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AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW
Second Series Volume 1 Number 4

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Dicebamus Hesterna Die

Three issues of the new ASFR and at last I get some serious constructive feedback: David King describes my contribution to the last issue as 'largely unhelpful', indulging in 'largely pretentious and pointless sycophancy'. Further, I resorted to clichéd expressions ('I don't know a lot about ...'). I'm sorry; where I live, when you say 'I don't know a lot about the Spanish scholar Luis De Léon' you tend to be taken at your word; no-one says 'under his breath 'Like hell! Did his bloody doctorate on 16th century Spanish Léons, didney!' Perhaps David wanted me to go on and say 'but I know what I like'. Fair enough.

That apart, I thought I introduced the new ASFR fairly well - at least as well as I introduced the original ASFR. And if David hasn't seen the first-series ASFR 1, I can assure him that my editorial there was just as unhelpful, pretentious, pointless, sycophantic and clichéd. Also ignorant. One of the secrets of the first ASFR's success was my truly extraordinary ignorance: readers had so much to write about!

On the whole, David King seems to be wondering what I'm doing here in ASFR, especially on page 2. I wonder that, too. I didn't ask to be here. John Foyster rings me every Thursday, or thereabouts, and says (after a while) 'Now, about your editorial ...' and I just can't get out of it, he's like that. Tonight, for example, he tells me Yvonne has written a humorous editorial, so I can write something straight, and I'm so grateful I ask him the deadline.

When I hang up I realize I've never written anything entirely straight in my life, and he's conned me again.

But not entirely this time, because Yvonne and I have been talking about the tyrant Foyster, and I said this and that to her, and she said oh yes, and that and this, and we agreed to ignore him to his back, and I mentioned Gillespie's Pun - and she was awestruck. 'He said that?' Yvonne said. 'I believe so,' I said.

I don't know precisely when the Gillespie Pun was uttered. I was in Canberra, so that dates it between March 1972 and January 1976. As reported, certain Melbourne fans were talking about me, my perceived loss to Melbourne fandom and et cetera; my mythological importance to Melbourne fandom came into the discussion; and with his own mouth Bruce Gillespie said 'John Bangsund: the mythic link'.

That's what I'm doing here, David. I have nothing to do with the second series of ASFR. I am not consulted on its contents. I read it when you do, when it comes in the mail. Mostly I like it. Every now and then I think Now this is the ASFR I wanted to publish, dammit! But my function is to provide 'the mythic link'.

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g at Wynne Whiteford's piece in ASFR II/3, I seem to be do-
at. The main adjective I missed when I wrote about Wynne
ovial'; he has a lovely sense of humour - I said that - and
ugh is as close as you can get in these dire times to jovial-
ut I did mention his powers of invention, and these are ev-
in his account of our time at the Northcote Leader. My
e was called Lodbrog, after Ragnar Lodbrog (Ragnar Hairy-
), but I did not know that Ragnar had held Paris to ransom,
don't think I looked at Wynne 'in mock amazement' and so
But we did do those cartoons Wynne mentions. I still have

en't read sf for ages, and in that sense David King has hit
il right on the thumb: I don't belong here. But I do care
, and some of my best friends ... Oh, stuff that!

my first science fiction convention of 1972 started in the
south of Adelaide in the dying hours of 1971. We even got
going around midnight and held hands and sang 'Auld Lang
It was one of the few sf conventions I've attended where
me left happy, however they'd arrived. It was just great.

the second or third night of the convention, most of us in
well-known Adelaide fan of the time vroomed in with his
riend and sports car, and I could hear him saying something
'meeting John Bangsund'. Like hell, I thought, rolled
and was asleep as I could look. Bill Wright, whose bunk
xt to mine, either approved of the deception or was taken
it. As Bill reported it, the well-known Adelaide fan ush-
his girlfriend to my bed, and I opened half an eye and said
ught I said no autographs after midnight' and went back to

were the days. Science fiction was fun then (and I can't
ry it shouldn't be now). It was fun first because it was
ee all had in common; then we got together in these silly
magazines and conferences and met each other, and discov-
hat we were more or less full-grown people, people worth
g to. I think I am here to remind us of that. John's
to remind me. JB 30.7.86

er Collective Ways

rst three issues of ASFR (Second Series) have had a mainly
able response. Of criticisms, I shall not mention the ones
ee with and are attending to as well as we can. Instead, I
objections to the Committee, the Regularity, the Long
and the Sacrilege.

mmittee objection holds that the editors will quarrel inde-
lly and be too amorphous to get written to. This would be a
le objection, except that the editors are not a committee
collective, and therefore make One. As a guide to those
we never met it, the Mean Collective Editor has one-fifth
eard and one-fifth of a pair of spectacles. It is rather
the mean height of other Australian sf editors, but two-

fifths of its muscles are getting purposely swollen beyond mere meanness. It harbours cats in half of its mean home, but it completely lacks dog. Since it is one-fifth allergic to wheat, its diet consists chiefly of meringue, and (although it is one-fifth teetotal) it mostly drinks champagne during collating sessions, to counteract the dizziness induced by trekking round and round a table. It one-fifth wears steel-capped boots, and among its past and present employments are pineapple-trimmer, artist's model, painter-and-docker, and engineer. At present, it lives equally on either side of the tracks (otherwise known as the river Yarra) in Melbourne. It is passionately fond of receiving letters, although the mood in which it responds to them changes markedly at two-month intervals.

The odd reader, however, will be unmoved by these warm personal details and would rather write to faceless initials. Such a reader, while always pretending to address the Mean Editor, is free to gamble on the fact that letter-answering initials keep the same order of appearance as editorial initials and are therefore predictable for any issue. Nevertheless, chance remains, because an overlaid ASER must sometimes surrender a letter to the following issue; thus, in Martin Bridgstock's mind there must now forever echo the haunting question: 'But what did JF reply to me?'

The Regularity objection is more imposing. It is unreasoning, deep-rooted, primeval, messy - a widely-found inchoate outrage that anyone should admit in print the intention of producing a magazine regularly. The Mean Editor regrets these people's pain (for which, however, it cannot believe itself wholly responsible) but its intention stays firm.

The Long Words objectors are just blatantly lengthist. ASER defies them, rejecting their prejudice. Where a long word works better than a short one, nobody scares us out of using it.

Lastly, the Sacrilege objectors hold that John Bangsund and John Foyster, in sanctioning a second series of ASER, have simply unfrocked themselves; that they are unworthy priests of the legendary, unrecapturable ASER of the 1960s - worse still, that the Mean Editor (aside from its choice of cover colours) is not even attempting a doomed slavish imitation. The Mean Editor replies that the 1980s (on which the original ASER has already acted) call for a new response to the same challenge that John Bangsund met so brilliantly: to produce a serious-constructive fanzine that also stays in touch with sf fandom. 'Fun' and 'fights' and 'the sense of doing something worth while': of the things John Bangsund remembers, the present ASER hopes to achieve at least those three. YR 25.7.86

CORRECTION: In the third issues of ASER reference was made to a review to be published in The Metaphysical Review which described William Gibson as a 'four-eyed wimp'. This remark has been censored edited by Bruce Gillespie and will not now appear. Maybe this will teach me not to make impertinent comments about famous people. LS 25.8.86

Kismet Harding!

Cherry Wilder

This Doric Dithyramb will have a different name every time. One has plenty of Old Jokes to repeat or use up. Most of the contemporary happenings are Not Funny. Or maybe they are, in Shaw's formula, 'Funny but Serious'. (His contention was that the opposite of Funny was Not Funny. For example: Mr George Robey, the comic, is Funny and Not Serious, Mr George Bernard Shaw, the dramatist, is Funny but Serious, Lord Pompcus, the Tory Peer, is Serious but Funny, Queen Victoria is Serious and Not Funny, Mr Albert Fish, the unsuccessful comic, given the Hook last night at the Empire Music Hall, is Not Funny and Not Serious ...)

Take Tschernobyl for example ... As the clouds of fall-out wandered over West Germany the scientists and bureaucrats of the Bundesrepublik went stark, raving bonkers. They rushed gibbering into the fields with all the measuring devices they could find and measured far into the night. Their findings were reported daily, nay, hourly, for a long time. Every state of the Federation had different measuring standards: we were adrift on a sea of Bequerels and Rems. Acres of spinach were ploughed under, oceans of milk were ditched, kids were, in some districts, forbidden to play in the sand pits, in others not. One was advised to stay indoors and not mow the lawn. Then one was told to mow the lawn quickly before it rained. And above all one must stay out of the rain.

The contradictoriness of all this did not go unnoticed. The telecasts warning against the Fall-Out Crisis were followed by telecasts deploring the uncoordinated panicky reaction to the Fall-Out Crisis. Political supporters of atomic power tried to play down the whole thing and insisted, purple in the face, that It Could Never Happen In A West German Atomic Reactor. To which the answer was and is 'Bullshit. That cloud you see on the horizon clicks for us, my friends.'

To sum up: there was serious fall-out in the Bundesrepublik and a woman in the first stages of pregnancy might have been well advised to take a short holiday in the Canary Islands. The reaction to the fall-out, in one of the most advanced technological nations, was one of panic, contradiction, muddle and helplessness. I wonder what it will be like next time? I have always said that a really nasty Peacetime atomic disaster could occur in France. Maybe at Cattenom, the gigantic powerplant nicely placed at the conjunction of France, Luxembourg, West Germany

David Lake has an amusing article in Foundation entitled 'A Theory of Errors: The Altered Worlds of Fiction'. As one suspected, writers often make errors of various kinds in their scientific disciplines. One of the most difficult errors to get around concerns Piggy's glasses in Lord of the Flies by William Golding. They must be concave because Piggy is short-sighted, in which case they could not be used to light fires. I'm not happy with

Lord of the Flies for another reason: young boys have never seemed to me quite representative of the human race. Or put it another way: I distrust a set-up that would be radically altered by the inclusion of a few girls.

Oh sure, if William Golding likes and understands boys better and constructs his fable to include boys only that is his right as an artist. But why have we been led to accept the fact that little girls - motherly, fussy, bossy, timid, bold, physically mature at eleven, cute and sexy at five, imaginative, visionary, level-headed, well-behaved - riddled, in fact, with all of civilization's discontents, do not fit into the scheme of things.

It takes us back to a very famous future. Chapter One. During that dazzling tour of the London Hatchery with a group of male students the director comes up against a pretty and naturally Alpha+ nurse. 'Charming!' he says and pats her several times ... O Brave New World.

