sized version of his own Buick on his passenger seat, with a tiny self inside it ... and so on ... while, when he steps out of his car, he finds himself standing on the expanse of a huge car seat. Outside the giant car is a giant self looking away from him (and evidently standing within the confines of an unimaginably cyclopean Buick).

The book treats its subject with a quasi-mathematical elegance, but it is never truly serious (à la The Lathe of Heaven) and seldom outright funny. It's a quick and clever, silly and mildly-amusing read - like Sheckley on an offish day, occasionally managing to go snap, Gödel, quark: an endless string of sausages.

William Gibson, COUNT ZERO, Gollancz, 1986, 269 pp., £9.95

reviewed by Janeen Webb

Count Zero looks like an experiment in collage as a literary form. In an interview with Joseph Nicholas and Judith Hanna, Gibson remarked that: 'I see myself as a kind of literary

collage-artist, and sf as a marketing framework that allows me to gleefully ransack the whole fat supermarket of 20th century cultural symbols.' (_Interzone_ 13, p. 17). He has ransacked more than just the 20th century for the ingredients of _Count Zero_, which contains elements of such things as the fairytale, the gothic romance, and the revenge play as well as the more recent thriller, hard core sf, and so on. It's very easy to play 'spot the archetype' with this material.

More importantly, however, Gibson appears to be using collage as a structural model. There are three convergent storylines in the novel, and although the thriller form provides the basis for the text, in that both reader and protagonists are gradually working toward an understanding of the events that involve them, the bits of information don't quite fit together to form a jigsaw puzzle in thriller style resolution. The lines of action do meet, and their characters do interact at various points, but there is more to be learned from the juxtaposition of elements than from the events themselves. At times, the reader is given much the same information from different perspectives.

Which brings me to the superstructure within which these plotlines exist. _Count Zero_ is a sort of sequel to _Neuromancer_. It does not pick up the lives of _Neuromancer_'s characters (most didn't survive the plot), but it returns to their fast-lane Sprawl world of frenetic high-tech activity. And things have changed in cyberspace. _Neuromancer_ ended with the amalgamation of Wintermute (hive mind, decision-maker) with Neuromancer (personality, immortality) to become the whole matrix - an Artificial Intelligence _deus in machina_. But in the few years that have elapsed to separate _Neuromancer_ from _Count Zero_, this omnipresent AI has shattered into separate fragments of itself, and at least some of these parts have found ways to exist in the cyberspace matrix - the god in the machine has split into a whole high-tech pantheon.

These cyberspace-dwelling splinter AIs are now interfacing with the human world, offering the mechanism for the Faustian contracts that provide much of the plot. Their reasons are unclear - indeed, the whole gigantic question of relationships between the human mind and artificial intelligence looms at the edges of this novel, but is never directly addressed. Instead, Gibson uses his matrix AIs in much the same way that Marlowe used Mephistophilis - to keep things moving. In a zaibatsu controlled world where success is measured in terms of technological superiority, the temptations to knowledge are obvious, and exploitable. In one explanation, Finn points out that 'there's been funny stuff out there, on the console cowboy circuit. The new jockeys, _they make deals with things_ ... all the ones who really know how to cut it, they got _allies_ ... ' (p. 138); this is later reinforced when the nostalgic Tessier-Ashpool remnant remarks that 'They plot with men, my other selves, and men imagine they are gods ... ' (p. 251).

The possibility of making deals with the matrix inhabitants provides the outer framework for the action, or, to extend the collage analogy, it creates the shell of the Cornell box within which the events take place. The fragmentary AIs seem to lurk in

cyberspace to tempt the unwary, and the human reaction to such matrix-gods is predictably venal. This results in a number of sub-plots by supercompanies like MAAS and Hosaka, by the unthinkably wealthy but tank-bound Virek, by the meta-religion/business of the devotees of the Loas, and by other less spectacular but equally greedy individuals. There also appear to be counter-plots by some of the AIs.

With all of this activity overlapping, the reader needs reference points. At the centre of the action are the two young victims of the cupidity of their elders: Angie Mitchell (the Virgin of Miracles), and Bobby Newmark (Count Zero). Angie has been marked out from birth by the Faustian fact that her father gained his brilliant reputation and his exalted MAAS position by 'cutting a deal' with the AIs: for knowledge beyond the dreams of men, Marlowe's Faustus sold his soul - Mitchell (in fairytale fashion) sold his daughter. Bobby, on the other hand, has been recently trapped when an unscrupulous dealer set him up to run a potentially lethal cyberspace program. Both are being used: each has abilities beyond the expectations of their exploiters. And both make things happen.

