

‘Shadow World’ (Alan White) (to accompany Alex Skovron’s poem).

March 2024

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SF COMMENTARY 115

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BACK COVER: Dennis Callegari: 'Robert Heinlein's "And He Built a Crooked House"'

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I must be talking to my friends

Alex Skovron wins 2023 Patrick White Award

What is the Patrick White Award?

The Patrick White Award is an annual literary prize established by Patrick White, who used his 1973 Nobel Prize in Literature award to establish a trust for this prize.

The \$25,000 cash award is given to a writer who has been highly creative over a long period but has not necessarily received adequate recognition. White stipulated that the award be announced the

Friday after the Melbourne Cup to turn attention from sport to literature. The 2010 award was reduced to \$18,000 because of the economic slump, and in 2012 it was \$23,000. In 2020 the winner received \$15,000. Writers are automatically eligible without the necessity for submissions.

The winners



Alex Skovron. (Photo: The Conversation.)

- 2023 Alex Skovron
- 2022 Antigone Kefala
- 2021 Adam Aitken
- 2020 Gregory Day
- 2019 Jordie Albiston
- 2018 Samuel Wagan Watson
- 2017 Tony Birch
- 2016 Carmel Bird
- 2015 Joan London
- 2014 Brian Castro
- 2013 Louis Nowra
- 2012 Amanda Lohrey
- 2011 Robert Adamson
- 2010 David Foster
- 2009 Beverley Farmer
- 2008 John Romeril
- 2007 David Rowbotham
- 2006 Morris Lurie
- 2005 Fay Zwicky
- 2004 Nancy Phelan
- 2003 Janette Turner Hospital

Alex Skovron

SHADOW WORLD Ghazal

Say the end of the world fell on a Saturday —
would it then remain that Saturday forever?

Or what if one grey morning you woke up to find
the world was not the same, but had changed forever?

That suddenly your life, the world you knew so well,
was not the life you thought would be yours forever?

Or that those dear to you, both close and far away,
were part of your world no longer, lost forever?

Would you retreat into the world of your small room,
your even smaller bed, and lie down forever?

Or would you curse your fate, and rail against your god,
then pray for your world to be restored forever?

Maybe you'd fling your fist, defy the world's new face,
resolve to conquer fate if it took forever?

Or what if, abruptly, an endless night-time fell,
not on the world but on your spirit, forever?

Would you yearn for a day your shadow world might burst
free of its nightmare, pledging a fresh forever?

Or would you look around and for the first time see
that though the world had altered, now was forever?

That the whole world was now, and now was what you were,
and it was always now, and would be forever?

For as I write these lines it's Saturday no more
and the world keeps turning — now, if not forever.

2002 Tom Hungerford
2001 Geoff Page
2000 Thomas Shapcott
1999 Gerald Murnane
1998 Alma De Groen
1997 Vivian Smith
1996 Elizabeth Harrower
1995 Elizabeth Riddell
1994 Dimitris Tsaloumas
1993 Amy Witting
1992 Peter Cowan
1991 David Martin
1990 Robert Gray
1989 Thea Astley
1988 Roland Robinson
1987 William Hart-Smith

1986 John Morrison
1985 Judah Waten (posthumous)
1984 Rosemary Dobson
1983 Marjorie Barnard
1982 Bruce Beaver
1981 Dal Stevens
1980 Bruce Dawe
1979 Randolph Stow
1978 Gwen Harwood
1977 Sumner Locke Elliott
1976 John Blight
1975 David Campbell
1974 Christina Stead

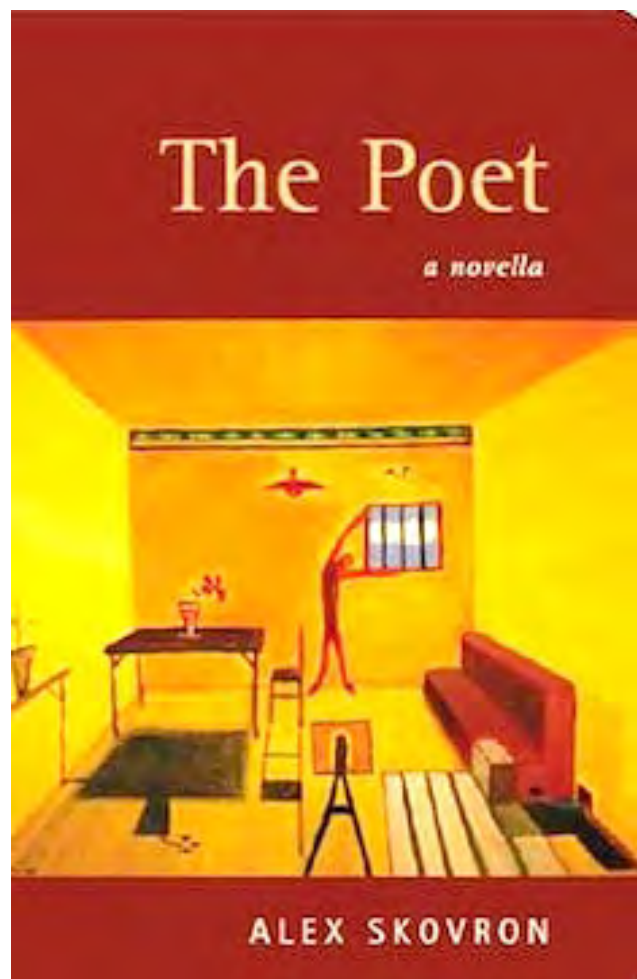
— Wikipedia

Bruce Gillespie turns up at Alex Skovron's 2023 Award presentation

I was hoping there would be some press or media coverage of one of the most important events in the Australian literary calendar each year ... but not a cracker. *The Age* used to make a big thing of the annual winner of the Patrick White Award. The award, like the Nobel, comes out of the blue to the recipient. This year there was a notice in *Books+Publishing*, the publishing industry's weekly newsletter, and a nice item on *The Conversation* website (see next page). But nothing from the ABC's various book and interview shows.

On the night of Wednesday 15 November 2023 it was awarded to my old friend **Alex Skovron**, who has been publishing poetry books of a very high standard since 1981. There was a gathering at Readings Bookshop, State Library of Victoria. I felt very privileged to be asked to attend. I suspect I was surrounded by many of Australia's best-known poets, but nobody was wearing a name tag. Alex looked as if he were still rather stunned at his win.

I knew nobody, but started chatting with a distinguished-looking chap who was standing near me. In this way I met for the first time Des Cowley, who was Rare Books Librarian at the State Library of Victoria (SLV) for many years. In 1997 he sent me a letter asking me to donate to the SLV the boxes of papers and manuscripts that form the



George Turner Archive. Since then I have kept hoping I might publish another collection of George's non-fiction, but it hasn't happened. Des retired a year ago, but he gave me the contact address of his successor. I'm hoping that this chance meeting might allow Elaine and me to get rid of six or seven very large boxes that form the Turner Collection.

During Alex's reply of thanks to the awards committee, he read five of his best shorter poems that, as a sequence, I found very moving. Alex has allowed me to republish the most powerful of these poems, 'Shadow World', in this issue.

Unfortunately I could not grab one of the few chairs in a crowded room, and my feet hurt, so I did not stay to chat. I shuffled off into the night and had dinner at the Spaghetti Tree, my favourite eating place in the city.

Alex and I met in 1984 when he was assigned to be my contact at Macmillan Australia in South Melbourne as I began to edit books regularly for them. We spent most of the time during our first meeting talking about our favourite authors. Alex said: 'Would you know my favourite American poet, Thomas Disch?' Immoderate laughter from me: 'Tom Disch is one of my favourite science fiction writers.' Yes, we were talking about the same person. Alex has been reading and responding to my magazines ever since, and I've bought and read all his books of poetry. We're about the same age, so I hope we are both 'mid career'. It's a long time since we've had dinner with Alex and Ruth and other mutual friends, but that's life, as we always say about retirement.

It's a pity that Alex's fine poetry is still regarded

as 'not adequately recognised'. I note from the list of winners (Alex is the 50th) that many of them have become much better known since they received the Award. Gerald Murnane is the only other winner to write regularly for my magazines, but in 1999 his books were still not selling well and were still treasured mainly by aficionados. Only in later years did Ladbrokes of London and the *New York Times* mention him as a possible Nobel Prize winner. In the early 1990s about twenty people gathered for the book launch of Gerald's *The Plains*, published by Norstrilia Press. By February 2019 several hundred devoted readers and friends gathered at the Church of All Nations in Carlton to celebrate Gerald's 80th birthday.

Similarly, the poet Gwen Harwood has become much talked about in recent years because of the publication of Anne-Marie Priest's biography and Harwood's own posthumous books.

I've surprised that Christina Stead was ever considered 'unrecognised', but when she arrived back in Australia about the time of the first Award, she had few resources for her retirement. It was said at the time that Patrick White himself intervened to make sure she received the first award. Since then her star has risen continually. *The Man Who Loved Children* is now often cited as the greatest Australian novel other than Patrick White's own work, and her *For Love Alone* was made into a TV mini-series.

Let's assume that Alex's star also continues to rise.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 17 November 2023

The Conversation interview: Kevin Brophy interviews Alex Skovron

[**Kevin Brophy** is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing, The University of Melbourne.]

If you have ever been to the launch of a small-press poetry book at Collected Works bookshop (now defunct), or at one of the Readings book stores, or at a bar or café in Melbourne, you may have seen a small, fit-looking, bespectacled man. He has a ready grin and eyes that invite you in — often to a conversation you'll remember for its warmth, intelligence, wit, and passion for literature.

You will have encountered Alex Skovron, who has this year won the Patrick White Literary Award

for his achievements in poetry and prose and his lifelong support for writers and writing in Melbourne and beyond.

This prize is awarded to a writer who might not have received the recognition that is due when that writer's full contributions and achievements are considered. Writers do belong to a community, even if it is fractured, fractious, garrulous, and competitive at times. The community is best characterised, though, by acts of generosity towards each other, and Skovron has been a behind-the-scenes master of generosity towards other writers.

Author of seven books of poetry and three works of fiction, Skovron has previously won the Anne Elder and Mary Gilmore awards for a first book of poetry, the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for poetry (twice), the John Shaw Neilson Poetry award (twice), and the Australian Book Review (now Peter Porter) Prize for a single poem. His novella *The Poet* was co-winner of the Christina Stead Prize in 2005.

Skovron worked as an editor for two Australian encyclopedia projects during the 1970s, then from 1980 with publishers Macmillan, Hutchinson, Dent, and finally, Houghton Mifflin. Alongside this work, his quiet and sustained impact on poets and poetry in Melbourne has been immense.

Hundreds of poets, especially the young and emerging, have been edited, mentored, and encouraged by Skovron. It is common to pick up a new book of poetry in Melbourne and find his name there on the acknowledgments page. He has offered reliable and consistent support to others for decades.

Born in Poland in 1948 and arriving in Australia via Israel as a ten-year-old, Skovron's cultural and intellectual reach has always been global.

His work has been translated into French, Chinese, Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Czech, Macedonian, and German. He has worked with his Czech translator, Josef Tomá, on book-length translations into English of two twentieth-century Czech poets, and his latest book, *Letters from the Periphery*, includes his translation of the first canto of Dante's *Inferno*.

It is a shame poetry is not more widely read, enjoyed, and appreciated in Australia. Skovron's poetry has been wonderfully enriching, entertaining, and provocative to its readers since his first published book, *The Rearrangement*, in 1988. His poems work attentively with shifts in tone and attitude, surprising line endings, pauses, and rushes of thoughts and connections always towards an elegance toughened by life experience.

One poem, chosen almost at random, showcases these qualities:

For Light

If one is to be awoken by a cliché
the clatter of breakfast dishes is as good
as any, or the aroma of coffee
freshly brewed, or that uncanny mood
of holiday immensity, when the world
was twelve, or a summer's garden when the
world
was good. Worst is the midnight

phonecall, or the way the disentangled mind
can brood a black density into being —
in the darkneses before seeing, lusting for
light.

— from *Towards the Equator: New & Selected*

His touch is light, his material is the experiences he knows and we do too, and his feel for the drama lying in store for the most ordinary of us (living our clichéd lives) is somehow both seriously disturbing and finally settling.

He has been a poet who appreciates the largely unappreciated and passed-over aspects of work-places, homes, marriages, streets, and minds. So it is perhaps fitting he has now been recognised with a national award at 75. Perhaps it is at that moment in a life when a poet might think he has already passed unrecognised from most people's view.

His poetry and his fiction surprisingly often turn to the Kafkaesque figure of an isolated everyman living slightly desperately but with an almost limitless potential for irony and humour.

One more poem offers a witty glimpse of this figure:

Homo Singularis

He would drive his car on the wrong side
of the street, tried to obtain a licence to kill
time, at work he displayed considerable skill
at incompetence, at home he had to hide
the dismissal notes under the mattress he
screwed
to the carpeted floor with nails. Rude
he was to a fault, nose to boot,
inconsiderate to snails, he locked himself
into books
of stamps and common prayer, funnelled
his looks
into singles bars and hardly ever stepped
foot
inside a song. Even his poems were too long.

— from *Infinite City: 100 Sonnetinas*

To add to the detailed fun Skovron has with his compositions, we might notice the last line of this poem is its eleventh — in a book devoted to ten-line poems.

I would like to read, one day, Alex's poem about this man receiving an award such as this.

— **Kevin Brophy**, *The Conversation*

55 years! So what's 55 years?

I feel I had no sooner published the three issues of the 50th Anniversary Issue of *SF Commentary* (Nos. 98, 99, 100) than I found myself heading towards the **55th Anniversary Issue**.

I see no need to repeat any of the anniversary articles that appeared in those three issues. You can read them any time on efanzines.com or fanac.org.

Not that I've much to add to the information in those issues. I haven't attended many meetings of the **Nova Mob** since the beginning of the Covid lockdowns, so you would need to consult Murray MacLachlan, the current Bossa Nova, about the progress of the Nova Mob from 2020 until now.

The history of **Norstrilia Press** would seem to have finished in 1985, but recently Rob Gerrand has dipped into his own savings and revived the company. Carey and I don't have any funds to rejoin as partners. Rob is slowly building a various

and vigorous publishing list.

What is consistent over most of the life of *SFC* has been the contribution of **Colin Steele** as book reviewer since 1979. Very welcome is the new column by **Anna Creer**, Colin's wife.

The most welcome news of the last five years is that **Mark Olson** of NESFA Press scanned all the duplicated (i.e. pre-offset and digital) issues of *SFC* to JPG files for <http://fanac.org> (run by Joe Siclari and Edie Stern). I haven't checked recently to see if all issues from No. 1 until 75 are now in PDF format. You can read for yourself the overall brilliance of the articles and letters in *SF Commentary* during its first twenty years.

If I felt at all brilliant these days, I would try to emulate those issues, both in quality and frequency. I am very grateful to the many readers who keep sending scads of letters of comment.

Tributes

Stop dying, everybody! Please! Only a few hours ago I read that **Christopher Priest** had died! This is not possible! Not tolerable! Chris was only three years older than me. Forever young. I'll write about him later in this issue.

I've even heard complacent persons write that 'one must expect death at our age, mustn't one'. Yes, the same way one accepts hacking off an arm or leg. Other people are part of yourself; you can't lose anybody without losing a bit of yourself.

Friends come in boxes

When **Helena Binns** had to move into aged care in 2021, and then died late last year, **Geoff Allshorn** and I finally were given the opportunity by her nieces to rescue some of the treasures in the totally packed house where Helena and Merv had been living for the last ten years. The nieces faced a nightmare of disposal of vast mountains of stuff before they could stop paying the lease, but we still don't know why in 2022 they didn't throw open the fannish treasures to fans who would appreciate what was in the house. By the time Geoff and I could visit in October 2023, ably

supported by Perry, Carey, and Elaine, we were able to liberate 16 boxes of material — mainly of Merv's carefully annotated collections. We still have no idea, for instance, what happened to Helena's room of *Star Trek* memorabilia, much of which (Geoff assures me) was very rare and potentially quite valuable.

Our rescue project felt very noble on the day, but when the boxes were rescued, Geoff said he had no room for boxes at his place, Perry felt threatened by divine retribution (from Robyn) if he took any to his place, and Carey wouldn't take any.

So they were dumped at our place. Of course, there were plenty of promises about getting in touch with various libraries that might be interested in the boxes, but nothing has happened yet. Leigh Edmonds fortunately could make use of four boxes of material for his *History of Fandom*. But Elaine and I are getting close to chucking out anything not really important to somebody.

We also now have cluttering up a living room with the six large boxes of the **George Turner Estate**. We've had these in the house, of course, since 1997, when George died. However, as I wrote earlier, I have made contact with the State Library, and there is the possibility of finding a home for the boxes of George.

What's stopped January in its tracks has been our continued support for **Dick Jenson**, one of the last two veterans the Melbourne Science Fiction Club of 1952. Now aged 88, he has been affected by cancer, but it's a much older problem, severe arthritis in his hips and legs, that has made it increasingly difficult for him to move around his own flat. Three weeks ago he returned to Cabrini

Hospital, after his legs would not let him get into bed. He has been treated very well there, but it became obvious that he could no longer return to living in his own flat. Worse, he was given 10 days to find permanent accommodation. Or rather, Elaine, who has now Medical Decision-maker and Power of Attorney, was given ten days to find him a place, and do vast amounts of paperwork involved in moving Dick out of home. With help from Cabrini Supportive Aged Care, Elaine was able to inspect three aged care facilities within our general area. The only one that seemed likely to meet Dick's requirements is the nearest, a few hundred metres from us in Greensborough. After a totally exhausting week for Elaine, Dick moved to his new residence on Friday 3 February. Now his flat must be cleared of everything as soon as possible so that it might be sold to pay Dick's continuing fees can be paid. So large amounts of stuff in over 260 boxes have now arrived at 5 Howard Street, making our two current box collections look like hillocks.

Read the end of this saga in SFC 116. Dick Jenson left us at 6 a.m. on Thursday, 7 March.

Death arrives from Facebook, Fictionmags, and in fanzines

Terry Bisson (1942–2024)

Terry Bisson (1942–2024) is someone whose death I might not have noticed if I hadn't met him in 2004 during my American trip to the West Coast. Charles Brown invited me to Locusville in Berkeley to natter about music and SF and everything else, and other people kept arriving for an afternoon barbecue and party. The most enjoyable natterer around the table was Terry Bisson. I knew of his books, but hadn't read them. He showed that adventurous, merry spirit that one rarely finds around a meal table. I was 57 in 2024, and I thought Terry somewhat younger than I was. We swore to keep up correspondence, but never did, but I've always remembered Terry's vividness. In fact, he was five years older than me.

Howard Waldrop, Tom Purdom

On the same day as the news came through about Terry, I also heard that **Howard Waldrop** had died, and so had **Tom Purdom**. I'm not sure I've read much of Tom Purdom's fiction, or even that of

Howard Waldrop, but Howard was always a fan who kept in touch with me until a few years ago. He was still contributing to fanzines until recently.

John Douglas (d. 3 August 2023)

Editor and fan **John R. Douglas** died on 3 August 2023. *Locus* records that his career in publishing 'spanned nearly 40 years; he edited for publishers including Simon & Schuster, Avon, and Harper Prism, as well as online publications ... He received a World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1973.' John and Ginjer Buchanan were married for 48 years.

I knew and valued him first as a fan. I met him at Torcon 2, 1973, and a few months later in New York at a gathering at the Kaufmans'. We always seemed to be on the same wavelength, and nattered enjoyably whenever we met. The last time was at Aussiecon 3, Melbourne 1999, when we were on the same panel.

John had special importance to me as a mutual admirer of the works of **George Turner**. As part of Dave Hartwell's team John was in charge of two

complete editions of George's SF novels in the USA, first at AvoNova and later at Tor. He

published George's posthumous novel *Down There in Darkness*. John Douglas is much missed.

Bruce Gillespie

Farewell, Michael Bishop (1945–2023)

Michael Bishop's recent death was expected, but still hit hard.

Various writers in the SF field have paid tribute to Michael Bishop since his death on 13 November 2023. They have covered a wide range of his achievements, many of which I did not know about. They also mention his kindness. As editor of *SF Commentary*, I received quite a few tokens of his kindness. Not only did he send long letters, several poems, and long articles, but he also allowed me to print two of his short stories without fee — the first fiction I've published in one of my fanzines. (That's not quite true, but you'd have to go back to 1977 in an ANZAPA contribution to find an earlier example.) He offered me his support during a period during when he was already suffering from the cancer that eventually killed him.

Michael received long-lasting and total support from Jeri, Stephanie, and the rest of his family during that long battle with cancer. He has been able to prepare almost all his books for re-

publication from Fairwood Press, as well as write new stories. His friends heard from him regularly on Facebook until about a year ago, after which the messages stopped. His treatments took up all his time and energy.

I find it hard to pick favourites from among his works, but I remember with greatest clarity his first published short story, 'Piñon Fall', in *Galaxy* in 1970, his pioneering novellas during the 1970s and 1980s, such as 'Death and Designation among the Asadi', his book of poetry *Time Pieces*, and novels such as *Unicorn Mountain*, *Brittle Innings* (which I enjoyed although I know nothing about baseball), and *Count Geiger's Blues*.

Like all great personalities, he should be still here, a kindly yet merciless eye overseeing everything and everyone. I have no idea how the family will cope after Michael's epic journey of recent years, but I'm sure they will.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 20 November 2023



Michael Bishop at the Nebula Awards, 2016.



Michael and Jeri Bishop, 2015.

STEVE HOLLAND (from Essex, UK) began writing about his collection of Fifties SF paperbacks in the early 1980s. Since then he has written and edited dozens of books on paperbacks, comics, and storypapers. His biography *The Trials of Hank Janson* was shortlisted for the Crime Writers' Association's Golden Dagger and his latest, *Beyond the Void*, is a history of the infamous Badger Books. He is a regular obituarist for *The Guardian* newspaper.

Steve Holland

A tribute to Michael Bishop

Michael Bishop, who has died aged 78, was the author of many stories that inhabit the borderlands between science fiction and mainstream, drawing on writers as diverse as Bradbury and Borges, Thomas M. Disch and Philip K. Dick, Dylan Thomas and Tolstoy, but also reaching back as far as Greek historian Herodotus for inspiration. No two stories were the same, except for their exploration of the human spirit.

Author Ian Watson described Bishop as an 'exoticist', summarising the vivid alien and alienating settings of the author's early stories, which included Hugo and Nebula nominees 'Death and Designation Among the Asadi' (1973) and 'The White Otters of Childhood' (1973), and novels, including his debut novel *A Funeral for the Eyes of Fire* (1975, revised as *Eyes of Fire*, 1980), which was set among the androgynous inhabitants of distant Trope.

Set in faraway worlds, his other early novels included *And Strange at Ectaban the Trees* (1976), which involved genetic engineering of alien races; *Stolen Faces* (1977), considered Bishop's darkest, sees commissioner Lucian Yeardance exiled to a planet ravaged by a leprosy-like plague which causes its inhabitants to indulge in mutilation as a form of self-expression; and *Transfigurations* (1979), in which a scientist tries to unravel a seemingly irrational alien culture.

In 'If a Flower Could Eclipse' (1970), his second published story, Bishop introduced the Urban Nucleus of Atlanta, a domed city, and told its century-long history of an alternate, isolated America through the stories of its people in the novel *A Little Knowledge* (1977) and the collection *Catacomb Years* (1979), the two books revised and combined in *The City and the Cygnets* (2019). Also known as the UrNu cycle, the stories were described by Robert Silverberg as 'one of the great extrapolative achievements of science fiction in the

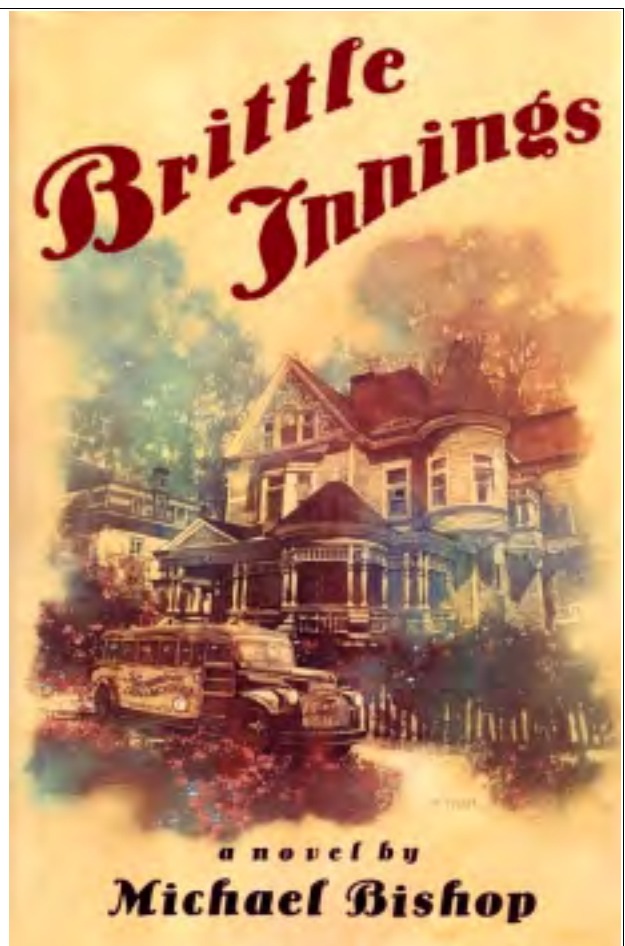
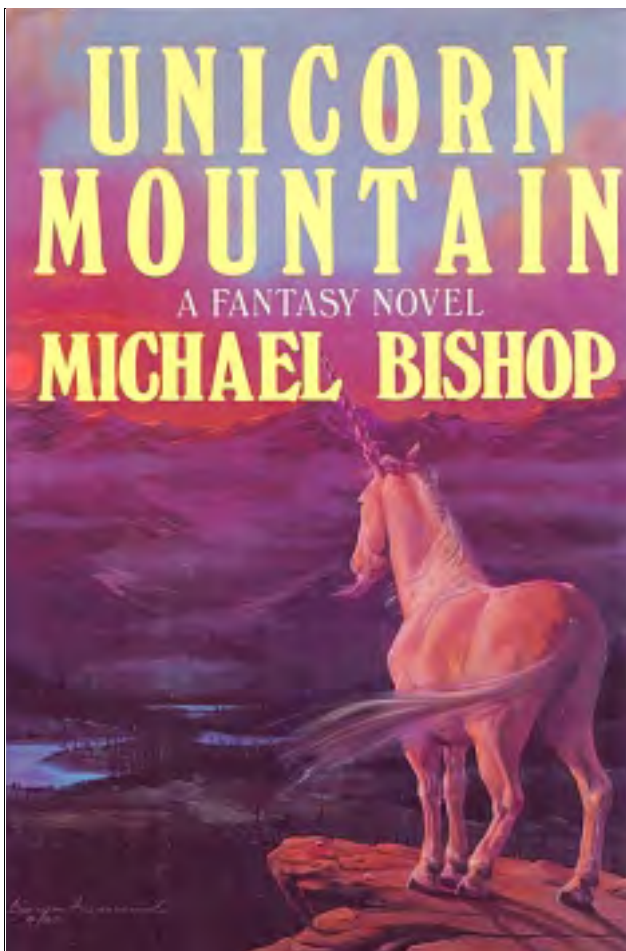
1970s' and its scenes of racial tension and protestors beaten by authorities have proved prescient.

As *Star Wars* gave a juvenile form of science fiction ascendancy, Bishop turned from off-world settings to palaeoanthropological topics, telling Nick Gevers in 2000 (<http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intmb.htm>) 'Rightly or wrongly, I wanted to reclaim [science fiction], at least in some of its literary manifestations, as a legitimate medium in which to examine age-old human concerns.'

His novelette 'The Quickening' (1981) won a Nebula Award and was followed by the Nebula Award-winning novel *No Enemy But Time* (1982), which threads two narratives, one told by Joshua Kampa, an African-American who travels back two million years into the past, the other revealing Kampa's journey from a childhood, when he was named John Monegal by adoptive parents and haunted by vivid dreams of an ancient world, to becoming an amateur palaeontologist offered the use of a time machine. Its examination of primitive hominids and moving scenes led D. Douglas Fratz to call it 'one of the most profound dissertations within the science-fiction genre on the nature of humanity'.

His novel *Ancient of Days* (1985), expanding the Locus Award-winning 'Her Habiline Husband' (1983), reversed the direction of travel, with an early hominin surviving to the present.

Bishop's short story 'The Creature on the Couch' (1991), written in response to a challenge to write the ultimate Frankenstein's monster story, also led him to write the Locus Award-winning *Brittle Innings* (1994) as a homage to both Mary Shelley and baseball. Seventeen-year-old Danny Boles is a promising young baseball player who joins the Georgia team the Highbridge Hellbenders and meets their star, statuesque and



grotesque Jumbo Henry Clerval, an enigma revealed to be the immortal creation of Dr Frankenstein. The inventor's creator herself starred in 'The Unexpected Visit of a Reanimated Englishwoman', Bishop's 'narrative introduction' to the collection *The Mortal Immortal: The Complete Supernatural Short Fiction of Mary Shelley* (1996).

Another homage was *Philip K. Dick is Dead, Alas*, originally published as *The Secret Ascension* (1987) but later reprinted under Bishop's preferred title, in which Dick's sf novels are suppressed by President Nixon.

Ever the experimenter, Bishop also wrote the horror novel *What Made Stevie Crye?* (1984); the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award winner *Unicorn Mountain* (1988), which wove fantasy with Native American lore in a moving contemporary tale of death at a time of discrimination and widespread fear of AIDS; superhero satire *Count Geiger's Blues* (1992); and a children's book, *Joel-Brock the Brave and the Valorous Smalls* (2016). Three collaborations were *Under Heaven's Bridge* (1981) with Ian Watson and two crime novels with Paul Di Filippo under the name Philip Lawson: *Would It Kill You to Smile?* (1998) and *Muskrat Courage* (2000).

Bishop was never afraid to tackle potentially controversial ideas, often, but not exclusively, notions of religion. In 'The Gospel According to

Gamaliel Crucis' (1983), the messiah's second coming is in the form of a mantis discovered on an alien world; 'The Procedure' (1996) asks whether removing religious impulses removes our humanity; 'Sequel On Skorpiós' (1998) was the author's attempt to write a story in which a cherished belief proved to be untrue — in this case that Jesus did not die on the cross; and 'Last Night Out' (2001) tells the story of a terrorist visiting a strip bar ahead of 9/11.

As well as sf collections, he also published two of (mostly) contemporary stories: *Emphatically Not SF, Almost* (1990) and *Other Arms Reach Out to Me* (2017), which won the Georgia Author of the Year Award. Bishop was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame in 2018.

His poetry was collected in *Windows and Mirrors* (1977) and *Time Pieces* (1998), the latter including 'For the Lady of a Physicist' (1979), which won the Rhysling Award. A collection of essays, *A Reverie for Mister Ray*, appeared in 2005.

Bishop's parents met in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1942, when Leotis ('Lee') Bishop, a farmer before enlisting in the army, was posted, caught the eye of telephone operator Maxine Elaine ('Mac') Matison. Mac left to work in Los Angeles soon after but Lee tracked her down and proposed; they

avoided California's regulation waiting period by marrying in Yuma, Arizona.

Their son was an army brat, the family moving to Washington, North Carolina, Colorado, and many other places while his father served in the Air Force stateside and in the Pacific, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere abroad, although he never saw battle. Bishop spent a year at Yoyigi Elementary School in Tokyo before his parents separated and Mac returned to the US, divorcing Lee in 1951 and finding work at McConnell Air Force Base. Bishop continued his education in Mulvane, Kansas, and spent his summers wherever his father was posted until Lee retired to Walsenburg, Colorado.

Mac married Air Force lieutenant Howard Miller, but he left for a post in Hawaii and never returned; her third marriage, to former bomber pilot Charles Edwin Willis in 1955, added a stepbrother and stepsister to Bishop's family. They moved to Tulsa in 1958, where Bishop attended Woodrow Wilson Junior High School and Nathan Hale High School.

Willis was a fan of UFOs, pulp magazines, and sf and horror movies; Bishop was already aware of science fiction through the Buster Crabbe *Flash Gordon* serials and *The Twilight Zone*, but favoured *Classics Illustrated* and the novels they were based on until a high school friend recommended Ray Bradbury and he read *The Martian Chronicles* and *A Medicine for Melancholy*.

Recovering from a groin injury and blood clot suffered while trying out for a local football team, Bishop began writing stories ('gritty urban fragments') and poetry ('bad'), and outlined two novels about wolf-dogs inspired by Jack London's *White Fang*. A 'humorous Socratic dialogue' won him an award from *School Life*, a weekly publication for Tulsa's senior high schools.

In 1962, Lee was sent to Spain and his son

joined him, spending his senior year at a USAF dependent school in Santa Clara where he edited the end-of-year literary magazine *El Teorador*, and included one of his own stories.

Returning to the US, he majored in English Literature at the University of Georgia, took creative writing classes and met, on a blind date, Jeri Ellis Whitaker, whom he married in 1969. On graduating in 1968 (with both a BA and MA, his thesis a study of Dylan Thomas), he applied to the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps and taught English, first at the USAF Academy Preparatory School in Colorado Springs, and then, from 1972, at the University of Georgia.

With only one professional sale under his belt (a poem to the *Georgia Review*), Bishop and his wife were taken by a colleague to a Denver science fiction club where Harlan Ellison was the guest, and persuaded him to submit stories to SF magazines. Bishop sold his first, 'Piñon Fall', to *Galaxy*, and sales to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *If*, and various anthologies followed.

Leaving teaching in 1974, Bishop moved his family to Pine Mountain, writing full time and occasionally working as a substitute teacher. He took up a post as writer-in-residence at LaGrange College in 1996, teaching creative writing courses, and received an Honorary Doctorate of Humanities from the college in 2001. He retired in 2012.

His son, Jaimie, a German-language instructor who provided the artwork to five of Bishop's books, was killed on 16 April 2007 during the mass shooting at Virginia Tech.

Bishop is survived by Jeri, daughter Stephanie, and two grandchildren.

Michael Lawson Bishop, author, born 12 November 1945; died 13 November 2023

— **Stephen Holland**, November 2023

Christopher Priest (1944–2023)

None of these deaths means quite as much to me as that of **Christopher Priest** (1944–2023), reported today (3 February). Many of his friends didn't know he had been ill with cancer for six months. He was only three years older than I am.

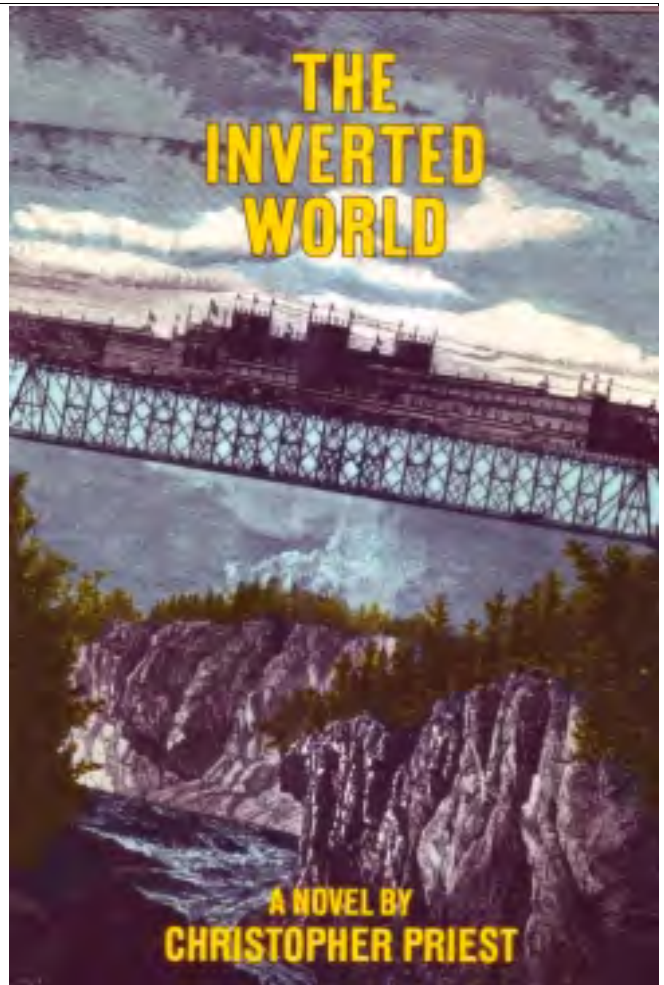
I met him in 1974 in London during the last month of my world trip. He was kind enough to put me up at his large basement flat in Harrow, during which time he allowed me to read the manuscript of his latest novel, *The Inverted World*.

