

brg 29 gillespie grigg langford murnane priest

The background of the page is an abstract, layered composition. It features a series of concentric, wavy lines that create a sense of depth and movement. The color palette is primarily earthy, with shades of brown, tan, and beige, transitioning into cooler tones of purple and lavender towards the right side. Overlaid on this background is a grid of dotted lines, which appear to be part of a larger, possibly digital or architectural, structure. The overall effect is one of complex, organic geometry.

No. 29. A fanzine for ANZAPA (February 2001 mailing) by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Collingwood, Victoria 3066. Phone & Fax: (03) 9419-4797. Email: gandc@mira.net. Cover: design by Bruce Gillespie, graphic by either Elaine Cochrane or Ditmar (Dick Janssen), created by DJFractals.

Apology to the President

Gillespie? Who's he? Didn't he used to write mailing comments for ANZAPA? Voted him a few years ago, didn't I? Won't do that again.

Yes, here I am with guilt splashed all over my face. Every two months Bill Wright spends days, even weeks, conscientiously writing endless pages of mailing comments and Funny Bits from all over for *IRS*, and all I can do is raid the biscuit jar of nostalgia and give a quick rundown of my Lists of This and That. Bill must be the first Official Bloody President who hasn't immediately collapsed in a corner as soon as he's won the honour. Not only does he encourage *les autres*, he sets such a cracking pace that we have to produce 260-page mailings to keep up with him.

For my sings of tardiness and slothfulness, I offer an apology to our noble President. Will he offer me a Presidential pardon? Or has he become really ambitious? Will he offer me a papal dispensation?

Why no mailing comments from me? Because I'm way behind in reading the mailings. Excuse me if I don't offer condolences for a death in the family or a horrible accident or any of those things that keep happening to ANZAPAns. Next time I'll be up date.

I really was going to catch up reading my mailings of ANZAPA and *Acnestis* during January. I thought there would be a slump between *Paying Jobs* during January and February. This has not happened. I'm delighted and undelighted to say that publishers have kept sending me work, and I keep slaving over a very hot computer.

In the middle of January I was going to stop reading books and catch up on apa reading. In mid January I pulled out the unread ANZAPA contributions and was sitting down for a good long word-wallow when Lawrence Person reminded me I'm supposed to review *The Avram Davidson Treasury* for the next issue of *Nova Express*. Review it? I hadn't even read it yet! So I read the entrancing *Avram Davidson Treasury*. Then *The Enquiries of Dr Eszterhazy*, also by Avram Davidson. And *What Strange Stars and Skies* and *Strange Seas and Shores*, the two main Davidson SF anthologies. (I've owned the latter since 1972.) Then *The Investigations of Avram Davidson*, a splendid collection of his mystery stories.

I can't get enough of this writer. I should have discovered him years ago. Alan Stewart is willing to lend me two collections I don't have. And now I'm reading Davidson's *Adventures in Unhistory*. I feel a Nova Mob talk coming on.

Apart from reading Davidson books, I've seen a few movies (best so far for 2001 are David O. Russell's *Flirting with Disaster*, David Fincher's *Seven* and Clint Eastwood's *Space Cowboys*), worked a lot, and mooched around the house suffering from heat exhaustion. There have been occasional cooler days between heat waves, but it seems that the basic underlying feeling since Christmas has been *heat*. The blokes from the Weather Bureau talk merrily on their radio spot about the huge mass of hot air that currently covers the south of the continent. Not only does this big glob of hot air prevent cool changes reaching inland, but it stops any of the subtropical rainfall (120 mm overnight rainfall recently in Sydney) north of the Murray from stretching south of the Murray. We're now entering the fifth year of drought in Victoria, with the only relief a few rainy weeks last October. George Turner's gloomy climate predictions in *The Sea and Summer* are coming true. Doom! doom!

I'll just have to catch up on past mailings during February and March. Meanwhile, I recommend a real treasure I found on the Web: David Grigg's collected short stories. *Islands: An Anthology*, which has to be the best Australian SF book of 2000, but David hasn't told anybody about it yet! (That's my real objection to Web sites: just because you put something up there doesn't mean you've told anybody anything.) It's available in several formats from www.rightword.com.au/ptero/article.asp?id=95&type=9 or search for 'David Grigg' or 'Grilled Pterodactyl' at google.com. *Islands* has all my favourite David Grigg stories, plus a few unpublished pieces. David's site also has a wide selection of thirty years of his non-fiction writing.