Gibson also uses something like the collage approach in his characterization, and his evocation of Bobby, for whom the book is named, is indicative of the method of cumulative imagery that replaces straight description. There's something of the Revenge hero in Count Zero, caught up in the evil of his society, sinned against, dressed all in black, and connected with death. His first icebreaker-run calls down all manner of destruction: he never kills, but is indirectly responsible for a number of deaths, including those of Rhea, Jackie, Lucas, Finn, Conroy, and, most significantly, Virek, the arch-plotter himself. Bobby chose the 'handle' Count Zero from an old computer book, and the note at the front makes sure that the reader gets the point: an 'interrupt' is a coded signal that announces a significant 'event' that requires immediate attention, and Bobby's encounter with the Virgin of Miracles certainly provides evidence of an anomalous phenomenon in the system. Gibson's technique also allows a number of other interpretations of Count Zero as the reader's perspective changes, so that this character is both a non-entity and the one who changes everything, re-setting the counter at zero. Similar lists of attributes and connections can be made for all of the characters, who seem to relate to each other more as points in a collage than as full blooded people. Perhaps it's a comment on Mass Man.

There has been quite a lot of comment on the 'poetic' qualities of Gibson's prose, and I see no need to duplicate the discussion in this short space. However, one can scarcely suggest a literary model based on collage without touching on the image systems in the prose. Gibson's main descriptive method is to pile up heaps of sensory images to evoke the feeling of his environments, as, for example, 'the unmistakable signature smell of the Sprawl, a rich amalgam of stale subway exhalations, ancient soot, and the carcinogenic tang of fresh plastics, all of it shot through with the carbon edge of illicit fossil fuels.' (p. 133) These image accretions are mostly consistent, although

there is the occasional lapse - I was uneasy about some image juxtapositions, such as that of the Wig, who 'puched himself through a couple of African backwaters and felt like a shark cruising a swimming pool thick with caviar.' (p. 141)

The most powerful collage image of the book is that of the Cornell box, which the art lover Marly characterizes when she asks, 'How could anyone have arranged these bits, this garbage, in such a way that it caught at the heart, snagged in the soul like a fish hook?' (p. 37) The search for these poingant images suggests a search for humanity by those no longer human, like Virek. It is ironic that the boxes are being produced by a nostalgic part of the once great Wintermute/Neuromancer AI, in the wreck of the Tessier-Ashpool empire, where 'all the worn sad evidence of a family's humanity [has been] left ... to be stirred, to be sorted by a poet.' (pp. 251-2)

Despite the slow sadness of these last quoted lines, the collage technique generally works to make Count Zero a fast moving novel. It does not, perhaps, maintain quite the pace of Neuromancer, but it has Gibson's characteristic sense of urgency as the protagonists rush, lemminglike, to what appear to be their appointed ends. I enjoyed reading Count Zero, and I think that the structure works - but I am left with a tiny doubt about the point at which collage becomes pastiche.

William Gibson, BURNING CHROME, Arbor House, 1985, 200 pp., US$S15.95

reviewed by Lucy Sussex

In my last review of William Gibson, I called him a four-eyed wimp, and was less than pleasant about his novel Count Zero. As often happens in life, his latest collection of short fiction, Burning Chrome, is packaged with a photo of Gibson looking, well, personable, and so are the stories within the packaging. If my words weren't in the custody of Bruce Gillespie, who intends to publish them in Metaphysical Review, I'd eat them.

Here in this collection are the ideas and motifs later deployed so successfully in Neuromancer, and they work well in short form too. The title story is particularly intense, being a version of the raid on Neuromancer told in several thousand never-wasted words. Neuromancer's The Finn debuts in this tale, as does Molly in 'Johnny Mnemonic' - the sharp-eyed reader will notice a difference between this story and Molly's memory of Johnny in the novel. Elsewhere it is possible to see Gibson mulling over metaphors: a leather jacket is described in 'The Winter Market' as a 'butter-tanned matte black blouson' (p. 141). In Count Zero there is a reference to 'cowhide tanned thick and smooth as Flemish butter' (p. 35).