Not bad going, to read one of the greatest SF novels in the home of the author, who during the day locked himself away up the other end of the flat writing his next masterpiece. (The flat was later the home of Australian fan and author John Brosnan.) On the last day of my five-month trip we were sitting around wondering how to bore each other for the day when the phone rang. Brian Aldiss was on the other end of the line. 'Is Bruce still there?' he asked. 'Bring him up to Oxford, Chris, and we'll

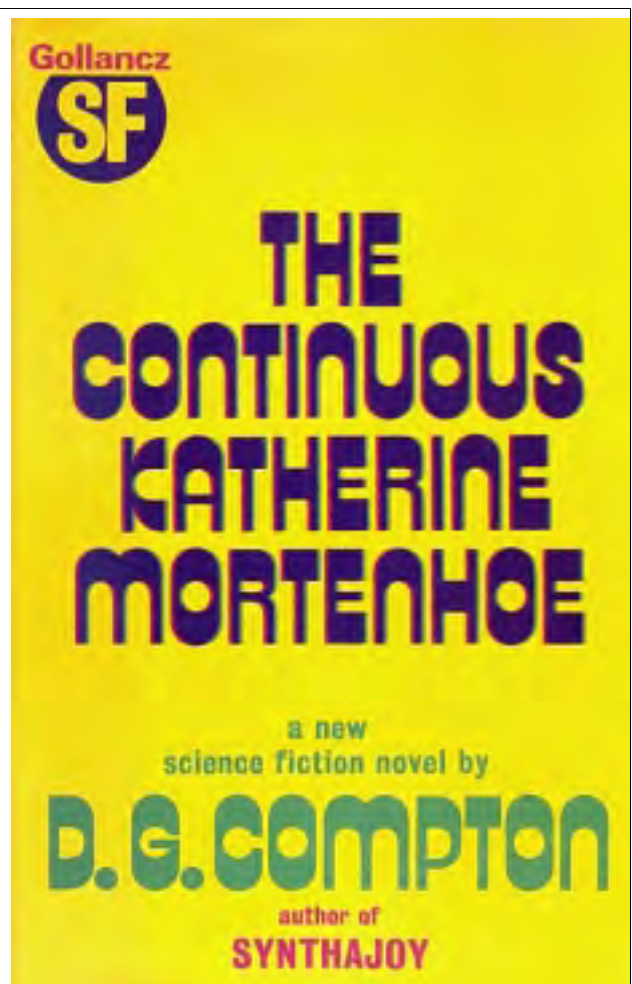
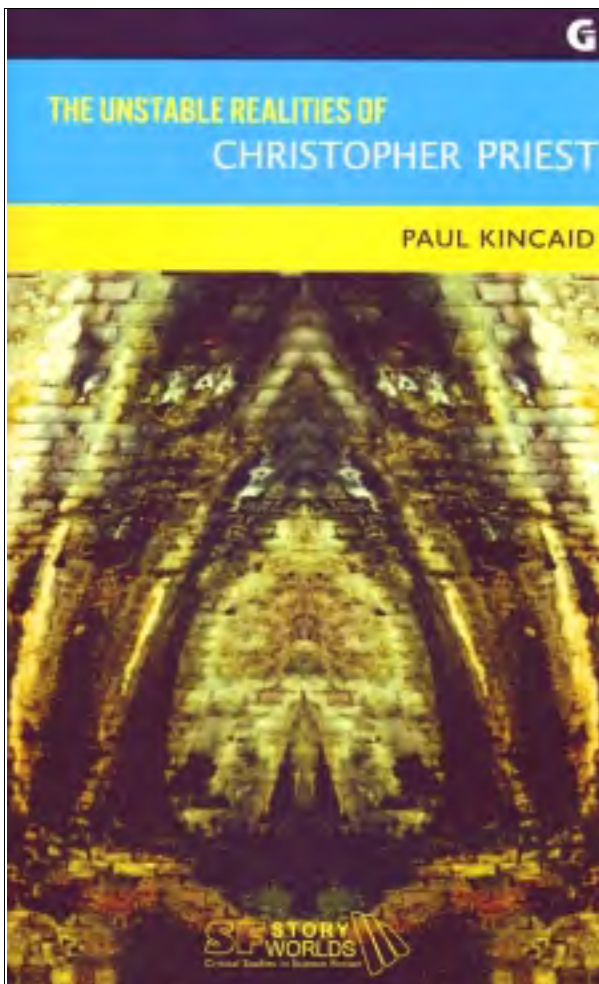


Christopher Priest as many of us would best remember him: 1973. (Photo: Dave Langford.)

visit Stonehenge.' Chris, like any other writer who could enjoy taking a day off writing, drove us to Oxford, from where we drove to Stonehenge. In those days you could wander around Stonehenge without fences getting in the way. A storm swept



Convention gathering, 1982: Rob Holdstock, Sarah Biggs, Rachel Pollack, Malcolm Edwards, Christopher Priest, Lisa Tuttle, Chris Evans, Garry Kilworth. (Photo from Garry Kilworth.)



in, so we drove back to Oxford, helped by several visits to village pubs. Margaret Aldiss cooked an excellent meal, and I was shown around Heath House, where the Aldisses lived. We drove back to London — and then I climbed on a plane for the 36-hour journey home.

Chris was always a candidate for adventure. He was one of the teachers at the Monash Writers Workshop in early 1977 (and the Guest of Honour at Monoclave), and visited our half-house at Johnston Street, Collingwood, where Solomon honoured him by sitting on his lap. In 1982 he was a Guest of the Adelaide Writers Festival, but

became so bored by literary people being literary that he flew over to Melbourne for a few days to catch up with fannish friends he had made in 1977. We always expected him to return to Melbourne, but this did not happen.

Condolences should be offered to Chris's wives, including Nina Allan, with whom he was living on the Scottish island of Bute at the time of his death, and to Paul Kincaid, who lived near Chris and Leigh in Hastings and wrote an critical/exploratory book about Chris Priest's work, and Dave Langford, with whom he had a computer software business for many years.

D. G. Compton (1930–November 2023)

News of the death of **D. G. Compton (David Guy Compton)** last November arrived with me and most of fandom only during January. Compton was a correspondent of John Bangsund in 1971 and 1972, and other friends tell that Compton remained a delightful letter writer almost up to the time of his death. I read all his SF books that appeared in the late sixties and through the sev-

enties, but it became more and difficult to buy copies of his books from the 1980s on. Compton was a fine writer of doom-laden scenarios in his SF novels, which rarely stretched beyond 80,000 words. He could explore deep emotional wells, as in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (1974), which was made into a superb film, *Death Watch* (directed by Bertrand Tavernier). But it seems that

publishers stopped buying his SF. He had a later career as a writer of mysteries, but I bought only

one of them because I did not hear of the others until long after they had been published.

Zelda: The worst death of all

In December 2019, Sampson, the last of the cats with a Collingwood connection, died. The next day, Elaine visited the **Cat Protection Society**, about two kilometres away from us in Greensborough. Elaine was not looking for a kitten because a kitten would probably outlive both of us. Instead she wanted a pair of senior cats. She'd already looked online and spotted profiles for **Chloe** and **Esmerelda**, two very similar 14-year-old black-and-white female cats. She was introduced to Esmerelda, who immediately face-rubbed her hand. OK, she was a taker. But cat No. 2? What about Chloe? So she was introduced to Chloe, who also face-rubbed her hand. But both profiles said they needed to be 'only' cats. Did the vet think that if they were introduced to a new place together they would get on OK? The vet admitted that they were sisters who didn't like each other but that they didn't actually fight. So Elaine promptly adopted them both.

They were both in perfect condition, although Esmerelda — immediately dubbed **Zelda** by us — had spent a traumatic month in a household where she had not fitted in. When Elaine brought them home, they both seemed to fit into our house.

On the first night, while Elaine sat on her chair knitting, Zelda sat on her lap and Chloe sat on the back of the chair behind her. Elaine must resemble their previous owner. The next night we discovered that we were suddenly missing Zelda. She had escaped through a tiny hole in the outer

mesh of our cat enclosure. Much distress. Elaine sat there deep into the morning, hoping that Zelda had not bolted across the back fences of Greensborough looking for her original home. Finally, Chloe gave a little growl, and it became obvious that Zelda was still within earshot. Elaine thrashed around our very wild back garden in the dark, and found Zelda sitting on the back fence. The hole in the wire was fixed next day, and neither cat has ever made another escape attempt.

Although they both looked the same and, by cat standards, had impeccable manners (they did not jump on benchtops, for instance, or over-eat), Chloe and Zelda proved to have quite different temperaments. Zelda is the sweetest cat we've ever owned. It was plain that she had spent her entire life trying to make friends with Chloe, and Chloe had spent her entire life treating Zelda with disdain. Chloe is a managerial cat. She is very good at commanding us, and we are good at obeying.

Zelda always fitted in. She liked a tummy tickle, whereas Chloe prefers a head scratch. Both cats remained in excellent health, although Zelda showed some signs of arthritis. Then, just as she reached the age of 18, she gradually stopped eating and drinking. Eventually she could hardly raise her head when Elaine patted her. If she had been much younger, we might have asked for intensive investigation, but it was most likely that she had been afflicted by cancer of some kind. So, on Thursday, 25 January, Elaine's sister Margaret drove Elaine and Zelda to the vet's, and the most beautiful and delightful of cats left us.



**Zelda (Esmerelda),
8 December 2023.
(Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)**

The Tony Thomas column — and a story by Jennifer Bryce

EDITOR:

SFC 112 paid tribute to JENNIFER BRYCE, who died on 28 April 2023. TONY THOMAS, her partner, had been with her every day of her last months, and was then faced with the task of arranging a celebration of her life at the Linden Gallery in St Kilda on 9 July, which was reported in SFC 113. This he did with much help from Jennifer's and his families and friends. Elaine and I did not realise that Tony himself was facing chronic pain throughout the year. He underwent a hip replacement operation on 13 December.

Through this extremely difficult year, Tony has kept in touch as often as possible, writing about books and reading and much else. He has also kept in touch with the ELWOOD WRITERS GROUP, of which Jenny was an important member. In his letter of 5 December (page 22), Tony introduces Jenny's story 'A Christmas Oratorio', one of her last pieces of fiction.

TONY THOMAS

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1 June 2023:

We seem to have been reading some of the same books recently. I read **Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time*** in March and thought it was the best thing I'd read for quite a while — I agree that the prose stands out. And I just read ***The Secret Scripture***, which was quite a bit disrupted because I haven't settled down to a normal life since Jenny died. I liked it a lot but thought *Old God's Time* was better. I told Dick Jenssen that I thought it could win the Booker this year — I certainly hope it makes the long list. ***Days Without End*** made the Booker long list in 2017 and I thought it was better than most of the short list, especially the winner by George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which used a plot similar to that of Peter Beagle's *A Fine and Private Place*, and was shaded by comparison with the Beagle, I thought. *Days Without End* continues Barry's exploration of just a couple of families, through all his acknowledged novels up to this point — the McNulty name figures prominently — but is set in the American Civil War following the fortunes of an emigrant McNulty (I think), a homosexual bluecoat, who with his partner soldier has adventures in the American west. ***A Thousand Moons*** is a sort of sequel, but focuses on an American Indian girl that the soldiers have saved and sort of adopted. Good, but not as good, as I remember. ***On Canaan's Side*** I read years ago and don't

remember well.

Another Barry also read recently is his first novel, ***Macker's Garden***, and a couple of early novellas, all of which are long out of print, and obtained via ABEbooks. They all show their age, but are interesting when contrasted with the superb novelist that Barry became. A couple of other Barry novels were read so long ago that I can't remember them well enough. And I've bought some of his plays, too, but have only read one so far, ***Andersen's English***. The dialogue seems exceptional.

I also recently read **John Banville's *The Lock-Up***, and agree with you that it's not as good as the previous couple of books featuring these characters — the ending seemed rushed and unconvincing. I haven't yet read his *Singularities*.

Other books enjoyed recently have been **Eleanor Catton's eco-thriller *Birnam Wood***, **Peter Beagle's *Summerlong*** and ***The Way Home***, the latter two novellas including his **'Two Hearts'** and a new sequel.

Late last year I discovered **Elizabeth Hand** as a writer, having known her name for years but not having read any of hers as far as I can remember. I read her collection ***Errantry*** from the library, thought it was excellent, and started buying up her back list. Since then I've read her tetralogy featuring Cass Neary, all enjoyable, and several of them in exotic settings, which according to the acknowledgments at the back she's explored in company with partner John Clute. As well, I enjoyed her early collection ***Last Summer on Mars Hill***, collection ***Fire***, and stand-alone novels

Mortal Love, *Wylding Hall*, and *Hokuloa Road*, the latter set in Hawaii, where her daughter lives, I think, and another place she explored in company with John Clute.

Maggie Shipstead was a Booker discovery in 2021, when both Jenny and I thought her *Great Circle* was much better than the winner, Damon Galgut's *The Promise*. Since then I've read and greatly enjoyed her earlier novels, *Seating Arrangements* and *Astonish Me*, as well as her collection *You Have a Friend in 10A*, which I thought had no weak stories at all.

Also caught up with **Sally Rooney's** novel of a year or two ago, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, which despite negative reviews I thought was up to the standard of her earlier two novels, both of which have been turned into TV series. *Normal People* has just started on SBS, though it's a couple of years old, and looks like it will take 15 hour-long episodes to deal at great length with a 250 page novel. I re-read the novel, which seems sharp and dense by comparison.

A couple of sf novels enjoyed this year were **R. F. Kuang's** *Babel*, and **Monica Byrne's** *The Actual Star* — but that's enough for now; it's already too late into the morning.

11 August 2023:

I only listened to the *Cover to Cover* radio program on Sunday [a tribute to **Jenny Bryce** on FM Radio 3MBS, which is also the site of Tony's own Tuesday-night program 'Contemporary Visions'] as I was at a concert on Friday. It was Barry Lee Thompson whose reading was unclear some of the time when reading Jenny's story 'Benjamin'; he wasn't near enough to the mike.

Jenny's Continuum Story Contest winner was published in the convention program booklet, so you may have read it there. Jenny and I only discovered she was the winner when we turned up — on a Friday afternoon was it? — and got the program booklet, intending to go on to a concert that night. Instead we stayed, and Jenny collected her prize. The radio program was a thoughtful tribute by Elwood Writers.

Thanks very much for your generous tribute to Jenny. I'll also attach the list of speakers from **the Celebration**, together with notes I made for **Laurance Splitter's** benefit in introducing them. Two didn't turn up because of illness: Sue Tweg and Jim Minchin.

The reader from Jenny's novel was **Heather Leviston**, who has acted with me in many Shakespeare Society readings, and who also came to Bagels for Breakfast on occasion, although I don't

know if your visits ever coincided. She also reviews classical music for the online *Classic Melbourne*. I'm sure she would appreciate your comments — she's at heather.leviston@bigpond.com

Some photos of Jenny's Celebration were taken by **Angela Munro**, which I'll also forward though I don't know if they will be useful as many of the subjects are unidentified/unidentifiable.

I'd totally forgotten that I'd written a long letter to you about books a month after Jenny died, when I obviously didn't know what I was doing, staying up till all hours of the morning. **The Booker long list** has come out, and my prediction in June that Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time* should make the long list has come true!

I'm reading the only other novel from the list that I have (though others are on the way), American **Paul Harding's** *This Other Eden*. It is also pretty good, though it's yet another novel about race.

Other books read recently include **Sally Rooney's** *Normal People* (re-read at the same time as the TV series, which eventually made it to free-to-air). While the series was quite good and very faithful to the novel, well acted, it seemed hugely over-extended in the way that series makers seem to need to do to justify the expense of making a series at all. By contrast, the novel was tight, and could be finished in a fraction of the time.

Hernan Diaz's *Trust* (left over from last year's Bookers) was over-complicated and not worth worrying about. (It had shared a Pulitzer.)

Rebecca Kuang's *Yellowface* was routine and predictable (and not sf), compared with her *Babel*.

Sebastian Barry's play *The Pride of Parnell St* (read only) was a brilliant two-hander, all about Irishness, a subject that I used to loathe before reading Barry.

Peter Beagle's *In Calabria* was another superior fantasy by this often superb author.

Under the Hollywood Sign, **Tom Reamy's** collection of most of his short works, reminded me of how much I liked him when these stories first came out (of those I'd read then), though **'Twillia'** and **'San Diego Lightfoot Sue'**, the two I remembered best, are still the two stand-outs. The one that Ellison failed to publish, now read for the first time, would have been startling for its time in its depiction of a u-/dys-topia based on gay male sex, but now not so much.

Ray Nayler's *The Mountain in the Sea* was excellent sf on several levels: translation, other minds, robots, drones, big business futures. He

cites Peter Godfrey-Smith's two books on cephalopods as key influences.

Ned Beaman's *Venomous Lumpsucker*, up for the Clarke Award this year (but I think didn't win) also deals with intelligent sea-life, and canvasses dozens of sf tropes very intelligently by a person coming (as far as I know) from outside the field.

Former Poet Laureate **Andrew Motion's *Sleeping on Islands*** is his sort of autobiography from age 17 to 2021, sometimes interesting.

Much superior is literary critic and editor of the RSC Shakespeare **Jonathan Bate's *Mad About Shakespeare***, which interleaves plenty of stuff on Shakespeare with often moving autobiographical anecdotes. The most interesting book on Shakespeare I've read in years.

Sue Burke's *Immunity Index* follows up her fine *Semiosis*, up for the Clarke a few years ago, which I thought the best of the bunch — though nobody in the Nova Mob agreed, as I remember (and I haven't read the sequel). *Index* is set in the near-future Earth with Covid-type infections, clones (human and mammoth), and right-wing politics in the mix. Burke seems good on biology, somewhat less so on politics, but nevertheless quite enjoyable.

And **Paul Kincaid's *Brian W. Aldiss*** is a masterwork, reminding me of how much Aldiss I haven't read.

24 September 2023:

I find that I've read four of this year's **Booker Prize shortlist** (I've started reading a fifth today). But as I said in my previous email, I'd certainly rate ***Old God's Time*, *In Ascension*, and *Pearl*** above the three shortlisted that I've read, while I'd agree on ***Prophet Song***.

The three I'd rate lower are:

- ***Western Lane***, a coming-of-age first novel about a young Pakistani girl whose life is transformed by her ability at squash. Quite readable and adequately written but a large amount of time is given to squash — ho hum. It's about race and culture too, which seems to be the judges' preferred theme this year.
- ***Study for Obedience*** by **Sarah Bernstein**: a highly intellectual story with references (in the back) to highly intellectual books, which mostly it's impossible to see the precise relevance of in the text. The woman protagonist comes from a highly dysfunctional family to work for her brother in an unnamed northern country where she doesn't speak the

language and can't fit into the community. Through asides and casual references, it appears she is Jewish and the country may have (who can be sure of anything here?) an antisemitic past. So it's about race again. The Canadian author is clever, highly praised even, but this it seems to me is too clever by half, and information is deliberately withheld throughout for reasons that are unclear to me.

- **Paul Harding's *This Other Eden***: A freed negro enclave makes their extremely poor living for a century on an island just off the coast of Massachusetts (was it?). Apparently based on fact. The sad racist ending can be guessed from the beginning (spoiler alert) as the nearby whites break up and disperse the community. Some of the best parts concern a story about one of the young protagonists who is an outstanding, largely self-taught artist, who seduces a white maid. Harding appears to have based several previous novels in this same part of Massachusetts. Worth reading certainly, and once more, about race.
- I'm pleased that none of the books read so far has made me want to toss it across the room. And the current one I'm reading, ***If I Survive You***, is by a Jamaican heritage author, about the coming of age of a Jamaican-heritage protagonist, at least in the first chapter, which is really an independent and previously published short story, as is the rest of the 'novel'. It's nearly all about race again: the whole of the first chapter is an examination of the question posed to the protagonist: What are you?

I've totally relied on memory writing this note, so if a detail or two is inaccurate I apologise.

25 September 2023:

Of your 'Books Read Recently' list, I have the Atkinson, the Harrison, and the two Beagles recently bought and waiting for me, though everything pretty much has been put aside for the Bookers.

I read **Benjamin Black's *Christine Falls*** about nine years ago, together with a second Black, but didn't like them that much and didn't continue. I probably should read more real Banville — I think there are one or two about, but things are getting more and more difficult to find.

Recent **Peter Beagles** read and enjoyed a lot include ***The Way Home, In Calabria***, and ***Summerlong***.

The book I enjoyed most in the last couple of

months is **Carlo Rovelli's** *Anaximander and the Nature of Science* — an old book by Rovelli but maybe only recently translated. Science and philosophy combined.

Your policy of only buying books that you want to read is a good one. I sort of follow it too, but in the end I buy many more books than I can read, and they sit there and sit there.

Other books I mixed in with the Bookers this month were the latest **Jonathan Kellerman** thriller *Unnatural History* — up to the usual high standard of an author I've read everything by since he started 20 or 30 years ago, except for electronic-only items. Apart from the murders (and excessive number of serial killers), very good on social conditions in current LA, this one focusing on the awful homeless situation, much worse than ours it seems.

And I read the new 'Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' novel, *The Girl in the Eagle's Talons*, by a third author, **Karin Smirnoff** — the seventh in the series overall — just OK, but with an interesting locale in remote rural northern Sweden, with an obvious inconclusive ending heading towards a sequel.

And I read the much-lauded **Claire Keegan** short story — published like a novella — '**So Late in the Day**', originally published under the French title *Misogyny*, which better describes it. Not nearly as good as her Booker short-listed book of last year. I read in an interview with Keegan that she had recorded the audiobook herself, after George Saunders had been approached but refused because he didn't want to say the word 'cunt', which occurs a couple of times at a key point in the story, as it characterises the misogynistic Irish male view of women at the time she's writing about.

That's all my reading up to date now.

1 December 2023:

Thanks for *SFC* 114 and thanks for including more about Jenny.

Sorry I haven't been more in touch, but I've been busy in a number of ways. I resumed going to concerts a month or so ago in an effort to return to a somewhat more normal life, after a long gap following Jenny's death. I especially went to many of the free or cheap concerts at ANAM (Australian National Academy of Music), many of which were excellent. This meant travel to the Abbotsford Convent (mainly) and the Recital Centre. This was by car or public transport.

At the same time I've been semi-disabled with

my arthritic hip — so much so that I'm going into hospital for a hip joint replacement on 13 December: this will involve four nights in hospital (The Avenue in Windsor) followed by 7–10 days rehab at Masada Private Hospital in Balaclava Rd, as I won't be able to manage the 23 steps from street level up to the flat in Dickens Street. After this (assuming all goes well) I won't be able to drive for a considerable time. Lyndal, who has her own health problems, will be helping me as much as she can.

I've arranged a replacement for my radio show starting after next Tuesday's program and going through to the end of February, at present.

I did go to the Nova Mob for **Ian Mond's** talk a while ago — the first time I've really seen any friends, except at concerts. I had to use the lift in the Kensington Town Hall. Ian and I agreed on one of the best books of the year (Ian had it second): **Martin MacInnes's** *In Ascension*, which made the Booker Prize long list but not the short one. This, together with Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time* (as we've discussed) I thought were better (considerably better) than any of the five of six from the short list that I've read.

From the five in the short list that I read (missing *The Bee Sting*) I thought the Booker judges picked the best — **Paul Lynch's** *Prophet Song*, set in a very near-future Ireland, which has suffered a Trumpian-type takeover. So, it is sf, though of course not advertised as such, and Lynch leaves pretty well all the politics aside to concentrate on the sufferings of one family. This is fine (and horrific) as far as it goes: we are becoming very familiar with the suffering following calamity; but because the incremental steps leading up to the horror are left out, the warning falls somewhat flat. What might have been done to prevent the Trumpian government taking over? What might be done in the US to prevent the same thing? Where was the (free) press? Where were the neighbours? So, I suppose, the same was true of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but that was a lot less near-future when written.

In Ascension is much more subtle, and better written, while also following events through one main family. It does include some classic sf tropes: deep sea (maybe) aliens (à la *The Kraken Wakes*), speedy intra-solar system travel (thanks to the aliens) (à la Clarke–Kubrick *2001*). Blackwell's has chosen it as their book of the year (an sf novel!!!), and a number of critics who know sf have deservedly praised it, such as Karen Joy Fowler, Jonathan Lethem, and Ned Beaman.

Other recent reading has included **Elizabeth Hand's** authorised sequel to Shirley Jackson's *The*

Haunting of Hill House, that is, **A Haunting on the Hill**. I liked the sequel a lot — which includes a number of Hand's usual concerns, along with a very haunted house. So then I read Jackson's original for the first time, and found this to be equally well written, so I've asked the library to get me more of her novels. I also read **Kate Atkinson's** recent book of short stories. I agree with you that the book is Atkinson in fine form.

Thrillers recently enjoyed included **Michael Connelly's** latest, **Resurrection Walk**, which includes his two most frequent continuing characters — Bosch and Haller (*The Lincoln Lawyer*) — in alternate chapters, I think for the first time. Also **John Grisham's** **The Exchange** — this author also in top form. And **Stephen King's** **Holly**, another continuing character, but one I'd largely missed, not being a King aficionado — so I caught up with a couple of older novels, **Mr Mercedes** and **Finders Keepers**, where Holly was a subsidiary character: All good, so long as King keeps in detective mode. When he introduces the supernatural, my attention begins to falter.

That's it for now. Have to go to another concert.

3 December 2023:

The only films I've seen from your list were **Asteroid City**, seen at Brighton Bay (projection all right as far as I remember), and one of just a couple of films I've gone out to see in the last six months. Another was the new **Kaurismaki** film (name forgotten). **Targets** I saw long ago in a MIFF Bogdanovich retrospective (maybe it's been on TV since as well), which I remember well, and how prescient it was in its time about what has become an American disgrace and crisis.

SBS free-to-air also has had some good films from time to time: On one day in a row (daytime and night) I saw **Agnes Varda's** **Cleo from 5 to 7** (for the first time), **Chaplin's** **The Great Dictator** (for the umpteenth time), **Parker's** **The Commitments** (for the first time), and **Bill Nighy** in **Wild Target** (a remake of a French film without much change, of which I'd seen the original).

It's rare though to have a day free like this. However on another Saturday a month ago I sat through (in a row) the last half of **Tony Scott's** (brother of Ridley) **Spy Game**, with Redford and Pitt, **Spielberg's** **Poltergeist** (for the first time; excessive), **Fairy Tale: A True Story** (about Arthur Conan Doyle and the fairies) (with McCann and O'Toole and two terrific children) (for the first time), and **Daniel Auteuil** directing and starring in **The Well-Digger's Daughter**, with a great cast: sentimental but nevertheless moving.

More on books now. I'll look out for the new Carlo Rovelli on your recommendation.

I just finished the new **Adam Roberts, The Death of Sir Martin Malprelate**, out in paperback from an unknown (to me) publisher Datura, because I imagine Roberts couldn't get his usual publisher Gollancz interested. This is a strange mishmash of a book — historical, set in 1848, with the main character the father of Sherlock and Mycroft, Vavasour Holmes, and with characters and places appearing from multiple Dickens novels, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The Invisible Man*, and even a character name borrowed from Chris Priest, because Wells never gives the name of the Time Traveller. I suppose this all adds up to a pastiche, but Roberts is too much of a good writer to rest easy with this, and the historical detail is marvellously well done, the writing often superb, and the story a convincing Conan Doyle style mystery, resolved in a typically somewhat unbelievable Doyle-like way. Roberts continues to surprise with every new book.

Other books I liked in the last couple of months, not previously mentioned as far as I can remember, include **Stanley Wells's** **What Was Shakespeare Really Like?** This is necessarily a short book, as someone blurbing remarks, because we know remarkably little about WS. But what we do know, or can reasonably deduce, is set out beautifully by the world's greatest living Shakespeare scholar — including the fact that nobody else wrote most of the plays (though there were a number of acknowledged collaborators), despite the continuing putting forward of more or less ridiculous candidates.

Patrick Stewart's fat book **Making It So** naturally enough has a lot about his participation in the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* franchises, about which I am almost totally ignorant, but it also has plenty about growing up and his early and mid-career on stage and film, is very well self-written for an actor's memoir, and is engaging throughout.

John Gray's **Feline Philosophy** of a few years ago grabs stories from all over the place, as usual, and hardly integrates them into anything like a whole, let alone a philosophy — but many of the stories were new to me (also as usual) and worth hearing about. Cat lovers may fight to be the first to throw this against the wall.

John Grisham's **The Exchange** has gone back to his first novel (the first I read, anyway) **The Firm**, to tell us what became of the protagonists of the original novel a few years later. It's set in 2006, and partly in Ghadafi's Libya, and we find that establishment life still does not agree with the

lawyer who upset the Mafia in *The Firm*. Grisham is in his best form here.

Lee Child (really **John Grant**) and **Andrew Child** (really **Andrew Grant**) continue to publish joint efforts, with Lee's name in giant letters on the cover, but with most of the writing, it seems, done by Andrew. The three recent joint efforts have been a bit disappointing, after I'd been a Lee-alone addict for years, reading every book as it came out. *The Secret* seems a bit better, though I can't recall at this minute what was the Secret of the title, only a couple of months after reading it.

Stephen King's Holly has appeared on the *NY Times* 100 Best Books of the Year. I'm not sure how regular an appearance here might be for King, though I'm sure he outsells most of the competition. Holly previously appeared as a subsidiary character in *Mr Mercedes*, and its two sequels *Finders Keepers* and *End of Watch* (the latter of which Dymock's had when I was there a week ago). I've read the first two and wanted to read more. Despite King saying he fell in love with the character, she was again a subsidiary character in *The Outsider* — not yet read, but I gather from the references in later stories a supernatural novel grafted onto a detective story. This is also the case in *If It Bleeds*, the long novella in the collection of this title, where Holly mainly goes it alone fighting another (spoiler alert) non-human murderer. Despite his incredible horror CV, I like King better when he doesn't mix his genres. This is the case in the most recent *Holly*, when we know whodunit from the beginning, but catching them is the fun. Holly uses her detective skills to solve the puzzle, but then gets trapped herself in a place somewhat reminiscent of one in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. King has a character somewhere remark that he only reads thrillers by Michael Connelly and Ed McBain because these are the two who know enough about police procedure to get it accurate. My guess is that better police procedure, such as we see even in *Vera* for example, might well have solved these murders/disappearances before Holly got the job, but King is a clever enough writer to leave us in enough doubt about this, at least while we're reading through his latest 'unputdownable' novel at the usual white-hot pace.

Off soon to hear *A Christmas Oratorio*.

5 December 2023:

Yesterday I had a somewhat emotional afternoon at a soiree organised by **Elwood Writers**, the group Jenny co-founded, which was partly in memory of her.

I read her story '**A Christmas Oratorio**', which she was working on with a mentor, **Ceridwen Dovey**, part of a group of oboe stories which was her final project. There were half a dozen or so of these, completed or part completed: 'A Christmas Oratorio' she was still working on early in April, the month she died.

This is a powerful story, autobiographical in content, though all the stories have been fictionalised, with the life of Annabel and the oboe the continuing threads. I thought you might like to read it at least, and tell me what you think [see page 24].

I was going to go to a performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* today, but the trams let me down and I would have been so late, I decided not to keep trying, and went to Elsternwick instead for lunch and books.

1 January 2024:

I came home on 28th after my hip operation a couple of weeks earlier, thanks to Lyndal's help.

The doctors say I am healing well and I am looking after myself at home, with Lyndal's help with shopping, and the supermarket delivering. Still on crutches for a few weeks, but am able to negotiate the 23 steps up to the flat — though not too often each day.

So this gives me plenty of time to read, look at movies on SBS, listen to music, read emails. Too many books are piled up on the coffee table, as usual.

Phone calls, emails are welcome and I should be able to receive visitors a bit into the new year.

Thanks again for everybody's support. It's wonderful to have friends.

9 January 2024:

Thanks for your lists. In return here are mine for 2023. Not as much helpful year of publication and publisher data; perhaps I'll try for this next year

82 books read, 72 given 4 to 5 star ratings (a high percentage, partly reflecting my latter-day decision not to read or keep reading books that didn't seem worth it).

Five-star books 2023 in order of reading

(Shakespeare omitted)

48 items:

R. F. Kuang: *Babel* (sf)
 Chris Hammer: *The Tilt* (m)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Generation Loss* (m)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Errantry* (sf)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Last Summer on Mars Hill* (sf)
 Ursula K Le Guin: *A Wizard of Earthsea* (reread) (sf)
 Maggie Shipstead: *Astonish Me* (f)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Fire* (sf)
 Ursula K Le Guin: *The Tombs of Atuan* (reread) (sf)
 Martin Rees: *On the Future* (sc)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Hard Light* (m)
 Elizabeth Hand: *The Book of Lamps and Banners* (m)
 Sally Rooney: *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (f)
 David Hare: *The Blue Touch Paper* (th)
 Monica Byrne: *The Actual Star* (sf)
 Sebastian Barry: *Old God's Time* (f)
 Peter S. Beagle: *Summerlong* (sf)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Hokuloa Road* (f)
 Candice Fox: *Fire With Fire* (m)
 Eleanor Catton: *Birnam Wood* (m)
 Peter S. Beagle: *The Way Home* (sf)
 Sally Rooney: *Normal People* (re-read) (f)
 Peter S. Beagle: *In Calabria* (sf)
 Sebastian Barry: *The Pride of Parnell Street* (pl)
 Ray Nayler: *The Mountain in the Sea* (sf)
 Jonathan Bate: *Mad About Shakespeare* (lit)
 Tom Reamy: *Under the Hollywood Sign* (partly re-read) (sf)
 Paul Kincaid: *Brian W. Aldiss* (sf)
 Carlo Rovelli: *Anaximander and the Nature of Science* (phil)
 Siân Hughes: *Pearl* (Bookers) (f)
 Martin MacInnes: *In Ascension* (Bookers) (sf)
 Stanley Wells: *What Was Shakespeare Really Like?* (lit)
 Elizabeth Hand: *A Haunting on the Hill* (sf)
 John Gray: *Feline Philosophy* (phil)
 Kate Atkinson: *Normal Rules Don't Apply* (f)
 John Grisham: *The Exchange* (m)
 Patrick Stewart: *Making It So* (th)
 Shirley Jackson: *The Haunting of Hill House* (sf)
 Michael Connelly: *Resurrection Walk* (m)

Stephen King: *Holly* (m)
 Stephen King: *Mr Mercedes* (re-read) (m)
 Stephen King: *Finders Keepers* (m)
 Stephen King: *End of Watch* (m/sf)
 Stephen King: *The Outsider* (m/sf)
 Ruth Rendell: *A Spot of Folly* (ss) (m)
 Miklós Bánffy: *The Remarkable Mrs Anderson* (m)
 Michael Connelly: *A Darkness More Than Light* (m)
 Max Allen Collins: *Spree* (m)

Four- and four-and-a-half star books 2023 in order of reading

24 items:

Elizabeth Jane Howard: *Getting It Right* (f)
 James Blish: *The Tale That Wags The Dog* (sf)
 Matthew Hughes: *Ghost Dreams* (sf)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Wylding Hall* (sf)
 Bill McKibben: *The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon* (soc)
 K J Parker: *Pulling the Wings Off Angels* (sf)
 Elizabeth Hand: *Mortal Love* (sf)
 Sebastian Barry: *Two Novellas* (f)
 John Banville: *The Lock-up* (m)
 Sebastian Barry: *The Secret Scripture* (f)
 Andrew Motion: *Sleeping on Islands* (lit)
 Ned Beauman: *Venomous Lumpsucker* (sf)
 Sue Burke: *Immunity Index* (sf)
 Paul Harding: *This Other Eden* (Bookers) (f)
 Paul Lynch: *Prophet Song* (Bookers) (sf)
 Sarah Bernstein: *Study for Obedience* (Bookers) (f)
 Chetna Maroo: *Western Lane* (Bookers) (f)
 Jonathan Kellerman: *Unnatural History* (m)
 Karin Smirnoff: *The Girl in the Eagle's Talons* (m)
 Jonathan Escoffery: *If I Survive You* (Bookers) (f)
 Lee & Andrew Child: *The Secret* (m)
 Stephen King: *If It Bleeds* (re-read) (sf)
 Adam Roberts: *The Death of Sir Martin Malprelate* (sf)
 Madison Smartt Bell: *Straight Cut* (m)

10 January 2024:

I've been keeping lists of books read since the 60s,

including 'categories', though I agree with you these are malleable. I thought I'd sent some to you in previous years. You might have even published some, but I'm unsure about this.

Only in the last decade or so have I bothered to rate them, probably following your lead.

But I know how many books I read for all these years, and how the categories changed — not all that much I have to say. They used to be in an Excel file, but this is something like five computers ago, and it wasn't preserved as I updated. But I have the handwritten lists in three notebooks, and the yearly analysis, and, I presume like you, my fun job each new year is to tot up the totals.

The latest notebook was started in 2017, and I've estimated that there are enough pages left to easily cover the rest of my reading life, even if this were exceptionally long (not so likely).