Well it's Back to Brighton in '87. One never goes anywhere, then one goes to the same place twice or three times. Aussie Fans from Sydney to the back of beyond, come to the World Con in Brighton next year. Save your pennies, sell the jam-jars, win GUFF, DUFF or STUFF, but be there! Visit the Pavilion! Stroll along the Prom! Infest the marble halls of the Metropole and rub shoulders with Doris Lessing, the Strugatsky Brothers and Alfred (I kill you filthy Vorga) Bester.

Back in 1979 we were too poor for the Metropole and stayed in Keehans Hotel, round the corner in Regency Square. It was, and probably still is, a crumbling hostelry that saw better days about 1879. The English breakfast was splendid however and as the Con approached - we came early - the house filled up with odd persons, quite different odd persons from the little old ladies and gentlemen who habitually resided there. A large party of these newcomers turned out to be ERB fans. On the Wednesday before the Con I sat in the lobby of the Metropole and actually saw the oil sheiks in full regalia move out and the fans in beards and rucksacks move in. The whole tone of the place altered in minutes. It was wonderful.

Our daughters, aged 14 and 16, had a fairly good time, saw the Rocky Horror Show, got Superman's autograph, hacked around on the pier. One night, going home to Keehans by themselves, they kidnapped the big resident tabby cat and fed it prawns in their room ...

A RIDDLE

What happens when you give good advice to Vincent Van Gogh?

Answer .ereah t'reh eue are and st'ays t'reh t' I

No juicy items of gossip, alas. Who is that stout bearded party leaning dangerously over the Grand Canyon? Why it's Moorcock, on a bus tour of the United States. Who are those cheery demonstrators picnicking near a large munitions dump? Gadzooks ... it's the Watson family....

interesting TV interview programs, one on Ray Bradbury, one on Marion Zimmer Bradley. Ray Bradbury showed us his dens, full of endearing boyish junk, as befits the poet of boyhood. (Another poet of boyhood in a similar small town world is Stephen King.) Film clips were used from Something Wicked This Way Comes and Fahrenheit 451. The impact was somewhat blurred by the fact that poor old Fahrenheit is one of the most-clipped films in the archives of German telly. I wish I had ten marks for every time I've seen Montag making with the flame-thrower or the old lady trying among her books ...

The film on Marion Zimmer Bradley was occasioned by the enormous success of The Mists of Avalon in West Germany. It was a carefully made attractive little film entitled 'Taking Leave of the American Dream - The erotic fantasies of Marion Zimmer Bradley'. Well, I've never thought that the frank sex scenes in Marion's work were really the most important thing but I suppose they are there. It is a German practice to illustrate quoted passages of a novel with elaborate film sequences. Shots of an actress playing Morgaine on the wild sea shore or in the grassy meads were blended into shots of Stonehenge and the traditional King Arthur stills. The theme was hammered home by contrasting the various sacred bowers of Avalon and of Night's Daughter with shots of California modern: poor saggy baggy everyday folk at a supermarket. Marion, who interviews well, made her points and seemed to be going great guns on her word processor. I missed shots of her own house and her den. I know she likes Cabbage Patch dolls but maybe this was too cosy for the film makers.

Dreaming remains a popular theme in sf. An excellent border-line novel is Dorothea Dreams by Suzy McKee Charnas with a fine character study of a woman artist. The eagerly awaited novel from short-story whizz Connie Willis is Lincoln's Dreams. (What about? Well, there is this lady who seems to be having, you've guessed it, Lincoln's dreams ...) And there's a novelette coming out in the fullness of time in Asimov's called Dreamwood by Cherry Wilder. About SRD, shared recreational dreaming ... and other things.

And to wind up A SIMPLE AUSTRALIAN FILK SONG (Tune: Guess What?)
 There's a track winding back to a scungy fibro shack -
 Come to the Con at Wombat Creek!
 Where the Bunyip is waiting,
 The crocodiles are mating,
 You can hear the ghost-gums squeak!
 Don't step off the pathway whatever you do ...
 Our Emmaville Tiger is hungry for you!
 And if you spot something weird
 Why that's just Harding with his beard
 Along the road to Wombat Creek!

Debased and Lascivious?

Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand*

Russell Blackford

[This paper was originally presented as a talk to the Nova Mob at a meeting early in 1985.]

I.

Samuel R. Delany has been a prolific writer in recent years, having just completed the trilogy that began with Tales of Neveryon as well as working on a far-future diptych that begins with Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand. The Neveryon books deserve a separate extended discussion, which I'll attempt on another occasion. Stars in My Pockets has its own internal structural complexities: it is actually two stories, or perhaps three counting its Epilogue, as well as forming the first half of a diptych, the second half of which does not seem to be available in Australia at this point. The second of the two novels is called The Splendor and Misery of Bodies of Cities, which is a suggestive title when read against the subject matter of Stars in My Pockets.

The two stories which make up Stars in My Pockets are a virtually self-contained novella, actually listed as the Prologue and entitled 'A World Apart', and a notably ragged-ended set of 'Monologues', with a final 'Epilogue'. Presumably the ragged or open-ended nature of this whole sequence, and hence of the novel itself, will be tidied up when the second half of the diptych becomes available some time this year. From the shape of the first book, it appears that the two books might be going to form a genuinely unified work, and not just a novel with a sequel to keep readers and the publisher going. I say this because the overall shape of the novel is somewhat peculiar, with a major unresolved crisis taking place at the end, and with a number of major elements left unexplained. Most obviously, the full roles of a Universal information-distributing organization called 'the Web' are left quite unclear, even though it is the conspiratorial force driving many of the events. Even more unclear is the role of a species of aliens known, for whatever reason, as the Xlv (George Turner informs me that some of the apparently arbitrary references, including the title of the second novel of the diptych, can be read as allusions to French literature, a point on which I make no comment). It may well be that the second book of the diptych will be written in such a way as to be virtually inaccessible to anyone who hasn't read the first book, while Stars in My Pockets appears to end prematurely unless we go on to tackle The Splendor and Misery - but that the frayed edges of the two novels will be sewn neatly together. It may also well be that the manner in which the Prologue is injected into a larger political and imaginative context in the first book will provide the pattern for the entire two-volume work, in which case I would be unwilling to criticize the first book for having loose ends; in fact, if Delany is able to develop the pattern he has established

within the first book I for one will consider this to be a refreshing and courageous development in sf - he will have my applause.

This is not to say that every difficulty I will be drawing attention to in the plotting of Stars in My Pockets can be given the benefit of the doubt on the ground that the sequel will make all clear: some of the difficulties would appear to be endemic to Delany's fundamental approach in this novel. But I am suggesting that the unexpected overall shape of the book is not necessarily to be considered a fault, depending on what Delany is going to come up with next.

In trying to analyse the aesthetic and thematic characteristics of Stars in My Pockets, I've found myself thinking about how typical the book is of Delany's work in general, and how much it illuminates what Delany has been doing in his other more recent books. I'm very aware that such critics as George Turner and Bruce Gillespie, among other sceptics in this country, have been unwilling to accept that Delany is saying anything profound or worthwhile behind the often difficult surfaces of his narratives. While I haven't taken the opportunity to refresh my reading of the whole Delany oeuvre, at this stage, it does seem to me that Delany has been saying important and potentially explosive things in his recent novels. I'm not going to attempt to explore the extent to which the same themes and attitudes found in Stars in My Pockets also turn up in Delany's earlier work, but I would suggest that many of the same tropes are present and should probably be given the same significances. It also seems to me that the strengths and weaknesses which I have found in Delany over the years, and which have been commented on by George Turner and others (particularly the weaknesses in Turner's case), are exemplified very well in this latest book.

The Prologue, which I have referred to as a virtually self-contained novella, tells the story of an unnamed slave on an unnamed world (all my page references are to the Bantam hardback edition). Later on, we find out that the slave's name is 'Korga' - he comes to be called 'Rat Korga' - and his planet is Rhyonon. Korga is a misfit on a very backward planet. On the first page we are introduced to him at an Institute which practises a process called 'Radical Anxiety Termination'. This consists of destroying certain neural pathways in the brain so as to turn off the capacity for aggression, anxiety, and original thought. It's a kind of far-future lobotomy with more drastic results: once subjected to the RAT treatment, a 'rat' is apparently completely tractable, even to the extent of being willing to sleep in his own excrement. The social practices on Rhyonon declare that rats should be made the slaves of institutions which have need for the cheap but menial labour they can provide. Individuals are not entrusted with owning human lives, and the institutions which use rats are supposed to be screened to ensure that they are humane - but this is treated as a great, if bitter, joke by Delany, since the institution where Rat Korga spends most of his time denies its rats even the most universal and fundamental dignities. It is hard to imagine how a society such as this would work, or how any pretensions to humanity could be found in a society which contains people who think like this, but so Delany has stipulated

it. As soon as I start to describe what is going on here, it seems to me that I'm showing something of the kind of thing that has rightly worried George Turner, though alleged practices in this country's mental institutions make me wonder whether Delany is not, against expectation, right.

At the polar research institution where Rat Korga spends most of his time working, he lives a life which appears fantastically debased and humiliating, and there is nothing in the book to compel us to see it in any other way. However, the book goes on to present us with a series of apparently degraded lifestyles, actions, and desires, and leaves us to sort out which are which in terms of morality and value. The conditions under which Korga lives in slavery on Rhyonon provide one version of degradation, or one touchstone for it, but that is all.

The main action in this first part of the novel concerns a woman who seeks the company of her own slave; she is a sadist who wants someone for sexual use and abuse. In a key episode the woman demands that Korga make love to her (he is not interested since he is entirely homosexual, but his RAT treatment does not allow him to refuse), to allow her to whip him bloodily, to allow her to spit upon him without defending himself. But she also gives him a glove-like device which plugs into his neural circuits with the effect of healing his mind, while at the same time she grants him the release of knowledge. It transpires that under certain conditions a rat can absorb information many hundreds of times faster than a human being who has not had the Radical Anxiety Treatment. The woman wishes to be able to spit upon a man who has read all the books she hasn't, so she sets him to read a sequence of major works through direct neural input, scoffing down the equivalent of tens of thousands of pages within seconds. It appears that the effect of the RAT treatment is not only to eliminate anxiety and so on but also to eliminate certain filtering mechanisms that limit or retard the processing of input information by our brains. The glove which the woman sadist provides compensates for the RAT treatment rather than undoing it, so Korga is able to retain his enhanced information-processing potential even while enjoying his return to something like a state of creativity and initiative. Once again, so Delany has stipulated the technology, though it is all suspiciously convenient to his thematic purpose.