Burning Chrome also contains features not present in the novels, like Gibson's two space stories, 'Red Star, Winter Orbit' (with Bruce Sterling) and 'Hinterlands'. Apart from occasional visits to the orbiting Straylight, Gibson's characters tend to stick to terra firma. So, it might be suggested, should Gibson, for

neither of the extraterrestrial stories are at all wonderful. The weaker of the two is 'Red Star', which centres on an elderly Russian cosmonaut who is neither a convincing old man nor a convincing Russian. The story also contains mistakes like 'You're a prince, Colonel' (p. 89), said by one communist to another!

Another short fiction not recycled in the novels is 'The Gernsback Continuum' which is on one level a simple story about a man with unwanted visions. However, it also incorporates a dash of semiotics and an elegant critique of pulp sf - hence the title. 'The Gernsback Continuum' was only Gibson's second publication, and it is an unusually sophisticated and accomplished tale for a newcomer. The story is also witty: the cure for the visions is to ingest large quantities of trashy popular culture.

Mention of pop brings to mind one of Gibson's virtues, his ability to use apparent kipple in his stories without seeming either to be slumming or hiding behind a 'Danger, Lowbrow' sign. In this respect he resembles his character Rubin in 'The Winter Market', who makes 'art' from junk:

> I've seen Rubin program his constructions to identify and verbally abuse pedestrians wearing garments by a given season's hot designer....a few seem constructed solely to deconstruct themselves with as much attendant noise as possible. (p. 127)

Some of Gibson's allusions are at times obscure. Rock fans may recognize Sandii in 'New Rose Hotel' as the Japanese chanteuse from Sandii and the Sunsetz, but probably not Brygada Kryzys in 'Red Star'(p.90). Not many westerners listen to Polski post-punk bands. A point to be made is that both these groups date from the 'eighties; Gibson is in age a baby-boomer and one would expect him to allude to the swinging 'sixties. The man appears to move with the times - George Turner called him trendy, but contemporary is a less loaded term. Awareness of the zeitgeist, the cutting edge between present and future, is a valuable skill in the skiffy medium.

Another feature of Gibson's short stories is that basically they are concerned with some kind of psychological tension. 'Boy meets girl, boy loses girl' can describe the title story, 'New Rose Hotel' and 'The Winter Market', for instance. This reductionism may make the tales sound hackneyed; they are not, despite Gibson's use of stereotyped characters.

Mostly his dramatis personae comprises young punks and delectable streetwise girls. Gibson has admitted to assembling Molly from 'Clint Eastwood movies, Bruce Lee, Emma Peel, Chrissie Hynde's cheekbones...' (interview with Joseph Nicholas and Judith Hanna, Interzone 13, p. 17), which is essentially four public images rolled into one. Drawing a character from the outside, as when apparently basing Sandii on the eponymous singer (both girls are Eurasian) is no way to create psychological depth. Yet Gibson almost gets away with it, because of the highly coloured stage on which his puppets strut.

However, enough of quibbles. Read Gibson for his vitality, mastery of suspense and quirky humour, as with the 'bar hade' that assaults a sixteen-year-old girl in 'The Gernsback Continuum'. What's a bar hade? Read Burning Chrome and find out! Gibson may ultimately be disposable, like the pop songs he alludes to, but for now he is essential.

David Brin, THE POSTMAN, Bantam Books, 1985, 294pp. US$15.95 hb

reviewed by George Turner

David Brin holds a doctorate in astrophysics, takes graduate classes in physics and is a consultant to NASA, so he understandably knows his stuff at the rough end of hi-sci. He is also a pleasant, unassuming, quietly witty bloke whom it is nice to know; on the strength of a single meal in his company I would place him high on the list of Desirable Guests for future convention committees.

Unfortunately, I have not so far liked his fiction. Sundiver and Star Tide Rising left me with the same feeling as so many novels in the 'hard science' group, that they were chock-a-block with good ideas whose impact was largely negated by routine plotting and writing. I think you have to be in the first flush of sf enthusiasm to go starry-eyed over a brilliant 'scientific' concept for its own sake. All too soon we grow to the cynical level of, 'Lovely idea, mate, but you haven't done anything with it.' Hard science in sf seems too often to relate only to itself.

So to The Postman and an altogether other David Brin, writing up a wholly human idea without benefit of super-science and giving us what seems to me by far his best work to date. (If you prefer his hard science stuff, that's a matter of taste, not open to criticism.) His theme is the re-establishment of communications between scattered groups in an America disintegrated by the aftermath of nuclear war. In this case it was a short war, resulting in only a brief cooling period rather than a nuclear winter, with planetary cultures finally reduced by famine and plague.