The totals since 2017 (2 years after I started living with Jenny) are as follows:

2017: 87

2018: 100

2019: 94

2020: 84

2021: 95

2022: 93

2023: 82.

But of course, these are much less interesting than the books themselves, and I note that over the years there is a quite a large overlap with your reading, as reported by you annually. While there is some reciprocal influence at work, I rather think this is because we both go for good books in quite a few similar categories.

[*brg* When Tony sent me Jenny's story, he wrote (see complete text, letter of 5 December, p. 22), 'Yesterday I had a somewhat emotional afternoon at a soiree organised by Elwood Writers, the group Jenny co-founded, which was partly in memory of her. I read her story "A Christmas Oratorio", which she was working on with a mentor, Ceridwen Dovey, part of a group of oboe stories, which was her final project. This is autobio- graphical in content, though all the oboe stories have been fictionalised, with the life of Annabel and the oboe the continuing threads.'

I told Tony that Jenny's story is very powerful, and it should be published with her other oboe stories. This is still a possibility. He asked me to publish 'A Christmas Oratorio' in *SFC*. This is only the third piece of fiction I've ever published in one of my fanzines. The other two were by Michael Bishop, who also left us in 2023.*]

Jennifer Bryce: A Christmas Oratorio

A new mother sat in a church clasping her oboe, waiting. To the audience, she was one of the twenty members of the Oriana Orchestra, yet she was alone, amidst echoing coughs, the rustle of programs and hushed anticipation. The conductor strode to the podium, bowed to applause, tapped his baton and Annabel, the mother, along with the other orchestra members, lifted her instrument ready to play the opening chorus of Bach's *A Christmas Oratorio*. A roll from the timpani quickened the orchestra — the oboes echoed the flutes as the different melody lines knitted together in a magnificent celebratory offering.

No one else there knew that Annabel had left her little Michael in hospital, cradled in his father's

arms with neonatal pneumonia, gasping into an oxygen mask.

She'd attended the two rehearsals of this work when Michael was doing well — her first professional playing since the birth. Old feelings had returned — that sense of authority as she played the A for tuning and the tingling behind her neck as she melded into the orchestra. Family members had been critical of her decision to return to playing so soon. Her mother had said, 'You can play the oboe at any time, Annabel. Your place now is with your baby.' But her husband Peter had understood: 'You need to do it. I can look after him.' That was back in the heady days when Michael was putting on weight and 'doing all the

right things', as the nursing staff said.

What a relief it had been to be back in her familiar world of music. She'd fobbed off the inevitable questions: 'You had a little boy?' 'Was he a bit early — how's he doing — had a first smile yet?' 'What does he weigh now?' And she had preferred to become involved in gossip about a French horn player and a trumpeter sneaking off to New Zealand together. This was her world; she could cope with scraping her reeds, clearing condensation from the top joint of her oboe, and comfortable musical chit-chat. It was so much easier than grappling with little Michael's bronchial aspiration, pneumothoraxes and parenteral nutrition.

Annabel wasn't obliged to be here now. Even at short notice the orchestra manager could have found a replacement oboist when Michael became ill. The head nurse had looked a bit surprised when Annabel, on receiving an update of Michael's precarious medical situation, had expressed her intention to take part in the performance. 'Maybe you need to have a bit of a break,' she'd said without much conviction.

During the pregnancy Annabel had sometimes craved time by herself and she would drive along the peninsula road with the sea crashing on rocks at her side and this very oratorio blaring from the car's sound system. In those days she was on the verge of motherhood; the glory of creating a new human being coupled with the tenderness of nurturing — the nurturing that Bach has captured so exquisitely in this story of the nativity.

Michael came twelve weeks early. Such a shock. They hadn't attended childbirth preparation classes. The birth was easy, too easy, she'd wanted more pain — she'd wanted a punishment for her body's rejection of this fragile scrap of existence. That night she'd lain alone in a hospital bed — Michael was in the NICU — and she'd had to keep whispering to herself, 'I am a mother. I have a son.' But as she lay there in the dimly lit ward she felt a failure. Most of the patients had their babies with them and there was a constant undercurrent of squawkings and mutterings and every so often a full-throated wail. Something mechanical was feeding her baby as he lay spread-eagled under bright lights, rather than warmly swaddled in the gently lit, milky sanctuary of the nursery. Part of her wished that Michael was there at her side demanding nourishment, another part of her indulged in a fantasy — she would wake up soon with Peter snoring at her side and the little mound of Michael still cocooned within her body.

The conductor looked at Annabel, ready for the

aria, 'Prepare thyself Zion'. The oboe takes the lead here, and for a few minutes her full concentration has to be on the score and blending her oboe with the alto's voice. For the duration of the aria she must focus solely on the music. She worked through to the final phrase, totally absorbed in every element of this musical odyssey, which gradually slows on the last three notes. As she held the final chord, watching the conductor for the final beat, she didn't think of Michael for one moment. He was left in the arms of his father. She wondered whether his existence was dependent on a kind of telepathy between mother and son. Was he still alive?

Relatives would sometimes visit the NICU — reluctantly it seemed. They didn't coo and smile in the usual manner for a new-born baby; their faces puckered, they'd turn away from the crib and whisper, 'Is he going to be all right?' or worse, 'Is it going to survive?' On one occasion, a particularly plainspoken friend had pinned her with her probing eyes, 'Would you prefer he didn't make it? It might be more humane.' And for a nanosecond Annabel had imagined the freedom, the relief of knowing that a phone call no longer potentially summoned them to some trauma, some earth-shattering drama. No. Little Michael was their son, their flesh and blood, a baby who was born too soon. There was no way she could want him to die. For the moment she was hemmed into the heart of Bach's oratorio, and the baby in the nativity scene, the purring flutes, the madonnas, they all made her think of Michael.

Annabel nursed her oboe during a chorale and a recitative and looked up to the leadlight windows through which shafts of light streamed blue and gold. The first time she saw her son in his crib she was surprised that he had blond curly baby hair — she'd thought that coming so early, he'd be bald. He was surrounded by raucous metal machines and plastic tubing, yet the nurses referred to him as 'a little chicken' and there was a mobile of blue felt birds hanging over his bed. He wasn't ready to feed, but she'd been encouraged to express her milk for him. 'It's important for him to get the colostrum,' one of the nurses had said, 'it's full of nutrients that will help to protect him from infections.' They'd fed him the milk through a tube. Expressing milk night and day sometimes seemed to be the only thing she could do for him.

Two oboes and a bassoon accompany women singing a duet with the men, 'He comes to earth in poverty'. Bach has woven a rhythmic phrase throughout the parts of both instruments and voices; the melody emerges high and low, modulating in all kinds of ways, but that rhythmic phrase is always the same. Will that be the case

with Michael? She wondered. Is his essential being like that rhythmic phrase, remaining intact while he endures all kinds of complications? In what condition will he emerge from all of this? Will he emerge?

Next came the bass aria, 'Mighty Lord' — no oboes. There's overpowering strength in the trumpet. When Michael was born he required a ventilator to breathe and Annabel remembered staring at the confusion of tubing in his crib. The only part of him that seemed to resemble a normal baby was his solid little thighs — she pictured them now — such fortitude in a tiny, heaving body.

A chorale, and then the interval. Annabel pushed her way outside, barely aware of her fellow players who were leaning on a veranda rail smoking and sharing a vacuum flask of coffee. A violinist offered her a cup and indicated that she had some more salacious gossip to share, but Annabel stood by an old gully trap, resting one foot on the broken concrete edge and, heart quivering, telephoned Peter. He answered immediately, his voice strong and self-assured: 'He turned the corner soon after you left and doesn't need oxygen now. They say he's going to be all right'

Everyone was beckoning for her to return to play the second half. Annabel floated back to her place and automatically opened her music to Part Two. In the midst of this oratorio of jubilation is a bubble of serenity — a Sinfonia of Shepherds' Music. The gentle flutes and violins are joined by oboes in a tender rocking rhythm that surpasses words. Annabel played with tears running down her cheeks. 'They say he's going to be all right.' Little Michael had been closer to death than she

had ever been, he had fought, struggled in ways that she has never had to do. 'He's viable,' they had said when he was born. And with that label he was left to prove that he, at only twenty-eight weeks' gestation, could do the things expected of a full-term baby. Annabel was playing this gentle lullaby for Michael. The oratorio had become an intimation of a kind of love she had never felt before — a totally selfless love, a kind of worship.

She sometimes tried to imagine what it might be like lying in that crib with the blue felt birds hanging above; big faces looming over him, connecting tubes, adjusting equipment, frowning. Where was the shepherds' music for little Michael in the NICU, with its beeping machines and pattering heart monitors? There was no distinction between night and day. Once, when Michael was very ill, she and Peter visited at two o'clock in the morning; a lone couple groping their way along the dimly lit hospital corridors, then they burst through the Perspex doors into blinding brightness, voices calling and the clatter of a ward working at full speed. Little Michael was going to be all right. She would take him out into the night to see the moon and stars, and hear birds sing.

Maybe outwardly Annabel seemed to be a mother escaping from her sick baby, but she now knew that you never have 'a bit of a break' from being a mother. Bach's *A Christmas Oratorio* had become an integral part of Annabel's mothering self and she was driven to play it. Every note of this oratorio was Michael.

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Colin Steele's Book World

Colin Steele AM:

The librarian whose Australia Day honour pairs nicely with his knighthood

by Amy Martin

Canberra Times, 25/26 January 2024

'It goes nicely with my Spanish knighthood,' Colin Steele said upon being congratulated on his Member of the Order of Australia this week.

It was in 1984 that Mr Steele received the Knight Cross Queen Isabella La Catholica — alongside the likes of Al Grassby, the Immigration Minister for the Whitlam Government — as recognition for his services to Hispanic culture.

This latest Australia Day honour — which was announced on Thursday evening, 25 January — was for his significant service to librarianship and digital information sharing.

Moving to Canberra from the United Kingdom in 1976 — where he was an assistant librarian at Oxford University's Bodleian Library — Mr Steele spent the majority of his career at the Australian National University Library, playing a pivotal role in the move towards digital information sharing in the 1990s.

But the Australia Day honour, Mr Steele said, was just as much recognition for the library field as it was for the work that he has done for it.

'What is fabulous is that it's a recognition of what I've done, but also what all my professional colleagues have done in the field of libraries and digital information, and book collecting and the importance of the book,' he said.

'It's a recognition of them, my wife, in particular — because, as ever, I would never do any of this without support intellectually and, as my wife said, providing the necessary infrastructure.'

Having spent decades in the industry — which included seeing many an author come to Canberra in his continuing role as convener for *The Canberra Times*/ANU Meet the Author Series — Mr Steele has seen how the industry has changed.

And indeed, been part of that change.

'We were obviously in a print environment for many years. but we were the first university library to have a website in the country. We were the first ones to set up a digital repository. And we were the first to set up an electronic press,' Mr Steele said.

'And so in the 1990s, it was ironic that we were pushing all the digital stuff ... and we were being attacked by some of the elderly academics for not liking the printed book, even though we just got our two millionth book.'

That was in 2020 — and the two millionth book was *Flora Australasica*, by Robert Sweet, a rare



Colin Steele, AM. (Photo: Elesä Kurtz.)



Colin Steele, right, in 2012 with Australian author Bryce Courtenay and then-ANU Vice Chancellor Ian Young. (Photo by Stuart Walmsley.)



Colin Steele with Australian author Tim Winton in 2013. (Photo by Lyn Mills.)

first edition of one of the most attractive Australian botanical books.

But how does Steele see the state of the library field today? More than ever it's a balancing act — one that Steele says has swung too much in favour of the digital world.

'Now, ironically, I am now supporting the printed book because I feel the digital ones have gone too far,' he said.

'The British Library was hacked in late October last year by a Russian ransomware group, and destroyed the entire digital infrastructure and it is still out of action. So people can't get access to stuff, and the Public Lending Rights for the authors don't work. It's going to cost them £7 million in terms of restoration of IT.

'The library world has changed in the sense that a lot of people say, "OK, the printed book doesn't exist anymore, you shouldn't use it." But we say, well actually printed material is still needed.

'Your reliance on digital stuff is very important, because putting archives up on the web means we can get stuff in Europe or anywhere in the world and the ANU press sends this stuff out to the world

as well. But on the other hand, you've got to have a printed backup, otherwise, you're going to be in trouble.

— **Amy Martin**, *Canberra Times*, 25–26 January 2024

To which I must add ...

Bruce says: Colin Steele might well justify earning his gong because of his 44-year stint as the SF and Fantasy reviewer for the *Canberra Times*. This finished in 2023, when, for not exactly clear reasons, the *Canberra Times* decided to dispense with all its arts and book reviews and to reduce its cultural pages.

By a fair number of years, he was the last regular SF reviewer in daily media in Australia. (Although I don't know how long Ian Nichols lasted in WA.)

Colin was chair of the National Word Festival from 1983 to 1987, covering three festivals, and then convening Meet the Author events from 1987 to the present day.

And, of course, he has been a regular contributor to *SF Commentary* from 1979 until now. He and his wife Anna now review for the *Canberra City News*, and their columns continue in *SFC*.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, January 2024

Colin Steele's top books 2023

42: THE WILDLY IMPROBABLE IDEAS OF DOUGLAS ADAMS
edited by Kevin Davies

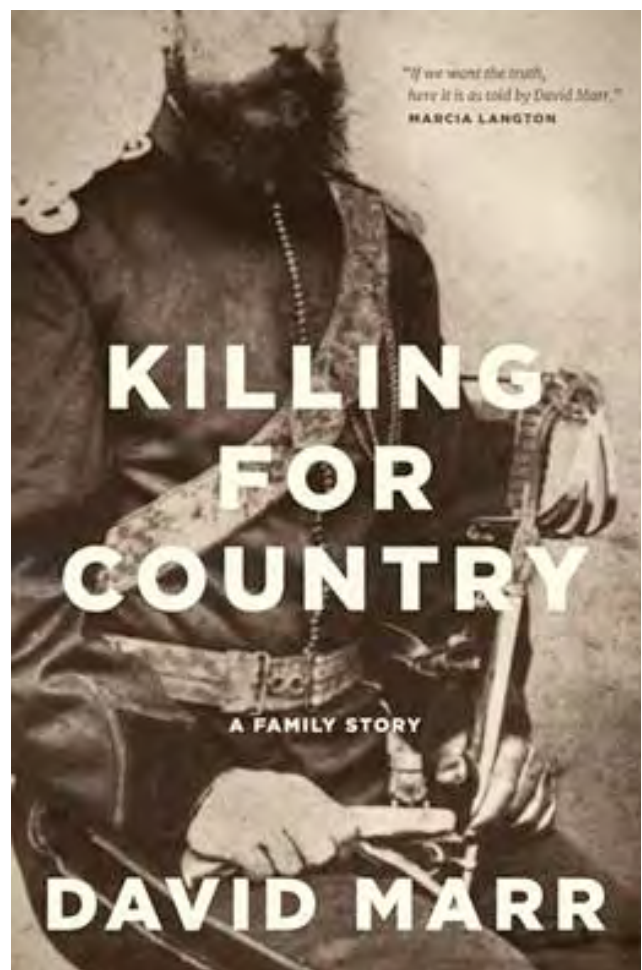
KILLING FOR COUNTRY: A FAMILY STORY
David Marr (Black Inc.; \$39.99)

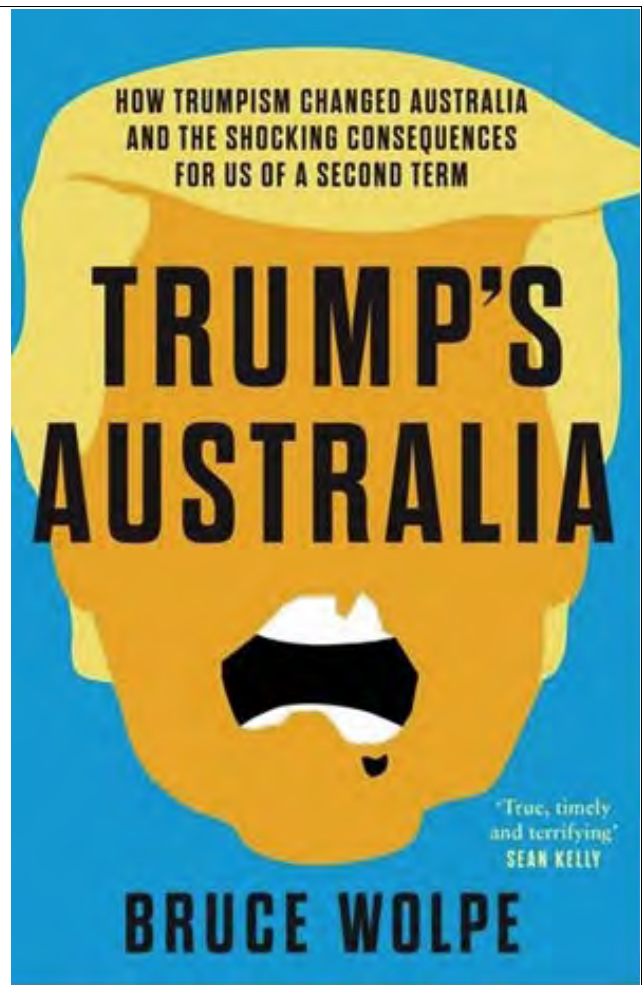
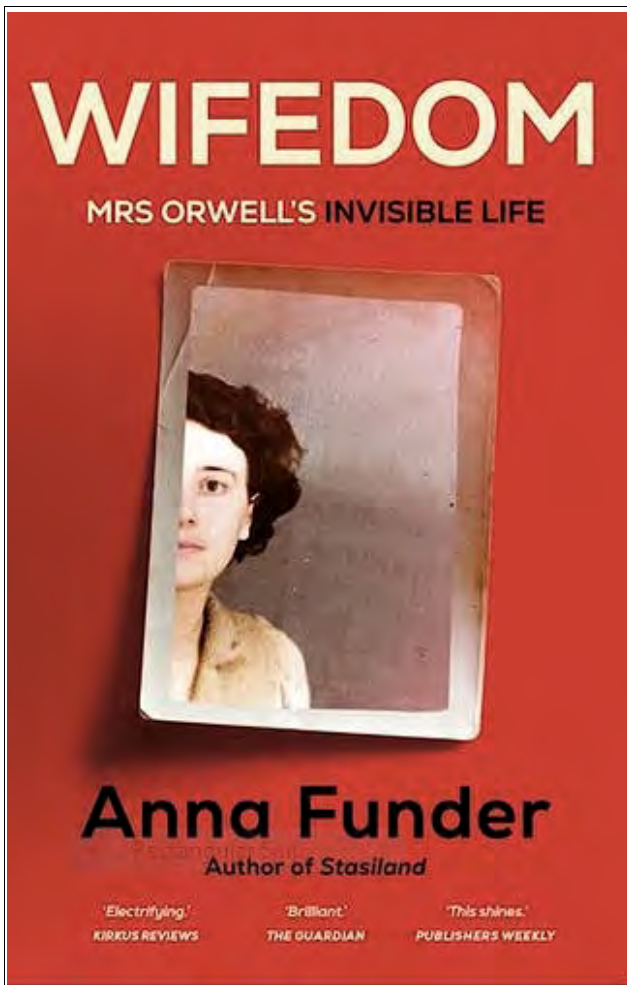
WIFEDOM
by Anna Funder (Penguin; \$36.99)

TRUMP'S AUSTRALIA
by Bruce Wolpe (Allen & Unwin; \$34.99)

THE BOOKLOVER'S JOKE BOOK
by Alex Johnson (British Library; \$29.99)

Killing for Country is a powerful indictment of the treatment of Indigenous Australians in mid-nineteenth century Queensland, seen through the main prism of **David Marr's** colonial ancestors and their involvement in the frontier wars. Marr, building on the work of historians such as Henry Reynolds, and through intensive archival research, presents a bleak picture of the abuse and murder of Indigenous Australians. It is a searing indictment of Australian society at that time, but with contemporary resonances. Marr, when he travelled to Canberra for an October ANU Meet the Author, signed my copy of his 2018

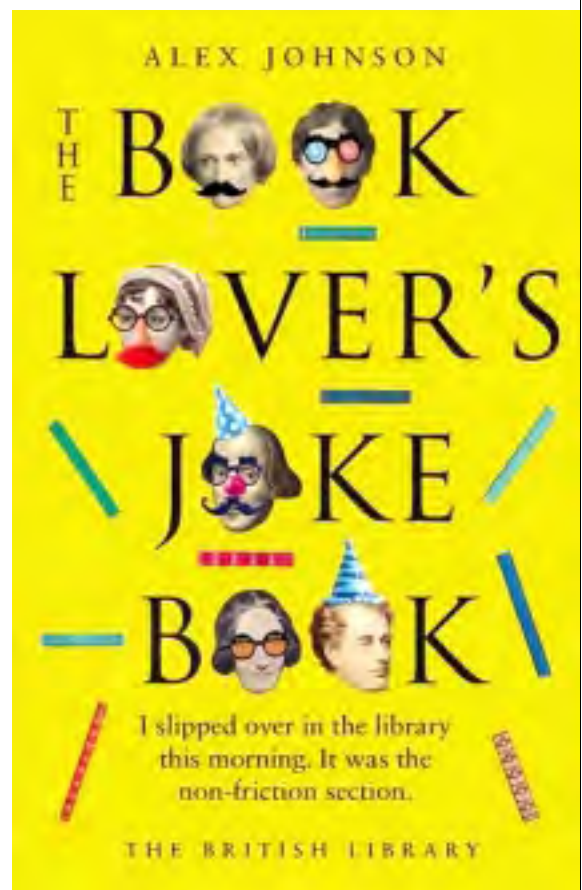




Collection of Essays, in which he had written in the Introduction the words, 'I know my country now.' Marr underlined those words in my copy with an asterix to his writing on the page 'bullshit', reflecting his dismay at now not knowing his country at all.

Anna Funder's *Wifedom* brings to the forefront the life of George Orwell's wife, **Eileen O'Shaughnessy**. Funder, in a mixture of biography, fiction, and autobiography, reveals that Eileen, who died in 1945, provided major intellectual and domestic support for Orwell, but she has been largely air-brushed out of history, which Funder calls a 'wicked magic trick'. Oxford educated, Eileen, who had a particular influence in the writing of *Animal Farm*, was, as Kathryn Hughes has commented, Orwell's 'editor, agent, secretary, co-conspirator, bread winner, nurse and lavatory unblocker'. Funder interweaves her own personal story of the nature of being a working wife in sections of the book, which sits tonally, sometimes uneasily, with the main narrative of rescuing Eileen from her husband's Orwellian shadow.

Bruce Wolpe's *Trump's Australia* is underpinned by a subtitle, ***How Trumpism Changed Australia and the Shocking Consequences for***



Us of a Second Term. Wolpe's long experience with American life and politics, including his time as adviser to President Obama, provides background to his searing analysis of Trump's ascendancy and influence. He ranges widely over domestic and foreign policies to the eroding of democratic values through Trump's actions, and their impact on Australia. Wolpe prioritises the need for the maintenance of democratic values in the face of the actions of billionaire demagogues, tribal media, and manipulated social networks enhancing 'the tyranny of the minority'.

To end the roundup on a cheerier note, avid readers will love **Alex Johnson's *The Booklover's Joke Book***, which even has a joke on the title page, 'I slipped over in the library this morning. It was the non-friction section.' This gives a flavour of the content in the 25 subject chapters. Here are jokes about books, writers, agents, publishers,

bookcases, and even cats. In the chapter on 'Authors' you will find, 'Why did Puck cross the road? Because he saw someone he knew Oberon the other side.' And following the Shakespeare links — 'Shakespeare walks into a bar. 'Not you again', says the landlady, 'you're bard.' Also in that Author chapter, 'Doctor, doctor, I keep dreaming I'm writing *The Hobbit*.' 'Don't worry sir, you've just been Tolkien in your sleep.'

In the 'Grammar' chapter, 'What happened when the verb asked the noun to conjugate? The noun declined.' Real literary shopping places gives us 'Lord of the Fries', which is an Australian vegetarian fast-food chain; 'Cash-22', a pawnbroker chain in London; 'Grate Expectations', a fireplace shop in London, and 'Tequila Mockingbird', a cocktail bar in London. Have a happy punny Christmas!

Fantasy and science fiction books

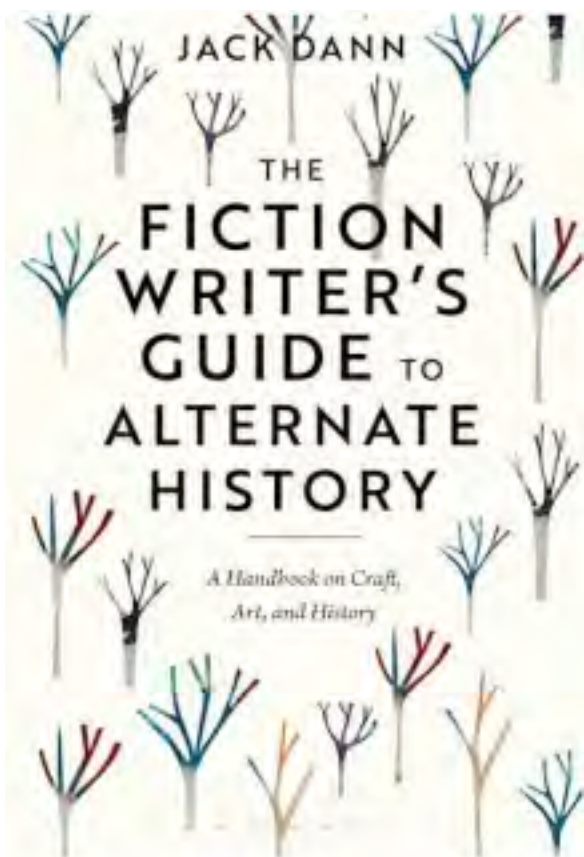
THE FICTION WRITER'S GUIDE TO ALTERNATE HISTORY: A HANDBOOK ON CRAFT, ART, AND HISTORY
by Jack Dann (Bloomsbury Academic; \$34.99)

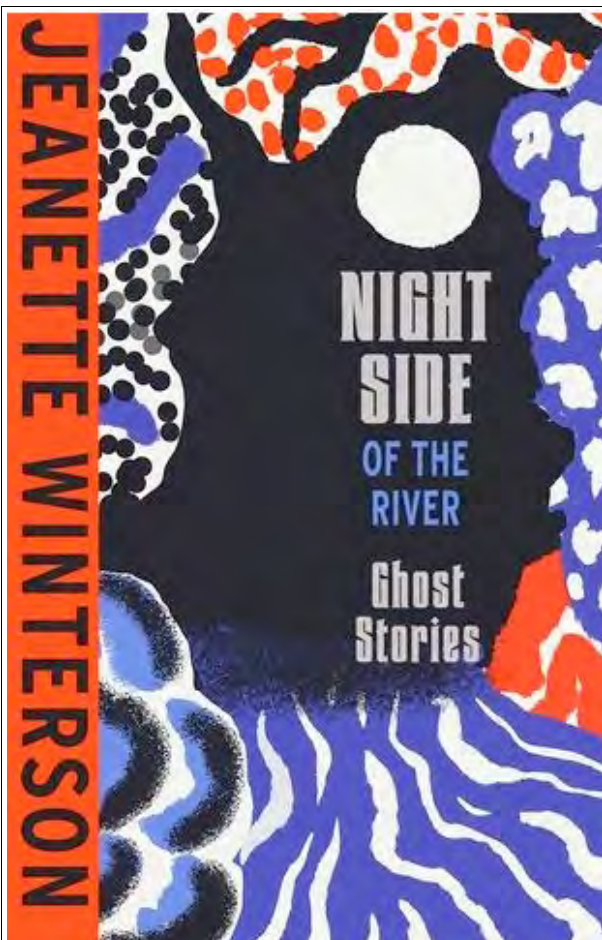
Jack Dann needs no introduction to the readers of *SF Commentary*. He has written or edited over 75 books, including *The Memory Cathedral*, *The Rebel*, *The Silent*, *Junction*, and *The Man Who Melted*. He has been a recipient of the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Australian Aurealis Award (three times), the Ditmar Award (five times), the Peter McNamara Achievement Award, and the Shirley Jackson Award.

Now he offers ***The Fiction Writer's Guide to Alternate History***, examining, through personal insights and notably through conversations with leading writers, a subject that has always been a significant sub-stream in speculative fiction, namely alternative or counterfactual history.

Dann also provides a useful potted history of SF and alternative history, leading into a structured analysis of alternate histories and their fundamentals. He infuses the text with his experience of writing alternate histories, such as his alternate life of James Dean, *The Rebel*, as well as *The Memory Cathedral* and *Shadows in the Stone*. The analysis of the short story 'White City' by Lewis Shiner will be of particular interest to emerging authors.

A substantial and fascinating portion of the book is taken up with the 68-page section, 'The Tactics of Creating Counterfactual Texts: A Roundtable Q&A' with Kim Stanley Robinson, William Gibson, Pamela Sargent, Harry





Turtledove, John Crowley, Michael Bishop, Lisa Goldstein, John Kessel, John Birmingham, Barry N. Malzberg, Janeen Webb, Bruce Sterling, Mark Shirrefs, Christopher Priest, Terry Bisson, Mary Rosenblum, Michael Swanwick, Paul Di Filippo, Richard Harland, Howard Waldrop, Lewis Shiner, and George Zebrowski. It would've been nice to have seen a response from Michael Moorcock in this section about his multiverses, but having said that, it is a remarkable roll call. Dann notes that that in the period since the Q&As were conducted one of the contributors, Mary Rosenblum, has died.

The authors responded independently to questions posed over a period of years by Dann. It is fascinating to see the length some authors have taken to address the issues and the differences in their responses as to what alternate history should be, how much detail is required in the process of 'divergence' from 'real' history, and what rules should be followed, if at all. Kim Stanley Robinson notes that 'all history is a fiction, and as such, maybe it's always an 'alternative history'.

There are numerous fascinating discussion points in this round table, for example, when Kim Stanley Robinson responds to Tom Shippey's view that a divergence point in history should be 'plausible, definite, small in itself and massive in

consequence'. Robinson argues instead that you 'need some very big changes to make any historical difference'. John Birmingham muses as to whether too much research on a historical period can overpower the story. Read on!

The Fiction Writer's Guide to Alternate History will be of interest to a number of reader audiences, ranging from the academic SF community to budding authors. Unlike most academic books it is competitively priced. Those readers should also refer to an excellent **Coode Street Podcast, No. 634**, by Gary Wolfe and Jonathan Strahan with Jack Dann, recorded on 10 September 2023.

NIGHT SIDE OF THE RIVER
by Jeanette Winterson
(Jonathan Cape; \$32.99)

Jeanette Winterson begins *Night Side of the River* with a short history of ghosts from Dante to the present day, followed by 13 ghost stories, organised in four sections, 'Devices', 'Places', 'People', and 'Visitations'. Each section also contains Winterson's reflections on her experiences with the paranormal, ranging from her deceased grandmother's presence to the ghosts that have haunted her eighteenth-century house in Spitalfields over 30 years.

Winterson believes: 'In spite of Protestant theology, scientific materialism, or the plain fact that there is no empirical proof that anyone has come back from the dead, ghosts have not been evicted from their permanent ancestral home: our imagination.'

Winterson's stories range from those set in the ghost fiction traditions to innovative AI stories, in which the metaverse and virtual reality create 'an opportunity for the Dead'. Winterson writes, 'Technology is going to affect our relationship with death. In theory, no one needs to die. In theory, another can be resurrected. We can be our own haunting.'

She notes how grief in a technological era can have an impact on the boundary between life and death; for example, through the creation of digital avatars, literally ghosts of human originals. This is foreshadowed in the first story, 'App-arition', which has echoes of Roald Dahl's black humour. A widow finds herself haunted by her former abusive husband, whose persona has been uploaded as an app to her smart phone, for malicious reasons, by her sister. The playing out of the relationship with her sister concludes with a nice twist in a digital adultery framework.

In 'Ghost in the Machine', a woman who has bought into a metaverse resort returns after her

husband's death, and tries to re-create a better marriage, but her digital avatar husband has other thoughts. Winterson said that she 'wanted to play with the idea you might start to have a real relationship with an entity that is a program that is much more interesting than anybody you know in your biological world. Where would that logically take you? It would logically take you toward your own death.'

In 'The Door', two female lovers, about to be married in a remote Scottish castle hotel, unwittingly invoke and release the ghosts, in a 'networked haunting', of another lesbian couple who died centuries before after facing the brutal prejudice of their time.

In what Winterson calls 'hinged stories', 'A Fur Coat' and 'Boots', a circus juggler and a pick-pocket, who are lovers, move into a derelict house on an aristocratic estate, find the dark secrets of the past increasingly having an impact on their lives, with Winterson dramatically highlighting the Gothic elements.

The stories that best succeed in *Night Side of the River* are those that recount events that go beep in the night rather than a bump.

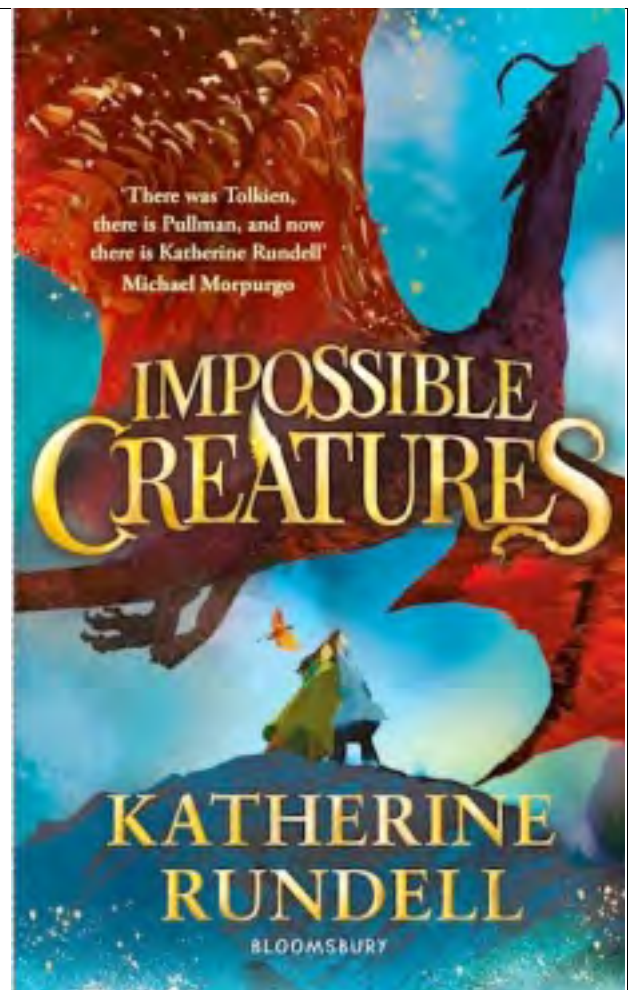
IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES
by Katherine Rundell
(Bloomsbury; \$18.99)

Katherine Rundell, 36 years old, is something of an impossible creature herself, combining academic and literary careers. She was the youngest female fellow at All Souls College, Oxford and the youngest person to win the £50K Baillie Gifford Prize for non-fiction for *Super-Infinite*, her 2022 biography of John Donne.

In addition, her five YA novels have won major critical acclaim, while her latest, ***Impossible Creatures***, about a realm where all the creatures of myth still live, won the British Waterstones Book of the Year for 2023.

Impossible Creatures is the first in a trilogy. A young boy, Christopher Forrester, travels to a remote part of Scotland to visit his grandfather, who is the guardian of a portal to the Archipelago, 'a wild magnificence of a place: a land where all the creatures of myth still live and thrive'.

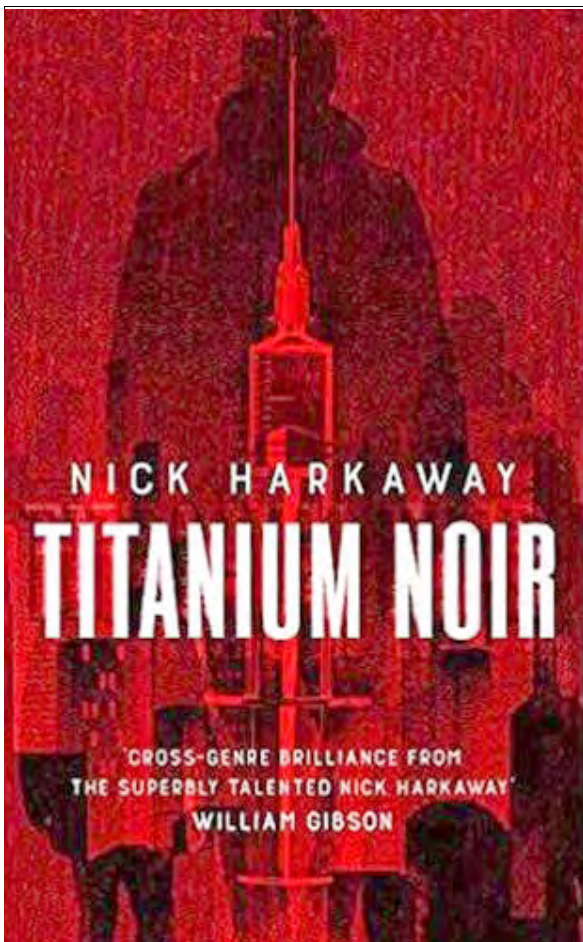
Rundell wrote: 'It's the story of a cluster of magical islands, in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean, where all the creatures of myth are still alive. I'm usually furiously critical of my own work, but *Impossible Creatures* is, I think, the best of me: a bid to distil what I've read and studied, what I know and what I have loved, into an adventure ...