The description of Korga's first experience of reading, and the exponential expansion in his consciousness as he starts wolfing down books is very impressive as a straight sf rendering of experience beyond the edges of anything which we could ever encounter. It is also full of successful tricks, some of which I'll return to. Preeminently, Delany provides a sensitive depiction of a feeling of splendour, the exploration of new realms of consciousness, completeness, and joy. This is the other side to Stars in My Pockets: it presents forms of degradation and misery, even versions of what might be the definitive forms of degradation; but at the same time it shows startling forms of splendour and joy, once again verging upon the extremes or the definitive versions of these things. Throughout, Delany's emphasis is that the question of which is which is either a wrong question even to ask, or at least the assumptions which our own society might make

in answering it are so parochial and problematical that we might as well start over again and dismiss what our society assumes. Stars in My Pockets is very much an attack on notions that there is an accumulated traditional wisdom about these things. The premise is radically constructivist: meaning, significance, value, and the social organization of relevant behaviour are not inherent in brute physical/biological fact, but are more or less arbitrarily constructed for and by societies.

In the case of Rat Korga, the woman who inflicts what we might consider the most degrading experiences of all upon him is also the woman who makes available to him the vistas and the splendour of thought and intellect. When Korga is 'rescued' from her, we feel immediately - some might say that Delany has tricked us into feeling - that he has suffered a net loss. Indeed, in a kind of coda to this section we get a poignant description of what Korga is like afterwards, wistfully and pathetically teaching his fellow rats to wear one work glove, in memory of the device which gave him his mind and a mental world - before it was literally torn from him and both mind and world rushed away.

In the end of the Prologue, Korga's world is destroyed, and with it, apparently, Korga himself. In this context, all questions of moral judgement or disgust seem to be held in abeyance, and we are aware only of pathos, futility, and a splendour which has been lost. The Prologue, however, is injected into the larger story, wherein it becomes clear that Korga is possibly the only survivor of the cataclysm which destroyed Rhyonon. The larger story is narrated by one Marq Dyeth, a small bearded male human (within the larger Universe where Marq roams the word 'man' is an archaism seldom encountered). Rat Korga and Marq Dyeth are spectacularly sexually attracted to each other, and the larger novel is mainly concerned with their relationship in the context of staggering political conspiracies which are impacting upon the lives of humans and other intelligent beings (generically known as 'women' in this Universal meta-culture) on 6000 planets: the backdrop is grand space opera in the inimitably baroque Delany mode, while the foreground is a kind of love story which could have been produced by Robert Heinlein revising Stranger in a Strange Land with the aid of a manual of (supposed) perversions, and fetishes, or perhaps a manual of safe sexual practices and a determination to exemplify the don't's. Of course our cultural definitions of what constitutes a perversion or fetish are very much at stake here.

II.

As I've already touched on, the RAT treatment undergone by Rat Korga has the effect of destroying the will, despite sophisticated assurances to the contrary which Korga is given early in the book. But it also makes possible a super-accelerated expansion of knowledge under particular circumstances. Accordingly, the RAT treatment, while destructive in itself, or, perhaps by itself, contains within it a potential for experiences of splendour as well as degradation. Thus it provides an example of how degradation and splendour can be conjoined, can be inextricable within a set of experiences, can even be aspects of the same identical experience, a point to which Delany returns again and

again. Note that Delany here has simply stipulated that this is how the technology works. He is able to gain a very poignant effect in the Prologue, and one which challenges our own deepest cultural revulsions but it is worth asking whether he hasn't gained part of his effect by cheating.

The answer to this question isn't simple. Delany is certainly entitled to use whatever thematic images he likes and to set up his technology how he likes - but only in the context of the larger world which he is creating. The trouble with the RAT treatment and the way it works is that it is just too thematically convenient, given that we are not given any detailed information about a larger technological context in which it might function: when it is revealed that RAT has a splendid as well as a degrading side this looks more as if Delany is trying to pull a rabbit out of his hat - it was up his sleeve all the time, of course - than as if the logical outcome of the information we've been given has been reached. This does not mean that Delany is a slipshod writer, at least not entirely: within the super-speed-reading sequence, Delany is brilliant. The description of what it is like for Korga to build up a world of vicarious experience for the first time is sensitive, vivid and moving, and this reader, for one, didn't care whether it would or could really work that way or not. Delany launches forth on a rich and seemingly inexhaustible account of the books Korga reads; they are luxuriantly and precisely named and described; more profound is the manner in which Delany describes the patterns which the different books form in Korga's mind, each throwing the ones before into a different series of relationships and significances, each enriched by the patterns which Korga has already built up. This is a very acceptable sf technique, extrapolating from the process of literary growth that we all know so well, but presenting a version of the experience far beyond the edges of what we can ever go through - but not what can be imagined. The scene also contains some wholly successful trickery, and even jokes. It turns out that Korga has dipped into a pile of women's literature by mistake, and he has failed to realize that what he has taken to be the literary canon of his world is actually a literary ghetto. There is even a note of self-deprecation here, since Delany is one of those writers whom we would expect to champion such alternative literary canons. There is a surprising amount of humour in the novel, but some of the other jokes are at the expense of the reader rather than the writer.

The joke on the reader in this 'books' sequence is that Delany provides some clues that he is actually writing about a women's literary ghetto, but the reader misses them: in the development of this joke there is a sense that Delany is concerned with narrative logic rather than mere stipulation and contrivance. Every time the sex of one of the writers of the material Korga is reading is revealed, it turns out that the writer is female. Yet, we find ourselves assuming automatically that the other writers are male. So strong is our cultural heritage that we don't even notice that only female pronouns are ever used when pronouns are used until the trap is finally sprung on us (I wonder whether women tend to fall so readily into the trap ...). So Delany is able to have a laugh at himself, at Korga, and at us, all with perfect narrative logic, and in an extended scene which works too

powerfully when read 'straight' to be dismissed as just a cheap narratorial trick. Yet, though the scene works well internally, and follows a logic which is very satisfying, it appears in the context of a quite unsatisfying technological stipulation, which in turn is in the context of a stipulated society which is vague and problematic. It seems to me that this unsatisfactoriness at the contextual levels of the societies and technologies which Delany works out, combined with a very satisfying development of symbols and of narratorial direction within sequences, is part of the reason why some critics such as George Turner remain so sceptical about the value of Delany's work, while other critics and readers find a great deal to read with admiration and delight, even awe.

I am one of the readers who feel some of the abovementioned awe, admiration, and delight when reading Delany, but I must admit that I don't find Delany's novels entirely satisfying. A related difficulty in Stars in My Pockets to what I have been describing is that much of the impetus behind the plot is provided by vast powers of Universal scope, particularly the Web and the Xlv. The result is that there are no clearly scrutable rules by which the logic of the events may be assessed: almost any coincidence has a chance of being justified as really manifesting conspiracy; almost any sequence of events can be shaped by powers which have no clearly defined restraints. Accordingly, the book loses some of its appearance of accountability to the reader, and to the reader's sense of narrative logic and the characters' psychology. This is a very common fault (or at least cause of dissatisfaction) in sf, but this book seems to take it to extremes - particularly because it does rely, extravagantly, on coincidences, which presumably we have to interpret as conspiracy, without any ground rules being established to test the workings of the conspiracy. At the same time, there are occasions where we have a sense that what Delany is stipulating about this universe is very unlikely, or even nonsensical. For example, there is great deal of discussion and argument about the nature of 'fuzzy-edged' concepts, some of it logical: the total population of the Universe can never be given exactly because it continually fluctuates by a billion - fair enough, though the only reason why this could be so is that the Universe's population is so vast that an approximation to the nearest billion, or five, or ten billion would be highly precise in percentage terms. The idea of fuzzy-edged concepts is used to equivocate about whether Rat Korga was or was not the only survivor of the destruction of Rhyonon. The simple answer seems to be that the concept is not particularly fuzzy but that the question is ambiguous. Delany tries to pretend that there is difference in principle between being the only survivor when a world is destroyed and being the only survivor when, say, a town is destroyed. But the very same ambiguities arise: what about people on the way out? the way in? normal residents who weren't home?

While the fuzzy-edged concept is a respectable philosophical animal, Delany appears to deploy it in such a way as to suggest that he is prepared to try to dazzle the reader with the first bit of old rubbish he thinks of - in this case, apparently, just to avoid admitting that there is a meaningful sense in which Rat Korga does seem to be that melodramatic phenomenon, the sole

survivor of a planetary cataclysm (a conclusion which he appears to want to fob off on to his characters, disowning it himself while still getting mileage out of it). Another such piece of old rubbish is the odd assertion made by Marq that 'You may assume, about absolutely any fact ... that nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand do not know it - which goes for the working assumption too' (p. 139). This is really used as a piece of humorous hyperbole, yet Delany appears to wish us to take it seriously as an explanation of the otherwise mysterious state of affairs wherein nobody much in the Universe he has created is aware of the existence of the Xlv, despite the fact that this is the only alien species capable of space flight. Delany tries to persuade us that there is no area of common knowledge in his far future Universe at all - and is completely unconvincing. Despite anything he has Marq tell us, it is impossible to shake off the feeling that there would be plenty of knowledge of such general interest that virtually anybody would be acquainted with it.

Part of the difficulty in reading this novel is that it takes away many of the codes which we are used to in constructing pictures of characters and actions from black marks on paper. In doing so, it draws attention to some of the most basic codes which are involved in the process. Most obviously, Stars in My Pockets dispenses with the simple distinction in language between male and female people. In this novel the word 'man' for 'male human being' is said to be an archaism seldom encountered, while the pronouns 'he', 'she' and their cognates are not used to denote gender; rather, these words are used to distinguish only between the mass of humanity (together with other species) and those by whom the speaker is sexually excited. Intelligent life-forms are called 'women', and the pronouns 'she' and 'her' are used; the pronouns 'he' and 'him', by contrast, indicate that the speaker refers to someone who sexually excites her. The result is that we have difficulty visualizing characters as Delany presents them because in our culture the first vital piece of information we need in attempting to visualize someone is knowledge of his or her sex. Because of the roles and values traditionally assigned to males and females in our own society, we tend to assume that characters in books and human agents in general are masculine unless we have evidence to the contrary, and this is reinforced by our language, which uses the masculine gender in many contexts to include the feminine. In Delany's novel, however, we find ourselves routinely encountering what strike us, though not Delany's characters, as feminine pronouns. We come to assume that characters are female as the default option, even though we know that the 'feminine' pronouns do not have the same meaning as in our own culture. This effect seems to corroborate the hypothesis that language does actually shape assumptions (it is an interesting experiment in the area on Delany's part). However, we are able to go beyond the effect I've described so far, to some extent, to get used to the idea that 'masculine' pronouns indicate not the male sex but the excitement produced by the person spoken of as a sexual object.