When in doubt, reprint. Suggestions for *SFC* or *TMR* reprints are welcome. I had thought of reprinting every issue of *SFC*, one at a time, from No. 9 onwards (since everybody owns a copy of the *SFC Reprint*, don't you?). Or should I do theme issues, such as the 'Christopher Priest special'?

A few people in ANZAPA might remember the original publication of the three reviews of Chris Priest's first three novels, but nobody would have seen my article about *The Inverted World*, or Dave Langford's interview with Chris Priest because (a) it was published in *SFX*, never imported to Australia, and (b) *SFX* cut the interview.

Welcome to . . .

THE CHRISTOPHER PRIEST SPECIAL

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST talks to David Langford

A much shortened and differently edited version of this interview and the accompanying material appeared in issue #4 of *SFX* magazine (dated September 1995, published August).

MAIN INTERVIEW

Christopher Priest's all too infrequent novels are eagerly awaited by countless readers inside and outside the sf scene. As well as winning or being shortlisted for the usual international sf awards (notably, receiving the 1974 BSFA Award for *Inverted World*), he's also a veteran of the first Best of Young British Novelists promotion; and his book jackets feature enthusiastic comments from John Fowles. To general enthusiasm and popping of champagne corks, the first Priest novel in five years appeared at last in September 1995: *The Prestige*.

Chris is married to fellow-novelist Leigh Kennedy; their twin children's names can be found on the new book's dedication page. These days the family lives in Hastings, so it seemed logical that Chris and I should chat on the seaside promenade under the blinding sunshine of Britain's 1995 heatwave. Is candyfloss bad for cassette recorders? Will the harsh cries of gulls drown out vital answers? Interviews are fraught with unreliability . . .

Chris, you're regarded as one of the more 'literary' authors working in or near sf, but the editor of *SFX* was morbidly fascinated by your brush with *Doctor Who* and asked specially about this: can you bear to tell the story?

I'll take on almost any writing job, provided it sounds interesting. *Doctor Who* was like that. The program is a challenge to a writer: a tiny budget, a more or less fixed cast of characters, a fairly inflexible storyline . . . and millions of fans who'll beat the shit out of you if you overlook a crucial fact mentioned in an undertone by a minor character in the second part of a story first transmitted in 1968 . . .

But you still bravely did a script.

I wrote two scripts, not one. The first was while Douglas Adams was script editor, before the *Hitchhiker* books burst on the world. Douglas rang me up one day and said the producer felt the show was drifting away from the heartland of sf, and wanted some 'real' sf writers involved. I went in and met Douglas, and he commissioned a four-parter called *Sealed Orders*. I wrote this, and it was accepted but never produced. This was because of upheavals in the show while

I was writing. Douglas Adams pissed off to become rich and famous, the producer also moved on, and by the time I delivered my story the 'brief' (the background story) had changed.

And what about script number two?

The BBC commissioned a second story called *The Enemy Within*, because of the first going wrong. Again it was written and paid for, but once again upheavals in the BBC wreaked havoc. They inflicted a total of three different script editors on me, who all mucked around with the story and demanded different things . . . and the new producer turned out to be an appalling little [word obscured by microphone noise, and triumphant seagull cries], who was more interested in being a media star than actually working with a lowly writer like me. It all led inevitably to a bust-up. I grabbed a parachute and took a header through the nearest emergency hatch.

Have you done much other TV/radio work?

In theory I'm currently writing a three-part sf/thriller original for BBC-TV called *The Cull*, based on the Hungerford massacre. I actually passed through Hungerford on the day of the shooting! Now the script is languishing somewhere in the Beeb and the contract is about to lapse.

I did an episode of *Return to the Labyrinth* for HTV, and Thames TV did one of my stories, *The Watched*, as a 30-minute play. A couple of years ago I dramatised *The Glamour* as a play for BBC Radio 4. At present most of my later novels are under option for movies, of varying likelihood.