The story opens with one of those post-holocaust sequences of man-on-the-run from brutal-marauding-band, leading the reader to fear the worst, particularly as Brin's determination to characterize his hero as humane and civilized makes him seem the kind of nitwit who wouldn't survive for a day in the real world, let alone make a thousand mile trek through dangerous territory.

Brian saves the day with a little master stroke: the fugitive finds an old Postal Services uniform and wears it because his clothes are ruined. Carrying the mailbag left by the long-dead postman, he approaches a settlement and discovers the addressee of one of the letters. More in desperation than with forethought he proclaims himself a member of the postal service of a reconstituted American government in the east, one of many postmen bringing communication and, eventually, law back to the

lost settlements. The groups welcome the idea of contact and he begins the establishment of regular local mail runs.

So far the working out of a simple and warmly engaging ploy is fascinating in its own right, but somewhere in the middle of the book Brin seems to have come up against the problem of what to do with his theme once it has been displayed - how to work in some conflict and a properly dramatic climax. It seems to me a pity that he has settled for the familiar power-hungry, murdering, woman-stealing group overrunning the peaceloving farmers (who seem less defensively competent than such self-reliant survivors would in fact be) and turning regeneration into slavery.

It would not be fair to say that this development is illogical or badly handled, but it is trite and drearily predictable. Even a rather shaky attempt to inject feminism into the plot cannot add more than melodrama to the proceedings, but my real objection to this warfare sequence is the dragging of a couple of supermen into the action. What has been a human story based on human premises against a credible background becomes suddenly sci-fi pasteboard. Some of the invaders are 'augments', relics of a special squad developed by the US Army biologists as monsters of enormous muscular power and super-speed. As a physicist, Brin should have known that such creatures would be almost useless as fighting machines (there's a point whereat over-developed muscles use more energy moving themselves than in doing work, which is why 'Mr Universe' is never a champion weightlifter) and that the use of super-fast movement would probably tear the ligaments loose from their anchorage on the overloaded bones.

How a superman of another kind develops the power to physically defeat one of these monsters is equally debatable. (And, like most civilized writers, Brin doesn't know how to describe violence; he simply doesn't know what happens in a fight.) The real weakness would seem to be that the sociological implications of the rebirth of communication are not developed but finally swamped by a trendy blood-and-guts ending. On the other hand, would a seriously considered examination of the natural drama of communication drawing together people who have grown apart in isolation and distrust have found a publisher or a wide public? After all, when you have written 120 000 words you want an audience for them.

Perhaps I have made too much of this abandonment of theme in favour of melodrama; The Postman is, when all's said, a more thoughtful work than 99 per cent of sf and worth your attention. Brin is no great stylist and sometimes ponders when he should be pushing the movement along (the art of the story teller is more demonstration than explanation), but he is easy to read and, in this book, better value than most of his peers commonly give.

I do hope that some committee, pondering its vacant guest spot, will bring him back to Australia for better acquaintance.

Letters

David King
26 McKay Street
South Bentley WA 6102

Thanks for the copy of ASFR 1. I was glad to receive it, but must confess myself a little disappointed by the quality of most of its criticism. I propose in this letter to present a short commentary on what I perceive to be wrong with the magazine, and what should be done to improve it.

The opening editorial was largely unhelpful. In a new magazine, one would expect a summary of the magazine's aims, its approaches, its intended audience. The first editorial, by one 'JB', addressed none of these topics; instead it indulged in largely pretentious and pointless sycophancy.

The second editorial, by 'JF', was a little better; we are at least told why ASFR is being produced (even though this *raison d'être* is, trivially, punctuality, not an attempt to produce sincere and worthwhile criticism). By this stage, one is left with the suspicion that ASFR will be yet another demotic fanzine - JB, despite the pretentiousness of his editorial's Latin title, had resorted to clichéd expressions, such as 'I don't know a *lot* about. . .'. Already, the question of tone is problematic. For whom is the magazine being written? And why?

The first article, 'The Long View', begins well: it at least states its aims. However, I question the need, in an Australian magazine, for yet another article on American sf magazines. There are topics far more worthy of exploration. (Examples: the sf of Michael Wilding and of David Brooks.) Apart from the fact that a small magazine like ASFR simply can't embrace the entirety of world sf (and the fact that it seems to want to is indicative of the cultural cringe), I find tonal incongruities between this article and the editorials.