The fact that this book has won [the Waterstones Book of the Year] rather than any of my others is so thrilling because this, in being a children's book that I hope could also be read by adults ... has the best of everything that I've learned and that I've read and all of the scholarship I've come across in the last 15 years of my working life, and a kind of distillation of everything I know and hope.'

The story begins when Mal, a young girl tending a baby griffin, pursued by a killer, comes through the portal. Christopher returns with her to the Archipelago, which is in danger of losing its magic. Rundell is an environmentalist and the world of the Archipelago echoes ours in that context. The magic is fading and many of the mythical animals, which Rundell underpins with considerable scholarship, are dying out.

Can Christopher and Mal restore the islands' magic and overcome the considerable dangers that they face? Rundell, superbly imaginative, clearly establishes herself as a successor to the Oxford fantasy traditions of Tolkien, Lewis, and Pullman. *Impossible Creatures* is destined to become a classic.



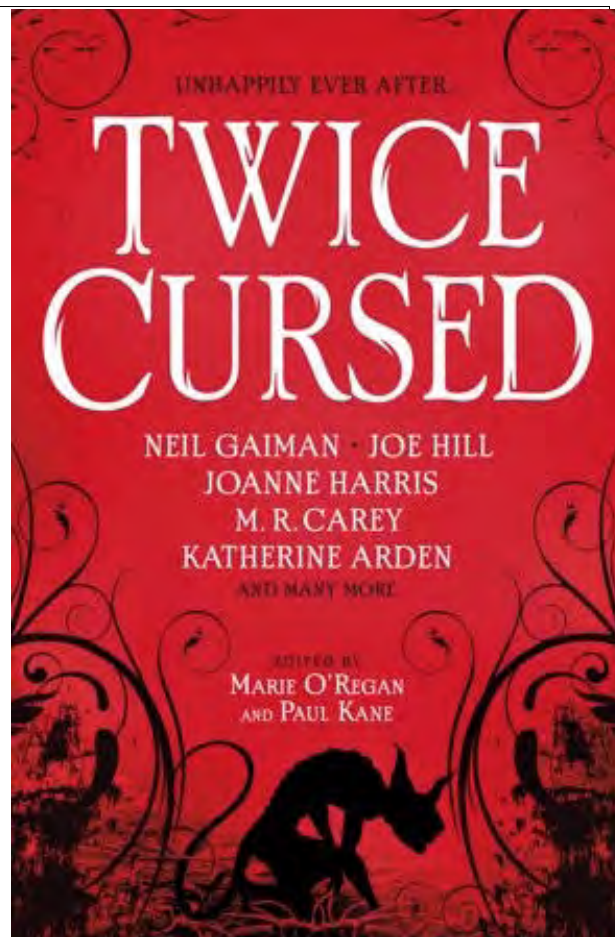
TITANIUM NOIR
by Nick Harkaway (Corsair; \$32.99)

Nick Harkaway, whose real name is Nicholas Cornwell, is the son of the late David Cornwell, better known as John le Carré. Harkaway is not in the le Carré league, but *Titanium Noir* is an intriguing mix of SF with American hard-boiled detective noir.

Harkaway's main character is a sardonic private detective, Cal Sounder, whose motto is 'I do what I do and I try to do it right'. Sounder is designated to investigate the shooting murder of Roddy Tebbit, a 91-year-old 7 foot 8 inches 'Titan'.

Tebbit is one of a 2000 strong 'speciation rich' group of individuals, whose lives have been extended and rejuvenated through a genetic drug T7, which also makes them physical giants. Harkaway clearly sees the Titans as having contemporary links with tech billionaires, such as Musk and Bezos, who operate autocratically and play at being global Gods like the Titans.

Sounder was once emotionally involved with Athena, the daughter of the lead Titan, Ste-fan Tonfameasca, the massively rich and ruthless owner and distributor of the patent of T7. So, it is natural that the police are happy for Sounder to investigate, given that it probably takes a Titan to



kill one, even though Tebbit had no known enemies.

Harkaway follows the tradition of Chandler and Hammett, as Sounder naturally gets beaten up and shot, there is much wisecracking dialogue and there are crooked cops and femmes fatales, although the Titan women have much longer legs than can be found in noir novels. Sounder's investigations lead him into the murky Titan world of secrets, betrayal, and vengeance, before his cracking of the case in a literally titanic struggle.

TWICE CURSED: AN ANTHOLOGY
edited by Marie O'Regan and Paul Kane
(Titan; \$21.99)

Twice Cursed is the second anthology, containing new and reprinted stories, compiled by editors **Marie O'Regan and Paul Kane**, on the theme of the curse. It will prove equally as successful as its predecessor, given its stellar lineup of authors.

The opening story, 'The Bell', by Joanne Harris, in which a small boy rings a bell to bring alive a frozen-in-stone royal court, highlights the dangers of wishing for what you want and sets the dark theme of 'unhappily ever after' in many of the stories in the book.

Standouts include Neil Gaiman's now famous

story 'Snow, Glass, Apples', adapted in several forms since its original 1994 publication, which flips the story of 'Snow White' and the Queen, placing it within a vampiric framework.

Joe Hill's atmospheric novella 'Dark Carousel' sees four teenagers, graduating from school in 1994, attend a carnival, but their misguided actions on the 'Wild Wheel', an antique carousel, brings to life the carousel's animals with chilling results.

Angela Slatter's 'The Tissot Family Circus' is more bittersweet, as a daily pop-up circus

provides a refuge for the cursed.

Closer to the contemporary, yet including the folkloric, is Mark Chadbourn's 'The Old Stories Hide Secrets Deep Inside Them', set at a university archaeological dig in Orkney riven by academic feuding over a possible Viking ship burial. Are the clues in an ancient saga fictional or do they point to the site of the real burial? The female main character is determined to find remains, whatever the curse allegedly linked to the burial. In the process she defeats her academic opponents in dramatic fashion.

Biography and autobiography

IAN FLEMING: THE COMPLETE MAN

by **Nicholas Shakespeare**
(Harvill Secker; \$42.99)

MAKING IT SO

by **Patrick Stewart**
(Simon & Schuster; \$55)

There have been several previous biographies of **Ian Fleming**, but **Nicholas Shakespeare's *The Complete Man*** has the advantage of unprecedented access to the Fleming archive. Fleming will forever be coupled with James Bond, but Shakespeare aims to give a picture of 'the complete man'.

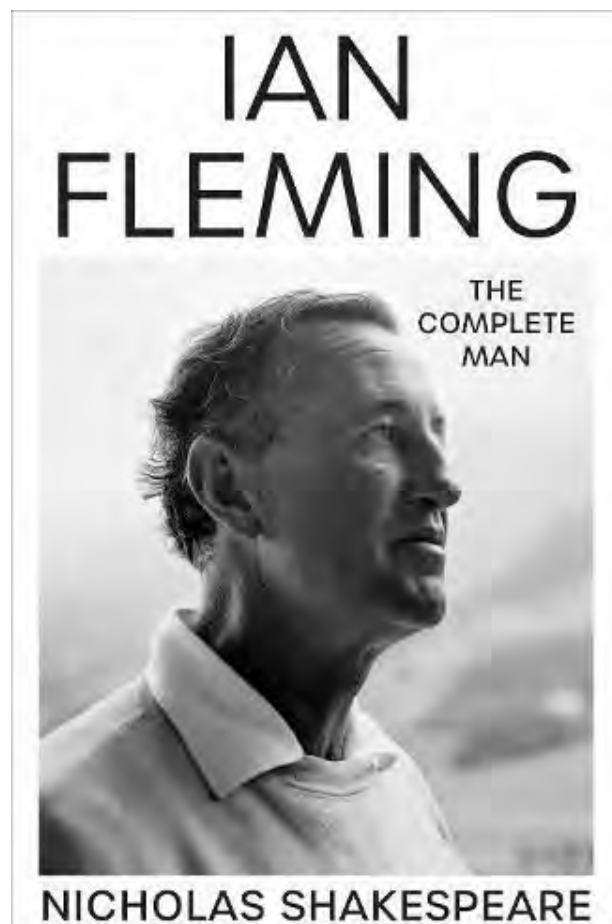
Fleming, from a wealthy background, had a difficult childhood. His father was killed in World War I and he grew up dominated by a 'monstrous' mother and Peter, a more popular elder brother. He left Eton under a cloud, and similarly at Sandhurst, after contracting gonorrhoea. A period as a stockbroker was followed by journalism in the 1930s, before an impressive career in Naval Intelligence in World War II, which Shakespeare covers with much new detail, and which provided Fleming with authentic background for the Bond novels.

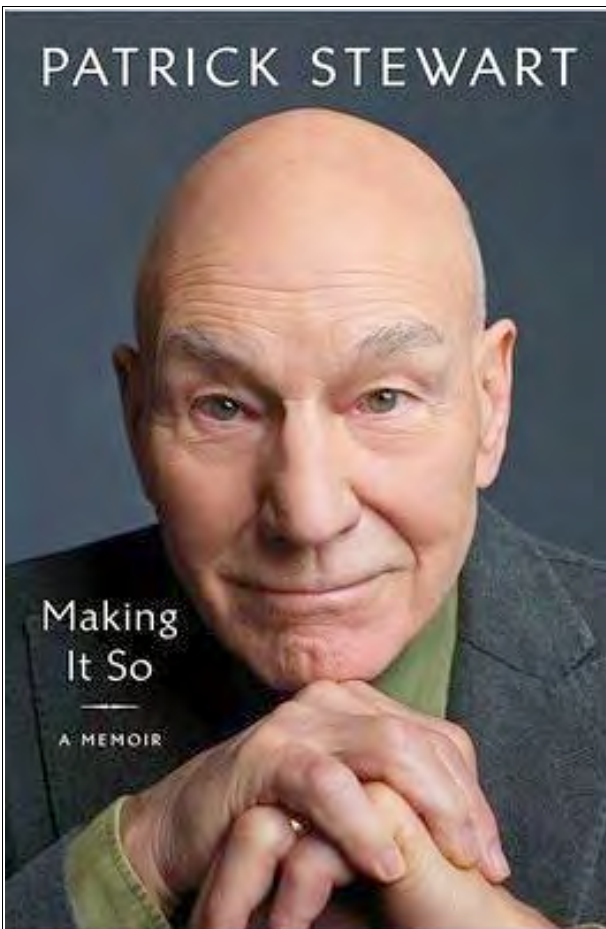
Patrick Stewart, now 83, begins his autobiography with an epigraph from Shakespeare, 'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.' His life, like that of Fleming, has been a mingled one. In contrast to Fleming, however, Stewart came from an impoverished working-class background in rural Yorkshire. His was another dysfunctional family, with his mother often assaulted by a father with World War II PTSD and an alcohol problem.

Stewart reflects: 'The future twenty-fourth-

century commander of the *Enterprise* grew up with neither a toilet nor a bathroom in his house ... It's taken me decades of analysis ... To understand and cope with the impact of the violence, fear, shame, and guilt I experienced as a child.' He believes he copied 'Jean-Luc Picard's stern, intimidating tendencies' in *Star Trek* from his father.

Similarly, Fleming's background imbued the Bond novels with 'sex, sadism and snobbery', as Paul Johnson described them in a 1958 review of *Dr No*.





Shakespeare covers Fleming's numerous affairs. Fleming evaded marriage until 1952 when he married his mistress, the pregnant Ann Charteris, previously married to Lord Rothermere. Their love of flagellation is reflected in Fleming's 1953 debut novel *Casino Royale*, launched amidst the 'spam-munching gloom of Attlee's Britain'.

Fleming's relationship with Ann, who was accustomed to wealth, became one of 'piranha shoals of recrimination', alleviated by episodes of mutual flagellation. Fleming once commented: 'My profit from *Casino Royale* will just about keep Ann in asparagus through Coronation Week.' Ann's intellectual coterie, which included her lover, future Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell, scorned *Casino Royale*, forcing Fleming to call it an 'oafish opus'.

Bond book sales only really took off globally after the 1962 *Dr No* film with Sean Connery. Fleming, a 70-a-day cigarette smoker, did not have long to enjoy the royalties. He died of a heart attack in 1964 at the age of 56. Fleming had reflected, 'Ashes, old boy. It's just ashes ... I'd swap the whole damned thing for a healthy heart.' The world thus missed the Bond novel, with, in Fleming's words, 'one final fatal Australian blonde'.

Shakespeare ends his definitive biography in 1964, apart from covering the suicide in 1975 at

the age of 23 of Ian and Ann's son Casper, another tortured individual.

Patrick Stewart reflects back on his life with a little more joy than Fleming, although one senses that he takes more pride in the first half of his life when he had a significant career in British theatre, including 60 productions of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the benefits of the wealth and fame, including a knighthood, which arrived from his starring roles in the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* series.

Stewart's memoir essentially falls into two parts, his acting life before and after *Star Trek*. Trekkies may not be interested in the theatrical first half, while the minutiae of *Star Trek* detail in the second may only appeal to that group.

Stewart's personal relationships, post Yorkshire with his parents and his three marriages, which significantly affected his relationship with his two children, are largely glossed over — no boldly going here. He comments, 'In a life chock-a-block with joy and success my two failed marriages are my greatest regret'.

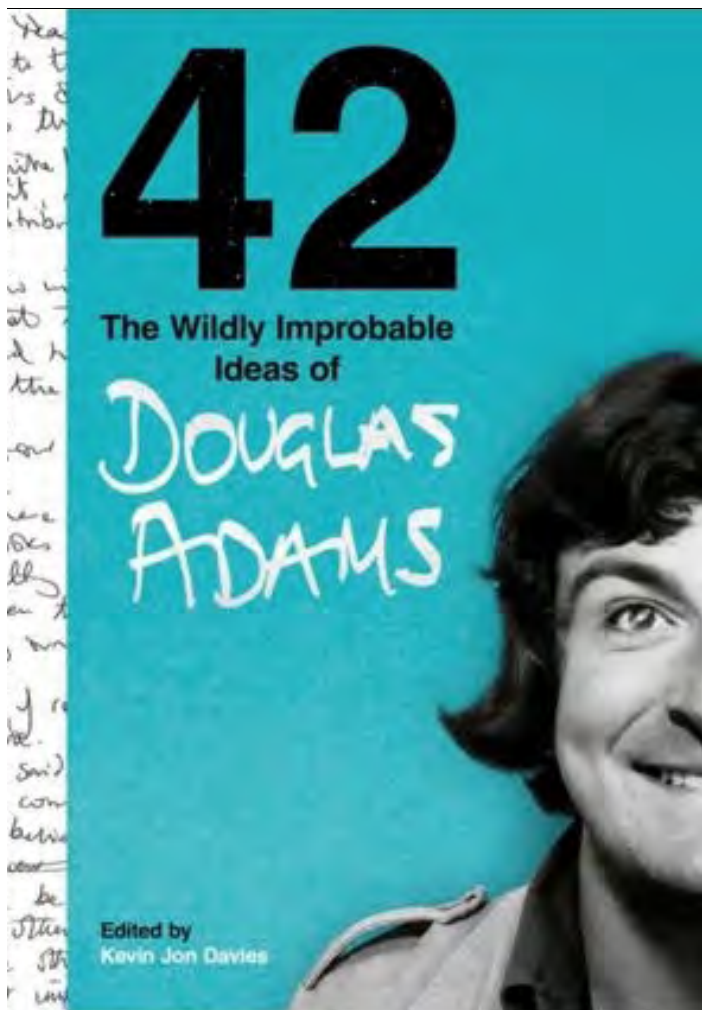
Making It So is an ultimately engaging rags-to-riches story, while *The Complete Man*, at the personal level for Fleming, is more riches to rags. Readers of both books, however, will undoubtedly wish, as Picard would put it, to engage with their lives.

42: THE WILDLY IMPROBABLE IDEAS OF DOUGLAS ADAMS by Kevin Jon Davies (Unbound; \$59.99)

42: *The Wildly Improbable Ideas of Douglas Adams*, authorised by the Douglas Adams estate, is a lavish illustrated book covering the achievements of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* author Douglas Adams, who died in 2001 from a heart attack at the age of 49.

Kevin John Davies has combed the Adams archive at St John's College, Cambridge University, to compile a comprehensive record, along with tributes from friends like Stephen Fry, apparently the only person Adams confided in as to the real meaning of 42 as to life, the universe, and everything.

Davies, a film lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire, was an early fan of Adams' work and subsequently became a documentary film producer, including directing *The Making of Hitchhiker*, a 1993 documentary, and contributing to a number of Adams-related projects, including *The Hexagonal Phase* (2018), the final radio series of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.



Davies reproduces school reports, family photographs, diary entries, fan mail records, and drafts of unpublished material. Much of the book consists of handwritten notes by Adams, scanned and reprinted but also transcribed for easier readability. What readers don't get are intimate details of his personal relationships and marriage, which could have added to a more complete understanding of his character.

Thus novelist Sally Emerson, in an interview in 2017, comments on to her affair with Adams in 1980, 'When I needed comfort from Douglas, it was like asking a black hole for comfort. He was romantic and funny, but much of the time in emotional freefall, which was the source of his genius. Six months after I moved in, I told Douglas I was leaving him. He didn't believe me because he said I was The One and always would be. He was going to make the dedication of his third Hitchhikers' book *Life, The Universe And Everything*, 'To Sally, who I love above the title.' It would have been a typically good Douglas conceit, puzzling, then dazzling with its cosmic largesse — but after I left, it became "For Sally".'

Adams' humorous writing accelerated at Cambridge University, where he was a member of

the famous Footlights Club. Davies then covers the initially disappointing early scriptwriting years, before the success of *Hitchhiker*, which was first broadcast on radio in 1978, to be followed by the TV series, the five-book trilogy and film success.

It's interesting to read a prescient 1974 notebook entry in which Adams contemplated an SF story: 'Man goes to friend; reveals that he is in fact an alien (they have known each other many years), he must now leave the present Earth, which is threatened with extinction and offers to take his friend with him.'

The Guardian in 2011 reported the origins of the *Hitchhiker* concept as follows, noting that in the spring of 1981 Douglas Adams was typing a letter to Australian writer Ken Welsh, author of *Hitchhiker's Guide to Europe*, which began. 'Dear Ken, Your book was really very useful to me ... One evening in 1971 I got frantically depressed in Innsbruck ... When the stars came out I thought that someone ought to write a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* because it looked a lot more attractive out there than it did around me.'

Adams admits early on to writer's block, and once commented, 'I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by'. This reviewer can attest to that. In 1987, Adams had not completed the manuscript of his latest work and his publishers stopped him twice boarding a plane at Heathrow to Australia until he had finished the manuscript. His Canberra talk, which I had organised, was twice cancelled, and his Australian trip was reduced in events. The publisher refunded attendees the cost of the event, gave everyone book vouchers and the venue, University House ANU, was refunded for 250 frozen veal cutlets, which they kept and reused in the restaurant. We still would have preferred to have met Adams.

Elsewhere, Adams reflects on book signings and his later books, such as the 'Dirk Gently' series. Adams' main interests outside of writing included a passion for music, conservation, and a love of new technology, which are covered in chapters of the book. Adams was the first to buy an Apple Mac in Europe, Steven Fry was the second. In the late 1990s Adams predicted e-readers, 'The device must be very simple. They are not computers, they are books which have computers in

them', while in a convention speech he foreshadowed the smartphone.

The 'Hitchhiker' popularity and influences are still reflected today — both Google's HQ and CERN's Large Hadron Collider have office com-

plexes named 42.

Adams' fans will be delighted with this lavish personal treasure trove, a significant testimonial to Adams' achievement and legacy.

Books and society

THE BOOK AT WAR: LIBRARIES AND READERS IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT by Andrew Pettegree (Profile Books; \$55)

Andrew Pettegree, Professor of Modern History at the University of St Andrews, reveals in *The Book at War* how 'print in all its manifestations', which includes books, newspapers, scientific papers, maps, letters, diaries, and leaflets, has shaped the course of war throughout history.

The book explores the weaponisation of book culture under six main headings: 'building a fighting nation; libraries as munitions of war; books on the homefront; providing books for troops: book plunder and destruction in wartime; reconstruction of book stocks and the war for ideological supremacy in the Cold War'.

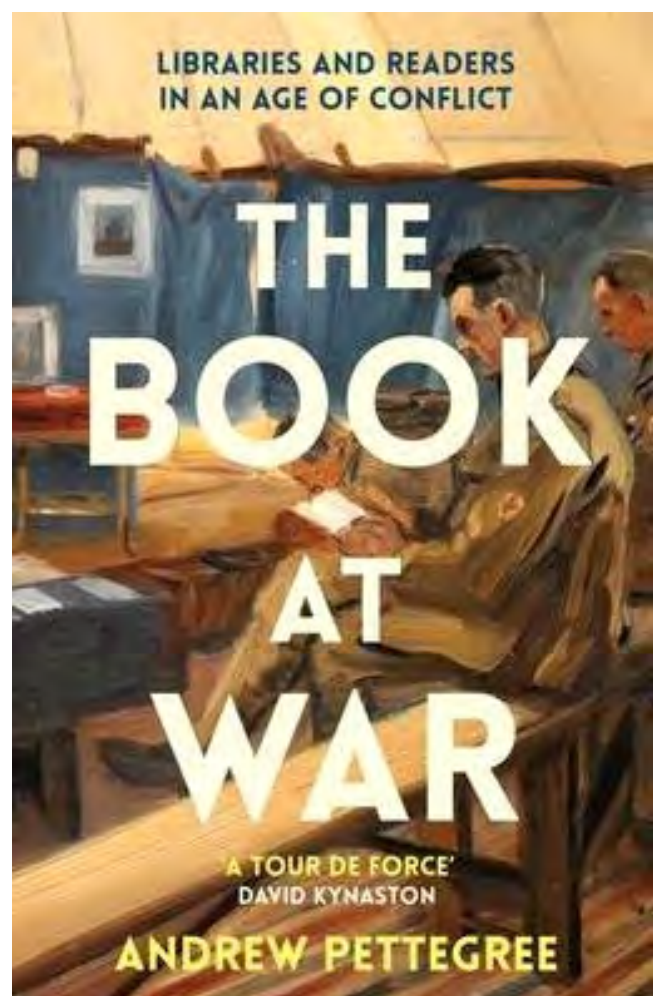
Pettegree demonstrates that, throughout history, the content of books can be used for good or evil. They can stimulate patriotism but also spread misinformation 'vectors of poisonous ideologies'. Pettegree asks, 'Was the bombing of libraries, the destruction of books, always a tragedy? ... Should we lament the loss of the 9 million copies of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* circulating in Germany by 1945, or the 100 million copies of Mao's *Little Red Book* destroyed when his cult receded?'. In that context, while the Nazi book burnings of the 1930s are to be absolutely abhorred, we forget significant numbers of German books were burnt in America during World War I.

Books always been trophies or victims of war. Pettegree, in the first chapter, references the Roman general Sulla 'parading through Rome with Aristotle's library as a looted spoil of war'. The Spanish deliberately destroyed the records of the Aztecs and Mayan civilisations and propagated Catholic texts, while in the seventeenth century Swedish forces ransacked the libraries of central Europe in order to stock Swedish libraries and to limit the spread of Catholic texts.

During World War II, Poland lost 90 per cent of the contents of its public and school libraries and in 1992 Serbian troops deliberately targeted the

National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Destroying libraries has over the centuries been seen as 'a thrust at the heart of an enemy society'. Pettegree ironically notes the major wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were 'fought between the world's most bookish nations'.

Throughout history, books have provided military strategic frameworks. Pettegree highlights Sun Tzu's sixth century BCE classic *The Art of War*; Machiavelli's similarly titled *The Art of War* (1521), and Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* (1832). Other publications were either implicitly or explicitly intended for influencing a particular cause. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, proved influential in shaping Union



support for the Civil War. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was especially popular during the Cold War. Pettegree reflects that the best works of propaganda were never originally intended as such.

Books can also provide relief in times of war. Anne Frank, hiding from the Germans in Amsterdam during World War II, found solace in books, while library associations and publishers provided books to frontline troops. Particularly notable were the US Armed Services' small paperbacks. In total, 122 million copies of more than 1300 titles were delivered to Armed Forces personnel. The accessibility of print and the low unit cost of books proved essential in war.

In a different kind of war, we see libraries today, especially in America, under threat from groups such as creationists and school library 'parents' rights' groups seeking to remove or destroy books, thereby restricting free speech and attacking democracy. Pettegree, while recognising 'the domination of new technologies of war-making and information gathering', as reflected in the Russia-Ukraine war, does not go into detail in this respect.

When the Internet goes down, so does society. The major cyber attack in late October 2023 on the British Library in London represents a different kind of war on the book and its digital fragility. The ransom attack on the British Library totally dismantled access to the library's electronic infrastructure databases and digital content. The British Library was effectively 'technologically immobilised' with rebuilding the database and new cyber defences expected to take up to 12 months and cost between six and seven million pounds.

Pettegree's concluding remarks on the continued importance of the printed book resonate here. Many university libraries, including in Australia, have, in recent years, deaccessioned hundreds of thousands of physical books on the premise that digital copies are available. Pettegree sums up 'the library is far from dead, and its contents will continue to be a subject of social and political importance'.

— **Colin Steele**, November 2023–January 2024

ANU/Canberra Times/Meet the Author dates 2024

Details of Meet the Author events can also be found at the podcasts site <https://www.anu.edu.au/anu-the-canberra-times-meet-the-author-series>.

March 13: Kathy Lette

Kathy Lette in conversation with Karen Hardy on her new novel *The Revenge Club*. Vote of thanks by Ginger Gorman. Kambri Cinema.

March 20: Carla Wilshire and Ronli Sifris

Carla Wilshire and Ronli Sifris in conversation with Kim Rubenstein on their books *Feminism in the Algorithm Age* and *Towards Reproductive Justice*. T2 Kambri.

March 2: Julia Baird

Julia Baird in conversation with Katharine Murphy on her new book *Bright Shining: How Grace Changes Everything*. Vote of thanks by Alex Sloan. Kambri Manning Clark Auditorium.

March 27: David Lindenmayer

David Lindenmayer will be in conversation with Alex Sloan on his new book *The Forest Wars*. Vote of thanks by David Pocock. Kambri Cinema.

April 2: Louise Milligan

Louise Milligan will be in conversation with Amy Remeikis on her debut novel *Pheasants Nest*. Vote of thanks by Sally Pryor. Kambri Cinema.

April 18: Lech Blaine

Lech Blaine in conversation with Mark Kenny on Lech's new quarterly essay 'Peter Dutton and the Forgotten People'. Vote of thanks by John Warhurst. T2 Kambri.

April 30: James Bradley

James Bradley will be in conversation with Beejay Silcox on his new nonfiction book *Deep Water: The World in the Ocean*. Vote of thanks by Tim Hollo. Kambri Cinema.

May 7: Hugh Mackay

Hugh Mackay will be in conversation with Virginia Haussegger on his new book *The Way We Are: Lessons From a Lifetime of Listening*. Vote of thanks by Frank Bongiorno. Kambri Cinema.

May 13: Shankari Chandran

Miles Franklin award winner Shankari Chandran will be in conversation with Karen Viggers on her new novel *Safe Haven*. Vote of thanks by Sally Pryor. Kambri Cinema.

May 16: Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno

Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno will be in conversation on their new book *A Little History of the Labor Party*. T2 Kambri.

May 27: Bruce Pascoe

Bruce Pascoe will be in conversation with Bill Gammage on his new book *Black Duck. A Year at Yumburra*. Kambri Cinema.

June 13: Jen Rayner

Jen Rayner will be in conversation on her new book *Climate Clangers: The Bad Ideas Blocking Real Action*. Harry Hartog Bookshop.

June 18: Nic Bryant

Nic Bryant in conversation with Mark Kenny on

Nick's new book *The Forever War*. Vote of thanks by Allan Behm. RISSS auditorium ANU.

June 25: Michael Brissenden

Michael Brissenden will be in conversation with Chris Hammer on his new novel *Smoke*. Harry Hartog Bookshop.

July 9: Allan Behm

Allan Behm will be in conversation with Mark Kenny on his new book *The Odd Couple. Reconfiguring the America–Australia Relationship*. Coral Bell Lecture Theatre.

August 7: Paul Ham

Paul Ham in conversation on his new book *The Soul: The History of the Human Mind*. RISSS Auditorium.

August 13: Andrew Ford

Andrew Ford will be in conversation with Malcolm Gillies on his new book *The Shortest History of Music*. Vote of thanks by Robyn Holmes. Larry Sitsky Room, ANU School of Music.

October 29: Joe Aston

Joe Aston will be in conversation on his new book on *Qantas: The Chairman's Lounge*. TBC

— **Colin Steele**, November 2023–February 2024

Creer on crime

Anna Creer's five best novels 2023

Anna Creer selects her five best reads for 2023:

ACT OF OBLIVION

by Robert Harris (Penguin; \$32.99)

THE HITCHHIKER by Gerwin van der Werf

(Text; \$32.99)

THE LOCK-UP

by John Banville (Allen & Unwin; \$32.99)

THE SECRET HOURS

by Mick Herron (Hachette; \$32.99)

THE FIRE AND THE ROSE

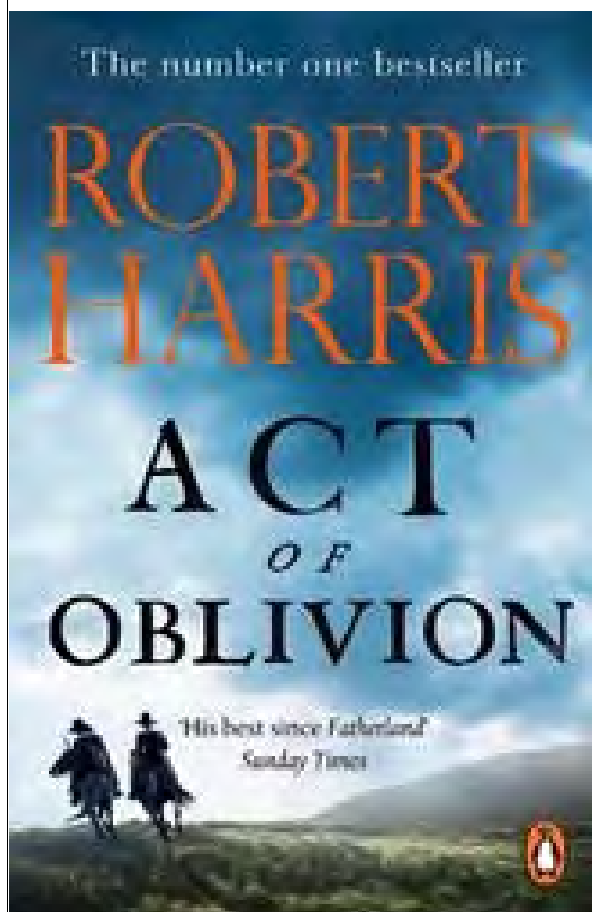
by Robyn Cadwallader
(HarperCollins; \$32.99)

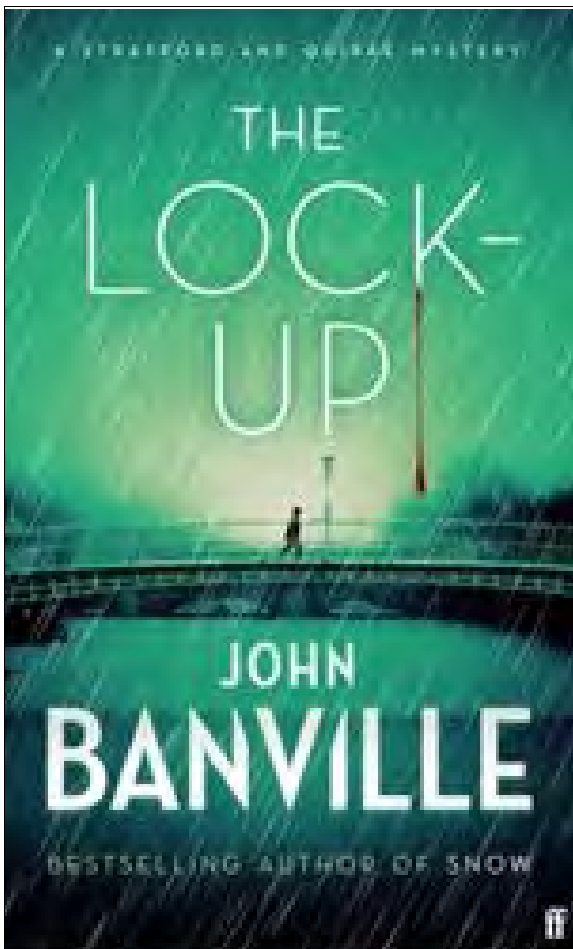
Robert Harris's best-selling novels, most recently *Munich* (2017) and *V2* (2020), have been inspired by historical events.

In *Act of Oblivion*, he turns his attention to the English Civil War and its aftermath, telling the story of two of the regicides, Col. Edward Whalley, Cromwell's cousin and confidant, and his son-in-law Col. William Goffe, who fled to America.

Harris's novel is based on the true story of their desperate attempts to evade discovery and capture. There are royal warrants for their arrest and a price on their heads. However, the American colonies are an ideal place to hide, as they are populated by Puritans, with little loyalty to the Crown.

Act of Oblivion is an extraordinary story of stoicism and persistent self-belief, full of moral nuances, told by a master storyteller.





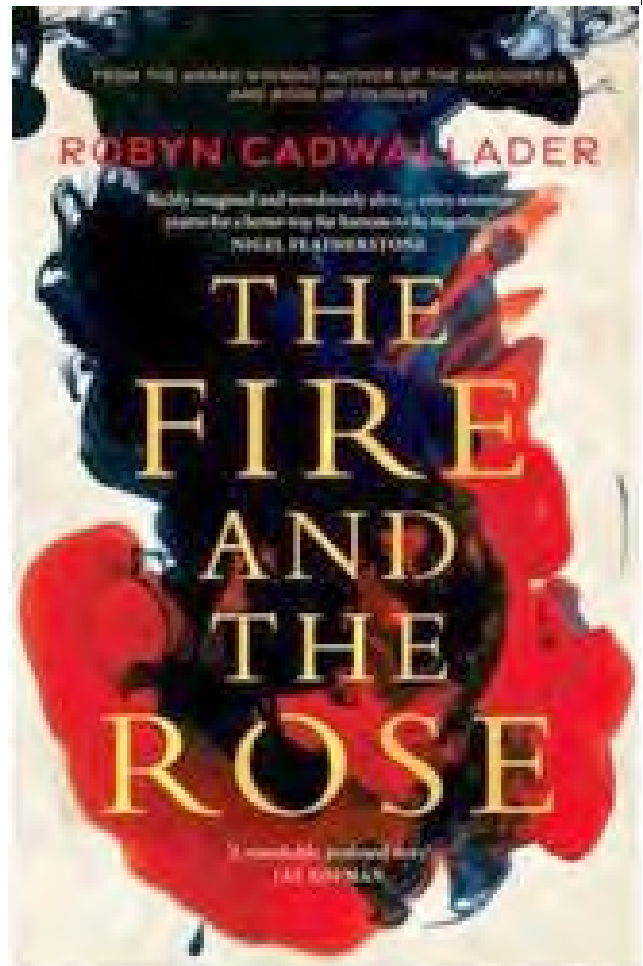
Gerwin van der Werf is a Dutch musicologist, teacher and journalist. *The Hitchhiker* is his fourth novel, but the first to be translated into English.

Tiddo and his wife Isa have drifted apart and his son Jonathan is quiet and introverted, constantly drawing monsters and fantasy creatures in a sketchbook. Tiddo has planned a driving holiday in Iceland because Isa has always wanted to go. He believes it will save his marriage and reunite his family.

As they travel the tourist route, they notice lots of hitchhikers. Tiddo considers them a 'bunch of freeloaders'. But Isa persuades him to pick up Svein Sigurdsson, 'handsome and enormous', tattooed and charismatic. Svein charms both Isa and Jonathan. But is Svein all that he claims to be? As suspicions grow, the dream holiday becomes a life-threatening nightmare.

Since 2007, using the pseudonym Benjamin Black, Booker Prize winner **John Banville** has written crime novels about an alcoholic pathologist, Quirke, set in 1950s Dublin.