People say my books are visual, but of course I think of them as novels, not first drafts for screenplays.

I read in that terrible scandal sheet *Ansible* (cough, cough) that you were in the studio for the recording of *The Glamour* and were pretty impressed . . .

Yes. The studio was purpose built for radio drama, and was almost new. It was a surreal place . . . built to allow just about every conceivable aural circumstance. One bit was carpeted,

BLUFF YOUR WAY AS A PRIEST EXPERT!

INDOCTRINAIRE (1970)

Slightly abstract and surreal tale about a chap held prisoner in a version of Brazil. The most memorable sf plot device is the 'live' hand growing out of a table which, during interrogations, points at our hero in a fearfully menacing way.

Priest: 'It was a period. There are a couple of good bits, but unfortunately I can't remember what they are.'

FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND (1972)

Disorienting cut-up-and-reshuffled narrative of nasty events in an England swamped by African refugees from a nuclear war. At the time our author was dead proud of having slipped a rogue piece into the jigsaw story, one that doesn't actually fit anywhere.

Priest: 'The first book of mine about someone who misremembers things. This has become something of a theme, based on one of my own failings. Another period piece, this is the one novel of mine where one hostile review wiped out any cheerful thoughts I ever had about the book, and I haven't been able to look at it since.'

INVERTED WORLD (1974)

This world really is inverted, geometrically transformed from a sphere to a hyperboloid whose equator and poles taper off to infinity (which makes Larry Niven's *Ringworld* look a bit puny, though later on it was topped by mathematically 'bigger' infinities in Rudy Rucker's *White Light*). Across the distorted surface trundles a whole city on wheels, fleeing disaster . . . Mindboggling stuff, shortlisted for the Hugo award.

Priest: 'The best opening sentence I ever wrote (even better in French!), and in the middle of the book is the best sf scene I ever wrote. I dined out on these two bits for about ten years after the book came out. I wouldn't be able to write *Inverted World* now, because I'd be too inhibited and self-conscious.'

REAL-TIME WORLD (collection, 1974)

Uneven collection of early stories, with two interestingly prophetic items: the grisly 'The Head and the Hand', starring a performance artist who chops bits off himself before huge audiences, and the title story with its foreshadowing of later Priest preoccupations.

Priest: 'This book happened because *Inverted World* did well. To be frank, I think it was too soon to put together a collection. But scarcity has its own dynamics, and the hardback has become by a long way the most collectable of my titles.'

THE SPACE MACHINE (1976)

A cheery romp: a gentle pastiche of H. G. Wells which begins with the assumption that *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* were episodes in the same alternative history, and helpfully fills in several gaps. Much of the action takes place on Mars, and we finally learn how the Martian invaders launched their capsules . . .

Priest: 'I thoroughly enjoyed writing this one, probably more than I should have done. For me it represents a kind of personal peak, because I wrote it in an extrovert mood during a happy period of my life, at a time when I wasn't too broke, and I was not yet feeling held back by other people putting labels on me. Everything went smoothly until publication day, when the *Observer* memorably observed, "Three hundred pages of homicidal tedium", since when I have written in a state of politically correct humility.'

A DREAM OF WESSEX (1977)

The sf gimmick is predicting the future (or at least, a self-consis-

tent possible future) by consensual hallucination in a kind of cyberspace. But the personalities of certain experimenters overshadow mere logical extrapolation . . .

Priest: 'This novel represents a kind of valediction to trad sf, because it explicitly describes the process of futuristic imagining, then subverts the whole business. It has recently been described as the novel that predicted virtual reality, but that's because whoever said it hadn't spotted the subversion.'

AN INFINITE SUMMER (collection, 1979)

A mixed bag of atmospheric short stories. Besides the much-anthologised title piece this includes 'Palely Loitering' (a BSFA Award winner) and the Hugo-shortlisted, TV-adapted novella 'The Watched'.

Priest: 'Another chunk of mid-1970s Priest, a bit raw in places, a bit soppy in others, but with a particular mood throughout that I haven't caught since.'