This whole effect is very disorientating, and we sometimes balk at being unable to use our normal basic clues in attempting to visualize characters. On the other hand, we also learn to take

some pride in picking up the new cues Delany provides and responding with upraised eyebrows at the occasional use of the pronoun 'he' and its cousins. Another point demonstrated here is that language, as well as shaping, or at least reinforcing, cultural attitudes also manifests them. In the highly permissive universal meta-culture which Delany has created, it is obviously not only acceptable to reveal openly when one is sexually excited and by whom - such revelation is actually demanded by the language itself, and it seems scarcely less 'natural' for these people to distinguish in the course of speech by whom they are excited than it is for us to distinguish whether the person spoken about is male or female.

Apart from the level of language, Stars in My Pockets also challenges our assumptions as to what sort of details will be selected to evoke the nature of people when they are described. In particular, Marq Nyeth does not automatically tell us whether a character is male or female, so the information we look for in pronouns is not supplemented by his descriptions. Moreover, in selecting evocative details, Marq will often point to veins, scars, calluses, and fingertips, rather than hair, breasts, facial features and other characteristics which we are more used to when visualizing people. As a result, the narration seems to be very vivid, yet we end up with many aspects not properly visualized because they don't fit in with our normal codes. Delany provides at least as much sensory detail as the average writer, and he thus draws our attention to the way we are dependent upon being told certain kinds of detail in constructing pictures and identities out of the black-on-blanks that make up a novel. However, as with the point about the use of pronouns, the violation of normal descriptive conventions also works in direct ways, creating a very strong cumulative sense that we are in someone else's mental world. Different readers will probably find different levels of disorientation in Delany's various techniques. For myself, I found it very difficult to understand some of the array of new concepts which Delany expects us to absorb, often with no simple discursive explanation. At the end of the book I decided I didn't really understand the distinction made between work1, work2, and work3, despite the concept appearing at times to be perfectly simple. We need to cope with a range of high-powered sf concepts: the Web, the Xlv, Cultural Fugue (the state reached by a planet before it destroys itself), the Web's officers, who are called 'spiders'. Marq does not explain anything more than he has to to someone in his own culture, as a result of which we never get sustained descriptions of the things he is familiar with. At the end of the book I'm still not precisely sure what the evelmi, a race of six-legged reptiloid aliens who live in symbiosis and sexual interrelationship with human beings on their home world, look like. Yet, as with the humans of whose sex I remain unsure, the evelmi are treated as individuals, and some sharp individual distinctions are made by Marq on coloration, the shape of talons, and so on.

A final question which should be raised about these various new codes of language and description is how much they can simply be stipulated, and how much they should be placed in some historical context to allow the reader to understand how they could have evolved. George Turner has placed great emphasis on his view

that anything new about a future world should be explicable as having evolved from our own culture. Delany obviously prefers the black box technique: we are to assume that the intervening time represents whatever box is required to have produced the necessary transformations of our own experience; if the passage of time is great enough, it can be envisaged that almost any sort of 'box' could have been there, given that human nature is considered to be plastic rather than fixed. On this point, I'm inclined to agree with Delany, provided that what we are shown does not violate our (admittedly vulnerable) sense of the most basic human needs, interests and capacities, and provided that the individual elements of future society, language, technology, etc. are mutually consistent and exist in some sort of shaping context that we can understand, rather than just providing an arbitrary and convenient set of symbols. Delany does sometimes merely stipulate stuff which is symbolically convenient, but he is also able to develop sequences and far-future changes with great rigour, even while plundering them for all the poetic effects that they are worth. These are the strengths and weaknesses of Delany.

III.

The thematic centre of Stars in My Pockets is the idea of degradation or debasement. This takes many forms: a great deal of emphasis is placed upon nudity - which can signify a lowering of status combined with great vulnerability, or can signify a situation where clothes are seen as unnecessary. Stripping a victim or enemy is a well-known method of humiliating him or her, making the enemy vulnerable, demeaned, attacking some of the sources of identity and pride. At the polar station where Rat Korga works in the early part of the book, he is treated negligently and demeaningly in that he is not fed enough meals, is not provided with toilet facilities, is forced to work naked - his clothes are never replaced but are allowed to wear out. However, this is not the only context in which nudity is presented in the book, since the characters are also shown as going naked at Dyethshome, where Marq and his fellows live in an innocent symbiosis with the evelmi. Here the emphasis is upon the lack of need for clothes. Nakedness is a sign, in other words, both of shame and degradation and of innocence and transcendence; Delany is able to exploit this widely-recognized ambiguity.

As already touched upon, many elements of the book simultaneously convey ideas of degradation or shame and splendour or transcendence. Stars in My Pockets seems to have little to do with the concepts of good and evil as such. Such concepts are largely abstract and intellectually-based ones; more visceral feelings than those of moral condemnation are horror and disgust, and it is at the concepts associated with these feelings that Delany appears to direct his analysis. An attempt to hold together the disparate elements of the novel by relating them directly to moral approval or disapproval would fail, since many of the experiences described, though emotionally potent would probably be considered to be morally neutral upon dispassionate analysis. For example, it is hard to believe that anyone would be morally concerned one way or the other about Marq's sexual interest in calluses and bitten fingernails rather than the conventional bums and tits -

but the feeling could easily be that such sexual interests are nasty, debased, and unfortunate, comic rather than wicked, with the comedy based upon a mild form of disgust. Other aspects, such as Marq's sexual relations with reptiloid aliens, would be both disgusting and wicked according to conventional wisdom. However, Delany challenges our assumptions of what experiences should strike us as degrading, should disgust or repel us, or make us feel vicarious shame. In doing so, he also challenges much of the basis for conventional morality. Delany goes to the core of what is natural or acceptable experience for a human being, and to the question of the limits of tolerance for behaviour which his own society constructs as degraded or disgusting; he stretches the boundaries of what can seem acceptable or even, in the right circumstances, delightful. As far as Marq's relationships with evelmi go, the view that interspecies sexuality might be shameful is made to appear mistaken, parochial and itself comic.

Towards the end of the book, the Dyeths' friends the Thants attempt to make a statement distancing themselves from and denouncing the Dyeths. Their way of doing this is to avoid coming to dinner, instead huddling about, wrapped in privacy clouds, and saying scornful and insulting things about 'lizard lovers' (earlier we have been introduced to other insulting terms such as 'front-face' for heterosexual; such terms don't mean much to us). The Dyeths, both human and evelmi, find the whole display incomprehensible but are most perturbed that their carefully prepared meal is being left uneaten. Under the circumstances, the Thants appear to be rude and narrow-minded, while we identify with the Dyeths. It all seems like a humorous clash of a more generous and a meaner culture - in which the upholders of what we would normally consider the most basic assumptions of sexual morality are simply ridiculous.

Delany places in the foreground the whole idea of cultural difference and the social construction of meaning and value that goes with it. Marq's job is that of an industrial diplomat, someone who has to deal in trading relationships between many cultures and even species. For him, it is second nature to assume that responses to situations, together with the very concepts which are employed in those situations, will vary fundamentally from culture to culture. He has internalized this assumption so much that he sometimes appears bemused when not all others share it, but are sometimes locked into their own cultural assumptions. Marq is very aware that he lives in a Universe of 6000 inhabited planets, each with cultural variations of its own.

The outer limit of acceptable behaviour seems to be marked in this when Marq encounters the proclivities of a male sadist, Clym, early in his narrative. Clym is a professional psychopathic killer, as well as being sexually excited by torture:

. . . I am going to take you by force, chain you in a special chamber I have already equipped for the purpose, and do some very painful things to your body that will possibly - the chances are four out of five - result in your death, and certainly in your permanent disfigurement, mental and physical.' (We live in a medically sophisticated age. You

have to work very hard to permanently disfigure any body.) (p. 96)

Marq responds coolly enough by our standards; Delany employs a mixture of conventional humour and his own far-future codes to show us how his protagonist feels. Marq says: "Just tell me, is this part of your job or just your way of being friendly?" (p. 97). At the same time, he suddenly refers to Clym as 'she', and adds 'from then on "she" was the only way I could think of her' - Marq's sexual distaste is emphasized more than any familiar moral reaction. However, he takes the opportunity to warn a more innocent-seeming acquaintance to beware of Clym before moving 'sixty million kilometers away' and adding 'And I wished it were sixty million light years and in another sun system' (p. 98). The tone here is comic self deprecation at being unable to cope with such an experience as meeting Clym, rather than of disgust or moral outrage. Marq refers to Clym as one of the 'odd creations of our epoch', but does not judge him any more harshly than that, and does not denounce him to anyone.

The initial implication, and not a trivial one, seems to be that here is a variety of nastiness beyond the pale of cultural relativism or sexual permissiveness, but that even Clym merits some respect and consideration in that he gave his potential victim fair warning. In this book's terms, Clym seems to be just about at the far limits of tolerance. We may contrast the woman who wished to treat Rat Korga sadistically - the two scenes, both occurring fairly early in the book, are obviously to be read against each other. The woman seems harmless compared with Clym, even though her desires are selfish and spoilt. She is unable to do Korga any real physical harm, and she begins to do him a great deal of good. Even within the ambit of sadism, it is possible to make distinctions as to what is tolerable and what is not tolerable behaviour: there is no attempt to apply conventional blanket judgements. Here, then, is perhaps the further implication of such scenes: as the feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin has emphasized in another context, we tend to construct less privileged forms of sexual activities in our own culture's moral hierarchy as uniformly repulsive - without grace, consideration, or individual complexity. Delany is prepared to create and juxtapose scenes which include complexity and a range of intelligent interaction that subverts the popular cultural assumptions.

Degradation is frequently associated with both sex and sin in our own culture, and the equation is shown as not forgotten in Stars in My Pockets, though it is much attenuated in the ultra-sophisticated culture in which Marq Dyeth moves. When the woman who buys Korga does so, she underlines the equation by asking whether he is willing to obey her every whim and caprice, 'no matter how debased or lascivious?' (p. 19). He responds simply 'Yeah ...?'. The desires which she wishes to articulate are both lascivious and debased by the standards of our culture - debased in part because they are lascivious. But the concept of what should count as 'lascivious', a value-word if there ever was one, is just one more which is very much up for grabs.