However, in 2020 he decided to 'kill off' Black and publish *Snow* under his own name, introducing a new detective, Insp. St John Strafford, from



the Protestant land-owning class. In *April in Spain* (2021) he brought Strafford and Quirke together.

The third in the series, ***The Lock-up*** (already reviewed in *SFC* 114), sees both detectives back in Dublin. Quirke's wife has been murdered and he's 'faded ... reduced in substance. He seemed not entirely there.'

Strafford is investigating the death of Rosa Jacobs, a Jewish student at Trinity College, found dead in her car in a lock-up garage. It would appear to be suicide, but Quirke proves the girl has been murdered.

The mystery of Rosa's death eventually reveals the extraordinary complicity of the Irish Catholic church in providing a safe haven for Nazi criminals after the war.

The Secret Hours, Mick Herron's latest, has also been reviewed in *SF Commentary* 114. Herron's incredibly popular and successful Slough House novels have brought him considerable fame and fortune.

Already two of his Slough House spy stories are Apple TV series, with a talented cast including Gary Oldman and Kirsten Scott Thomas.

Although considered John Le Carré's successor, Herron's spies ironically are MI5 failures, the Slow Horses, condemned forever to repetitive tasks of 'unfulfilment' and boredom in Slough

House, 'to look back in disappointment and stare round in dismay' as they live out the aftermath of their professional errors. Herron's stories are both dark comedy and compellingly entertaining.

In her award-winning debut novel, *The Anchoress*, set in England in 1255, local author **Robyn Cadwallader** introduced Eleanor, a child from the village who asks the anchoress to teach her to read and write.

Eleanor returns in ***The Fire and the Rose*** working as a housemaid for a wool merchant in Lincoln. She dreams of working as a scribe, rejecting a proposal of marriage from an estate bailiff, telling him, 'I can write ... I have skills I want to use.'

Sent to buy spices, Eleanor meets Asher, a Jew who works for a spice merchant. Despite being wary of the Jews, in a city where prejudice is entrenched, Eleanor falls in love with Asher and they begin an illicit love affair forbidden by both the law and the Church.

The Fire and the Rose, however, is more than a love story. It is a beautifully written, ambitious novel spanning 15 years that see the persecution of the Jews by the English king intensify, culminating in 1290 with the expulsion of all Jews from England.

THE SEVEN

by Chris Hammer (Allen & Unwin; \$32.99)

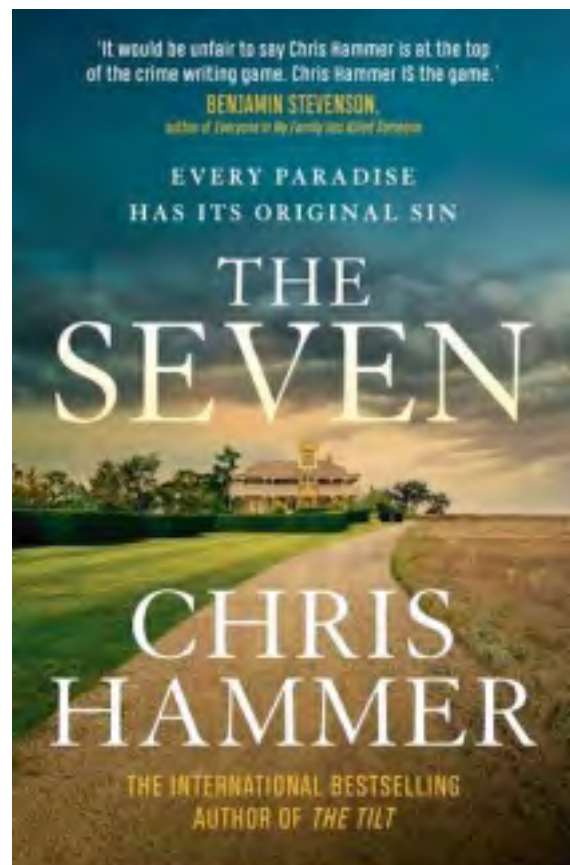
Best-selling Canberra author **Chris Hammer's** annual offering is ***The Seven***, a story of power, privilege, and political corruption set in the Riverina.

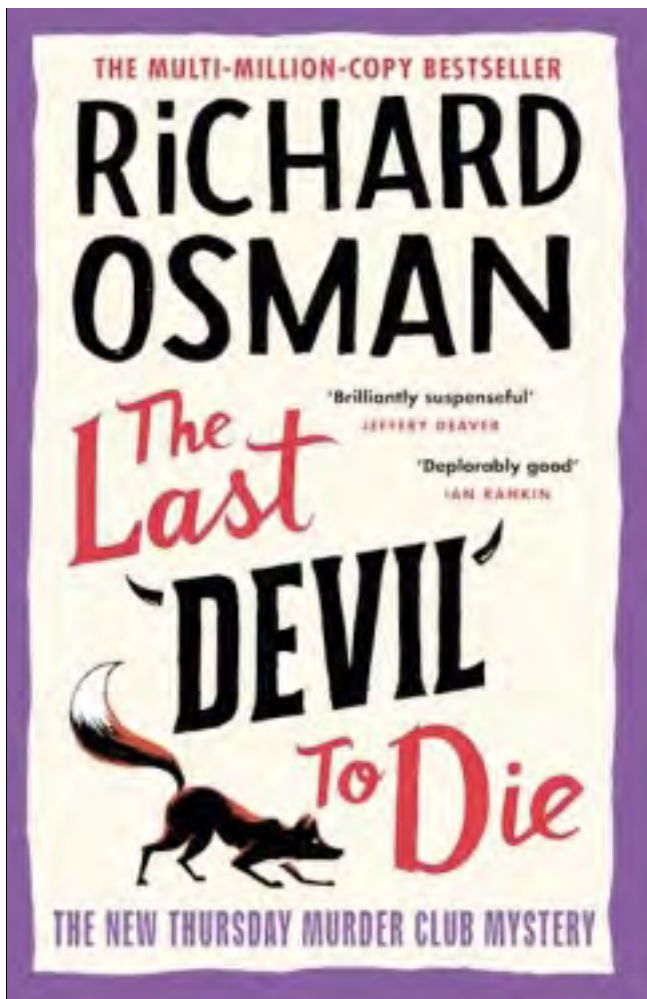
Homicide detectives Ivan Lucic and Nell Buchanan arrive in Yuwonderie to investigate the murder of Athol Hasluck, a member of the seven founding families of the town, who established their own irrigation authority after World War I.

The rich and powerful seven families control everything in a town that's 'too neat, too perfect, the buildings too well maintained, the lawn on the nature strips always mown to a regulation height ... like a movie set, an invented reality'.

Hammer says he based his fictional town on Leeton, which, like Canberra, was designed by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin.

Lucic and Buchanan suspect that Athol's murder is connected to that of another member of the Seven, Davis Heartwood, 30 years earlier.





Hammer uses multiple time lines, which eventually combine to reveal the criminal underbelly of the seven families.

THE LAST DEVIL TO DIE

by Richard Osman (Penguin: \$32.99)

Richard Osman's latest adventure of 'The Thursday Murder Club' is *The Last Devil to Die*. This very successful series comprises cosy crime novels that feature the investigative talents of four friends in a retirement complex.

The Last Devil to Die is the fourth in the series in which Elizabeth, Joyce, Ron, and Ibrahim again combine to investigate a murder, this time of an old friend, Kuldesch Sharma, an antiques dealer.

It's Christmas at Cooper's Chase, and as always it's an idyllic and nostalgic occasion with 'turkey and stuffing, balloons and streamers. A nice bottle of red ... [and] Christmas pop songs playing in the background'. But the idyll is shattered with the news of the death of their friend, and their determination to discover who shot him and why.

The famous four outmanoeuvre the police, drug dealers, and cyber-criminals targeting the old and the lonely. The message as always, underneath the

humour, is don't underestimate or patronise the elderly.

Osman does, however also tackle sensitively issues of old age, in particular dementia, assisted dying, and the acceptance of mortality. Joyce comments on 'the urgency of old age. There's nothing that makes you feel more alive than the certainty of death'.

THE RUNNING GRAVE

by Robert Galbraith (J. K. Rowling)

(Sphere: 39.99)

Robert Galbraith's (J. K. Rowling's) latest is *The Running Grave*, the seventh in the series featuring private detectives Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott.

They are hired by a distraught father, Sir Colin Edensor, whose son Will dropped out of University to join a religious cult in rural Norfolk. He has stopped communicating with his family and his trust fund is being systematically drained.

The Universal Humanitarian Church, founded by the charismatic Jonathan Wace, preaches peace and hope for a better world through prayer and meditation. However, when Robin goes undercover, she discovers a repressed world of enforced discipline, humiliation, and torture, where church members are encouraged to engage in unprotected sex called spirit bonding. Inevitably, as Robin investigates, she puts her life in danger.

The Running Grave is both sordid and salacious, intensely complex as well as overly long at 945 pages. Galbraith fans will love it.

THE UNEARTHED

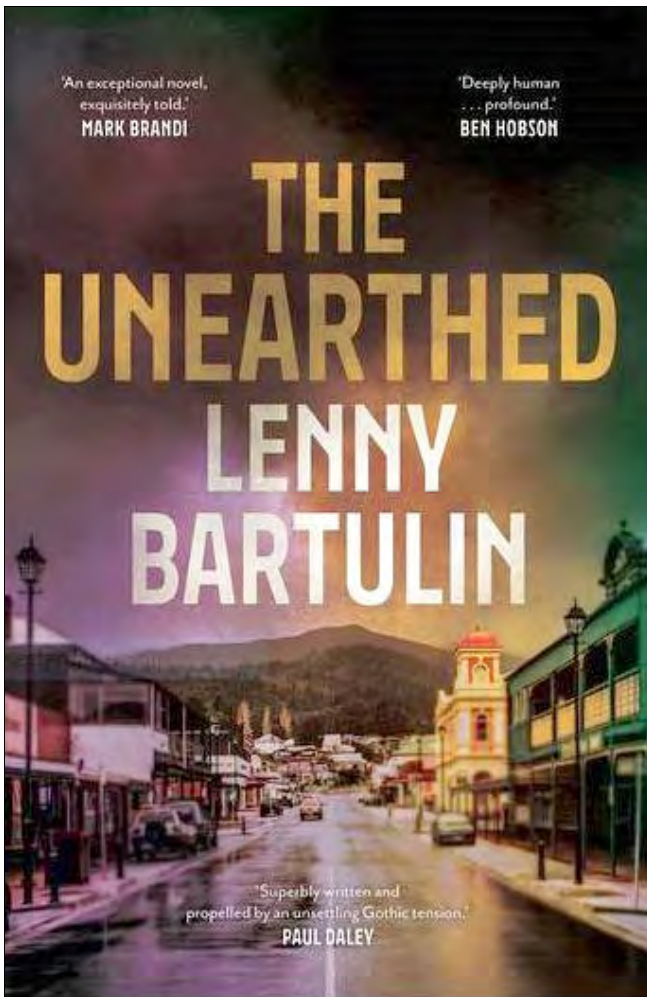
by Lenny Bartulin (Allen & Unwin: \$32.99)

The best of this selection, however, is Lenny Bartulin's *The Unearthed*.

Tasmanian-born Bartulin's parents emigrated to Tasmania from Yugoslavia. He draws on his migrant heritage to tell a story of hardship and tragedy in the remote north-west of Tasmania, which he describes as 'a whole once upon a time, or far, far away' place.

After tourists discover bones in a ravine near Strahan, forensic scientist Antonia Kovacs travels north from Hobart to Queenstown to collect them and at the same time visit her father, a retired police inspector.

Meanwhile Tom Pilar learns of an unexpected inheritance. Slavko Cicak, an old friend of his father, has left him a house in Queenstown, some money, and a request that his ashes be buried



next to his daughter.

Bartulin's story shifts back in time to tell Cacak's story from migration to the tragedy that destroys his life.

The Unearthed is not traditional crime fiction; rather, it's an often violent story of a small community struggling with poverty and alcohol.

Even more, it's a lyrical love letter to Tasmania's ancient forests where 'the trees towered overhead ... and it was as though the car had passed through some portal, arrived somewhere else that felt not hours from where you had started but rather weeks, months, years'.

REYKJAVIK

by **Katrin Jakobsdottir**
(Michael Joseph: \$22.99)

Iceland has been voted the safest place to live in the world 12 times. On average, there's only one murder committed each year. However, Icelandic crime writers ignore these statistics, writing relentlessly dark stories of crimes of passion, serial killers, and the dangers of the environment.

It's therefore not surprising that Iceland's

current Prime Minister, **Katrin Jakobsdottir**, wrote her Master's thesis on Icelandic crime writing. She has said, 'Every politician needs to have something to take his or her mind from the daily business of politics ... and I've been reading crime fiction all my life, so it's kind of in my DNA.'

Jakobsdottir has been friends with one of the most successful of Iceland's crime writers, **Ragnar Jonasson**, since they met on a jury deciding the best crime novel translated into Icelandic that year.

In February 2020 he suggested that they co-write a crime novel. 'Writing is a lonely thing and I thought it would be much more fun doing it with a friend.'

When the pandemic struck, Jakobsdottir accepted his offer, realising that this was the time to write the book. *Reykjavik* is the result. She says that writing it 'saved my mental health'.

Ragnar Jonasson suggested setting the novel in 1986, a year of significant change in Iceland. It was the year Reykjavik celebrated its 200th anniversary; the year a second radio station opened and TV began, and the year Iceland hosted the Reagan-Gorbachev summit, which Jakobsdottir describes as 'the biggest thing to hit Iceland'.

Against this backdrop, Valur, an ambitious young journalist, decides to investigate the unsolved case of the disappearance of 15-year-old Lara 30 years earlier. She had gone to the small island of Videy, off the coast of Reykjavik, to work for a wealthy couple. They tell the police she left suddenly one night but Lara hasn't been seen since.

Valur has convinced his editor that Lara's story sells newspapers, and is confident he can solve the mystery and find Lara. But Valur is unaware that someone is willing to go to any lengths to ensure the truth is never revealed.

Jonasson and Jakobsdottir explore the power of loyalty in a stylishly crafted, tragic mystery.

DEATH OF A LESSER GOD

by Vaseem Khan (Hachette: \$49.99)

Although **Vaseem Khan** is British born, it was the decade he lived in India that has inspired his crime writing.

Khan is the author of two award-winning crime series, the 'Baby Ganesh Agency' series set in modern Mumbai, and the 'Malabar House' historical crime novels set in 1950s Bombay, just after

independence. He says that this series is his 'attempt to look at a period of Indian History that's not often examined in fiction ... a couple of years after Gandhi's assassination and the horrors of partition'.

Death of a Lesser God is the fourth in the series featuring Khan's remarkable detective, Inspector Persis Wadia, India's first female police detective, who struggles to assert herself in a paternalistic, misogynistic society. Her appointment led to 'occasional hysteria' in the press.

Although she topped her year at the academy, Persis has been sidelined to a crime unit in Malabar House, 'a menagerie of misfits ... the unwanted and the undesirables', exiled and despised for blunders and mistakes. Persis' mistake is that she is female, smart, stubborn with a 'prickly personality' and a refusal to conform, which means she's seen as a troublemaker.

However, she has proven an astute, intuitive detective and, as *Death of a Lesser God* begins, she is given a special assignment by the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Amit Shukla. He asks her to re-examine the James Whitby case and tells her 'to go over the case, but do not attract attention'.

James Whitby, a white man born in India, son of a wealthy colonialist, has been found guilty of the murder of prominent lawyer and Quit India activist Fareed Muzumdar. Whitby is due to be hanged in 11 days, when 'he will become the first — and quite probably the last — Englishman to be executed by the Indian Government'. Shukla asks Persis, 'Can you imagine the repercussions if we were to hang an innocent white man?'

Persis's investigation leads her to Calcutta and the murder of an Indian nightclub singer and a Black American reporter in the Calcutta killings of 1946.

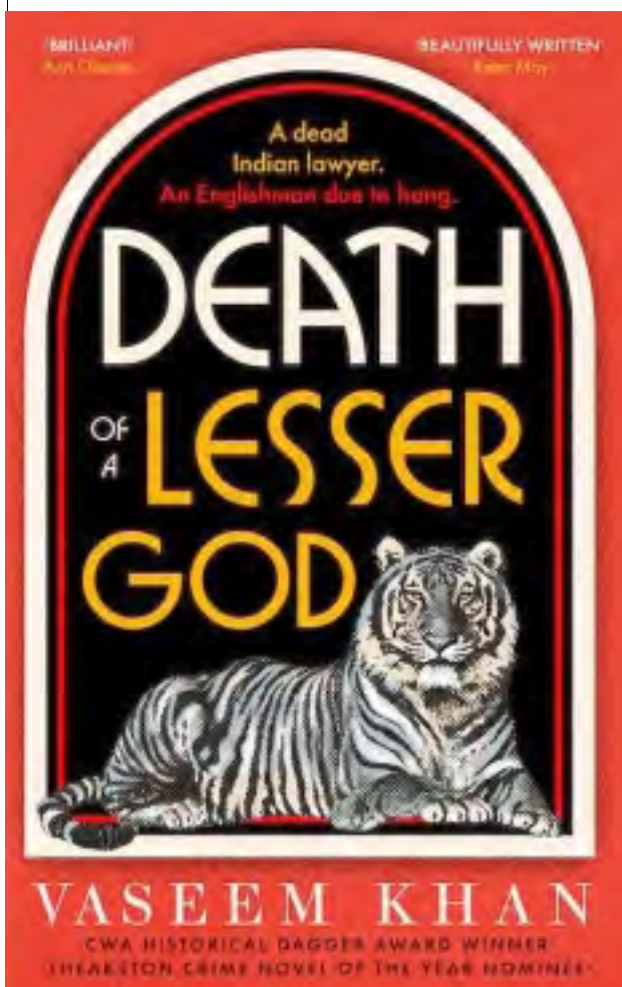
Death of a Lesser God is an extraordinary story of power and politics, love and obsession, as Persis battles crocodiles and tigers both literally and figuratively. It's historical crime fiction at its best.

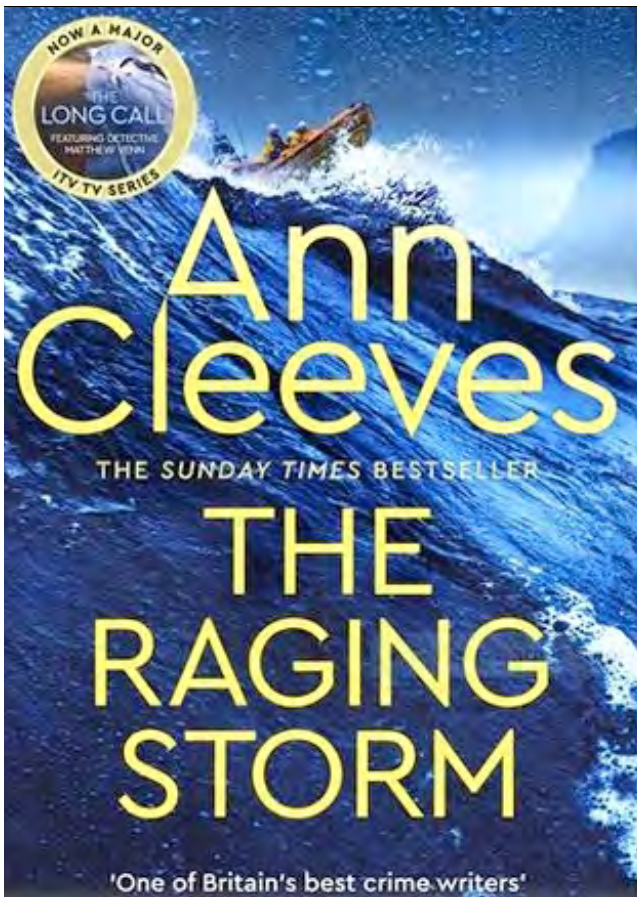
THE RAGING STORM

by Ann Cleeves (Macmillan; \$32.99)

Multi-award-winning crime writer **Ann Cleeves** needs little introduction because of her famous detectives, Vera Stanhope and Jimmy Perez, in *Vera* and *Shetland*, the TV adaptations of her novels.

Cleeves was recognised as the modern Queen of Crime in 2017, when she was awarded the highest accolade in British crime writing, the CWA Diamond Dagger. Presenting the award, Martin





Edwards, Chair of the CWA, said: 'It's a lifetime achievement award and above all it recognises excellence in writing. But it also recognises a significant contribution to the crime writing world. And nobody can deny that Anne Cleeves' contribution has been magnificent.'

In 2019, Cleeves introduced a new detective, in another distinctive setting, in *The Long Call*. *The Raging Storm* is the third in the series.

Detective Inspector Matthew Venn lives in North Devon, where the rivers Tow and Torridge meet, with his husband, Jonathan. He leads a small team of detectives who operate out of Barnstaple, the main town in the area.

Venn is 'a man of principle, still haunted by a strict evangelical childhood. He had been expelled from the Barum Brethren after he denounced his faith and 'joined the police force because it provided the sense of duty and community that he missed'. He's a man who likes to be 'in control of an investigation, in control of himself'.

The Raging Storm opens with Jem Rosco, 'adventurer, sailor and legend', arriving in the pub in the small north Devon village of Greystone, at the height of a September gale. He has rented one of the cottages up the hill behind the pub, telling the locals he's here to meet someone special.

Rosco is a TV celebrity who has shared his travels up the Amazon and sailing single-handed

around the world. When he disappears, the villagers believe he has set off on his travels again, until the lifeboat is called out in a gale and discovers his naked body in a dinghy off Scully Cove.

When Venn arrives with his team to investigate, he remembers visiting the Barum Brethren community in Greystone as a child and being happy 'showing off his bible knowledge and faith'. But the present day Brethren close ranks and hinder Venn's investigation, protecting each other and hiding the truth about jealousies in the past.

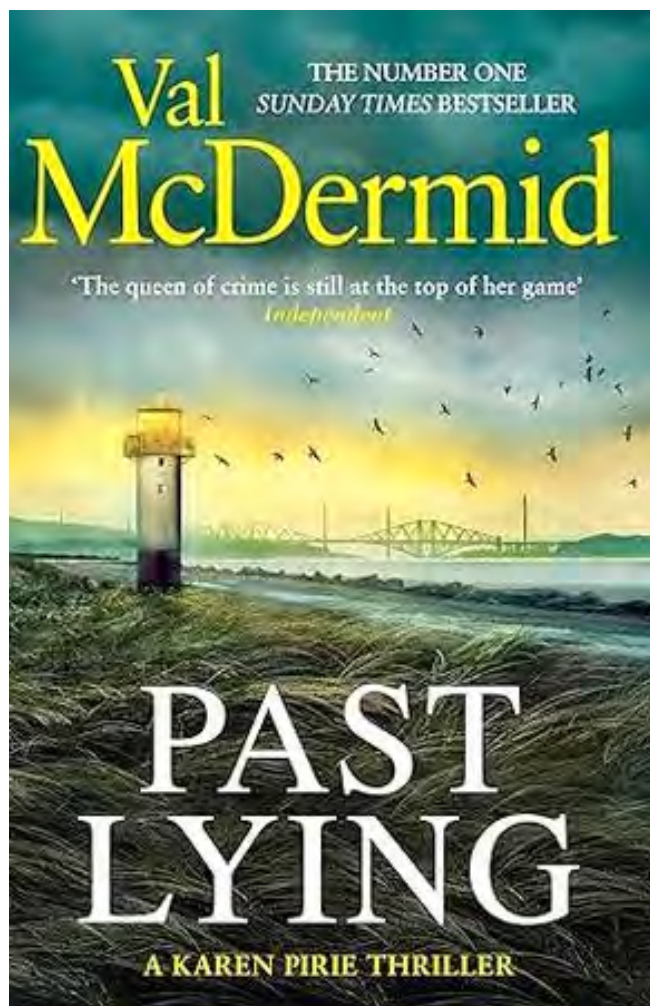
In *The Raging Storm*, Cleeves once again reveals her talents as a storyteller and a perceptive observer of human nature. Unfortunately, Cleeves' 'controlled' detective Venn isn't as appealing as either Vera or Jimmy Perez.

PAST LYING

by Val McDermid (Sphere; \$32.99)

Award-winning Scottish crime writer **Val McDermid**, the creator of Tartan Noir, can certainly challenge Cleeves for the title of Queen of Crime.

McDermid has also been awarded the Diamond Dagger by the CWA in recognition of her lifetime



achievement as a crime writer, as well as receiving the Theakston's Old Peculiar award for an outstanding Contribution to Crime Writing.

McDermid's novels have also been adapted for both TV and radio, most notably the *Wire in the Blood* series featuring DCI Carol Jordan and clinical psychologist Dr Tony Hill, and more recently, *Karen Pirie*, based on her novels featuring Detective Inspector Karen Pirie of the Scottish Historic Crimes Unit.

Past Lying is the seventh novel in the Karen Pirie series, set firmly in the time of Covid. April 2020 and Edinburgh is in lockdown. The streets are quiet: 'it was like the zombie apocalypse without the zombies'.

Detective Chief Inspector Karen Pirie is living in a 'bubble' with her sergeant, Daisy Mortimer. Pirie misses her work because in lockdown there are no active cold cases to occupy them. 'Right now she was languishing for the lack of something meaningful to investigate and it didn't suit her.'

Therefore, when the unit is contacted by Meera Reddy, a librarian at the National Library of Scotland, about 'The Vanishing of Laurel Oliver', an unpublished manuscript in the papers of the recently deceased crime writer Jake Stein, Karen and her team know they have a case to investigate.

Lara Hardie, an Edinburgh University student, had vanished a year ago. Meera thinks Stein's manuscript is 'a blueprint or a kind of explanation for what happened to Lara Hardie'. In fact Jake Stein appears to be confessing he murdered Lara in an act of revenge against his friend and fellow crime writer Ross McEwen.

In *Past Lying*, McDermid not only constructs a complex and intriguing story but also highlights ironically how transitory fame as a crime writer can be.

WHAT HAPPENED TO NINA? by Dervla McTiernan (HarperCollins; \$32.99)

Since **Dervla McTiernan** gave up her career as a lawyer in Ireland, moved to Australia, and decided she wanted to be a crime writer, she has published four critically acclaimed crime novels: *The Ruin* (2018), which won the Ned Kelly Award for Best First Fiction; *The Scholar* (2019), and *The Good Turn* (2020), all set in her native Galway.

However, in her first standalone novel, *The Murder Rule* (2022), McTiernan moved to an American setting, drawing on her memories of working as a law student in Maine, which she claims are 'among my brightest and most tightly



held'.

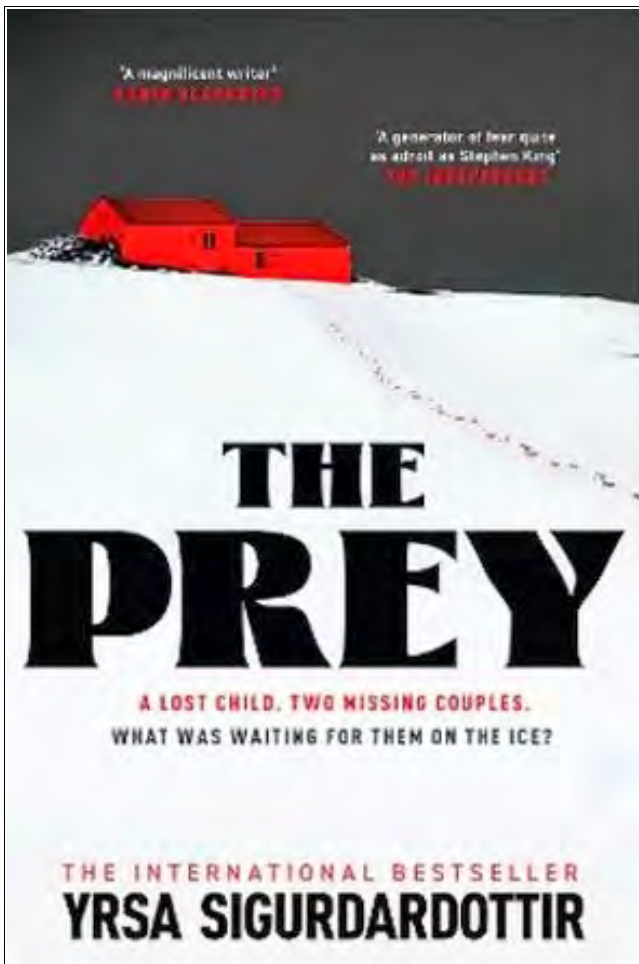
What Happened to Nina?, her latest novel, is set in rural Vermont and explores the devastating impact of a missing daughter on two families, while highlighting the power of social media to distract and misinform.

Nina Fraser and Simon Jordan have been a couple since high school but attending different universities has led to separation and tension. They decide to go away together for a week of trekking and climbing, staying at Simon's parents' holiday house, but only Simon returns.

He tells his parents that, as a result of a quarrel, he had returned home and Nina was going to Boston to visit friends.

When Nina doesn't make contact, her distraught parents, Leanne and Andy Fraser, report her missing to police. In a desperate plea to the public for information, Leanne demands the Jordans allow the police to search the grounds of their holiday house.

The wealthy Jordans decide to hire a PR firm that specialises in reputation management to protect their son from gossip and innuendo. They start an online campaign against Nina's parents, planting seeds of suspicion about unsavoury



behaviour to distract media attention away from Simon.

Rory Jordan tells his wife, ‘What matters is that we keep muddying the waters. What we want is a lot of confusion, we want people to feel like there’s more going on here than meets the eye.’

As a result, public sympathy shifts, as conspiracy theories grow and the Frasers’ life becomes a nightmare.

What Happened to Nina? is a disturbing exploration of crime and punishment in a world dominated by the power of social media, culminating in a shocking resolution.

THE PREY
by Yrsa Sigurdardottir
(Hodder & Stoughton; \$32.99)

Even more disturbing is *The Prey* by Icelandic author **Yrsa Sigurdardottir**, who said she started writing crime novels in 2005 to release her ‘darker side’. Her detectives investigate bizarre crimes often involving horrific supernatural elements in

life-threatening locations. As a result, her novels are a unique blend of crime fiction with a horror twist. *The Prey* is no exception.

In mid December, members of the Hornefjordur Search and Rescue team are searching for four Icelanders missing in the National Park near Hofn. Although it’s not unusual for tourists to go missing, it’s rare that Icelanders would choose to trek in the wild at this time of the year.

When Johanna and her partner investigate one of the huts in the area, they discover a woman’s body frozen under the snow. There is no sign of her companions, but Johanna feels the presence of something following them across the snow.

At the same time, Hjorvar, working lone shifts at the nearby Stokknes radar station, is plagued by a child’s voice on the phone asking to be let in.

In flashbacks, Sigurdardottir reveals the horror that the two couples encountered on their trek across the snow, in an atmospheric, complex, and totally chilling exploration of encountering the unknown.

DEADLY GAME
by Michael Caine
(Hodder & Stoughton; \$32.99)

And for something completely different there’s **Sir Michael Caine**’s debut thriller, *Deadly Game*.

Caine has starred in over one hundred films and was knighted in 2000 in recognition of his contribution to film. However, he claims in his acknowledgments, ‘I’ve always enjoyed reading thrillers and had the idea of writing one of my own for years — so I’m glad that life has finally allowed me the time to do it.’

Caine has used a true story about uranium being found by workmen on an East End dump as the basis of *Deadly Game*, but he’s based his heroic DCI Harry Taylor on his younger self, or at least the characters his younger self portrayed on film.

In Caine’s thriller, the uranium is stolen from the dump in a violent robbery and then it’s a race against time to discover which major criminal organisation was responsible. You’ll either shake your head in disbelief or allow yourself to enjoy the rollercoaster ride of Taylor and his team saving the world.

— **Anna Creer**, December 2023–February 2024

Bruce Gillespie's favourites 2023

Favourite books read for the first time in 2023

- 97 books read during 2023
- 57 four-star contenders

Categories of the books I read (for those who care about categories):

- 29 science fiction (including some fantasy)
- 17 crime/mystery
- 15 'literary novels'
- 6 historical novels
- 6 memoirs/autobiographies
- 5 essays/lit.crit.
- 4 comic novels
- 3 horror/dark fantasy
- 3 poetry
- 2 biography
- 2 science
- 2 history
- 1 artbook
- 1 book of film analysis.

1 THE SECRET SCRIPTURE (2008) Sebastian Barry (Faber)

I've been fascinated by the novels of Irish writers **Sebastian Barry** and **John Banville** during 2023, mainly for the deftness and poetic depth of their prose. Both authors can tell compelling stories, concentrating on the way the bloody history of Ireland during the twentieth century has been liable to catch up with its innocent victims, particularly women and children. *The Secret Scripture* tells the story of a hundred-year-old woman, Roseanne McNulty, who has been living in a mental institution for about 80 years, who is writing the story of her suspended life. Shakespearean blows have struck her down during her young womanhood. Strong feelings could be aroused in a small Irish town in the 1940s about a beautiful single woman of the wrong religion (Presbyterian, not Catholic). Thanks to Tony Thomas for putting me onto *The Secret Scripture*. Barry's *Old God's Time* appeared recently. I remember it less clearly than I do *Secret Scripture*; Tony prefers it.

2 ORLANDO (1928) Virginia Woolf (Granada)

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is an ideal example of 'exuberance of language' (Harold Bloom's term). In most of her novels Woolf experimented with the possibilities of language, but there was usually a

purse-lipped quality, that she was trying too hard. In *Orlando* Woolf's prose overflows with exuberance because she is so obviously enjoying every sentence she writes. I don't often quote the back cover blurb, but here is the blurb from the 1977 Granada edition:

'Orlando lives through four centuries and many disguises. He is page to Queen Elizabeth I, beau at the Court of King James, Ambassador to the pompous palaces of Constantinople. There, he undergoes a miraculous transformation. He sleeps — for days — and finds on waking that he has become a woman. Orlando as a woman is as beautiful, sensuous and unfashionably irrepressible as when she was a man. Times change, but Orlando's youth is unceasing ... Orlando bursts into the twentieth century still full of energy and irreverence.'

You might remember the magnificent 1992 movie of *Orlando*, the first film for director Sally Potter and the first starring role for Tilda Swinton.

3 THE BOOKBINDER OF JERICHO (2023) Pip Williams (Affirm Press)

This new novel by **Pip Williams** is more than a sequel to her *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, which tells of a woman who works tirelessly but anonymously for many years on the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary. *The Bookbinder of Jericho* tells of the women who worked in the



factory where the copies of the OED were bound, a highly skilled occupation whose importance was never acknowledged, even after the first edition appeared. All goes well at the bindery until World War I, when many of the women volunteer to enter the nursing and other support services to go to France. This evocation of the horror of the fighting on the Western Front is as well told as I've seen anywhere, all the more so because the experiences of the soldiers are reflected through the experiences of the nursing staff.

4 COLLECTED POEMS (2023)
Ursula K. Le Guin (Library of America)

Few poets deliver to me the kind of intense concentrated experience that one is supposed to find in great poetry. Modern poetry often seems to me too polite, not sufficiently animated. Rarely do I read a book of poetry from beginning to end just for the pleasure of it. I had read little of **Ursula Le Guin**'s poetry while she was alive, because few of her books, issued in small editions, reached Australia. While reading this posthumous **Collected Poems**, I suddenly discovered that Le Guin's work, strongly influenced by Chinese and Japanese classical poetry, is one of the major achievements of American literature. The Library

of America hardback edition is a pleasure to open and hold.

5 SALON FANTASTIQUE: FIFTEEN ORIGINAL TALES OF FANTASY (2006)
ed. Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (Thunders Mouth Press)

Ellen Datlow and **Terri Windling** are known for their many anthologies of horror and fantasy fiction, but nothing I've seen from either editor has matched this collection of stories. The stories go beyond the 'horror' field into the field of 'utterly weird'. They include stories by Delia Sherman, Christopher Barzack, Peter S. Beagle, Paul Di Filippo, and Gavin J. Grant ('Yours, Etc.', the weirdest story I've ever read).

6 THE ESSENTIAL PETER S. BEAGLE: VOL. I: LILA THE WEREWOLF AND OTHER STORIES (2023) (Tachyon Press)

7 THE ESSENTIAL PETER S. BEAGLE: VOL. II: OAKLAND DRAGON BLUES AND OTHER STORIES (2023) Tachyon Press)

Many of these stories are among those published by **Jonathan Strahan** in his *Mirror Kingdoms* collection about twenty years ago — but they gain power from a second reading. Peter Beagle is my favourite writer of fantasy during the last thirty years, and ‘The Rabbi’s Hobby’ has become my favourite fantasy story.

8 CREATURE: PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS AND REFLECTIONS (2022)
Shaun Tan (Windy Hollow Books)

This is a relatively new collection of great fantastic art and concepts from **Shaun Tan**. You know how good he is, but you might not yet have heard of *Creature*. Buy it if you can.