(*An Infinite Summer* and *The Affirmation* centre on the 'Dream Archipelago' venue; two more published stories with this setting exist, 'The Cremation' and 'The Miraculous Cairn' — not collected with the others except in translated omnibus editions published in France and Germany. Priest: 'I have been secretly hoping I might one day get a British or American publisher to do the same, but would want to rewrite all the stories first.')

THE AFFIRMATION (1981)

Indescribable. Read it! As one reviewer (oh all right, Ian Watson) noted, this book — which only *seems* to end abruptly in mid-sentence — can be re-read with a new understanding as its own sequel.

Priest: 'The first of the novels to make a deliberate effort to deal in a new and realistic way with stock sf ideas: in this case, immortality. The whole novel, from beginning to end, subverts reader expectations: everything is unreliable. As a result I think *The Affirmation* has the best overall plot I ever wrote, and also the best and most surprising plot revelation . . . on the other hand I think it has rough edges, caused by my being a bit nervous about what I was up to.'

THE GLAMOUR (1984)

H. G. Wells's invisibility is physical: light somehow passes undisturbed through the invisible person. G. K. Chesterton's psycho-logical invisibility (see his Father Brown story 'The Invisible Man', which Chris insists he's never read) applies to people and things you don't notice, can't take in, have forgotten even though they're in plain sight . . . *The Glamour* passes through this territory and goes far beyond.

Priest: 'Another go at a stock sf theme: this time invisibility. Again, nothing about the novel can be trusted. I look back on this book and enjoy the plot, and the strength of the central metaphor (invisibility = memory loss), but once again I feel uncomfortable with certain short passages. *The Glamour* was once spoken of as a major Hollywood "vehicle" for Barbra Streisand and Christopher Walken, a fact which ten years later *still* has the power to make my goolies shrink in horror.'

THE QUIET WOMAN (1990)

A deceptively understated tale whose backdrop is a withering extrapolation of Thatcherite excess: the media prevented from reporting the awkward fact of Southern England being partly radioactive, the barely restricted power of a now-privatised Military Intelligence, and worse.

Priest: 'BBC-TV got hold of this one, dramatised it into a three-parter, hired a director, recce'd the locations . . . then did nothing until the contract expired. I was sorry about this, because apart from the obvious benefits of having a book on TV, I was dying to see how they would work out the story. This has an anti-plot: on the surface it's a story of a woman surviving a nuclear accident, but as soon as you delve into it nothing is certain any more.'

THE PRESTIGE (1995)

The Victorian era: and two stage magicians are deadly rivals leading strangely parallel lives. Each has his own unique version of a major magical illusion; each is baffled by the other's method; the two

another had bare boards, another flagstones, another gravel, etc. The staircase linking the two levels has three 'strips': bare wood for institutions, carpet for houses and stone for dungeons. There are numerous different doors to be slammed, opened, rattled, locked. There's a phone box in one corner, and even a car. I poked around, trying to imagine what someone would think were they to wake up in the room without knowing what it was used for!

What was the recording process like?

I assumed radio plays were recorded with a group of actors holding scripts and standing around one microphone. 'Ahem!' they said as they ticked me off. 'Only *The Archers* is done like that!'

The way my lot did it was almost like a stage play. The fight scene was meticulously rehearsed, with all the punches and *oof* noises arranged so they were close to microphones: several takes, with much falling over and bruising. Bed scenes are recorded in a bed (which folds out of the wall), with sheets! 'God, if I'd known this,' I said, 'I'd have put in a scene in a swimming pool.' The sound man visibly paled. 'We don't like swimming pool scenes . . .'

An authentic broadcasting secret! I'd never have guessed.

Nor do they like scenes in cars: too many familiar noises that change all the time — gears, traffic, etc. — and which have to be timed to the script. They still cut cabbages in half for beheadings ('not much call for that these days'), but I saw no coconut shells anywhere. The sound of a ring-pull beer can defies aural science: they had to go down to the vending machine and buy a few cans of Coke.

A highlight was listening to the effects people build up a car bomb from scratch, beginning with a dynamite explosion (sounded a bit like a door slamming), then layers added to give echo, reverberation, glass shattering, metal lumps skidding down the road, ground juddering, windows rattling, people screaming, alarm bells going. When this was played to the actors, two of them ducked — I too jumped out of my skin, and I knew it was coming! The BBC people were so pleased with it that they put it into the effects library. Me: 'Here, that's *my* car bomb!' They: 'Sorry, squire, it's ours now.'