Accordingly, in reassessing what debased behaviour might be, Delany is looking mainly at various kinds of less mainstream sexual activities. In some cases, these are somewhat comic, even for

Marq, such as when one of his encounters is with a fetishist interested in high-tech paraphernalia; Marq's friend ends up 'a-crackle with sparks from the low-amperage high-voltage electrodes that he had me play across his handsome, lithe body in its various manacles and restraints' (p. 76). Other behaviours shown, however, would normally strike most of us as ugly, off-putting, even disgusting. Marq is attracted to people whom we would conventionally think of as ugly, and to bits of their bodies which we would consider blemishes: calluses, severely bitten fingernails, acne scars. All this is apart from the fact that Marq, a male human, has sex both with other male humans and with the lizardish evelmi. Throughout, Delany builds up ideas of what it would be like to be sexually attracted by things which are thought of as ugly or disgusting in a sexual context. In doing so he manages to create a romance of ugliness, deformity, and mutilation.

Science fiction has tackled the question of cultural relativity as it applies to sexual behaviour before. The most celebrated example, prior to Delany's work on the theme, would be Robert A. Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land; Delany, the 'left-wing' constructivist, and Heinlein, the 'right-wing' libertarian, agree on the parochialism of our cultural taboos on sexuality, and on much else. But the most obvious difference between Heinlein and Delany, leaving aside their underlying politics (as interpreted by a society which defines political difference in terms of certain concepts rather than others), is that Heinlein's characters are all the stuff that wish-fulfilment is made of. His supermen and superwomen display a transcendent morality, which includes the area of their sex lives - in fact especially in the area of their sex lives - but they are basically folks who can be recognized as the fantasies of well-heeled types brought up on the symbols offered in Playboy, Cosmopolitan and their ilk. While Heinlein usually has at least one character of advanced years, the familiar Jubal Harshaw-Robert Heinlein figure, in each novel, his characters would never be shown as in any way ugly or even plain: the men are handsome, clean, heterosexual, usually dashing; the women are beautiful in standard Western terms, ultra-smart, perhaps with a trace of fashionable male-fantasy bisexuality. It is easy to scorn Heinlein, and possibly more relevant to praise him for the success he has had in the area he has mapped out. But Delany has gone far beyond Heinlein's justification of a narrow form of sexual radicalism in terms of the other values of his culture, and has suggested that the most intense assumptions within that culture of what is nice and what is nasty might be without foundation. (Perhaps the most obvious example of libertarian thought generally falling short of true radicalism is in its complacent or rationalized acceptance of socially-constructed property concepts; Heinlein, with his millionaire heroes, is not an exception to the rule.)

The point to emphasize has already been laboured: degradation and splendour are not necessarily separated in Stars in My Pocket. Many things which would normally be considered ugly or sordid are actually splendid to those involved, and the two kinds of experience often seem to go together. A notable example is the dragon hunt on which Marq embarks with Korga: this is not actually a quest to slay a dragon (a larger biological relative of

the evelmi) but to capture its thoughts and momentarily be a dragon. The feelings in this state are wonderfully rich, exhilarating, and a monument to the goal of understanding rather than destroying - but also explicitly sexual. In addition, Korga and Marq make love during the dragon hunt, apparently exploring each other in intimate physical ways which our culture conventionally and automatically considers degrading. Without bothering even to provide any explanation, Marq tells us: 'He came twice, I, once, and we joked about it. Later, both our hands wet with his urine, we lifted our bows . . .' (p. 260). The title of the book is a reference to the idea of personal splendour, and is picked up in such a context within the book, and it also links with the description of a particular star, Aurigae, the largest star in the Universe, which appears like a vast sunset. Though the woman who tries to own Korga identifies lasciviousness and debasement, the book as a whole more identifies splendour and degradation, or perhaps splendour and misery.

It should not be thought that Delany attempts in this book to redeem notions of sexuality by equating sex with love. At times, the question is raised as to whether Marq and Korga love each other; the question is not ultimately answered, because, as Marq tells the spider, Japral, who originally brought them together, they were able to know each other for only a day. Delany does not attempt to sentimentalize lust as equating with love, but neither does he deny the splendour in lust itself. Rather, Stars in My Pocket seems to be ordered consistent with a viewpoint most often articulated in our society by the male gay community, but now being taken up by at least some radical feminists and others, that the ideals of fidelity and permancency are not necessary to give value to sexual relationships, and nor is it necessary that the physicality of sex should be subordinated to deep emotional experiences for sex to be in itself a splendid experience. Any idea that the sexual experience stands in need of redemption by emotions and ongoing relationships which may accompany the experience but are not demanded by it is parasitic upon a socially constructed fear of sex in itself as somehow debased or degrading. On this view, for example, it is false and sentimental to defend gays by claiming that their relationships can be as faithful, profound and 'spiritual' as those of traditional couples. In the process of developing such a defence, so the argument goes, one accepts an unnecessary and repressive construction of the nature of sexual experience.

Towards the end of the book Marq defends his particular sexual makeup in a powerhouse speech worthy of Shakespeare's Shylock reminding us that even Jews bleed. This speech is a kind of manifesto, though elsewhere Marq cannot be precisely identified with the implied author, suffering as he does from his own failings of understanding - we often see Marq bemused by what is going on around him, but only in contexts where we are led to understand that bemusement is a civilized if not a totally comprehending reaction. Civilization is another possible opposite of degradation, and no matter how degraded Marq's tastes and actions would appear in our own society, Marq always strikes us as preeminently civilized, a true diplomat. Despite this, Delany sometimes attempts to make aspects of Marq's life take on poignancy - and here he fails where elsewhere he succeeds. It may be that the

reason for the apparent failure is based on an inability to win us over from our own cultural assumption that a relationship needs to be based upon more than sexual attraction and even wonder before it can affect us as poignant.

In conclusion, Stars in My Pockets is a courageous attempt to dramatize explosive themes in the teeth of traditional social attitudes and the recent anti-sex attitudes that have been having such a successful run, encouraged by social elements as disparate as cultural feminism and the New Right. By creating whole new cultural/linguistic codes and forcing us to live with them, Delany tackles his theme more radically than any other sf writer before him. Much of what is given dramatic expression in Stars in My Pockets was already latent in the earlier books. It was there in Dhalgren, which explored the taboo areas of sexuality - kinky, flaunted, polymorphous, and sudden - in such a way as to show interaction, complexity, and humanity; it is in the Neveryon books where, for example, Gorgik the Liberator's interpretation of his slave collar makes it both an emblem of servitude and a sexual statement or focus. But Delany is writing closer to the bone than ever in his new diptych, and using far future sf tropes with a radicalism and ruthlessness that justifies the far future sub-genre itself. If his work is uneven and not entirely satisfying, it is nonetheless pointing the way for the rest of sf, including the works of less audacious but more conventionally perfect writers. Once what Delany is doing, or attempting to do, is understood, it is difficult to be satisfied with the ambitions of any other sf writer, much less the overwhelming bulk of mainstream fiction.

Still a young man in his early forties, Delany has many years of pioneering sf and fantasy ahead of him. We can only await with enthusiasm what he is going to do, first of all in the second half of his present diptych, and then in greater things to come.

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Exchanges

JACK WILLIAMSON TO JOHN FOYSTER

Dear John

Thank you for the issues of ASFR with the comments on 'Opposites - React!'

I was glad to see it. Glad, I suppose, to have the story recalled. But this sort of thing always makes me wince.

(I recall the 20 000 word hatchet job done by Brian Aldiss on The Legion of Time in SF Horizons.)*

The stories of that time were written by writers of the time for readers of the time living in the culture of the time and published in pulp magazines that we felt to be nearly as ephemeral as radio broadcasts - all with no real expectation of the heady delights of book publication and the flattering attention of critics in the next half century. Looked at from here and now, a lot of things fail to fit the current norms. But at least - at least in a way - it's nice to be remembered.

* (I should add that I have come to terms with the way I felt about that, and Brian is still a very firm friend.)

JOHN FOYSTER TO JACK WILLIAMSON

Dear Jack

Thank you for your kind note. I guess that I am trying to make a large number of points in The Long View, and you have brought a special emphasis to one of them.

When I started reading science fiction, thirty years ago, I thought the stuff I was reading then was pretty good. But everywhere I read about 'The Golden Age'. As I found and read earlier copies of Astounding (and Startling) much of this made sense to me. Certainly the magazines of the late 1940s had a lot more oomph than those of the 'fifties. But the real Golden Age was supposed to have started much earlier than that.

The magazines of the early 1940s were not all that easy to find, but over the years I have managed to build up a collection; I've no doubt that, like me, you buy more than you read, and somehow one regrets that pile of unread paper. The opportunity to read for a purpose seemed to me too good to be lost. And so, when I came to think about writing about the history of magazine sf, the interval structure I'm imposing in The Long View came quickly to mind as one way in which I could pay a tribute to the earliest writers.

In the case of Astounding in 1943, I would be choosing a starting point which was generally highly acclaimed - it comes

right in the middle of 'The Golden Age' as defined by Alva Rogers in A Requiem for Astounding. But there was an additional advantage to starting with Astounding - those AnLab ratings which provided contemporary opinion about the relative merits of the stories.

Now when I turned to the 1943 issues I found some surprising things. In the first instalment I indicated some of my surprise at things like the way advertising was handled - in a great rush, and sometimes not well. As I have moved through the year I was immediately struck by the problem of the misplaced artwork, which I've now mentioned a couple of times. What surprised me most about artwork being put on the wrong pages was that no one seems to have mentioned it previously; at the same time, it does seem a fault which could easily have been avoided. The implication of the latter point is that the art editor also saw the magazine as ephemeral and didn't take the care that might reasonably be expected.

Writers, by contrast, in my view did take more care. For example, when you re-wrote 'Opposites - React!' as Seetes Ship you did a major re-write, obviously taking care of some of the objections I raised in my review. In just the same way, when van Vogt re-wrote The Weapon Makers for book publication he made major changes - so major that in that case the book version is scarcely recognizable in the serial version. At least you and van Vogt took the trouble to re-write, and science fiction is better because you did give so much care to improving the original (possibly hastily-written) versions.

Yet from an historical viewpoint - which is the one I'm taking - major interest must lie with the original version. In the case of stories in Astounding we know, for example, just which stories were most popular with the readers, and from that information we can learn something about the science-fiction reading population of the day. What cannot be overlooked or forgotten is that 'Opposites - React!' was very popular in those days. However you may feel about it now, at the time you were plainly writing the sort of stuff readers wanted. It seems to me that this gives you a unique and valuable perspective of the growth of science fiction, as it does to all the other fellas who were writing then and are still around now.