9 OLD GOD’S TIME (2022)
Sebastian Barry (Faber)

I’m just been re-reading **Sebastian Barry**’s *The Secret Scripture*. I do remember that the prose is as fine as in *The Secret Scripture*, but I have only a vague memory of the basic plot. After I’ve re-read it, it might jump up the list.

10 RUPETTA (2013)
N. A. Sulway (Tartarus Press)

Rupetta is the last winner of the Norma Hemming Award during the stewardship of the original judging panel. For some reason, the people who consider themselves the gatekeepers of Australian SF and fantasy have overlooked this major achievement. (It didn’t help that it appeared only from a small British press.) In this alternative Europe (or is it even an alternative Australia?) *Rupetta* seeks the secrets of her own existence. **Nike Sulway**’s prose is intense and fragrant, and the narrative compelling.

11 A PALE VIEW OF HILLS (1982)
Kazuo Ishiguro (Faber)

The more I read books by **Kazuo Ishiguro**, the more I become an admirer. *A Pale View of Hills*, his first novel, is the only one set in Japan rather than in Britain (Ishiguro’s home for most of his life). The characters live near Nagasaki only a few years after the disaster that levelled the town. None of the characters mentions that event. The result is that in their everyday conversation, nobody says what she really means, or means what she says. This is deep comedy, embedded in an implied tragedy.

12 WHITE HOLES: INSIDE THE HORIZON (2023)
Carlo Rovelli (Allen Lane)

This the Science Book of the Year for me. Like Brian Greene, **Carlo Rovelli** can explore the most sophisticated ideas of modern astrophysics in what seems like simple, compact language in a small number of pages. So what does happen when you travel into a black hole? You reach *White Holes*. This account of the journey is quite new to me.

13 LOLA IN THE MIRROR (2023)
Trent Dalton (4th Estate)

Trent Dalton will never write anything as good as *Boy Swallows Universe* because reading that story feels like the explosion of a bomb inside the skull — Dalton’s and ours. It’s Dalton’s version of ‘How I became me’. The miracle is that much of *Lola in the Mirror*, Dalton’s third novel, is nearly as exciting as *Boy Swallows Universe*. His character Lola is very vivid. The magic mirror device that shapes the story works well, but the big action scene towards the end does go on for too long. Even the best novels need an editor’s trim.

14 QUESTION 7 (2023)
Richard Flanagan (Knopf)

The great Australian book of 2023? Other than *The Bookbinder of Jericho* or *Lola in the Mirror*? *Question 7* by **Richard Flanagan** is not a novel but a free-wheeling essay of speculation, including lots of autobiography. I love it because of the connection Flanagan makes between H. G. Wells, the atom bomb, and the fate of the people who live in Tasmania. If Wells in *War of the Worlds* based his Martian invaders’ tactics on those of the British soldiers and settlers in Tasmania, who attempted to eliminate the Indigenous population during the early 1800s, doesn’t that make the people who still control Tasmania (and by implication, Australia) the successful Martians?

15 THE SILVER LOCUSTS/THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES (1951)
Ray Bradbury (Corgi)

I have strayed far from the company of those readers who keep up with the Latest and Greatest SF/fantasy books. It doesn’t help that almost every new book is announced as a work of genius. First, the promoters of new genius rarely make their champion novelists sound more interesting than the writers I know and love; and second, I

only read real books, not e-books, so I can rarely afford more than a small number of the new novels. I did attempt to watch a DVD of an American mini-series based on **Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles***. I gave up after three episodes, so I pulled off the shelf our 54-year-old paperback of ***The Silver Locusts/The Martian Chronicles***. I rarely read SF as interesting as this. It's a fix-up of short stories and novellas, but they add up to a novel. The action varies between a realistic account of the first attempts to colonise Mars and a fantasy narrative about the native Martians' attempts to save their home planet. The reader becomes suspended in a magical place. The ending is inconclusive but satisfying. No doubt somebody has written the ultimate thesis on Bradbury. I'm glad I haven't read it yet. There are still quite a few Bradburys on our shelf to read.

16 **BILLY SUMMERS: A NOVEL (2021)** **Stephen King (Hodder)**

Stephen King's crime/mystery novels are a new experience for me. Like every Stephen King novel I've read so far, ***Billy Summers*** is far too long for its material, but it adds up to a satisfactory account of how an all-too-believable criminal meets his fate.

17 **A WINTER GRAVE (2023)** **Peter May (Riverrun)**

Peter May is a new mystery author to me. During the year I was intrigued by Colin Steele's *SFC* review of ***A Winter Grave***, and Colin was kind enough to send me his copy. A memorable mystery, set in the icy Scottish offshore islands.

18 **WULFSYARN: A MOSAIC (1990)** **Philip Mann (Gollancz)**

Phillip Mann, who died recently, was a New Zealander long resident in Britain. His early SF novels caused a stir, but I hadn't heard much about his later work until **Murray MacLachlan**, noted NZ expatriate living in Melbourne, lent me some of his last novels. Mann's style is vigorous and penetrating, and his theme is the ambiguous problems of encountering non-terrestrial races. Wulf, of the ***Wulfsyarn*** title, returns alone from such an expedition, the rest of his crew having died on the planet visited. He is haunted by the catastrophe because he cannot work out for himself what went wrong. (If anyone can sell me a copy of this book, I need to read it again.)

19 **THE SINGULARITIES: A NOVEL (2022)** **John Banville (Knopf)**

Few reviewers have noticed that **John Banville's *The Singularities*** is an SF novel. It seems to tell only of the return of several people (all characters in earlier John Banville novels) to a once-treasured house. Each character is articulate, egotistical, and not very likable. About half way through the novel the acute reader (i.e. reader of SF) will realise that these characters inhabit a Britain parallel to ours, a world without nearly all the technological 'necessities' of our world. The point is never made; the divergence from our history is never explained; it just is.

20 **MRS OSMOND (2017)** **John Banville (Penguin)**

What happened to Isobel Archer, my favourite character in fiction, after the unfortunate events told in Henry James' *A Portrait of a Lady*? **John Banville** offers his own answers. He is not presumptuous enough to try imitating James's style, only his tone of voice. His story is a legitimate sequel to *Portrait*. His Isobel Archer is a person made stronger and more astute by the ordeal she has suffered. In *A Portrait of a Lady*, she is a bit too innocent to the world's wiles; in ***Mrs Osmond*** she casts aside that innocence.

21 **M.U.P.: A CENTENARY HISTORY (2023)** **Stuart Kells (Miegunyah Press)**

This is my one book of history read during 2023! **Stuart Kells** is a vigorous writer, and falls into none of the traps that can beset a historian who must cover in fine detail a long stretch of history. The history of Melbourne University Press is in many ways the history of serious academic writing in Australia. Kells concentrates on the personalities of both the people who led the organisation and the authors of its most notable books. How can a university fund a press that has been long seen as an outpost of the university itself but is also a commercial operation that should not be allowed to run up debts? Hence the crisis caused by the appointment of Louise Adler as head of MUP in the 1990s; she began to publish top-selling books not written by academics. She solved the funding problems of MUP, but the purists brought her down in the end. According to the current board of directors, MUP will no longer publish books meant to be popular.

22 **THE PROPHET AND THE IDIOT (2022)** **Jonas Jonasson (4th Estate)**

- 23 **WISH I WAS HERE: AN ANTI-MEMOIR** (2023)
M. John Harrison (Serpent's Tail) Kate Wilhelm (Gollancz)
- 24 **HUYSMAN'S PETS** (1986) Arthur C. Clarke
(Ballantine/Del Rey/Book Club)
- 25 **THE SONGS OF DISTANT EARTH** (1986)
Arthur C. Clarke
(Ballantine/Del Rey/Book Club)

Four-star contenders, in the order read:

- ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE: A NOVEL** (2014) Anthony Doerr (4th Estate)
- SPACE OPERA: SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE GOLDEN AGE** (1974) ed. Brian Aldiss (Futura)
- THE SWORD OF RHIANNON (THE SEA KINGS OF MARS)** (1949/1953/2009) Leigh Brackett (Planet Stories)
- A FACTOTUM IN THE BOOK TRADE** (2022) Marius Kociejowski (Biblioasis)
- RESTLESS** (2006) William Boyd (Bloomsbury)
- EDWARD TRENCOM'S NOSE: A NOVEL OF HISTORY, RARE INTRIGUE AND CHEESE** (2007) Giles Milton (Pan Macmillan)
- DAY OF MY DELIGHT: AN ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN MEMOIR** (1965/1974) Martin Boyd (Lansdowne)
- LUCINDA BRAYFORD** (1946) Martin Boyd (Cresset Press/Readers Union)
- THE SECRET BOOKS** (2017) Marcel Theroux (Faber)
- SMALL MERCIES** (2023) Dennis Lehane (Abacus)
- THE LOCK-UP** (2023) John Banville (Faber)
- THE JAGUAR** (2022) Sarah Holland-Batt (University of Queensland Press)
- COFFIN ROAD** (2016) Peter May (Riverrun)
- THE START OF THE END OF IT ALL AND OTHER STORIES** (1990) Carol Emshwiller (Women's Press SF)
- NIGHT FLIGHT (VOL DE NUIT)** (1931/1942) Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (Signet Classics)
- FRIENDS COME IN BOXES** (1973) Michael G. Coney (DAW)
- CHRISTINE FALLS** (2006) Benjamin Black (Picador)
- IDEAS TO SAVE YOUR LIFE: PHILOSOPHY FOR WISDOM, SOLACE AND PLEASURE** (2021) Michael McGirr (Text)
- NORMAL RULES DON'T APPLY: SHORT STORIES** (2023) Kate Atkinson (Doubleday)
- LOVE LETTER TO LOLA** (2023) Carmel Bird (Spineless Wonders)
- MR MERCEDES** (2014) Stephen King (Hodder)
- ALL GOOD THINGS: THE LAST SFX VISIONS** (2017/2023) David Langford (Ansible Editions)
- BRIAN W. ALDISS** (2022) Paul Kincaid (University of Illinois Press)
- COUNTRY OF THE BLIND** (1997) Christopher Brookmyre (Abacus)
- THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE: TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION** (1989) John Banville (Picador Classics)
- TRAVELS WITH MY AUNT** (1969) Graham Greene (Penguin)
- A PERSONAL JOURNEY WITH MARTIN SCORSESE THROUGH AMERICAN MOVIES** (1997) Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson (Miramax Books/Hyperion)
- THE POWER OF THE DOG** (1967) Thomas Savage (Vintage Classics)
- THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SANDY STONE** (1990) Barry Humphries ed. Collin O'Brien (Macmillan Australia)
- NAMING THE FLOWERS** (1992) Kate Wilhelm (Axolotl Press)
- THE WHOLE MAN** (1961) John Brunner (Ballantine)



Favourite films seen for the first time in 2023

As I've said too many times, I can't yet download streamed films into this house. Various friends have tried to set up a system but have failed so far. Therefore I miss seeing many new films. Many major films go straight to a streaming server. Many are shown at cinemas, then sent to a streaming server without being issued on disc. If they appear on disc, I can catch up with them. Only some of the major films of 2023, such as **Oppenheimer**, have appeared on Blu-ray.

If I had time, I could catch up with most of the major films at the Nova Cinema in Carlton before they are sent off to Netflix limbo. However, I've found over and over again that some great films, such as the recent **Saltburn**, suffer from woeful standards of projection. Both *Saltburn* and David Fincher's **The Killer** were so dark on the cinema screen that it was difficult in some scenes to see what was going on. Perhaps the end of this column is in sight — or it would be if I didn't have more than 1000 Blu-rays and DVDs waiting to be

watched.

On the other hand — and there is always another hand — various specialist disc release firms are offering remastered classic films, many of which have never appeared on disc. **Imprint Films** in particular offers box sets of Blu-rays of directors, film stars, and genres long thought lost, plus extra documentaries and commentaries. BFI, Criterion, Indicator, and others offer similar packages. **Dick Jensen** and **John Davies** are two kind souls who have given me film packages during 2023. Otherwise I buy them through **Play Music/Video** in Melbourne (Shop 8, 50 Bourke Street). Thus I can avoid having anything to do with Amazon.com. The guys at Play take a lot of trouble to hunt down the best available new film packages for nuts like me. If ever I could afford to walk into that place with \$20,000 in hand, I would have none of it left an hour later. But I would need a maxi-taxi to take home the loot.

1 THE POWER OF THE DOG (2021)

Jane Campion

The Power of the Dog is a major film that escaped me entirely — until a British Criterion Blu-ray turned up at Play Music/Video. Filmed by **Jane Campion** in the high country of New Zealand, spectacularly standing in for 'Montana 1926', it includes Benedict Cumberbatch in his best performance, and centres around characters who for the first half of the film seem merely to dislike each other, but in the second half are revealed to be participants in a crime mystery. The script, photography, acting, production design, and editing are magnificent.

2 THE EAGLE HAS LANDED (1976)

John Sturges

The Eagle Has Landed is the best of the great British post-World War II widescreen colour epics. It is also the oddest. **John Sturges'** film tells of a World War II secret mission by Germany to send into Britain undercover agents to assassinate Winston Churchill at a holiday house on the coast. The action is seen from the viewpoint of the German agents, led by Michael Caine, who seek to take over an English village as a base for the assassination. Caine is the name above the title, but the real star is Donald Sutherland, as a merry, dangerous Irishman who seems to be on the side of the Germans but is rather more on his own side. (You might well see this as a widescreen Technicolor reverse-version of Browning's *It Happened Here*.) Needless to say, the film-makers do not support the cause of the Germans. The new Blu-ray box features the full-length version, much longer than the theatrical release, plus lots of extras.

3 THE FABLEMANS (2022)

Steven Spielberg

For most of the year I listed *The Fablemans* as my favourite of 2023, and I remain very fond of it. Its story of the growing up of a film-maker and his parents is absorbing, but the craft of film-making itself is at the heart of the film. **Steven Spielberg** is about my age, and we assume the Fableman family mirror the Spielbergs. The first film to which his mother takes him is *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). That was the first film to which my mother took me, at the age of five. She probably imagined it would include lots of ringside entertainment. Instead, I (and probably young Steven)

was totally bored by a film that was mainly about soured interpersonal relations. One of the most shocking incidents of my childhood was watching the train crash in *Greatest Show on Earth*. I was nuts about trains when I was five. Trains can't crash! Otherwise, the main reason for watching the Fablemans is for Michelle Williams' glorious performance, and for its last ten minutes.

4 OPPENHEIMER (2023)

Christopher Nolan

Everybody seems to agree that *Oppenheimer* is the film of 2023 (although the Oscar results have still to appear). It is a great film, much better than most recent **Christopher Nolan** films. Its three hours seem to flash by in one and a half hours. It includes the public record of Oppenheimer's post-War downfall in black and white, and in colour, Oppenheimer's own view of the arc of his life and the development of the atomic bomb. As a member of the audience I do feel a distancing effect, but it is intentional. Each member of the audience must make a decision about the actions taken by Oppenheimer and his colleagues. Nolan offers no answers.

5 SCROOGE (1951) Brian Desmond Hurst

This is the film I always hoped to catch up with, but have never had a chance to see. *Scrooge* is the classic 1951 British black-and-white version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, his most perfect creation. To film it properly it was necessary to hark back to the illustrations in the original magazine serialisation. But it also needed **Alastair Sim** as Scrooge. Nobody else could do. The Dickensian over-the-top acting style of every actor suits the film, as do the supernatural effects. God bless us everyone, especially **Brian Desmond Hurst**.

6 FREAKS (1932) Tod Browning

Freaks stars a circusful of people who, according to conventional standards, suffer some very strange bodily distortions, but are also dedicated and brilliant performers in the ring. The film works because **Tod Browning** assumes that they are the normal people, and not the freaks. The drama that plays out is realistic, not gothic. Some shots were regarded at the time as scenes of 'horror', and the film had a hard time entering Australia. It probably wasn't shown much anywhere, even in pre-Hays Code America. This remastered, fully restored disc version includes valuable extras.

7 ROALD DAHL'S MATILDA THE MUSICAL (2022) Matthew Warchus

I watched this movie for the first time in 2022 at the Lido Cinema in Hawthorn. It was a dire experience. There was a strange yellow wash over all the photography. The sound system was so loud and distorted that I could not catch the lyrics of any of the songs. I despaired of ever seeing the film properly. Not long before our friend Charlie Taylor died of cancer, Elaine and I were invited by **Charlie and Nic** to an Indian meal at their house. Not only were we well over-fed but we were able to watch streaming in action: on a 70-inch screen, the Netflix presentation of **Roald Dahl's Matilda the Musical**. The colour photography was brilliant. I could hear clearly the lyrics of all the songs. What a delicious film! Without Charlie and Nic's generosity, I would have missed it, because it still has not appeared on Blu-ray or DVD.

8 ASTEROID CITY (2023) Wes Anderson

I suffered the same dire cinema experience with **Wes Anderson's Asteroid City** as I did with *Matilda*. But it did appear on Blu-ray. In the cinema, the images were slightly fuzzy and off-colour and it was difficult to catch most of the dialogue. On disc, it proves to be one of Wes Anderson's best films. It has a framing device. Its actors are playing out a script set in a desert town in 1954. But the script becomes their own story, and we become caught up in the strange and amusing relationships between various people trapped in the town. A-bombs from the Arizona testing grounds keep exploding on the horizon. An alien appears to a group of scientifically minded teenagers. People burst into song and dance routines. Delicious, articulate madness, as in most Wes Anderson films.

9 CANNERY ROW (1982) David S. Ward

I read John Steinbeck's novel of **Cannery Row** most recently in 1963. Its tale of down-and-out people attempting to survive in a down-and-out coastal Californian town gave a sixteen-year-old a whole new view of life, one free from the constrictions imposed on my mind by a puritanical, religious background. The free-flowing quality is expressed in the colours of the photography and the energetic, almost balletic quality of the acting. Nick Nolte and a very young Debra Winger are magnificent.

10 THE BIG RED ONE (1980) Samuel Fuller (remastered; length restored)

I knew already that **Samuel Fuller** had been one of those gnarled, confrontational free spirits of the American cinema. I knew nothing else about him until I watched **A Fuller Life**, his daughter **Samantha's** biography of her father. Fuller was certainly cantankerous and confrontational, but he had started his professional life as a novelist of the working classes of America before he entered the army during World War II. He was the most left-wing Hollywood film director, and therefore had an uncertain career path. All his many experiences of men under pressure are packed into **The Big Red One**.

Without **Dick Jensen's** advocacy of the films of Samuel Fuller, I would not have watched it. I like very few films about war, and Fuller's style seemed too rough and ready for me. However, during 2023 I had already watched **Samuel Fuller's** eccentric **Forty Guns**, the oddest Western other than Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar*. The Blu-ray disc included Samantha Fuller's bio-flick. Fuller was determined to make *The Big Red One* into the first authentic war film. His picaresque style takes some getting used to, as he and his buddies (the Big Red One company of the title) survive four main campaigns during World War II — the Vichy colonies landing in North Africa, the Italian campaign, the D-Day Normandy landing, and the German counter-offensive of 1945. *The Big Red One* could have been a very grim movie, but young Fuller and his buddies also see the funny side of almost every encounter. To movie exhibitors in 1980, the film fitted none of the clichés of the Hollywood war movie. 59 minutes were cut from the theatrical release, so it failed. The complete version on Blu-ray is a great epic of ordinary people somehow surviving under impossible conditions.

11 THE BLUE DAHLIA (1946) George Marshall

12 THE LOST KING (2022) Stephen Frears

13 THE RECKLESS MOMENT (1949) Max Ophuls

14 MADAME DE... (1953) Max Ophuls

15 MARCEL: THE SHELL WITH SHOES ON (2021) Don Fleischer Camp & Jenny Slate)

Four-star contenders, in the order viewed

MIRROR (1975) Andrei Tarkovsky
A PERFECT WORLD (1993) Clint Eastwood
IVAN'S CHILDHOOD (1962) Andrei Tarkovsky
TAR (2022) Todd Field
MRS HARRIS GOES TO PARIS (2022) Antony Fabian
WHALE RIDER (2002) Niki Caro
MADIGAN (1968) Don Siegel
DINNER AT EIGHT (1933) George Cukor
IKARIE X131 (1963) Jindrik Polak
RADIO FREE ALBEMUTH (2014) John Alan Simon
MR TOPAZE (1961) Peter Sellers
MARLOWE (2022) Neil Jordan
GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY, VOL. 3 (2023) James Gunn
THE GUNS OF NAVARONE (1961) J. Lee Thompson

LAND OF THE PHARAOHS (1955) Howard Hawks
FORTY GUNS (1957) Samuel Fuller
A DANDY IN ASPIC (1968) Anthony Mann
DIE HARD 2: DIE HARDER (1990) Renny Harlin
DIE HARD WITH A VENGEANCE (1995) John McTiernan
MR NOBODY (2009) Jaco Van Dornel
WINCHESTER '73 (1950) Anthony Mann
FURY (1936) Fritz Lang
THE KILLER (2023) David Fincher
THE CAMERAMAN (1928) Buster Keaton
TROUBLE IN PARADISE (1932) Ernst Lubitsch
SALTBURN (2023) Emerald Fennell
THE UNKNOWN (1927) Tod Browning
THE MYSTIC (1925) Tod Browning

Favourite films seen again in 2023

This list is stronger than the list of Films Seen for the First Time. As it's becoming more and more difficult to find discs of recent films, some companies have made it easier to catch up with favourite old films that have never appeared on disc. Many of these come from the 1930s, and there is an era of 1950s Hollywood films that is being documented for the first time. Most of the films mentioned below have become available in plush Blu-ray boxes only within the last year. Thanks to **Dick Jenssen**, **John Davies**, and **Geoff Allshorn** in particular for tracking down and presenting me with these little boxes.

1 **THE TRIAL (1963) Orson Welles**

The Trial is the greatest movie of the greatest film-maker, **Orson Welles**, now fully restored — although not accompanied by all the extras I had hoped for. The film remains as breathtaking to watch as it did when I first saw it in 1965. This is Anthony Perkins' greatest performance, before his career was permanently sidelined by his success

in *Psycho*.

2 **THE FURIES (1950) Anthony Mann**

This is my candidate for the best Hollywood Western. It's Barbara Stanwyck's strongest role, as the daughter of a dictatorial ranch boss, played by Walter Huston. The family are **The Furies**. The ranch boss persecutes the local Native Americans, who resist being thrown off their own lands. But it's hardly the plot that matters (except for its pro-Indigenous viewpoint, still unusual in the early 1950s). **Anthony Mann** drenches the film in style. Instead of sunny landscapes, Mann photographs everything in noirish deep focus. The acting is in deep-conflict melodramatic style. Not a waste of time here — the film moves like a maddened steam train. Now the whole wonderful show can be found in a Criterion Collection packet, complete with a copy of the novel by **Niven Busch**. (Thanks to Dick Jenssen for both the *Trial* and *Furies* discs.)

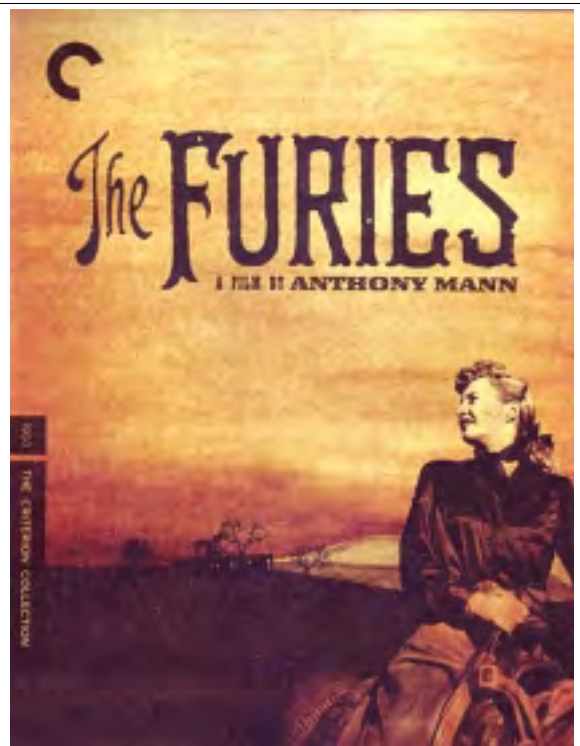


3 THE GREAT DICTATOR (1940) Charles Chaplin

The Great Dictator is not quite the greatest movie I saw during childhood — that honour is shared between *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *The Wizard of Oz* — but it has had the most enduring effect on my political outlook. The speech at the end of the movie by the Little Tailor who suddenly finds himself dictator of Ptomaine retains its power nearly 70 years later. Equality between all people, the escape from power structures — yes, ideas that remain fundamental to my viewpoint. After viewing the extras on the new Blu-ray, it struck me how brave **Charles Chaplin** was to make such a film in 1941. The US had not joined World War II. Many Americans still rather liked Mr Hitler. *The Great Dictator* made fun of many of the fundamental principles on which American society had been based. Yet the film was released in 1941, and was successful, and I was lucky enough to see it in 1957 and 1958. In 2023 it still comes across as a very well made, deeply amusing comedy, and not one of the ideas in the final speech has lost its relevance.

4 THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS (1970) Anthony Harvey

Dr Watson (played by Joanne Woodward) is a psychologist asked to treat a bloke who believes he is Sherlock Holmes (George C. Scott). In fact she is being asked to commit her patient to an institution so that his brother can inherit his fortune. When Dr Watson decides to join her



patient in his crusade to track down and destroy Dr Moriarty (who might or might exist), the ambling 'plot' becomes a series of vivid comedy sketches. I get the feeling that cuts were made throughout the film by the producers. All previous DVDs had been afflicted by a cruel cut, that of the supermarket scene at the end. Now it's back in the movie. You might find the whole plot absurd, but it's all great fun, and the final scene hits me in the cosmic infundibulum every time.

5 HELL DRIVERS (1957) Cy Enfield

I've seen *Hell Drivers* a few times over the years, but the experience is given even greater impact by watching it on the new Blu-ray disc. This is the most energetic British film of the classic 1940s/1950s black-and-white era. Mad Patrick McGoochan plays the mad truck driver who will do anything to maintain his role as one of a team who pick up soil from a quarry and carry it to a building site some miles away. Nobody challenges him until the new driver, played by Stanley Baker, finds himself as the latest rival. The scenes of trucks hurtling along narrow country roads are among the most exciting ever filmed in Britain.

6 TARGETS (1967) Peter Bogdanovich

I recall seeing *Targets* in 1972 when director **Peter Bogdanovich** and his latest flame Cybill Shepherd visited Melbourne and spoke to an audience at Melbourne University's Union Theatre. They were here to promote *The Last Picture Show*, but also shown was *Targets*,

Bogdanovich's first feature. Producer **Roger Cor- man** had given him the opportunity to use an hour of film, but had also offered the use of 20 minutes of Boris Karloff acting in his last role. Somehow the limitations became transformed into *Targets*, the first film about the kind of random sniper — Mr Ordinary Nice Guy — who takes up a rifle one day and goes on a shooting spree from the top of a water tower. This was a very rare event in 1967, so the film has become increasingly pertinent during the last 20 or 30 years. The remastered print is, of course, excellent. It includes a short documentary in which Bogdanovich explains the origins of the film.

7 THE DEATH OF STALIN (2017) Armando Iannucci

As she is the first to admit, Elaine dislikes most films, but she has really taken to *The Death of Stalin*. The events surrounding the death of Stalin in 1953 are horrifying — and were meticulously recorded. The Russians are very good at keeping records of actual events. **Armando Iannucci** stitches together the real events plus real dialogue, gives the whole shebang over a gang of very talented comic actors, and the result is one of the blackest, funniest films ever made. Funny to anyone who was not a resident of the USSR in 1953.

8 PADDINGTON 2 (2017) Paul King

Charm, witty dialogue, excellent combination of animation and real-life actors, gorgeous English-style photography at its best and — aah! — Jane Hawkins as the human star. Who could ask for anything more, especially if you're feeling a bit down, as I was when I watched *Paddington* and *Paddington 2* for the first time? I would not have discovered the Paddington movies if it had not been for Yvonne Rousseau, who with her daughter Vida Weiss watched them when they were first released. They said I had to see these films! *Paddington* again, through innocence and a sharp mind, makes himself indispensable to his new London family. He defeats the villain, and has afternoon tea with the Queen (who acts as herself).

9 DIE HARD (1988) John McTiernan

I can re-watch *Die Hard* any time, but it's good to now have a Blu-ray box set of the five *Die Hard* movies. Bruce Willis at his action-man best, and most viewers became aware of the talents of Alan Rickman for the first time because of his role as the sardonic bad guy head of the crime team. The real double-act is between Willis and Reginald VelJohnson, the one cop on the outside of the

building who believes that bad things are happening inside. (I haven't watched all four sequels yet, but *Die Hard 3* is excellent.)

10 BLOW-UP (1966) Michelangelo Antonioni

I saw *Blow-Up* in the cinema in 1966, but haven't watched it since. It should be outdated, but it isn't. It's a gimlet-eyed portrayal of 1966 'swinging London', a London steeped in its own self-image as the fashion and fun centre of the world. David Hemings, the monomaniacal photographer, is both part of 'the scene' and strangely apart from it. He could be part of our own world 60 years later. There is a plot of sorts, a mystery. I think it is resolved at the end, but many people don't. For much of the film we simply watch David Hemings being David Hemings. It's an astonishing performance. In the new Blu-ray edition, the colour is even more vibrant than it was on the screen way back then. Thanks to John Davies for showing it.

11 I'M NOT THERE (2007) Todd Haymes

I'm Not There is the strangest biographical film any of us will ever watch. It's not clear why it takes six actors to portray a character whose name changes with each actor, but each of which is meant to show an aspect of Bob Dylan. It's a brilliant concept and it works. Unforgivable was the failure to give an Academy Award in 2008 to Cate Blanchett for her portrayal of Bob during his tour of England in 1966.

12 MURDER SHE SAID (1961) George Pollock

Somebody who saw this list was puzzled by my devotion to an unknown director named **George Pollock**. Pollock was the husband of the legendary aged and eccentric Margaret Rutherford, who portrayed Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple in four films. She is much more entertaining than any of the later TV Miss Marples. The scripts are compressed, witty, and retain the spirit of Agatha Christie. The four films are available in a box set.

13 MURDER AHOY (1964) George Pollock

14 MURDER AT THE GALLOP (1963) George Pollock

15 CALAMITY JANE (1953) David Butler

16 SEARCHING FOR BOBBY FISCHER (1993) Stephen Zaillan

Favourite documentaries and music films 2023

This might be the last year I can offer this list. Few documentaries or music performance films are now being offered on disc. I realise that this is the

‘golden age of the documentary’ — on streaming services, but not on disc.

1 **HOLST: IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER** (2011) Tony Palmer

This is the last of **Tony Palmer**’s TV documentaries about classical composers that I could buy while Discurio was still open in Melbourne. No other store imported them, although I believe all 50 in the series were released in Britain. **Holst: In the Bleak Midwinter** must have been difficult to make. There seem to be few photos from early in the twentieth century of young **Gustav Holst** or his family, but Palmer does offer a compelling story of a man unblessed by being born aristocratic (like many famous British composers) or into family-money (like Thomas Beecham). Holst, who had to work three low-paid music teaching jobs for most of his adult life, still managed to compose some of the most original music of the century. Palmer

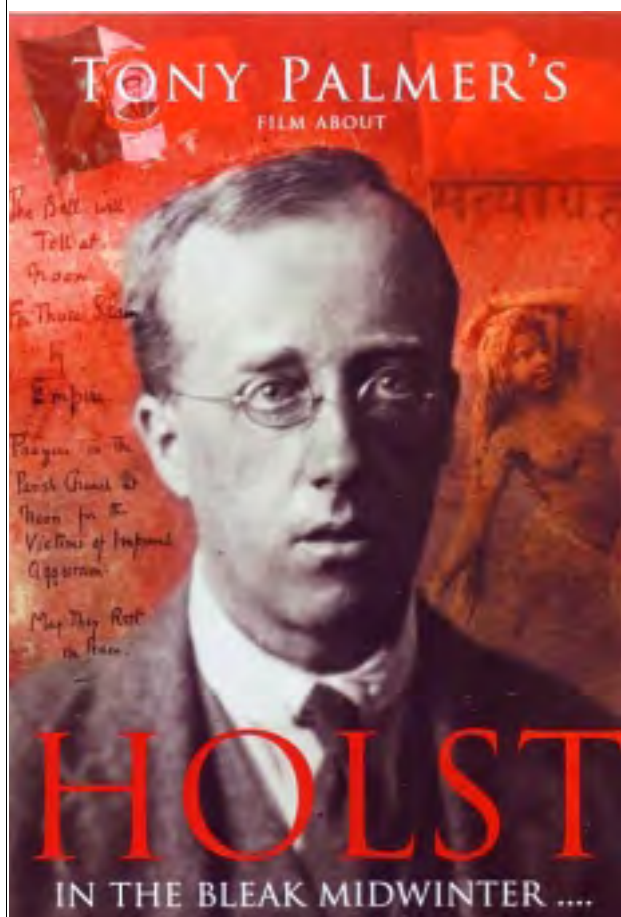
makes the film crackle by offering magnificent recent performances of movements from many of Holst’s greatest works. Not only does he offer an electrifying take on several movements of *The Planets*, but he also explains why it is the most original piece of British music.

2 **JOHN FARNHAM: FINDING THE VOICE** (2023) Poppy Stockell

There is nothing brilliant about the craft of this TV documentary about **John Farnham**, but it does show the whole arc of Farnham’s up-and-down professional career. Farnham has been very popular in Australia since his novelty hit ‘Sadie the Cleaning Lady’ was high on the Top 40 chart for nearly all of 1968. His popularity ran out in the early 1970s when record companies wrote him off as nothing more than that ‘Sadie’ bloke. The film tells the epic story of the recreation of Farnham’s career by Glenn Wheatley, his new manager. Large amounts of money and writing talent went into the LP *Whispering Jack*. It could have failed, but it became the largest-selling Australian album of all time, and revived Farnham’s career. There are some riveting scenes showing how one sets out to create a successful pop classic. Farnham’s newfound fame then lasted through album after album, but Glenn Wheatley died recently and John Farnham was operated on for throat cancer. In 2023 ‘You’re the Voice’, the hit song from *Whispering Jack*, became the theme song of the recent pro-Indigenous Voice campaign.

3 **MY OLD SCHOOL** (2022) Jono McLeod

It’s hard to describe how peculiar **My Old School** is, so I won’t. At first it seems to be a fictional tale about a bloke who pretends to be an old boy of a school so that he can teach there. Only gradually do we realise this is both a drama and a documentary, with actors re-enacting real events. Photography and acting are splendid; the script often much fun.



4 A FULLER LIFE (2023) Samantha Fuller

Covered in my discussion of Samuel Fuller's *The Big Red One*.

5 THE DARK EMU STORY (2023) Allan Clarke

This the only program for the year that Elaine and I watched on free-to-air television in real time. **Bruce Pascoe** has been a hero of mine for 50 years, mainly because of his editing of the long-running magazine *Australian Short Stories* in the 1970s. In his recent book *Dark Emu*, he became an advocate of Australian Aboriginal traditional methods of farming and hunting. He and his colleagues have been demonstrating down at Mallacoota, Victoria, the value of native agricultural methods. For many us, Pascoe reveals an entirely different pre-European civilisation to the one that's always been put forward. The success of his book has aroused the ire of a particularly racist, bilious newspaper and TV columnist in Melbourne. Bruce Pascoe is a gentle soul and he has resisted the temptation to sue the lying scoundrel. However, there are legitimate experts in the field who question some of Pascoe's conclusions, so the documentary *The Dark Emu Story* covers the whole range of theories and methods that might be employed to reverse the effects wrought on the Australian environment by European methods during the last 200 years. Elaine and I are particularly glad we saw this in real time, as it has not appeared on DVD.

6 FREDDIE MERCURY: THE GREAT PRETENDER (2012) Rhys Thomas

When I was lent *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the fictional portrayal of the life of **Freddie Mercury**, I was unimpressed by Rami Malek, the actor who portrayed Freddie. If you can find it, grab the DVD of *The Great Pretender* instead. It uses a wide variety of material to show us the actual Freddie Mercury, who had a leap-off-the-screen personality merely glimpsed in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

7 FESTIVAL EXPRESS (2014) Bob Smeaton

Festival Express is the visual record of the first let's-all-of-us-get-in-a-train-and-play-at-every-whistle-stop adventure. Such musical train journeys have become common over the years. This music train travelled across Canada from Toronto to Calgary in early 1971. Janis Joplin was still alive, and her performance is the highlight of the concert footage. Other memorable performances include one from a very young Buddy Guy. Some

of the most enjoyable footage is of the whole gang sitting around in the train just noodling and having a good time. It seems the film lay around in a vault until 2014, when the first version of *Festival Express* was put together. Now re-mastered, it has appeared on Blu-ray in America, with lots of outtakes and interviews.