The next article, Bruce Gillespie's 'Gene Wolfe's Sleight of Hand', is easily the magazine's worst. The style is loose and demotic; and the author seems to have no critical methodology. To publish an article that actually states, 'I like authors who do not explain things' (p. 13) is slapdash in the extreme. Literary fallacies are invoked: the author worries about authorial intention - and the whole is written in a critical vocabulary that depends on such vague and subjective words as 'marvellous', 'creepy', 'interesting'. It is currently fashionable to boast that one no longer reads sf; a far more worthwhile claim would be that one no longer reads sf criticism.

The next article, Russell Blackford's 'Taking Wynne Whiteford Seriously', is by far the best; but then, Russell Blackford is by far Australia's greatest critic of genre sf. The article is logically rigorous; its tone is uncontaminated by the cliché; it has structure: and, most importantly, it is about *Australian* sf.

The two book reviews recapitulate all the faults in the Gillespie article, although the authors show that they are capable of arguing with rigour.

If ASFR is to continue, you, the editors (of whom there are probably too many), must decide whether you want just another cosy, slapdash fanzine, like Metaphysical Review, or an intellectually rigorous journal (as Science Fiction seems occasionally about to become).

In order to help ASFR to grow, I shall, to use the vernacular, hit the magazine where it will hurt most: by not subscribing to it. This should at least prompt serious editorial discussion. Occasionally, I shall buy future issues, and, if the magazine has improved substantially, I shall support it.

> The editorial discussion was over whether boring letters by self-important twits should be published: I lost, whence the above. Uh-oh, here he comes again! (JF)

David King, address as above, 10 May 1986

I think the Turner/Rousseau correspondence was certainly a step in the right direction. Rousseau, in particular, made some excellent points, and, on the whole, had the stronger argument. The stature of Turner's argument was weakened, for example, by his irrelevant attacks on the intentional fallacy. Turner shouldn't make sulky outbursts about such an important concept unless he's prepared to address the issues in detail. He's certainly welcome to try to argue against the fallacy: others have done - and failed. I think, though, that it was a mistake to cast the dialogue in a form where the correspondents address each other by Christian name; this has the effect of excluding from the debate those who don't happen to know Rousseau and Turner personally. It's a small point, but it harks back to my earlier one about audience: is the magazine just for members of the Melbourne sf circle?

With a little more editorial rigour, I think ASFR will be the type of magazine that sf needs. there are too many quasi-literary magazines, and not one of consistent seriousness. If there must be 'fannish cosiness', let it be confined to the letters column.

On present indications, I think I shall be subscribing to ASFR soon.

> We're holding our collective breaths. (JF)

> Cherry Wilder has sent a list of 51 sn-words, in response to the competition proposed in ASFR 2. We are just a teensy-weensy bit doubtful about Snurg Sorguth, supposedly The Awful God of the Filthy Proboscis in Lovecraft, and the claim that the US term of endearment 'snooks' means 'cute, snub-nosed'. Nonetheless, the industry shown in both the list and in the slightly-suspect explanations impressed us. We are

even more impressed by the offer of a witty column (hereby officially taken up) and of accomodation (beware, Cherry: several of us are going to Brighton next year). (JBl)

Cherry Wilder
19 Egelsbacherstrasse
6070 Langen/Hessen
West Germany

Ten Good Reasons Why I should get a free subscription to Australian Science Fiction Review anyway...

I am a writer of Science Fiction and Fantasy!
I used to live Down Under and was pals with all youse Kangaroos!
Jenny Blackford gave a talk on my work (which I would love to read).
Leigh Edmonds once praised a story of mine.
I have no money.
We have a house now and can accommodate the Editorial Board when they visit Europe!!
George Turner once called me an Amazonian Girl (I would never dream of calling him a Napoleonic Boy).
I dressed up for the Cordwainer Smith Masquerade number.
I have not insulted Lee Harding for years (and need more practice).
The lovely and talented Damien Broderick published a story of mine!
I want to read the next instalment of that turgid bit of rubbish Foyster is churning out about magazines. (I'm a masochist.)
I could write you a literary and funny column about sf, Germany and the World.
I'm probably dying of Radiation Sickness, after Tschernobyl, but it will take ages.
I can't count ...

I hope 19 is bigger than the flat I have visited: five members of an editorial team adds up to a lot of floor space. (JF)

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In Australia send $10 (for six issues) to John Foyster, GPO Box 1294L, Melbourne, Victoria 3001.

In other countries, enquire from the editorial address.