I'm therefore very grateful to you for taking the time to write to me about my pieces. I'm worried that you might tempt me to go into even greater depth about what I read into the science fiction of the day - and fortunately 'The Long View' has been squeezed out of the September ASFE - but I shall try to resist: I must mention one regret, however, and that is that my present schedule doesn't call for me to write about 'The Equalizer', which I regard as one of the finest of science fiction stories.

Reviews

Keith Taylor, *BARD III: THE WILD SEA*, Ace Fantasy, 1986, 202 pp, US\$2.95

reviewed by Russell Blackford

For some years now, Keith Taylor has been Australian fantasy's unsung hero, almost unacknowledged by the critics, but arguably the most vivid writer among the fantasy-and-sf community in this country, and destined to be one of the most successful. Taylor is the author of six novels: four written alone, plus two Cormac mac Art books written with Andrew J. Offutt. He has also written short stories, including the award-winning 'Where Silence Rules'. While his work is receiving regular publication overseas, it remains critically neglected, doubtless because of the poor regard in which his chosen form of sword-and-sorcery writing is held by the critics, a point we'll come to.

Most of Keith Taylor's fiction is set in a fabulous version of Europe during the Dark Ages; his preferred period, to be more exact, is around the beginning of the sixth century, when Rome has fallen and barbaric Europe is entering a period of savage flux. *Bard III: The Wild Sea* is dated precisely by Taylor as being set late in AD 512. Taylor's Dark Age world is filled with magic, much of it unfamiliar and sinister. He delights in depicting violent, amoral action, dark, half-defined forces and marvels spectacular, erotic, or dangerous (or all three). As touched on above, this mode of writing does not appeal to everyone - least of all the sf literati - but its adherents are enthusiastic and recognize it as having its own rules and criteria for excellence, according to which Taylor has proved himself to be an outstanding genre writer. This seems to have been recognized by his publisher, Ace: the three books in his Bard series, *Bard*, *Bard II*, and *Bard III: The Wild Sea*, appear to be just the beginning of an epic sequence. In fact, Taylor's leading character Felimid mac Fal, a Druid-trained Irish bard wandering among the barbaric tribes of Europe and Britain, may yet end up with adventures as prolific as those of A. Bertram Chandler's John Grimes.

Taylor's gifts lie in his atmospheric evocations of the grim societies and strange landscapes through which his characters travel, his vivid descriptions of the powerful and uncanny beings which populate his stories, and an ability to describe action swiftly but in grimly realistic detail. While the plots of his novels are sometimes episodic, Taylor has a gift of weaving elements and episodes together to create satisfying and logical resolutions, enabling his heroes to escape from their predicaments by a blend of personal resourcefulness and the fortuitous dovetailing of circumstances.

The first Bard book was a showcase for Taylor's ability to imagine bizarre characters and beasts. It included a gigantic shape-shifting barbarian as its leading villain, a monstrous two-headed bear, a giant spider, an ermine far larger than a man, a

glamorous witch princess who shared lovers with her attendant (both of whom reappear in Bard III), a quite extraordinary magician whose powers gave him total control over any organic matter which was not still living - and more. In Bard II Taylor created an even more memorable magician in Koschei the Deathless, a giant and corrupt being who captured Felimid mac Fal for a time, and who proved far too powerful to be beaten by mere physical prowess or even normal cunning. The same book featured the woman pirate Gudrun Blackhair, as if in repentance that all of the female characters in the first book were drawn into the story essentially through their sexual involvement with the hero.

The adventures of Felimid mac Fal and Gudrun Blackhair are continued in Bard III, in which they encounter two races of faerie beings associated with the sea: the almost human Children of Lir and the fishy monstrosities known as 'sea-demons'. At the same time, they are forced to deal with two evil men of great supernatural power: Urbicus the wrecker - a former Christian Bishop and master of air and water magics - and the still more impressive Sulghein, a weirdo Christian ascetic determined to bring down apocalypse on the innocent Children of Lir.

All these characters and creatures in the Bard novels are described in detail and shown in action in long, rich sequences of story-telling, though Bard III seems to me less impressive in this respect than the two earlier books. For example, Urbicus, who appears at first to be the major villain, is not treated with the same generosity of imagination and detail as his predecessors Koschei from Bard II and Pendor from the first book. While I wish I could say that Taylor was improving with each novel, I am afraid that Bard III is the thinnest of the Bard novels so far, both in pages and in plotting and characterization. The incidents are starting to become a little repetitive and the attention to detail less loving and certain. At his best, Taylor is not only lavish with sensory information. He gains in vividness by creating scenes and characters both out of the ordinary and just a little askew from our preconceptions of the extraordinary. There is a feeling in his depiction of such characters as Pendor and Koschei that they could have been treated as heroes just as readily as villains if their motivations had been only slightly different: their attitudes, physical characteristics, emotions, are not peculiar to villainous characters - though they are shown as terrible, they are also strangely endearing. Moreover, they are depicted in such a range of moods and situations that they take on a sense of real solidity. This is less the case with the characters in Bard III.

Nonetheless, Taylor remains the most vivid writer in Australian *sf* & *sf*. Though he may describe events less acceptable in terms of an empirical-scientific Weltanschauung than those of other major Australian writers who will be discussed in this magazine, he is the most grittily realistic of all in the way he visualizes action and character and produces detail. The *sf* critics who have ignored his work would perhaps argue that it is not rewarding to a critic looking for such things as moral insight or social relevance. And it is true that Taylor does not in any sense use his imaginatively transformed version of the Dark Ages as a model for the human condition or for issues confronting our own society -

any critic attempting to read his fiction closely for significances going beyond the events being literally described would find little to write about. With regard to wider significances in Taylor's work, perhaps the most that can be said is that it tends to reject and subvert traditional notions of ethics and propriety. This is not so much a special feature of Taylor's writing as one which is common to the sword-and-sorcery genre, but which Taylor's work embraces and perhaps takes further than most genre efforts.

Neither sword-and-sorcery as a genre nor Taylor's work in particular necessarily endorses the militaristic values of many of its characters - some of whom, like Felimid mac Fal, are intelligent enough to realize that warrior values are at best dubious. But the heroes of sword-and-sorcery wander in violent, dangerous worlds where they have to live by cunning, strength and whatever skills they have which may make them dangerous beings themselves. The emphasis is upon survival and the satisfaction of elemental needs: food, shelter, sex, and a modicum of companionship. In the background is an assumption that the local mores of the barbarous societies depicted have no particular validity, but that those of our own society are no more absolute. Christianity, and Christian morality in particular, are treated with a degree of antagonism and contempt in Taylor's work as in much of the genre - this being one of the characteristics which tends to separate sword-and-sorcery from so-called 'high fantasy' in the mode of Tolkien. In Taylor's award-winning short story, 'Where Silence Rules' the Christian hermit who has exiled himself on the story's magically silent island is a madman. Elsewhere, much is made of the idea that Christians are at least as cruel as the barbarous pagans with whom they still share Europe, and their religion is inferior in that it is mean-spirited and life-denying. This idea reaches its apotheosis with the mad 'saint' Sulghein in Bard III, whose one-man jihad leads to devastating and extravagant effects which I won't go into now for fear of spoiling the book.

Many of Keith Taylor's characters appear almost nihilistic compared with the self-conscious, agonizing creatures who inhabit the universes of much contemporary fiction. But the sympathetic characters are governed by an elemental sense of right and wrong, their chief values being a kind of naive lustiness, generosity, and sense of honour. Their deeds (cunning or sudden) and their dark world are almost refreshing: here is a place where heroes respect the undeniable physical and magical powers which impinge on their actions - as for the various ideas of right and wrong held by those living in the varied and volatile societies through which their wanderings take them, such things are of little matter to a hero who acts according to his own lights. Good crypto-existentialist stuff!

I hope that Bard IV, which is doubtless on its way, will be a richer and more inventive (less hasty?) book than this one. Meanwhile, if you're the sort of reader who finds any pleasure at all in sword-and-sorcery, don't start with Bard III. The World Sea - go back to the first of the Bard novels and start enjoying this outstanding series of its kind from the beginning.

Greg Bear, BLOOD MUSIC, Ace Science Fiction Books, 1986, 247 pp, US\$2.95, \$A6.95

reviewed by John Foyster

When Analog carried Greg Bear's novelette 'Blood Music' in the June 1983 issue the cover-copper was neither that story, nor the middle section of a Lee Correy serial, but a rather tedious article about interstellar space exploration titled 'To The Stars!': the kind of thing Gernsback used to run, and indeed did run in finer quality, in Science Fiction Plus thirty years earlier. Although the idea underlying the story would lend itself to a cover painting, the story - wedged between the book advertisements for books we would rather not know about (was the Asimov/Greenberg/Martin anthology The Science Fiction Weight-Loss Book a grand success after all?) - is a rather confusing, if not telegraphic, mishmash.

The novel is the result, apparently, of considerable encouragement given Greg Bear by various readers of the original short version. There's no question that the novel is an improvement on the novelette, but whether it is of Nebula-nomination quality is another matter.

The novelette, told in the first person by a minor character of the novel, managed to introduce the major idea - designer-built biochips made superintelligent and capable of acting collectively are injected into the body of their inventor as a way of saving his (illegal) experiment. They take over his body and, ultimately, almost all human beings in the United States. The novelette is, as one might put it, unflashed and unbled.

The novel takes all those ideas and milks them to death. The characters remain almost as unsatisfactory as in the shorter version, although at least there is some differentiation albeit indifferently handled. (Speaking of indifferent handling, the proofreading here is awful, though perhaps the author is partly to blame. It's amusing to find that the usual '-our', '-or' difference of opinion between US and British spelling is applied to H G Wells's Cavor (though of course in the reverse direction), and as soon as 'noocytes' begin to be mentioned one waits with trepidation for the entrance of Teilhard de Chardin - this happens on page 175 in the clever plastic disguise of 'Tielhard de Chardin'. Someone ought to have been able to get this right. It must be admitted, however, that there's a mounting tension as soon as a character named 'Paulsen-Fuchs' enters the action, for one fears something dreadful is about to happen; it does, on page 179, and thereafter one is, as it were, more relaxed about the whole thing.)

This novel is a good example of a mildly interesting idea worked into a novel in altogether too much of a hurry. Vergil Ulam, the inventor and host, is only half-constructed as a character, and the complete realization of him seems to me to have been the heart of a novel with this particular plot, for the nature of the universal alien who dominates the second half of the book is surely determined by the nature of the onlie begetter. The

failure to create in Ulam an adequate Everyman leads to the failure of the novel.