8 EGO: THE MICHAEL GUDINSKI STORY (2023) Paul Goldman

You won't know the name **Michael Gudinski** if you're not Australian. He started Mushroom Records in Melbourne in the early 1970s when he was still a teenager, built it artist by artist and hit record by hit record during the 1970s, dominated TV's *Countdown* program during the eighties, and eventually sold it to Festival Records (owned by Rupert Murdoch's mob). His only regret is his failure to have a hit in America. He was known as egotistical and irascible, but also a complete workaholic and very loyal to his roll of artists. Along with arch rivals the Albert Brothers of Sydney, he and his labels elbowed many of the top overseas performers out of the Australian Top 10. The film is a bit of a hagiography, but Gudinski's faults are not hidden. He died of a heart attack at the age of 65.

9 A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM (2004) Mark Hartley

I wouldn't have known about this full-length documentary about the making of Peter Weir's 1975 film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* if it had not arrived as one of the extras on the new Second Sight Blu-ray box set of *Hanging Rock*. Mark Hartley conducts recent interviews with many of the actors in the film. *Hanging Rock* had a considerable impact on each actor's or technician's life and career. Some are still working. For some, making the film knocked their lives sideways and they did not act again.

10 SO FUNNY IT HURT: BUSTER KEATON AND MGM (2004) Kevin Brownlow and Christopher Bird

I would not have seen this documentary about the life of **Buster Keaton** if it had not been an extra on a recent re-release of the Keaton film *The Cameraman*. Lots of historical film here, plus some recent interviews, detailing the rise and heavy fall of Buster Keaton during the 1920s. He had great success until he allowed control of his work to slip out of his hands. He became a mere pawn at MGM, where perhaps only *The Camera-man* allowed him to exercise his genius. He began

to drink; he lost his marriage and his house; but he survived on the sidelines for many years. You'll remember him as one of Gloria Swanson's old

buddies in *Sunset Boulevard*. His is a sad story, but you have to watch every minute of it.

Four-star contenders, in the order viewed:

THE DREAM IN A MIRROR (2021) Louise Milne & Sean Martin

JEFFREY SMART: MASTER OF STILLNESS (2012) Catherine Hunter

DINOSAUR APOCALYPSE (2022) Matthew Thompson & David Attenborough

THIS IS ORSON WELLES (2015) Clara and Julia Kupaberg

WELLES: ARCHITECTURE OF LIGHT (2006) Dominique Maillet

MOONAGE DAYDREAM (2022) Brett Morgen

EMPIRE OF LIGHT (2023) Sam Mendes

CARL PERKINS AND FRIENDS: BLUE

SUEDE SHOES: A ROCKABILLY SESSION (1986) Tom Gutteridge

BUDDY GUY: BLUES CHASE THE BLUES AWAY (2021)

BRIAN JOHNSTONE: LIFE ON THE ROAD: ROGER DALTRY (2017) Christopher Walker

BRIAN JOHNSTONE: LIFE ON THE ROAD: ROBERT PLANT (2017) Christopher Walker

LEONARD COHEN: LIVE AT THE ISLE OF WIGHT 1970 (2009) Murray Lerner

THE PYTHONS (1979) Iain Johnstone

Favourite TV series seen on disc 2023

Another category that could be dead by next year. *Midsomer Murders Season 24* has just appeared on a double DVD, but there is no sign of new DVDs of the most recent series of *Vera* and *Shetland*. It

would have been good to watch *Anika*, but there's been no sign of the first series, let alone the second, on disc. I'll just have to keep rewatching *Inspector Morse*, *Lewis*, and *Foyle's War* forever.

1 [HIS DARK MATERIALS: SEASON 3 \(2022\)](#)



This will probably be the last great fantasy series to be released on disc. Fortunately, it has been released by HBO in Australia, not the BBC or ABC. Production values remain very high, and it continues to create the sense of wonder felt by readers of Pullman's books and viewers of the first two seasons.

2 [LITTLE DORRIT \(2008\)](#) Andrew Davies

3 [MIDSOMER MURDERS: SEASONS 1–23 \(1998–2022\)](#)

Jolly good fun. The murderous methods are interesting, too.

4 [SHETLAND: SEASON 6 \(2022\)](#)

Favourite popular CDs heard for the first time in 2023

213 CDs heard for the first time during 2023.

How is streaming affecting recorded music? I am told that many people do nothing but listen to free music from Spotify. That's exactly what I used to do in the early 1960s. I would listen to all the new singles on radio for free. Then I would save up my pocket money for weeks or months so I could buy the 45 rpm discs, and ask my parents for an LP each Christmas and birthday. Today it is possible to download your own copies of singles or albums. This process is useless to me. Who wants a mere bit of electronic shit sitting on a computer file? Hard discs go phutt with monotonous frequency. To have permanency, music must be available on little silver discs so it can sit on the shelf and be part of the collection.

So I'm surprised at the large number of CDs

1 **Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers: LIVE AT THE FILLMORE 1997 (2 CDs) (2022)**

I don't need to remind you of how great a rock and roll band **Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers** has been since 1978. There is a rumour that one last studio album might appear after his recent death at the age of 65, but there is no sign of it yet. I can only hope for further double-CD concerts as powerful as *Live at the Fillmore 1997*. The special quality of this set is its reliance on cover versions rather than Tom Petty hit songs. Most of the other Petty recorded concerts follow the 'greatest hits' format. It's good to see Petty and the Heartbreakers stretching out on their tributes to the Stones, the Kinks, Chuck Berry, the Kinks, the Byrds, John Lee Hooker, and many others.

2 **The Third Mind: 2 (2023)**

Several years ago Brian Wise on 3RRR played one amazing track from an album called *The Third Mind*. **Dave Alvin** was the singer, and somebody (I assumed Dave Alvin) was playing magnificent electric blues guitar. Dave Clarke at Readings couldn't get me a copy.

Three years later, **The Third Mind's Album 2**

that are still being issued, although my friend Dave at Readings Carlton is having more and more difficulty extracting them from local or overseas distributors. JB Hi Fi, the traditional retail source of CDs throughout Australia, is stocking a small percentage of the CDs that are actually available. The performers who are missing out are Australian musicians, who are forced to issue their own CDs from their own websites. Usually I don't hear of such CDs, because they are not offered to retailers. For instance, Sydney performer Perry Keyes is often called the 'Australian Bruce Springsteen' by enthusiastic journalists, but his work is still mainly unknown to Melbourne music fans, and his latest CD is unobtainable in Melbourne.

was suddenly sitting there in the CD shelf at Readings. I hadn't known it existed until that moment. It includes six long tracks, each of which begins with a solo by a female singer, Jessie Sykes, then segues into double-guitar brain-fryers. A Google search reveals that The Third Mind is a group put together by Dave Alvin. All the tracks had been recorded in the same way Ted Macero recorded the great albums of Miles Davis in the late sixties and early seventies. The whole group



THE THIRD MIND/2



would improvise each track in long takes. The producer would then cut the long tracks into six songs. Like Miles Davis, like *Third Mind*.

No sooner had I bought *Album 2* than I asked Dave Clarke to search for the first *The Third Mind* CD. And lo! he wrought a miracle (as he often does) and was able to import the first album. I didn't receive it until a few weeks ago, so it will have to appear on 2024's list.

3 CAT POWER SINGS DYLAN (2 CDs) (2023)

I don't often connect with musicians who are popular on such radio stations as JJJ, and indeed had not heard **Cat Power** until she released *Sings Dylan*. Brian Wise of 3RRR, Australia's most one-eyed Dylan fan, could hardly resist playing tracks from her magnificent Albert Hall concert, which features a replication of Dylan's Albert Hall concert of 1966. On CD 1 she sings and plays solo; on CD 2 she and her band 'go electric'. At the right moment in her concert, an audience member yells: 'Judas!'

4 Chip Taylor: THE CRADLE OF ALL LIVING THINGS (2 CDs) (2023)

Chip Taylor will forever be condemned to be known only as the writer of 'Wild Thing' for the Troggs in the mid 1960s. In fact, he wrote many hits during the 60s, but since then has specialised in albums of highly poetical lyrics sung in a low raspy voice. I discovered his later albums only a few years ago, so I've missed out on most of them. The double CD *The Cradle of All Living Things* is the best of those I've heard. Every lyric has the intensity I keep hoping for in formal poetry, but rarely find.

5 Old Crow Medicine Show: JUBILEE (2023)

I have a DVD of one of **Old Crow Medicine Show's** concerts during which they play without drums. The whole band bounces around the stage and sings and plays with complete conviction, and quite a bit of humour. *Jubilee* is a return to the pure power of their first two albums.

6 Mary Gauthier: LIVE AT BLUE ROCK (2012)

I'm not sure why this 2012 album popped up recently in the CD rack at Readings, but I'm glad it did. I enjoy greatly **Mary Gauthier's** melancholy human-relationships-disaster songs. You have to listen to every word. Her stage act in 2012, captured here, was more free-flowing, more aggressive, a bit more fun than some of her recent CDs.

7 Bobbie Nelson and Amanda Shire: LOVING YOU (2023)

Bobbie Nelson was Willie Nelson's slightly older sister until she died at the age of 92. She was Willie's pianist for 50 years as Willie Nelson and the Family Band toured the world. She died in 2023, but not before recording this set of shining country ballads with singer **Amanda Shire**. I love beautiful women's voices, and few have a voice more beautiful than Amanda's.

8 Rodney Crowell: THE CHICAGO SESSIONS (2023)

Rodney Crowell is one of the few singers left from the generation of Outlaws-style country singers of the 1970s. His voice is as clear and ringing as it ever was. His lyrics improve with each album. Some of his songs now talk about the regrets that come with old age, but his overall sound is as youthful as ever.

9 Henry Wagons: SOUTH OF EVERYWHERE (LP) (2023)

On *South of Everywhere* **Henry Wagons**, sardonic Melbourne balladeer with the low low voice, who sounds as if he never takes himself or the world entirely seriously, returns to the swinging country-rock style of his first album. Nobody seems to know about *South of Everywhere*, though, since it has been released only on vinyl.

10 **Iris De Ment: WORKIN' ON A WORLD (2023)**

Many people would not describe **Iris De Ment's** voice as 'beautiful'. Her high penetrating voice grabs you and makes you want to listen to what she has to say. Her songs combine Christian empathy with left-wing rage at the direction the USA has taken in the last 20 years. She's taken a few years away from recording, but returns here with **Workin' on a World**, the equal to any of her earlier albums.

11 **Various: STONED COLD COUNTRY: A 60TH ANNIVERSARY TRIBUTE TO THE ROLLING STONES (2023)**

12 **Molly Tuttle and Golden Highway: CITY OF GOLD (2023)**

13 **Ducks: HIGH FLYIN' 1977 (2023)**

14 **Chip Taylor: SONGS FROM A DUTCH TOUR (2008)**

15 **Various: MORE THAN A WHISPER: CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF NANCY GRIFFITH (2023)**

16 **Rhiannon Giddens: YOU'RE THE ONE (2023)**

17 **Hugh Moffatt and Katy Moffatt: DANCE ME OUTSIDE (1992)**

18 **Ben Harper: WIDE OPEN LIGHT (2023)**

19 **Nils Lofgren: MOUNTAINS (2023)**

20 **Dog Trumpet: SHADOWLAND (2022)**

21 **Van Morrison: ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE (2023)**

Four-star contenders, in the order heard:

Jerry Jeff Walker: JERRY JEFF WALKER (+ extra tracks) (1972/2011)

Lyle Lovett: SMILE: SONGS FROM THE MOVIES (2003)

Todd Snider: NEW CONNECTION (2002)

Leonard Cohen: DEAR HEATHER (2004)

Tedeschi Tucks Band: I AM THE MOON 1: CRESCENT (2022)

Tedeschi Tucks Band: I AM THE MOON 2: ASCENSION (2022)

Paul Burch: FEVERS (2013)

Shaver: LIVE AT SMITH'S OLD BAR (1995)

Ronnie Wood: NOT FOR BEGINNERS (2001)

International Submarine Band : BACK AT HOME (2000)

SETH AVETT SINGS GREG BROWN (2022)

Ringo Starr All-Star Band: LIVE AT THE GREEK THEATRE 2019 (2 CDs) (2022)

Dr John: THE MOJO OF DR JOHN: THE EARLY YEARS, RARITIES AND LIVE RECORDINGS (2 CDs) (2019)

Neil Murray: THESE HANDS (1992)

Nils Lofgren, Bonnie Sheridan and Tom Lepson: EVERY BREATH (1994)

Mickey Jupp: LIVE AT ROCKPALAST (+ DVD) (1978/2013)

Neil Young: HARVEST OUTTAKES (EP) (2022)

Neil Young: BBC IN CONCERT 1971 (EP) (2022)

Josh Teskey and Ash Grunwald: PUSH THE BLUES AWAY (2020)

Son Volt: AMERICAN CENTRAL DUST (2009)

JIMMY SMITH PLAYS RED HOT BLUES (2009)

Teddy Thompson: UP FRONT AND DOWN LOW (2008)

Lou Reed: ECSTACY (2000)

Willie Nelson: I DON'T KNOW A THING ABOUT LOVE (2023)

Sonny James: THE COMPLETE COLUMBIA AND MONUMENT HITS (2002)

Long Ryders: SEPTEMBER NOVEMBER (2023)

Linda Perry: IN FLIGHT (1996)

Patti Smith: LAND (1975-2002) (2 CDs) (2002)

Various: SOUNDS OF THE NEW WEST VOL. 6 (March 2023)

**John Hiatt: PERFECTLY GOOD GUITAR
plus extra CD EP: LIVE AT THE PALACE,
MELBOURNE, APRIL 24 1991 (1993)**

Waifs: TEMPTATION (2011)

**Joseph Tawadros and William Barton:
HISTORY HAS A HEARTBEAT (2022)**

Soundtrack: SMOKE (1995)

Holly Throsby: A LOUD CALL (2008)

**Fabulous Thunderbirds: HIGH WATER
(1997)**

**Wailin' Jennys: LIVE AT THE MAUCH
CHUNK OPERA HOUSE (2009)**

**Bob Dylan: HIDDEN GEMS FROM THE
BOOTLEG SERIES 1963–1997 (2023)**

**Dingoes: LIVE AT THE STATION HOTEL
(1976)**

**Bob Dylan: LIVE 1975: THE ROLLING
THUNDER REVUE (2 CDs) (2002)**

**Various: 10TH ANNIVERSARY EAST COAST
BLUES AND ROOTS MUSIC FESTIVAL
1999 (1999)**

**Bob Dylan: EMPIRE BURLESQUE (LP)
(1985)**

**Various: AMERICAN TUNES: SONGS BY
PAUL SIMON (2019)**

Richie Furay: IN THE COUNTRY (2022)

**Michael Nesmith: AND THE HITS JUST
KEEP ON COMIN'/PRETTY MUCH YOUR
STANDARD RANCH SMASH
(1972/1973/2000)**

**Maria McKee: PEDDLIN' DREAMS
(2005/2022)**

**Joe Camilleri and Nicki Bomba:
LIMESTONE (2006)**

**Ray Charles: RAY: RARE GENIUS: THE
UNDISCOVERED MASTERS (2010)**

**Bob Dylan: FRAGMENTS: TIME OUT OF
MIND SESSIONS 1996–1997 (2 CDs)
(2023)**

**Various: THE ANDREW DURANT
MEMORIAL CONCERT (2 CDs)
(1996–1997)**

**Molina Talbot Lofgren Young: ALL ROADS
LEAD HOME (2023)**

**Alejandro Escovedo: STREET SONGS OF
LOVE (2010)**

Ian Hunter: DEFIANCE PART 1 (2022)

THE BARNESTORMERS (2022)

**Tommy Emmanuel: CGP: ACCOMPLICE
TWO (2023)**

THE SILVERSOUND (2022)

**Mickey Jupp: UP SNAKES DOWN LADDERS
(2022)**

Dave Hole: OUTSIDE LOOKING IN (2001)

**Various: BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME:
MUSIC FROM THE BBC TV SERIES (2
CDs) (1991)**

Ray Davies: WATERLOO SUNSET (1997)

Margo Price: STRAYS (2023)

**Jen Cloher: KO AOTA AWA KOTE AWA
KOAU/I AM THE RIVER THE RIVER IS
ME (2023)**

**Lucinda Williams: STORIES FROM A ROCK
'N' ROLL HEART (2023)**

**Rickie Lee Jones: PIECES OF TREASURE
(2023)**

**Various: CONFESSIN' THE BLUES (2 CDs)
(2018)**

**Nina Simone: NINA SIMONE AND PIANO
(1969)/SILK AND SOUL (1967) (1999)**

**Lou Reed: PERFECT NIGHT: LIVE IN
LONDON (1998)**

**Various: STONED ALCHEMY: 27 ORIGINAL
BLUES AND R&B HITS THAT INSPIRED
THE ROLLING STONES (1989)**

Rolling Stones: ON AIR (2 CDs) (1996)

Patti Smith: PEACE AND NOISE (1997)

**Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band:
LIVE IN NEW YORK CITY (2 CDs) (2001)**

**Texas Tornados: HANGIN' ON A THREAD
(1992)**

Chris Wilson: FLYING FISH (2012)

**John Mellencamp: ORPHEUS DESCENDING
(2023)**

Eliza Gilkyson: HOME (2023)

**John Farnham: ONE VOICE: THE
GREATEST HITS (2 CDs) (2003)**

**Leonard Cohen: LIVE AT THE ISLE OF
WIGHT 1970 (2009)**

**Neil Young: CHROME DREAMS
(1975/2023)**

Willie Nelson: BLUEGRASS (2023)

Various: BLUES SLIDE GUITAR (1996)

**Eric Burdon and the Animals:
ROADRUNNERS: RARE LIVE AND
STUDIO RECORDINGS (1990)**

**Johnny Cash: I WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU
AGAIN (1978)**



**'Leonardo's Flying Omnibus'
(Dennis Callegari).**

**Various: EGO: THE MICHAEL GUDINKSI
STORY (3 CDs) (2023)**

**Various: BAD MOON RISING: 15 TRACKS
IN THE SPIRIT OF CREEDENCE (2012)**

**Ian Hunter: IAN HUNTER'S DIRTY
LAUNDRY (1995/2023)**

Dave Hole: SHORT FUSE BLUES (1998)

**Rolling Stones: HACKNEY DIAMONDS
(2023)**

**Various: TAKE WHAT YOU NEED: UK
COVERS OF BOB DYLAN SONGS
1964-69 (2017)**

**Katy Moffatt: THE GREATEST SHOW ON
EARTH (1993)**

Lou Reed: THE RAVEN (2 CDs) (2003)

Texas Tornados: 4 ACES (1996)

**Ray Charles: GENIUS LOVES COMPANY
(2004)**

Luluc: DREAMBOAT (2020)

Leonard Cohen: OLD IDEAS (2012)

Soundtrack: CROSSING JORDAN (2003)

Johnny Cash: ROCKABILLY BLUES (1980)

Friends talk back to me: Letters Part 1

2023 favourites lists — everybody's doing it

[*brg* 2023 seems to have been one of the great years of the artistic calendar, as lots of people have been offering lists of their Favourites of the Year.

CAREY HANDFIELD and MURRAY MACLACHLAN have already read my list of 2023 Favourites.

IAN MOND, Melbourne reviewer for *Locus* magazine, gives an annual presentation of his year's favourites to the Nova Mob meeting for October each year. His list and comments can be found at his blog *The Hysterical Hamster*.

To read DAVID GRIGG's and PERRY MIDDLEMISS's lists, you will need to read the most recent issues of their fanzines on efanzines.com: *Megaloscope* (David Grigg) and *Perryscope* (Perry Middlemiss), or listen to their podcast *Two Chairs Talking*.

One of my favourite critics is PAUL KINCAID. His commentary on the whole year of 2023 can be found at his blog: *Through the Dark Labyrinth*.*]

CAREY HANDFIELD

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This year was a poor year for reading. I have a target each year of 50 books. In 2022 I read 68. This year only 32. Part of the reason was motivation. I found it hard to get motivated to read.

Because of the small numbers I am only listing my Top 5 books rather than the top 5 in each category.

Also I am not doing a 1 to 5 ranking, just a list of books that stood out.

- *All The Seas of the World* (fantasy): **Guy Gavriel Kay**
- *American Gods* (sf): **Neil Gaiman**
- *Five Decembers* (crime): **James Kestrin**
- *Exiles* (crime): **Jane Harper**
- *Slow Horses* (crime): **Mick Herron**.

(31 December 2023)

I liked **Henry Gasko's** letter in *SFC 113*. It brought back lots of memories from the 1970s. Originally our plan in 1976 was to drive across country from Vancouver to Toronto with stop to say hallo to Susan Wood on the way. We got as far as Regina

and I realised I did not have enough funds to go to Toronto and then return to the West Coast for my flight home. So I stayed with Susan for one day and she drove me north to catch the Canadian Pacific train back to Vancouver.

I also liked your review of *MUP: A Centenary History*. What you may not know for a number of years I worked for MUP. I worked in a number of areas ranging from the warehouse dispatching books to doing admin in production, including for a short time proof reading.

(5 August 2023)

MURRAY MacLACHLAN

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An early comment on your Music Favourites of 2023:

Tom Petty live continues to delight, and Los Angeles not Gainesville really was home town territory. Wiltern Theatre LA 1985 was the venue for *Pack up the Plantation*, which has a wonderful version of 'American Girl' where the crowd sings verses as well as choruses. In some alternate universe Petty would have shut up and let the crowd carry the whole thing, or extended it to six minutes or more. But singers sometimes believe the music is not complete without them in it.

Chip Taylor's career has been well worth following. His archival approach is eclectic and captivating.

I'm intrigued to see **Henry Wagons** there. He's fallen off the radar a bit. For local artists I assume you've been keeping an eye on the Teskey Brothers?

In bullet point:

- I'd like to listen to your **Dr John** collection, please. The gris-gris juju man is the aspect of **Mac Rebbenack** I find most engaging.
- I'm surprised you'd not listened previously to **Patti Smith's Land**. It's a fine collection.
- Unfashionable to do so, but I really rate highly **Dylan's Empire Burlesque**.

- Ian Hunter. Pleasing to see a lot of Ian Hunter in there. Another musician's musician.
- I saw **Ringo Starr** in Melbourne about 2009. A very good show. A lot of fun!
(25 February 2024)

DENNIS CALLEGARI
159 Kilby Road, Kew East VIC 3102

Here, at long last, are some of the books I've been reading this year.

SF/fantasy

There were numerous SF books I started reading and did not finish (some of them generally well regarded in the SF community), mostly because I simply lost interest. I did manage to finish these ones:

- ***Sea of Tranquility*** by **Emily St. John Mandel**, which puts an innovative twist on an otherwise standard time travel story. (Saying more = too much information.)
- ***The Mountain in the Sea*** by **Ray Nayler**, a first contact/AI novel set in a chaotic future. Definitely interesting, but its main weakness (to my mind) was an attempt to cover that future too widely and in too much detail.
- ***A Prayer for the Crown-shy*** by **Becky Chambers**, a short sequel to the equally short *A Psalm for the Wild-built*, covers the adventures of a robot and a tea-making monk. Both novels are set in a quirky small-town world that's probably not ours. ('Crown-shy', by the way, refers to trees, not reluctant royalty.)
- ***Time Shelter*** by **Georgi Gospodinov** (read in translation from Bulgarian). This one starts from the premise of creating small environments where dementia sufferers can live happily in the world of their childhood, but eventually mutates into a situation where entire nations choose to live in the past.
- **George Saunders'** latest book ***Liberation Day*** is a collection of short stories — not always SF — that range from the brilliant 'The Mom of Bold Action' (a story that veers from hilarity to horror and back again) to utterly forgettable page fillers. I'm blaming the publisher for this variability: they're probably so desperate to put out something with Saunders' name on it that they'll print anything he produces.

Crime

I've been reading quite a few crime novels, but I'm going to mention only my fortuitous discovery of **Mark Hebden's** 'Inspector Pel' mysteries. (Hebden is the pseudonym for **John Harris** (1916–1991.) So far, I've read four of the Pel novels (***Death Set to Music***, ***Pel and the Party Spirit***, ***Pel and the Promised Land***, and ***Pel and the Sepulchre Job***).

Evariste Clovis Desiré Pel, a delightfully gloomy Maigret, is constantly puzzled why his life isn't as bad as he expects it to be. He heads a police department in an unnamed town in Burgundy, and the crimes they solve are a mixture of the commonplace, the comedic, and the bizarre.

History

- So far, **Nick Holmes** has written two books — ***The Roman Revolution*** and ***The Fall of Rome*** — in a planned four-book series on the later Roman empire. The first of these is particularly interesting, as it covers the period where the Western Roman Empire begins its evolution into early mediaeval Europe, together with the rise of Constantinople.
- **Ross King** covers a different kind of evolution in ***The Bookseller of Florence***. Vespasiano da Bisticci was one of the last publishers and purveyors of illuminated manuscripts immediately before the printing revolution burst across Europe. Interesting bits of trivia: (1) Christopher Columbus read some of Bisticci's books while working in his brother's bookshop in Portugal; (2) Leonardo da Vinci's father was the notary who helped wind up Bisticci's business when he retired.
- ***Beating France to Botany Bay*** is **Margaret Cameron-Ash's** enormously well-researched book on the race to found Australia in 1788, in which she drops some bombshells on what we Australian kids learned in school. Things like: (1) James Cook guessed that Tasmania was an island and knew that Port Jackson was a better site for a colony than Botany Bay. (2) While Joseph Banks was always a booster for an Australian colony, the entire plan to establish one was conceived in a matter of months in 1786. (3) The idea of a penal colony was more or less a smokescreen to hide the concern that France might establish an Australian colony first.

Bob Mortimer

By rights, half of this section belongs with 'Crime' above, and half with 'Biography' below. But of course I'm talking about **Bob Mortimer**, who is a law all to himself.

And Away is Bob's autobiography: the story of an English working-class boy who studies law, becomes a garbage man and then a small-time lawyer, until he accidentally finds himself billed as a stand-up comedian and beloved media personality. (And Bob Mortimer is beloved. So much that when he was recently hospitalised with shingles, Bob's replacement on his current fishing show was very nearly lynched.) If you're unfamiliar with Bob, watch a few episodes of the British *Would I Lie To You?* series on TV; he appears there quite often.

The Satsuma Complex is Mortimer's first crime novel, published immediately after the autobiography. Competent but unexceptional, other than the main character, a young lawyer, being a thinly disguised Bob Mortimer.

Biography

M. John Harrison's *Wish I Was Here* is labelled as an anti-memoir, and, though you do get some detail on his life within the book, it's more a meditation on his life, times, and thoughts on writing fiction. His dislike of artificially neat endings explains a lot why his recent novel *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* is structured as it is.

Sister Novelists by **Devoney Looser** is about **Jane and Anna Maria Porter** (older contemporaries of Jane Austen) who, during their lifetime, had a world-wide reputation as historical novelists. Despite this success, the sisters were never far from utter poverty, often not having enough money to heat their modest rented house. This detailed, sometimes harrowing, biography reads a bit like a never-ending Jane Austen novel. What a horrible time the early nineteenth century was!

(13 October 2023)

NICK SHEARS

15 Stawell Place, Middle Park QLD 4074

My 12 favourite films seen in 2023

All seen for the first time, although that wasn't a criterion. I rated the first two 10/10, which I would previously have claimed impossible, but I thought

both were masterpieces.

The rest are probably in order of date seen, apart from **Woody Allen's** lovely ***Coup de Chance***, which I wanted near the top, but was our last film of the year.

- 1 ***Taxi Driver***. 1976
- 2 ***Oppenheimer***. 2023
- 3 ***The Dish***. 2000
- 4 ***The Last Vermeer***. 2022
- 5 ***Coup de chance***. 2023
- 6 ***Red Joan***. 2018
- 7 ***The Pale Blue Eye***. 2022
- 8 ***Now You See Me***. 2023
- 9 ***Dark Waters***. 2019
- 10 ***TÁR***. 2022
- 11 ***Carrie Pilby***. 2016
- 12 ***Hunger Games: Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes***. 2023

My top 12 favourite books read in 2023

I gave 5/5 to all these on GoodReads. Not really quite in order, although the first three definitely are.

- 1 ***The Handmaid's Tale***, by Margaret Atwood
- 2 ***The Testaments***, by Margaret Atwood
- 3 ***Terry Pratchett: A Life with Footnotes***, by Rob Wilkins
- 4 ***The Last Lions of Africa***, by Anthony Ham.
- 5 ***All Our Shimmering Skies***, by Trent Dalton
- 6 ***Deliver Me From Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska***, by Warren Zane
- 7 ***Every Day is Opening Night: Our Journey Together***, by Des and Dawn Lindberg
- 8 ***Thro' My Eyes: A Memoir***, by Iain Matthews
- 9 ***On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft***, by Stephen King
- 10 ***Abbey Road***, by David Hepworth
- 11 ***The Year of Reading Dangerously***, by Andy Miller
- 12 ***Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language***, by Don Watson

(2 January 2024)

Feature letter:

Two historical figures talking

LESLEIGH LUTTRELL

Madison, WI 53704, USA

I'm wondering if you print out hard copies for your own (non-digital) files. What I produce for distribution to a select group are financial reports for the organisations for which I serve as Treasurer. Not as interesting, but very straightforward and sometimes useful. And the funds do support a variety of things valued in my community.

While I do keep lists of books read, movies seen, plays attended, that's just for myself — so I can answer that question 'Did I already read/see that?'

Hope all is well there. We are missing the really hot weather here. Not enough water falling from the sky (but when it does it comes in buckets). And the smoke from Canadian forest fires has drifted over us several times. Sometimes it does feel like living in a dystopian novel, the early chapters before the world really falls apart. That may happen but until then I continue to enjoy keeping in touch with friends and enjoying my community.

(21 July 2023)

[*brg* I can't afford to print many copies, of course, but I did ten of *SFC* 111, and that wasn't quite enough. I still have some correspondents who don't have computers or even (in a few cases) typewriters, so I need to send print copies. I printed twenty of *SFC* 113, but I can't send any overseas because of the huge increase in airmail postage that came with the US dropping out of the International Postal Agreement in 2020. I've had to print a few more for *SFC* 112 contributors.

My lists began in the early 1960s as a reminder to myself of what I had listened to, read, watched, etc., but when I began printing my lists in my fanzines in 1969 and 1970, I received interesting responses. Most people don't realise that I print the lists in the hope that people will send me theirs (and disagree with me, as well as agree with me), but very few friends keep lists. However, the two newish regular fanzines from Melbourne, Perry Middlemiss's *Perryscope* and David Grigg's *Megaloscope*, are based around their own reading lists. I've found both much more useful as reading guides than most other sources in recent years, especially as the local newspapers have

cut their reviews sections to almost nothing.

We'd expected very hot summers the last three years, but instead they have been cooler than expected. We were told we were going through a 'La Niña' event, which dumped much-more-than-record-busting flood rains on three states last year. I suspect hot summers will return this year. During the last killer bushfire season, at the end of 2019, we had days of bushfire smoke covering Melbourne.

Our old-time fannish friend Don Ashby is living in Mallacoota, on the extreme eastern end of the state of Victoria. Everything he had was lost in the vast bushfire that immolated Mallacoota and 6 million acres of three states. Most town dwellers and tourists escaped by swimming into the sea off the Mallacoota beach. Don was featured in a four-part TV documentary made about the Mallacoota bushfires. He has been trying to rebuild his own home and that of his neighbours. In the mid 1970s in Melbourne, he and his friends used to help move house for free for people like me. Same old Don; different venue.

Glad to see your cheery posts on Facebook. I forget to post anything most of the time — I try to gather everything together in fanzines, both *SFC* and my fanzine for ANZAPA. (It's still going; with David Grigg as OBE running the PDF-only apa, it ran to 657 pages last mailing. Not that I've had time to write mailing comments recently.)*

I know you can't really afford to send out physical copies but I'd like to believe that somewhere you have a complete run of *SFC* on paper saved for future fan generations to consult (because after all the digital world is not completely safe from loss). I do not have copies of every fanzine I helped create and am glad that some of them are available for me to revisit at Fanac.org. I am pretty sure that some of the on-paper letters I sent in a previous century are still in existence, some in the possession of the person to whom they were sent. And at least in one case a file of them is included in papers belonging to a now deceased person, who was famous long ago, now held by a library.

In this digital age I think we are now all aware that what you write can be shared much further than we expected back in the days of everything on paper (even if we did have photocopying). So I

think carefully about what I will post on Facebook, perhaps not as carefully about what I send by email. But as far as I know I am not under any investigation by the authorities and unlikely to be more than a footnote in anything written about more famous people.

It's true we have become 'historical figures' in fandom, but I take that as a compliment and not a danger to my reputation in the greater world.

(23 July 2023)

When I recall the primitive days of yore — typing stencils, tracing artwork, cranking the mimeo, collating/stapling, typing out mailing labels, stuffing envelopes, and taking everything to the Post Office (they knew who we were) — I can't believe we had the time and energy to do that. These days I post (thought-out but not lengthy) remarks on Facebook and do much of my contacting folks by email (including some who live on the same block). It's all human contact, and I do talk to lots of people in person, send cards and even an occasional letter. But I can't imagine ever again having the kind of energy doing fanzines took. But then we had fewer ways of staying in touch, having a public persona, or reporting on interesting happenings. I wonder if we would have written with the same sense of 'talking to our friends' if we'd seen the future of fanzines being digitised or even sold as collectables, accessible to people we didn't know. But heck, we were readers of fiction about the future so we should have been prepared.

(24 July 2023)

[*brg* Thanks, Lesleigh, for recalling the Great Old Days of fanzine publishing. Everything you describe was part of the fun of publishing back then. I remember nearing the end of the production process of the *SFC* I despatched just before flying off to Torcon in 1973. Every page had been run off — 70 little piles of paper

spread out over my flat's floor (it was a 150-pager). My friend Micheline visited with her son Rayner, who was then five years old. He took one look at the floor and cried out: 'He's making a book!' A few days later the whole issue was collated, stapled, put in envelopes, and dropped at the post office. I have no idea how I did it. You probably remember issues of *Starling* that were prepared under stressful conditions, but felt like the greatest fun once they had gone in the mail.

The main change over the years has not been in production method, but in postage rates. Airmail rates stayed much the same for years, then began to rise steeply from about 2000 onward. And my income stayed the same.

Still, miracles happen, in the person of Bill Burns, who began *efanzines.com* in 2000 or 2001. He gave us indigent fans the chance to publish our fanzines as PDF files for free. That's the only reason I've been able to keep going. Otherwise I would have to stick with ANZAPA, which is just as active as ever, but has always stuck to a 30-member limit. Indeed, once it changed to PDF files rather than print copies at the beginning of the Covid lockdowns, and David Grigg took over, participation has exploded.

So I can understand your account of all the ways in which you keep in touch with people, but to me the pleasure is in editing a magazine as well as keeping in touch with all my friends. Elaine suggests from time to time that I could close *SFC* — but what would I do instead? Publishing fanzines is what I do.

Sorry to sound so much the person I've always been, except when I look in the mirror. But I must have been very different once, for me to undertake that five months' trip from September 1973 to the end of January 1974. I certainly don't have the energy to do anything like that any more!*

Feature letter: Cy Chauvin in praise of personal reviews

CY CHAUVIN

(c.o.a.) 17829 Peters,
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My new snail mail address is: 17829 Peters, Roseville, Michigan 48066. It actually is my old childhood home, where I first wrote and corresponded with you and many others! I inherited it a number of years ago, and moved most items of

value (meaning books, of course!) to it ten years ago, but was not able to sell the old house until August of last year.

I haven't been too much of a one with series books, either. I like better novels that aren't series, but sometimes reference other books the author wrote (such as Barbara Pym's). I have read some of Ruth Rendell (*Keys to the City* made me want to spend a summer in London, although of course

without a crime to solve) and all of Dorothy Sayers' 'Peter Whimsey' books, too. She translated Dante, too. That seemed a surprise.

(6 July 2023)

Your description of your colonoscopy and fall in *SFC 111* was familiar. I just had a colonoscopy shortly after your own, in January 2023. I always find it quite an ordeal to drink that much liquid, especially so quickly. It doesn't seem to matter how one attempts to flavour it. This time I also suffered from constant shivering after drinking so much cold liquid (it was winter here in North America, and especially cold). I kept telling myself that this is the last time I will put up with the awful test, but I suppose it won't be. About twelve years ago cancer was found, and my terminal ileum removed. No side effects since!