Joan Slonczewski, A DOOR INTO OCEAN, Arbor House, 403 pp., US\$17.95

reviewed by Jenny Blackford

Lucy Sussex in another life was a bower-bird: for every era, writer or sexual perversion she has a small shiny blue anecdote. She tells me that Julie Burchill said, 'Angela Carter thinks that women are children: she writes fairy stories for them'.

A Door into Ocean is just on the borderline of this sort of lunatic-fringe feminism. Joan Slonczewski, despite the back-cover photo in which she looks the archetypal librarian (remember, some of my best friends are librarians), is a professor of biology at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. This feminist world is one where the biologist rules supreme.

On the subtly-named water world of Shora, the equally subtly-named Sharers (an all-female race, reproducing not by parthenogenesis as the appalling blurb claims, but by sophisticated biological/genetic techniques) have lived idyllically since the collapse of the inter-stellar civilization of the Primes. They neither use nor know metal or stone (as the blurb says, they 'have eschewed all unnatural technology'), and instead use such natural and normal means as viral culture, gene splitting and microsurgery through plants. The rafts on which they live are immense plants, which are also living laboratories. No unnatural computers for them - they genetically manipulate flying-spider type animals for information storage and communication.

The subtly-named Merwen (mer is sea, of course, and wen is Welsh for white; there might even be echoes of the oracular pig Hen Wen) is leader of the Sharers, in so far as a feminist collective might have a leader. She realizes that the more conventional people from the subtly named Valedon (echoes of valour), of which Shora is the moon (surprise), are human, are related to them and must be treated as such if Shora is to remain morally pure. She and her love-sharer (cutesy-poo strikes again) Usha ride the ferry to Valedon, and bring back an exceedingly wimpy and stupid boy, spineless Spinel. Once more, plot-structures worthy of Days of Our Lives seem to be in store. Surprisingly, the cultural clashes that follow are done quite nicely.

The events of the war between Shora and Valedon are individually unpredictable, even if the outcome is not. Even this jaded reader was occasionally taken aback by developments in the war. Interpersonal relationships, similarly, follow the soap-opera form, but avoid the clichéd incidents which I kept expecting. Young Spineless does grow up to be the hope of the side, and to marry Merwen's amazon daughter Lystra (subtle echoes of Lysistrata), but he surprised me now and then.

Ms Slonczewski's characterization and moralization are done with a butter-knife. She can't really aspire to Angela Carter's sharp little fruit-knife or Jane Austen's scalpel. Still, if she can get over her little problem with names, she might turn into that much-needed being, a good feminist science fiction writer.

AGE OF WONDERS by David Hartwell and LA NOUVELLE SCIENCE-FICTION AMERICAINE by Gérard Cordesse

reviewed by John D. Berry

[This review originally appeared, in slightly different form, in Wing Window 9.]

'It is always much duller to read about science fiction than it is to read science fiction itself.' That's what Groff Conklin says at the end of his introduction to Operation Future, a 1955 Permabooks anthology that I unearthed yesterday while probing a cardboard box of old sf paperbacks. The rest of the intro is boring enough to make the statement true in context, but in the wider sf world of 1986 the sad fact is that it's not true, not true at all. Reading sf is usually disappointing; reading about it is much more fun.

Last fall I was reading two books about sf more or less simultaneously, interleaving one with the other so that their ideas got mixed up but reflected each other. One was Age of Wonders by David Hartwell, which was published by Walker in 1984 and recently came out in a mass market edition (which unfortunately seems to be an experiment in the 'Doubleday game', or how gray an ink you can use and still get people to buy the book). The other was La nouvelle science-fiction américaine (the new American science fiction) by Gérard Cordesse, published in France by Aubier in its 'collection USA', also in 1984. (Eileen Gunn found the Cordesse book in a bookstore in Aix last November.) Both books were engaging and stimulating to read; the Nouvelle SF in particular made science fiction seem momentarily an exciting thing to read.

Age of Wonders is less a book about specific aspects of sf than an explanation of the sf phenomenon. It seems to be written for everyone who needs such an explanation; it's the perfect book to give to your relatives who not only don't understand why you read the stuff but are mystified at your involvement in the sf community. Hartwell establishes right up front that sf is everywhere today, so you can't very well escape brushing against it over and over if you pay any attention at all to the mass media; then he ties sf's in-group nature in to the rest of the world by alluding to Thomas Pynchon's idea that under the surface everyone is involved in some kind of weird underground. Beyond these basic points, the book is hard to get a grasp on. It's all explanation and exploration. It's a little like an sf story itself, especially like a novel compiled of several short stories: chock full of ideas, sometimes too many at once, always fascinating, but a little disjointed, without a single thrust from beginning to end. In that, of course, it mirrors the world of sf quite accurately: Hartwell's book is one of the few that gives you - even if you're

an outsider! - a good picture of all the contradictory, overlapping, ambivalent sides of the literature and its peculiar community.

As for sf itself, Hartwell's conclusion is that it needs its peculiarity and its unschooled vigour, or it becomes just a stupid fun-house reflection of normal literature. He manages to align himself firmly behind getting sf 'back in the gutter where it belongs' without joining the ranks of the nostalgia buffs who would limit sf to formulas. At least he tries to.

It's hard to follow exactly what Hartwell's argument is, in his last chapter or two. His attempt to represent the lines of thought and feeling of people within the sf community, which is the strength of the book earlier on, gets in his way when he tries to reach a conclusion. He neatly examines the twin forces from outside the field that are bending and shaping it - the force of standard literary judgement, and the corrupting power of big money and mass success - which have their effect because the people within the field adopt one or the other outside value as their own (if they're really fucked up they try to adopt both at once). But he's weak on just what that unique middle ground really is.

La nouvelle science-fiction américaine is also an explanation, but it's a critical explanation for people who are interested in sf. Cordesse gives much more space to the New Wave than Hartwell does, and it seems obvious that he's speaking to an audience for whom the effects of the New Wave, despite its excesses and stupidities, opened up the field enough to catch their interest. He writes a good deal about particular authors - first about the major writers of the New Wave, in Britain as well as the U. S., then about the most interesting contemporary writers - though he uses them sometimes to represent a point he's making; this is not a book of critical exegesis on any individual writers. (He does do some deft description along the way, though. 'Spinrad has the gift of making enemies, on both the right and the left, so well that even the enemies of his enemies are not his friends.') Like Hartwell, he takes a look at the ambiguities of sf's place between the exigencies of the marketplace and the demands of literature.

Cordesse is a very clear writer, and he understands American sf as if from the inside. He's also familiar with the currents of French critical thought, and takes them for granted. In a late chapter he deals with the 'theoretical promises of sf'; he raises questions of the theory of Reception (how a reader receives the text), but he does it matter-of-factly, without the jargon and the spectacularly convoluted sentences you might expect if your only point of reference is Delany's allusions to Jacques Derrida. Cordesse focuses on what is unique to sf, and to him the importance of the field is not in the way it picks you up and transports you to another world but in the way it distances you - even on John Carter's Mars - from the everyday. He creeps up on the sense of wonder and snares it from behind,

Because of the utter sanity of Cordesse's judgements, the ease of his prose, and the value of his European perspective on American

sf, I've been working on translating the book. I don't agree with everything in it, but it deserves to be part of the ongoing argument in the language of American sf.

The two books have one surprising feature in common: they both treat extensively, and intelligently, of fandom. You might expect this of Hartwell's book, since its focus is on the world of science fiction, and since David Hartwell is certainly a very fannish participant in our common subculture; but Cordesse too seems to know fandom and to understand its ambiguous relationship to professional science fiction publishing. (He taught at Berkeley for a while, so I presume that some of his knowledge is first-hand.) Cordesse may have a tendency to overestimate the importance of fandom, or its typicalness of the mass of sf readers. He punctures the myth of sf readers as all twelve-year-olds, citing reader surveys from the 'Forties and 'Fifties, but naturally he has to guess at how representative the people who responded to the surveys are. He does make an excellent case, though, for the hard-core audience's being a great deal older, a great deal more demanding, and a great deal more experienced in sf than conventional wisdom would have it; he also makes it clear that the best writing has been done when the editors and the writers felt that they were writing for that high-level audience. Hartwell cites the more traditional view - his very first chapter is titled 'The Golden Age of Science Fiction is Twelve' - but attacks the Wollheim belief that readers devour sf for three years in adolescence and then quit; he argues instead that a large part of that young audience goes on to read sf at a less frenzied pace through at least young adulthood. 'And this stage can last for life' (Most of us can probably recognize ourselves in Hartwell's book.) He cites more up-to-date surveys, from LOCUS, to suggest that most readers of science fiction have been at it for quite a few years. Hartwell's view of the mass of 'omnivores' (whom it requires extreme ignorance and professional incompetence, determination akin to constipating oneself by an act of will, to be unsuccessful' at selling books to), the smaller crowd of 'chronics' in for the long haul, and the intensely judgemental, participatory in-group of fandom (me and thee) corresponds fairly closely to Cordesse's pyramid of audiences, from the devourers of the Shaver mystery or modern hackwork ('alimentary' fiction - a lovely term!) to the demanding readers who prize the sf difference while having a wider reading experience in which to appreciate it. Both critics are well aware that fandom is an unusual, idiosyncratic, uncategorizable, loony, utterly infuriating subgroup that is absolutely essential to the composition of the world in which science fiction is written and published.

Reading either of these books gets you all excited, caught up in the momentum of a progressive artform with its struggles to survive and its brash assertions of nonconforming relevance. (The backcover blurb on Cordesse's book compares sf to the Elizabethan theatre and the English novel of the 18th century - forms right on the verge of gaining acceptance and achieving maturity but still keeping their popular vigour.) Both books end with the statement that the Golden Age of science fiction is now. They have the same feeling of liveliness and stimulation you get from reading Vincent Omniaveritas in Cheap Truth; there's nothing like

a call to the barricades to get your blood flowing. It's a shame that most of the fiction being published in the field, even by the would-be revolutionaries, is dull, repetitive, predictable.

Eileen Gunn was reading as many of the stories nominated for this year's Nebula as she could, in a vain attempt to vote intelligently. She did find one gem that she recommended to me, Nancy Kress's 'Out Of All Them Bright Stars', but on the whole it's been a discouraging ordeal. After stumbling over the second egregious bit of high-tech illiteracy from one of the brave new guard, Eileen looked up from her lapful of publisher-to-SFWA-member story xeroxes. 'It's that sort of thing,' she said, 'that makes science fiction look cute and pathetic - like puppies in the pet-shop window of literature.'

Isaac Asimov, THE EDGE OF TOMORROW, Harrap, 1986, #A29.95

reviewed by Rosaleen Love

Isaac Asimov is one of the most prolific science writers of our times. At the last count, he has published over 300 books. One of his recent books, The Edge of Tomorrow, is an anthology which mixes short fiction with short articles on the history of science. He writes about the people who make science happen, so the dust-jacket tells us, 'combining science fact and science fiction to illuminate the process of discovery'.

Asimov has tried the recipe before, in the magazine Fantasy and Science Fiction, where he has been publishing his essays on the history of science alongside science fiction stories for the past twenty-six years, at the rate of one essay per issue. The Edge of Tomorrow, however, increases the dose. Half the contents are fiction, the other half history of science.

Does the recipe work? I'm not so sure. Reading the book is like peering down a chronoscope, a machine Asimov describes in one of his stories. The chronoscope allows us to view the past, and the past Asimov most vividly brings to life is the 1950s, when eight pieces in this anthology were first published. Remember when science was the good guy, and technology promised to fix most of our problems, and no one had yet thought to apply the insights of social theory to the history of science? And all people needed to understand that science was good for them was to have science explained to them, in fairly small, regular, and painless doses? This is Asimov's world; he loves it, and he succeeds in conveying his enthusiasm to us.

Asimov wants to draw us into the real world, that is, real science, by luring us with the imaginary world. Does he succeed? On the whole, I think not. For me, the fiction works rather better than the non-fiction in showing scientists as people trying to make sense of their world.

The problem is the 'fifties orientation. The science is Boy's Own Science. The scientists, whether real or fictitious, are

invariably described as brilliant men. The young brilliant men behave in a deferential manner to their elder mentors. They call them 'Sir', and listen respectfully while science is explained to them. Older scientists refer to younger scientists as 'my young man'. I'm talking about the fiction here. Women appear in their social role as wives and knitters. Yes, you will be pleased to know that women will be knitting away and having science explained to them until the end of the universe. Actually there is one woman computer engineer in the story titled 'Found', which is a story about life from outer space finding us. I think the engineer is a woman. The one clue is a reference to a husband, which according to the sexual mores of the 'fifties must make her female.

In the non-fiction the men of science have flashes of inspiration, or make methodical observations out of a sense of inner neatness or compulsiveness. Some discoveries are said to favour the prepared mind: other discoveries are unexpected or revolutionary. I find Asimov explains scientific concepts very well, but because he restricts himself to psychological explanations of invention and discovery, he leaves out totally the social context in which discoveries are made. Science is a social process, so recent work in the history of science has argued, and Asimov is clearly totally unfamiliar with this work. For this reason, the fiction works for me rather better as the path to an understanding of science, because the fiction incorporates some of this wider dimension.

The story titled 'The Dead Past' illustrates what I mean. This story is the story of the chronoscope, the device for viewing the past. Access to the device is controlled by a Central Commission for Research, a state authority which assumes a social responsibility for science. All research is strictly controlled, and there is a network of secret agents, and spies, who infiltrate laboratories to make sure only officially sanctioned and funded research is carried out. This benevolent dictatorship of science suppresses knowledge which is bad for us, but in so doing creates an atmosphere which stifles and hinders research. The chronoscope has been invented, but knowledge of its construction is destroyed, because continually reliving the past, the dead past, will be bad for us. The story examines the question of the social responsibility of the scientist, and the question of what science is for, issues which the essays on the history of science fail to address.

The story I enjoyed most was 'Pâté de Foie Gras'. It dates from 1956. It's a retelling of the story of the goose that laid the golden egg. The goose this time is on a farm in Texas, and the owner calls in scientific help when the goose lays infertile eggs. The scientists soon discover the problem, heavy metal contamination by a thin layer of gold around the yolk. The story gets wilder and wilder, as the biochemists discover things about the biology of geese that they never knew before. Where does the gold come from? Various hypotheses are advanced, and eliminated, until we're told that the goose converts iron into gold, in its liver. The goose is an alchemical goose! How then does it do it? Further theories are put forward and investigated, significant facts are overlooked, and then their significance is

realized. The goose is a nuclear reactor! And its military significance is enormous! Perhaps there will be an antidote for radioactive fall-out! Of course, they must be careful not to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

The account of scientific method at work is in the best Karl Popper tradition, only funnier. There are, however, some sinister overtones, which serve to remind us of the involvement of the military in American science. The goose is a mutation, induced by radioactive fall-out over Texas. Asimov is very reassuring about the dangers from fall-out, for the story was published in 1956. Asimov says: 'The background radiation at the farm was a bit higher than normal. Nothing that could possibly do any harm, I hasten to add.' Just enough to turn a goose into a nuclear reactor. The moral of the story is that radioactive fall-out may be good for us yet. Asimov has a touching optimism about him, which is rather a worry.

I'm not so sure that Asimov has entirely succeeded in making the personality of the scientist come alive for us. However, he has the recipe for success in science writing under his belt, so why should he change it to accommodate recent insights into the social processes of science? His audience, he lets slip, or at least those who write to him most, are teenagers and retired engineers. As a Christmas present for a teenager or a retired engineer, you couldn't go far wrong with The Edge of Tomorrow.

Letters

Martin Bridgstock
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Bruce Gillespie (ASER March 1986) is generally right about Gene Wolfe's indirect methods of telling stories. However, I suspect he has missed a number of vital clues in 'The Doctor of Death Island'. The clues are these; Alvard wakes up in a prison hospital, forty years after being 'frozen'. He finds that his talking books are now vital to the world. His wife, now aged 65, brings him a Dickens book (page 274 of my Arrow edition). He steals and sharpens a knife (pp. 274-5), and cuts open the book to reveal the microchips (flashback on p. 295). It is then discovered that Dickens characters are jumping from book to book, corrupting other texts. Alvard uses this to blackmail his way out of prison.

It seems clear that Alvard has modified the Dickens book after awakening, presumably so that it can corrupt other books. We are shown the Dickens book next to library books (p. 274) and explicitly told that prison library books circulate to other libraries (p. 252). The path is clear for the corruption to spread into the world. Alvard knows this, and briefs his lawyer to be ready to bargain for him (p. 276).

Why has Wolfe presented the clues so indirectly? Bruce may be partly right in thinking that it is part of Wolfe's general approach. There is a simpler reason, though; it covers up some glaringly implausible assumptions in the plot. In order for the story to work, Alvard has to be au fait with talking book technology after forty years! (Imagine a computer scientist from the 1940s being faced with an IBM PC; he'd be used to wiring together banks of electric valves). He must be able to modify microcircuitry with a sharpened dinner knife, and make the circuitry do something that no one else on Earth can understand. To put it mildly, these are implausible assumptions, but all of them must hold for the story to function. Wolfe has concealed these deficiencies with a clever, indirect technique.

I suspect you're right, Martin, but don't be too hard on Bruce - the paper was written long ago (and besides, the wench is dead ...) (JBI.)

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I hadn't realized that ASER had actually started, although I knew it was in the works; if I had realized it, I would have written to you long ago. I'm delighted to see it - and delighted to see, from what I've read, that it's got exactly the quality that distinguishes all of Australia's best sf-oriented fanzines, including its own earlier incarnation: intelligence. I'm particularly struck by the review in the July issue of Count Zero, which does just what a critical review should do: it enriches my reading of the novel. Janeen Webb has pointed out lots of things, from the overview of the structure to a number of connecting details, that I hadn't noticed or hadn't consciously put together when I read the book; she gives me more tools for understanding why I like the book and what it does and does not do. (I do wish she had said more about her throw-away last observation, on the line between collage and pastiche. It just sits there begging the question.) I'm looking forward to the development of the new ASER.

We plan to keep Janeen tied to her desk writing reviews, though she tends to foil our plans by flitting off to France, Tokyo and other exotic parts. As for the development of ASER, the Mean Editor, heedless of expense, has decided on sweeping changes to typeface, size, and format, as well as expansion into sf-related topics other than straight lit-crit. It will also try to be more playful - as Mark Linneman requests. (JBI.)

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The Jenny Blackford editorial in the May issue spotted what is to me the most notable lack in the first two issues. As she writes the first issues have been 'solid'. There has been substantial and thoughtful discussion, scholarly debate, sf history, and loads of 'serious and constructive' criticism. I found myself

challenged and informed. What seemed to be lacking was a sense of fun. Only the Sussex review in the first issue raised a smile. While not claiming that the purpose of a fanzine is to get the readers cackling like idiots a certain sense of joy and style seems to be evident in the very best. Part of the problem may be that knowing the talent involved in the Collective I expected the very best. It's only damn good.

Some of my difficulties may be simply that I am too close to the main topic of the May issue. Those who receive many Australian fanzines and who attend Nova have seen and heard the Turner-Rousseau debate a number of times. It cannot hold my attention the way the first letters and comments did. If I were a bit farther away from the participants I likely would have found this much more interesting - like I did nine months ago.

With the above quibble (which is sounding much more negative than it was meant to) noted let me give my congratulations on a stimulating fanzine. Perhaps more silly fillers like the nose word contest would create a sense of fun. My even sillier entry is attached. What kind of loon (other than myself) actually researches something like this anyway? I suspect that the filler was inserted to lighten up the issue. It helped. (I may have partially rebutted my own quibble.)

Yes, Mark, we're working on it. I hope that Wynne's jovial article in ASER 3, Cherry Wilder's regular wide-ranging and funny column, the increasingly frivolous editorials, and the occasional witty review will help. Also, as ASER expands, these shorter and lighter bits will start to outmass the serious stuff. Meanwhile, congratulations on your highly imaginative list of sn-words. As we announced last issue, Cherry Wilder won first place and a free subscription, but as second placegetter we offer you a dinner with the collective-member of your choice, as long as you pay. (JBI.)

Sn-words - Second placegetter:

snite (wipe nose), snivel, snitch (nose), snoach (snuffle), snaffle (noise through nose), smoke (smell), snark (snore), snore, snat-nosed (snub-nosed), snork (snore), sneap nose (pinched nose), snort, snear (snort), snot, sneesh (snuff), snout, sneeze, snow (cocaine), sneke (cold), snub nose, sneve (scent), snuff, snick-up (sneeze), snuffing (sniffing), sniff, snuffling, sniffles, snoot, snift (scent), snur (snort), snifter (bad cold, stopped nose), snurl (turn up the nose in disdain), snifty (good smell), snurt (eject with a snort), snipy (nose like a snipe's bill), snush (snuff), snut-nose (snub nose), snuzzle (pig, to poke with nose), sny (turn up the nose), snoze (as in Durante), snorkel, and my favourite: snotsiecke (disease of cattle with running nose, supposedly from grazing near wildebeest). [Except for the last (from the Dictionary of South African English), the entries can be verified in the OED.]