Thanks for publishing the short review notice of the **Peter Nicholls'** book ***Genre Fiction: The Roaring Years***. I immediately ordered it because of your notice. Before hearing about the book, I would have said, 'Peter Nicholls? But he didn't write enough to collect into a book.' It is rather an amazing collection; I wouldn't have connected science fiction, fantasy, and young adult fiction together, even though I discovered young adult fiction as an adult about 1975. I thought I was an odd exception, seeking out such in book stores and libraries (it was especially awkward in the children's section of libraries), first with fantasies, of course, and then looking for other books. The first essay I read in *Genre Fiction* was the one on Philippa Pearce and her book *Tom's Midnight Garden*, which I had just finished rereading. Peter described precisely my own emotional reaction to the book.

I think the only area in which he was really wrong was in his self-assessment of his editing of the academic journal *Foundation*, in which he thought it was a mistake to have included comments about delays in publications and other problems. Those touches gave the journal a personality that the others of its kind lacked. The whole book seems to gush with his personality, or so it seems to me: I never met him or corresponded with him. Dave Langford's decision to include a couple of the funny convention reports Peter Nichols wrote seems a very wise one. If I had been editor, I think I would have lacked the courage to include the funny material amid all the serious sf criticism.

Another book, ***Anxious People***, by Swedish writer **Fredrik Backman**, has the same situation that you describe in ***Bel Canto*** by **Ann Patchett**. I attempted to read *Anxious People*, not because of its situation, but because of an interview I heard

by the author on the radio the day after Christmas. A long interview, that gave such a sense of sincerity (an interview that seemed like an Bergman film!). I wanted very much to read the book but found I couldn't. The interview was taped in Michigan, at Interlocken, an arts centre up north.

You also write in your review of *Bel Canto* that you found an article 'listing ten major novels that feature music as a major theme'. ***October the First is Too Late*** by **Fred Hoyle** has a composer as the viewpoint character; also there is some discussion of music in his novel ***The Black Cloud***. I haven't read it yet, not having a copy, but **Andrew May** quotes from it in his book ***The Science of Music***. (He also mentions Langdon Jones story 'The Music Makers', 1965.)

I am glad that you and some of your other reviewers on occasion write negative reviews or comments, since the bland press-release type of reviews, as in *Locus* and elsewhere, become useless after a while. Often the descriptions reveal that it would be difficult if not impossible for books to be any good because the actual conception is so bad, i.e., a book written from the viewpoint of a fossilised mammoth, or one in which all the women in the world are turning into dragons. Some of the reviews are rather on the short side, however.

After your review of ***The Necessary Beggar*** by **Susan Palwick**, I will have to read that novel. I had a copy of it, but I fear I gave it away.

Your review of ***Samuel Johnson: A Biography*** by **John Wain** was interesting. Sometimes the biographies of those earlier literary figures seem more interesting than their actual works might be, read solo. So much more is explained and put in context. Thus I enjoyed much more than I expected reading a book by **Margaret Drabble** on **Wordsworth**. She says there are at least two Wordsworths, early and late (after about 1814), and that readers and critics in different centuries valued the poems from different periods in different ways — the apparent difference between him as a 'Nature' poet and a more realistic, humane one. But I much enjoyed the mixture of his life, poem excerpts, and her commentary. The oddest part is that I actually borrowed the book from the local library because it was by Margaret Drabble and not because it was about Wordsworth. The library had only one other book by Drabble, *The Witch of Exmoor*, and I didn't care for what I read of it, although I have very much enjoyed a couple of her earlier novels. Perhaps she has an early period that is good, too, and a later period that is disappointing, as with Wordsworth.

It is disappointing that you don't have a physical *SF Commentary* that you could afford to mail out. But we have to live with it. My only very gentle request is that you might consider making SFC 'print edition' more printable — i.e., shorter, about 40 pages. Using a compressed typeface (such as Arial Narrow you can get in rather more words) and reducing in size or eliminating some of the book covers for the reviews, you could get in nearly as many words in fewer pages. I used some

quality paper to print the last *SFC* and could not get my stapler through the 84 pages! But please don't take this as any complaint. You are the only one to even offer a 'print' version of your fanzine, to my knowledge. That is appreciated, as it is.

Then again, a shorter *SFC* might mean that you will publish more often, and I will be even further behind in my loc writing than I am already!

(15 November 2023)

Feature letter: Cy Chauvin on climate change fiction

The most provocative article in *SFC* 113 is **Mats Dannewitz Linder's** on **climate fiction**. It is pleasing to see that **James Blish** is given credit for the first serious piece of climate change science fiction, 'We All Die Naked', published in 1969. While the idea of water flowing down the streets of New York City and the residents almost complacently adapting to boats for travel was quite outrageous in 1969, the most interesting piece of speculative science in the novella is the linking of earthquakes caused by deep underground fracking (although the term wasn't invented at the time) with larger seismic disturbances. The disturbances are so profound that they affect the moon. And the story is still moving and very readable today, although deeply disturbing, which may be the reason why it has not been reprinted in any of the Blish collections published in this century.

Its slim size is certainly a contrast to the bloated bulk of say, **Kim Stanley Robinson's** *The Ministry for the Future*. Or of what I thought was **John Brunner's** best novel, *The Sheep Look Up*. I recently tried to reread Brunner's novel, but couldn't get too far. Perhaps it is not that it's poorly written, but just that environmental horror, any more than the macabre, Lovecraftian kind, is best in short story form. How much horror can one take? What is the best length if the intent is a warning (and the reader has been warned before)?

I presume that you read the interview with Christopher Priest in *Interzone* 294. He talks about climate change with Paul Kincaid: 'For the writer of the fantastic there are only three legitimate ways of dealing with climate change: (a) describing the consequences of it head-on, (b) ignoring it altogether, or (c) coming up with a possible solution.' He suggests that the heads-on approach is over-familiar, and ignoring the subject escapist. He said he attempted both options (a)

and (c) in his latest novel, which I haven't read. Still, I don't know that it would be dishonest to acknowledge in a story that it has been mitigated and then go on. There are so many problems in the world that a writer could address.

Of course, everyone wonders perhaps why the various warnings in science fiction about climate change weren't heeded. By mere happenstance, I read a chapter in **Fred Warshofsky's** book *Doomsday*, dating from 1977. It seems that in the late 1970s, a fear of a new ice age was at the forefront of most scientific minds. Although global warming is mentioned in chapter 10, it is an afterthought.

The chapter is quite detailed and dense with information; Warshofsky does mention the **Fred Hoyle** theory advanced in 1939 that passage through the spiral arms of our galaxy and the resultant increase in dust may be the cause of ice ages. But the reasoning behind this (at least according to Warshofsky's explanation) is the inverse of what you might expect, since it is not the result of the increased dust in space blocking sunlight to the earth, but dust falling into the sun and causing it to burn for a brief time even brighter. 'The added sunshine causes additional precipitation on earth, and that extra rain and snow feed the glaciers to the point where they begin to advance.'

Another unexpected idea is that the present stable climate (especially helpful for crops) is 'the most abnormal period in at least a thousand years'. 'The probability of getting another 15 consecutive years that good is about one in 10,000,' says another scientist quoted.

Mats asks at the end of his article: who reads climate fiction? I am sure it is mostly those already convinced. I can't imagine those who deny climate change reading the work; and those who fall in between I rather expect don't read at all. But for

those who are convinced, it may spur them to continued political action, and personal conservation and reform. It continually amazes me how much many household devices consume electricity even when supposedly turned off. I now unplug my microwave regularly when not in use.

But should we read climate fiction? Do we have a moral obligation somehow to read it, to ‘support’ it? The same **James Blish** who wrote ‘We All Die Naked’ also told authors that if they had a message to send, they should post it on placards.

I do hope that **Matthew Davis** does write that article on **Fritz Leiber** for you. Most of Fritz Leiber’s best work seems to be in his short fiction, and he wrote such an interesting and varied lot, from the serious ‘**Coming Attraction**’ to the very silly one about the loaves of instant baked bread baked so light that they become airborne and float on the winds over the USA (‘**Bread Overhead**’). Not all of his best stories ever made it into his ‘Best of collection (as with many another author), so you have to seek them out. I did quite enjoy Matthew Davis’ article on **Theodore Sturgeon** that you published in 2013, and want to reread, since I’ve now read many Sturgeon stories I missed before.

Rich Horton’s article on **Cordwainer Smith’s ‘Scanners Live in Vain’** (in *SFC* 114) had what might be its intended effect: it got me to reread the story. I’ve read the story many times before, but it still is a remarkable story. It’s not strange, but rather Smith makes the strange seem familiar, and the familiar strange; and so the result is not an alien, irrelevant feeling, which is what I often get when reading current sf. A trivial example from the story might be the glass recordings of smells

— and Martel’s wife picks a recording of the smell of lamb chops to play, except Martel doesn’t know what lamb chops are (‘a beast?’).

It does seem hard to understand why the story was rejected by the other sf magazines at the time (although this was before *F&SF* and *Galaxy* had started). But certainly the editor of **Fantasy Book** knew he was on to something good, since he made it the cover story and commissioned artwork for it. Remarkably, too, Fantasy Publishing Co. was still selling copies of that issue of *Fantasy Book* up until at least the late 1970s — that’s where I got my copy of the magazine!

Rich asks if readers have forgotten **Cordwainer Smith**; but I rather doubt if anyone who has read Smith will have forgotten him. The stories have a peculiar haunting quality that lingers in your memory. I do wonder how many new readers discover him. Although NESFA Press’s collection **The Rediscovery of Man** is a wonderful book for those of us who must have everything, it is not the kind of book to give to a casual reader or friend. It is too monumental, too uneven in quality. Of the posthumous published stories, only **The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing At All** matches the quality of the previous work. Really, a book like **You Will Never Be the Same** needs to be re-issued to attract new readers.

P.S.: I’ve also just seen advertised a book called **Climate Change Catastrophes**, and misplaced the name of the author, so perhaps it’s becoming a real industry now.

(27 February 2024)

Feature letter: The seasonal letter to Bruce

MARK PLUMMER

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I always find that this period between Christmas and New Year — Twixmas as I understand the cool kids call it — is a time of great potential, a time when anything is possible. It is, though, a bit of an illusion. I think the sense of possibility arises from it being a long holiday, usually a week-and-a-half in my case without having to dip too deeply into my annual leave allowance, where we’re not going anywhere. But the first part was always given over to preparing a meal for friends and immediately after Christmas Day we’d have a visit

from Claire’s parents and then my parents and amazingly — despite the fact that it happened every year — that long holiday didn’t seem so unpopulated as I’d first thought.

I’d always try to cram all the things I’d planned to do into the last few days and would be so unsuccessful at it that I’d likely accomplish few if any of my objectives before the January return to the workplace. Potential evaporated. Every year.

Things did change in 2020, as did just about everything. We couldn’t host friends and our parents were unable to travel. And yet even then the potential of the season remained leashed as

we re-watched *The Bridge*, took part in a large number of Zooms and I re-read *The Number of the Beast*, if nothing else proving to myself that it really is as awful as just about everybody says.

We never really reacquired our pre-2020 pattern.

Claire's parents now live ten minutes' walk up the road and so came here on Christmas Day, the first time we've ever had anybody who wasn't us in the house for the main event. Visiting my mother has been deferred to the new year thanks to railway engineering works and the consequent dread replacement bus service similar to those you describe in 'Desperado Waiting for a Train'. But most significantly, for me at least, this year there will be no January return to the workplace.

I am now effectively an ex-civil servant. Not yet officially, as that comes on 1 March, but the intervening days are almost all given over to leave, thanks to a legacy bank acquired in 2020 and 2021 when I took little time off as there was nowhere to go. I have only to make a token re-appearance in mid-February to hand back my computer, phone, and security pass, surrender my ceremonial IT Support Manager hat and epaulettes, and I imagine sign something promising faithfully not to Tell All to *The Daily Mail*.

This could mean, then, that it's now All Potential All The Time although that in turn makes me wonder whether it will become a never-ending Potential Evaporated just as before. Still, I have at least resolved to cross off from my mental list for this year the seasonal 'Letter to Bruce about *SFC*', something that dates back to 2015 and simpler times when *SF Commentary* (and, sigh, *Trap Door*) still came through the letterbox. We will set aside the way that up to now this 'tradition' has gone unhonoured most years.

SF Commentary 114, then, and I think the two highlights are the 'authentic story' of Helena Binns and Rich Horton's analysis of 'Scanners Live in Vain' although (to paraphrase Roger McGough and 'Discretion is the better part of Valerie') all of it is nice.

I can't claim to have really known **Helena Binns**. I don't specifically recall her from Aussiecon III in 1999 but certainly remember her presence at later Australian conventions, photographing absolutely everything and everybody. I do have some sympathy with Elaine here, as I'm not that fond of having my photograph taken either, and Helena's zeal bordered on and possibly crossed over into intrusion. That said, and with my fan-historian hat on — Rob Hansen gave me one of his cast-offs and I wear it on significant fannish anniversaries — I do appreciate her docu-

mentation of the subculture. I am pretty sure I have one of Helena's CD-ROMs around here, perhaps from the 2007 Convergence 2 in Melbourne, and I should really make sure the files are properly backed up and, to the extent that I'm able to do it, labelled. I do recall one picture of Ross Temple and Simon Litten, sitting on the outer rim of a launch party and looking less than entirely excited by proceedings, which I always mentally tag as 'New Zealand fandom enjoying itself'.

One thing I didn't know, though, was that Helena's fannish roots were so deep. I hadn't seen any of the old Australian fanzines for which she provided art, and even if I had I wouldn't have connected her with the name 'Margaret Duce'. She says she first visited the MSFC in 1958 when she was only a few weeks over 16 and went to her first convention a few months after that, all rather remarkable for the time. I worry that I'm overlooking somebody here, but it seems to me that the early British female fans were usually attending meetings and conventions as wives, girlfriends, or sisters — for all that they were often fans in their own right too — or were much older, people like Ethel Lindsay and Ella Parker.

As always with accounts of the MSFC of this period, I look forward to the appearance of Somerset Place and the phrase 'hydraulic lift'.

Congratulations to the Club for making Helena a Life Member and prompting her to write this memoir.

I like to see in-depth coverage of a short story, and **Rich Horton** provides a fine account of '**Scanners Live in Vain**', both of the text and its publishing history. Not for the first time I'm tempted to read it. My problem is, and I really hesitate to say this given the general popularity of the author amongst older Australian readers, I've never really got on with **Cordwainer Smith**. We have the four volumes published in hardback by Gollancz in the late 1980s, *Norstrilia*, *The Rediscovery of Man*, *Quest of the Three Worlds*, and *The Instrumentality of Mankind*, and I've even read the last two albeit about thirty or more years back but ... I don't know, it feels like the kind of thing I should like and which I'd like to like and there are those oh-so-evocative titles ('No, No, Not Rogov!', 'The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-All', and 'Golden the Ship Was -- Oh! Oh! Oh!') and yet I just don't connect with it.

Andy Richards of Cold Tonnage bought up loads of remainders of those Gollancz hardbacks and they were steady sellers when we were running tables for him at conventions in the first fifteen or so years of the century. I was always rather surprised when we sold copies because

they'd been a fixture for so long and most of the customers had doubtless seen them again and again and yet one year for some reason something flipped for that person and they'd buy one or maybe all of them. I kept thinking, perhaps there's really something in this Cordwainer Smith fellow and maybe I should try again. Rich certainly convinces me that I like 'Scanners Live in Vain' without me having read it, so perhaps 2024 will be my personal Cordwainer Smith moment.

What else within the pages of No. 114? I think I had heard **Kim Huett** tell of the formative impact of **Brian Ash's *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction***. I was about to describe it as a book I knew of and had seen around, but it turns out that the place where I've seen it is on our bookshelves as we have a copy too, nestling between the behemoth *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Clute/Nicholls, 1993) and *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Clute/Grant, 1997). An illustration, I fear, of how rarely I consult once-vital reference works in the internet age. And a prompt to reconnect with our book collection in this dawning age of All Potential All The Time.

Interesting stuff by Kim about **Currawong Publishing**. I was particularly taken by the cover of *Time Marches Off* by Paul de Wreder (1942) with its blissed-out robot suspecting it's about to be snogged by blond woman with unlikely hair and very red cheeks. I wondered who was responsible for it.

John Andrews, apparently, the man behind several of those Currawong covers. And remarkably the book was reissued in 2020 with a cover that preserves the blonde-and-robot while ditching the futuristic cityscape background. It all sounds rather, er, striking: 'Follow the Ebb and Flow of the Tides of Love — and Lust — Over an Epic Journey of Two Thousand Years.' In the year 2050 we can look forward to a time of 'Sex, lies and surveillance', while in 2500 'Billy must wear feminine garments, just to prove that he's a man'. In 3500 'Harry stumbles into a "domestic arrangement" between a woman and a waistcoat-wearing tomcat' and in 4000 'Cave women hunt for men ... but do they want sex or food?'. Crikey. All this for £2.99 on Kindle.

Maybe in the dawning age of All Potential All The Time I will find time to read Mr de Wreder's

masterwork. Although maybe I don't have quite enough potential and time.

I imagine you're getting ready for list-making day, Bruce, gathering your notes and sharpening your pencils ready to sit down on Monday morning with a mug of coffee and decide whether your preliminary judgments of November will make it through to 31 December and secure the coveted title of Bruce's Best of 2023. Speaking for myself, after 2021, in which I bought no print books at all, I eased myself back in during 2022 (one) before this year buying an extravagant *six* paper books, five of which I have even read and the sixth I am partway through. A long way from the days when a trip to even a single convention would produce a poor haul if it *only* resulted in six new books.

E-books ... now e-books are another matter. I remain grateful to David Grigg and the other volunteers at **Standard Ebooks** for their mixture of classics and obscurities. It is a fine thing to know that should I ever feel moved to read *The Bolshevik Myth* by Alexander Berkman, *The Wrong Letter* by Walter S. Masterman, *The Benson Murder Case* by S. S. Van Dine or *Inspector French's Greatest Case* by Freeman Wills Croft, I can do so at no cost. Even when I am paying money I am unduly swayed by those titles **Amazon** chooses to offer to me at 99p — most recently, **Paul Lynch's** Booker-winning *Prophet Song*, set in a dystopian near-future Ireland — as I baulk at the thought of paying as much as £1.99. But I am not yet ready to commit to my best of the year when there are still 30 hours to go.

Best wishes for 2024...

(31 December 2023)

[*brg* Thanks, Mark, for your remarkably generous letter of comment, given that I have not located the latest *Banana Wings*, and probably won't. (But I will review it.) As is the habit of *SF Commentary*, No. 115 has swelled so that it is now necessary to publish 115 and 116 at the same time. That's mainly to accommodate the letter column, which I have split over the two issues.

In fact, yesterday I was gathering together all the letters of comments and WAHFs so that I could really begin editing the two issues. But this morning arrives one of the highlights of the year -- your letter of comment!*]

Feature letter: The year's discoveries

STEVE JEFFERY

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Vikki and I did our usual monthly morning stint behind the book table at the local church hall. Just as we were packing up I noticed sitting on top of one of the crates a book that I am sure may have been the book that first hooked me into being a science fiction reader, or certainly an sf short story reader.

This was a copy of **Edmund Crispin's *Best SF Stories 3*** (Faber, 1963). It would also have been my first introduction to **Cordwainer Smith** (**'The Game of Rat and Dragon'**) and must have pretty eye-opening back then. **Fredric Brown's 'Answer'**, although it has not aged well, and it now reads as a fairly obvious one-page shaggy dog (or god) story, even if people like Elon Musk are still getting all het up about AI computer overlords. (They should try reading **Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream'**. Or maybe not. I tried re-reading this a while ago and it's all a bit over-written and hysterical.)

What else is in there? The two that stand out immediately are **Tom Godwin's** problematical **'The Cold Equations'**. I must admit I skip-read this on re-reading because it does go on, and towards the end I was quite willing to push them both out the airlock myself. Since then, both *2001's* HAL and *Alien's* Bishop (and, more cynically, NHS performance targets) have shown what happens when you consider humans as expendable in meeting mission goals.

For me, the story that stood up on re-reading was **H. Beam Piper's 'He Walked Around the Horses'**. I like epistolary tales, and this was a delight, right down to the sign-off on the final letter.

Who remembers **Lion Miller** now? I admit the name was completely unfamiliar when I flicked through the contents page, but **Miller's 'The Available Data on the Worp Reaction'** worked upon re-reading (the same can't be said of **Leinster's 'The Wabblers'**, unfortunately) and had echoes of **Lewis Padgett's** classic **'Mimsy Were the Borogroves'**. (I must re-read that again sometime. It came to mind again a few days ago, although I

can't remember the context.)

A mixed bag, then, but I can see why it would have grabbed me at an impressionable age as a fledgling sf reader and sent me off to fill an unreasonable amount of shelf space with as many sf story anthologies as I could find in secondhand shops and Woolworth's dump bins — a lot of which I still have. I probably even have my own copy of this anthology already, but it's a bit of a nightmare negotiating the spare room, which has become a dumping ground for duvets, cases, backpacks, and old Amazon boxes, to get at where I've shelved them.

[*brg* My first anthology was a little paperback from Panther Books, *Asleep in Armageddon*, edited by Michael Sissons, published in 1962, when I was 15. I received pocket money enough only to buy a few of the SF magazines, so I'm not quite sure how I acquired a copy of that anthology. Probably a Christmas or birthday present. I remember that the best story in it was A. E. Van Vogt's 'Enchanted Village', the best thing he ever wrote.

My next anthology was Brian Aldiss's *Penguin Science Fiction*, which included many Golden Age favourites. It took a long time for me to build up enough of a collection of anthologies to gain an idea of the main authors of the Golden Age.*]

Current reading, before I got sidetracked, is **Doerr's *Cloud Cuckoo Land***. It seems to be taking me longer and longer to read books lately. It took best part of a month to read **Powers' *The Over-story***, but it was worth it.

[*brg* It took me half of *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (the first 300 pages) to get an idea of what it is about. The second 300 pages run much faster. A great novel, but it could easily have been cut to a slimline 300 pages.*]

(24 July 2023)

You mention several stories in **Crispin's *Best SF 4*** that are also there among my favourites, although I need to see if I have **'A Subway Named Mobius'** anywhere else.

The trouble with owning too many anthologies is that stories are scattered all over the place in different volumes and you can spend longer look-

ing for one than it takes to read it (but hunting is sometimes an entertainment in itself).

Just browsing idly along one shelf I found **Smith's 'The Ballad of Lost C'mell', 'Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons'**, and a couple of **Lafferty** stories that would all pay re-reading.

One title I remember is **'A Child of All Ages'**, but I can never remember who it was by, or where I have it.

I noted that two other fans (Jerry Kaufman, I think, and more recently, Andy Hooper) seem to have hit on **Erin Morgenstern's 'The Night Circus'**, which I remember reading and enjoying, but I can't find the Prophecy contribution where I wrote about it. I remember since reading Morgenstern's **'Starless Sea'**, which I enjoyed maybe even more. (It has cats, a secret hidden library, and a cross-time love affair — what's not to like there?)

I did note the review of **Ryka Aoki's 'Light from Uncommon Stars'** in *SFC* 112, which I need to add to my list if I don't already have it. I may have to add **Emily St. John Mandel's 'Sea Of Tranquility'** in there too.

Music:

We are currently working through the CDs I got Vikki for her birthday: **Christine and the Queens' 'Paranoia Angels'** and **Tanya Donnelly's 'Swan Song Series'** (a 3 disc set). I bought the latter on a whim, as both of us were fans of Belly, and this one is definitely growing on us the more we listen to it.

(25 July 2023)

Google (and Wikipedia) is your friend. **'Child of All Ages'**, that story I remembered, was by **P. J. (Bill) Plauger**, for which Wiki says:

Plauger has written a number of science fiction stories, notably 'Child of All Ages', first published in the March 1975 issue of *Analog*, which features a protagonist who has achieved immortality at the cost of never growing beyond childhood. The story was nominated for the Hugo and Nebula awards in 1976. Plauger won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1975 — notably beating John Varley for the award — and subsequently sold a story to *The Last Dangerous Visions*.

On a more nerdy note, Wiki says Plauger was a software engineer, co-author of *Elements of Programming Style*, and credited with inventing the concept of 'paired programming', which is

something we have recently adopted at my own workplace.

Seen:

a very strange film last night on Horror Xtra Channel, **Ascent**. A ragtag and fractious group of special ops soldiers (see also *Dog Soldiers*, *Aliens*, etc.) on a mission find themselves trapped in a building on a never-ending staircase. Every exit they find leads them back out to that the start of their mission (in which their original selves are already present) and they have to find a way to break the endless cycle. Eventually they succeed, are flown back to a debriefing in a building which turns out to be ... you guessed it ...

(26 July 2023)

SFC issues 113 and 114;

I don't appear to have anything by **Michael Coney** on my shelves. There's a metaphorical (although not literal: the shelves are too tightly packed for that) gap where my collection runs from Clarke (Arthur C., Lindsay, Susannah) through to Crowley, stopping midway only at Compton. I wondered whether we might have something in the separately shelved assorted Masterworks, most likely in the Gollancz yellow-back series, but apparently not there either. There might be something in the box of old SFBC hardbacks in the shed, but it's too cold to investigate. This the point where I start to regret not indexing my old anthologies so I can find whether I have any stories by selected authors. Hey ho, maybe that's a retirement project, although maybe one that will go the same way as my trial attempt to database my CD collection, which ran out of steam when I reached the limit of the free 'scan the catalogue number and look up the tracks' database I downloaded from somewhere.

Not that that prevents me enjoying **Daniel King's** take on Coney's fiction that kicks off *SFC* 113, any more than it does with other articles about works and authors I am not familiar with, although I must have read at least some Coney in the past. I'm pretty sure I have read **Syzygy** and **Hello Summer, Goodbye** in the past, and even have a memory of having a yellow-jacketed hard-back copy of the latter, reproduced here. And I'm fairly sure I have read **The Celestial Steam Locomotive** in the past, if only for the title.

I'm still mulling over King's aside that 'virtually all SF' fails in its attempt to depict the alien because the very act of translating alien thought or speech into something that the reader can latch on to inevitably reduces aliens to the *Star Trek* (or

worse, *Dr Who*) level of people in funny suits. I'm trying to think of cases where this doesn't happen and can only come up with **Bishop's 'Death and Designation Among the Asadi'** and **Tiptree's 'Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death'**, though we might make a case for the Presger in **Ann Leckie's *Translation State*** (where the 'translation' between alien and human is effected through the gory and hilarious attempts of the engineered Presger Translators to learn polite human habits like sitting in chairs and serving tea and cakes rather than disembowelling and eating each other) or the hive-mind alien swarm in **Arkady Martine's excellent *A Desolation Called Peace***. It's a good question: how can you depict alienness without translating it into human terms? It's noticeable that the principal protagonists of these two books (and also of that in the movie *Arrival* — based on a **Ted Chiang** short story) are all, in their own way, translators by aptitude, calling, or profession.

I thought about the **Chris Priest** novel while I was being nagged to add things to my Christmas wish list by Vikki, but wondered how many times Priest was going to drive down the same road of twins and time travel paradoxes before (or if ever) he worked that out of his system.

After some spectacular examples and thought and perspectives on AI art from both **Dennis Callegari** and **Jim Burns** (yes, it's a new tool, and can just as easily yield predictable, cliched, and sometimes risible results when people just throw a few prompts into a free online service, but they said much the same thing about the airbrush and probably before that photography. I'm less easy, though, about the copyright theft involved in training these models — even more so with their text/story generator incarnations).

SFC 114 ventures into the sadder territory of remembering people we've lost. A bleak reminder that we are all much of an age now and time is not going to stand still for any of us or our friends.

The bit that arrested me scrolling though SFC 114 the first time was the cover picture of **The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction** in **Kim Huett's 'My Fannish Origins'**. I still have a copy of that, as the first non-fiction critical work on sf that I bought back when brontosaurus still roamed the earth (and well before people decided they didn't actually exist after all, or rescinded that decision a bit later. Trying to track its current status through Google throws up a minefield of competing claims and counter claims in no chronological order). The *VESF* introduced me not just to books and authors I might not have discovered, and sf films, but artists such as **Virgil Finlay** (I slavishly copied more than one of these,

including Finlay's Sphinx illustration for Wells's *The Time Machine* when practising shading and stippling techniques) but also, unusually, to the whole idea of sf fandom and fanzines, something I hadn't even guessed at. It still has pride of place on my shelves because it is a thing of joy to look through.

Again, a first stop-off point when I downloaded this issue was the books column. I dithered about **M. John Harrison's *Wish I Were Here*** at the time, but after reading a subsequent review in the *Guardian* and hearing someone discuss it in a book program on the radio it's gone on the list for the next visit to Waterstones or Amazon.

I'm not much of a crime buff — apart from our addiction to Scandi Noir series on TV — but I paused at the cover shot and title of **Janice Hallet's *The Mysterious Case of the Alperton Angels***, since I worked just down the road from Alperton (I was based in Perivale). I remember Alperton not so much for angelic presences but chiefly for its range of multi-ethnic grocers and shops, including several where you could buy Indian sweets that could induce a day-long sugar rush rivalled only by the baklava in a nearby Greek bakery.

I've still got to go back and properly read the articles on Cordwainer Smith and the follow-up interview with Mike Coney. We've been distracted by a plethora of quiz shows over the Xmas period, including a new post-New Year addiction to the UK version of *Jeopardy*, and our daily dose of *Battle-Bots*, the US version of *Robot Wars* but with the brakes off. Despite which I have managed a satisfying amount of reading, partly due to a couple of weeks accrued holiday at the end of the year plus a cold. I've just recently finished **R. F. Kuang's *Babel***, and before that **Arkady Martine's *A Desolation Called Peace***, **Sayata Murata's *Life Ceremony*** (a library find, and rather wonderful and odd, if some of the stories are not for anyone squeamish about eating human flesh — not as a zombie fest, but as a post-death celebratory meal in which the deceased is prepared and served for their friends' enjoyment). Also **Alliette Bodard's fantasy *The House of Shattered Wings***, **T. J. Klune's *The House on the Cerulean Sea*** and **S. A. Corey's *Leviathan Wakes*** (there's a plot in there struggling to emerge from the overload, and makes me wonder about viewing the three-series box set of ***The Expanse*** that I still have to get round to. Though I still haven't watched Series Three of *American Gods*, which has now been joined on the shelf by *The Sandman*).

Someday when — if — I finally retire.

(15 January 2024))

BELINDA GORDON
Darlington WA 6070

Thank you so much for the three copies of *SF Commentary 112*, containing the wonderful tribute to Dad [**Lee Harding**]. Such a true delight to read and to have.

Dad kept an original copy of his *Canto 1*, which is in my care, along with a copy of *The Metaphysical Review 22/23* (1995), which has a picture of Dad on the front cover with Leigh, Sally, and John. Treasures!

(15 July 2023)

To Pa: just thinking and remembering only, and already, four months since we lost you. Months filled with a deep sadness at saying that final goodbye, but also for all the months leading up to it when we felt we had lost everything. Alongside the stroke, the falls, the in and out of hospital as your health steadily declined and you gave up the fight. That was so hard to witness and be a part of.

Since then, four months of constantly being reminded of your passing, a maelstrom of emotions — mostly held at bay so I could try and enjoy life a little, whilst also engaging in the endless hours of communications, decision-making, sorting, researching, form-filling, packaging up, and passing on your treasured possessions, managing your legacy/your life, now that you're gone. Trying desperately to honour your life, your work, and your wishes, and the rights and wishes of what remains of your family. And it continues, like it does for Nik and Amber, and I miss you and Rik so very much. Especially when I revisit images and memories of all the good times.

Like the last good time we shared together as a family. Mum's 80th. You were 83, and Covid lockdown for Melbourne was a heartbeat away. You were relatively well, and as always, so content to be observing the love and joy of family. Your granddaughter captured it — some of your favourite photos — and you were quick to express your pride in them, from a photographer's point of view of course. I *love* these photos.

I wish you'd come to live with us all before then. Because Covid snatched the life out of you. It's taken a lot from this family. Too much. But I understand now, how important it was for you to stay in the place that fulfilled all of your 'spiritual' needs. Friends, peers, family ties, your work and life history, arts, culture, food, intellectual stimulation, and all your favourite 'haunts' (bookshops,

restaurants, cinemas, theatres). All this provided a sense of 'home' and 'place' that nothing else ever could. Time and experiences have made so many things clearer.

Meeting in Melbourne (for many, again — but not since I was a child) so many of your lifelong friends, and receiving their kind words, support and encouragement has been an unexpected blessing. Just being in their company for your wake clarified many things for me. I know I can continue to rely on them for advice, and further accounts of your incredible career, moving forward.

Things have been on hold a bit this last six weeks. We welcomed our second precious grandson, and then one after another we all got very sick, him included. He had us worried for a bit. Many things have been cancelled or abandoned, which only makes all the grief a bit harder to bear. We've still got sickies in the house and family, and a way to go before getting back to 'normal', but we're getting there. We are looking after each other and I am so very grateful to have the love and support of Mum, of family, and of my lifelong and dear friends ... just as you did. Those who have been through this themselves certainly know what to say and do to help. So, I'm doing the best I can. And that's ok.

The sun is shining today and spring is on its way. I still think of you, and Rik, every single day. The yellow roses are for you, the orange and red are for Rik, with all my love.

(14 August 2023)

SALLY YEOLAND
Gilberton LPO, PO Box 4049,
Preston VIC 3072

Today it's three years since we said goodbye to John Bangsund. Please raise a glass or even several glasses to him, as he's still so very much missed.

And here's a photo to remember John at ANZAPAc on October 1978. It was at John Foyster and Jenny Bryce's Marine Parade St Kilda art deco first floor flat, which had a wonderful conservatory at the back, which just happened to be big enough for a mini SF convention. And I guess that John was holding a copy of the latest ANZAPA mailing.

And for those who have never heard of ANZAPA, here's a link explaining what it is: <https://fan-cyclopedia.org/ANZAPA> and a second link with some samples: <https://anzapa.org>



Sally Yeoland and John Bangsund, ANZAPA 10th Anniversary Convention, 1978.

And while I'm at it a link to John's fanzines: https://fanac.org/fanzines/by_editor.html and just select B for Bangsund. And thanks again to those very kind souls who spent so many hours collecting, sorting, and then scanning all of John's fanzines which was such a labour of love and a mammoth task.

(22 August 2023)

**APOLLO PAPPS
Tecoma VIC 3160**

Many thanks for the *SFC* 112. I haven't read it yet. It's certainly an improvement on the SF fanzines of the 70s printed on Roneo duplicators.

Can you help with two items ?

I can't find a short story written by Lee Harding in an anthology of stories. His story was 'Mistress of the Mind'.

In an issue of an SF fanzine in the seventies, I wrote 'Camping with Lee Harding'. Don Symons also had a contribution. Both were critted in a later issue. I can't find my copy.

(4 August 2023)

[*brg* The reference to 'Mistress of the Mind' was easy to find, thanks to *The MUP Encyclopaedia of Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy* (ed. Paul Collins). Lee's story was published in an anthology, *New Writings 18* (ed. E. J. Carnell, 1971).

Finding an article in an old fanzine is not easy. Your piece must have been in a John Bangsund fanzine. Maybe the Bangsund archivists Perry Middlemiss and Irwin Hirsh can tell you where to find 'Camping with Lee Harding'.*]

**ROB GERRAND
11 Robe Street, St Kilda VIC 3182**

Thanks for including **David Grigg's** review of my *The Millennium Job*, and also for printing my sf poem 'Stranded' .

(2 July 2023)

Six years ago today **Brian Aldiss** died. A seminal writer, and a very generous man. (He wrote the introduction to my anthology *Transmutations*.) He kept writing at the top of his game right to the end.

How many other writers have produced so many acclaimed works over such a long time? — from his 1960s early classics such as *Hothouse*, *Non-Stop*, and *Greybeard*, to 'Helliconia', his extraordinary climate change trilogy in the 1980s, to *Super-Toys Last All Summer Long* (the basis of the Kubrick/Spielberg film *A.I.*), to his superb late novels *The Cretan Teat*, *Jocasta*, *Walcot*, and *Comfort Zone*.

In between he wrote the best-selling 'Horatio Stubbs' trilogy, experimental fiction such as *Report on Probability A* and *Barefoot in the Head*, edited more than 40 collections, wrote short stories that read today as well as when they were first published, wrote the book of sf criticism *Trillion Year Spree*, as well as poetry. He painted too.

A promethean spirit now stilled.

(22 August 2023)

Thanks for *SFC* 114, which arrived today. Before reading the issue, I noticed that the middle photo on page 13 is the same as the one above; you might be able to fix that in the eVersion.)

(30 November 2023)

[*brg* That page is correct in the colour/internet versions; something went wrong in generating the print version. I know not what.*]

Continued on next loc — in *SFC* 115

***SFC* 115 contains about 60 letters of comment, more artwork from Alan White and Dennis Callegari, a column from John Hertz, and much much more.**

SF Commentary 115

55th Anniversary Edition

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84 pages



Dennis Callegari: 'Robert Heinlein's "And He Built a Crooked House".'