I was awed by the manifest professionalism and hard work of it all; felt shagged out at the end, and I was just watching.

Radio lets listeners create their own mental pictures — but often the elements of a book that translate well to film or TV aren't the important ones. From your own novels, do you have favourite visual images? Would they translate?

There's a scene in *The Glamour* where the two main charac-

different secrets go beyond mere mirrors and trapdoors to be the central defining and distorting factor in their owners' lives. Compulsive stuff.

Priest: 'The newest one, and therefore still a favourite. I think for the time being I'm too close to it to have any idea how it fits in relation to the others, but the usual Priest stuff about misremembering is in there, and a plot with many intricate developments. This novel, with *Space Machine*, is the most widely researched of my books. I must by now know more about magic than most people, but I *still* don't understand how tricks are done . . . even when I find out.'

ters are driving along, and one of them suddenly realises that a third person is sitting in the car with them, who must have been there unnoticed for several days. This is a fairly crucial scene and it works 'visually', but I can't imagine how anyone could actually point a camera at it and film it. There's another scene in which a woman is raped by an invisible man, the point of which would presumably defy a camera. (But film-making isn't my game . . . so maybe there's a way.)

I remember a hair-raising surprise on similar lines to that 'third person' discovery, in *The Affirmation*.

The Affirmation has several similar scenes. There's one with a particular room painted white, and another with a manuscript that the central character has written. Many people have found these scenes surprising, not to say shocking, because of the visual jolts they contain. But they aren't the same kind of jolt you get from a horror movie, where something leaps out unexpectedly and scares the shit out of you. My shocks are based on a sudden devastating reversal of what the reader knows or believes.

Let's call it the 'Priest effect'. When did you first consciously do it?

I think it was when I was coming up to the end of the first draft of *The Space Machine*. There's a character called 'Mr Wells'. At first, I planned him to be H. G. Wells, the real-life author. He never felt right, though, and the book started to unravel. Then I suddenly realised that it made more sense to think of him as the unnamed first-person narrator of *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* . . . a fictional character, but with many of the characteristics of the author. This kicked the novel into a completely new arena, and I saw the story in a more subtle light. It made it less 'reliable': it was still a scientific romance in the Wellsian mould, but it was now in quotation marks; it was not just a re-creation or a pastiche, but a contemporary novel set in a metafictional past. This sounds as if I was tarting it up, but in reality it opened up more possibilities for jokes, plot development and character insights, so I think it made the novel more enjoyable.

After that, things were never quite the same. I can no longer take a plot seriously enough to go with it as bare plot. I'm always thinking; where's the flaw in this, where does the idea leak? Unreliability soon starts creeping in, and I cheer up no end.

But that subdued mischief in *The Space Machine* was something an inattentive reader could overlook. It's the unmistakable shocks in *The Affirmation* that make this your narrative breakthrough novel.

Yes, the first really noticeable ‘Priest effect’ is there. This is a key novel of mine, if anyone wants to work out where I stand in relation to the rest of sf.

Looking through your older stuff, I found traces of the ‘effect’ as far back as 1972 — in the short ‘Real-Time World’. Had the germ of it been with you even longer?

The first time I remember being jolted by this was in Fredric Brown’s sf novel *Project Jupiter*. Something of the sort happens there, and it left an impression on me. But I think I first noticed this narrative unreliability lark back in my teens, when I was still reading horror stories. I was fascinated by writers like Lovecraft, whose narrators famously go on scribbling even as the horrid thing is slithering up the garden path towards them. I kept trying to imagine this. What would I do if that happened to me? Sitting in my study, trying to set down an account of the horrible events of the afternoon . . . and blimey! It’s out there again! And this time it’s coming for me! Would I go on scribbling? Clearly not . . . so then who finished the story? The problem used to worry me for hours!

Like that dreaded English Composition subject: ‘The Hunt, told from the viewpoint of the quarry. (Remember the quarry must escape in order to tell the story.)’ Guaranteed to set any red-blooded schoolkid searching for a loophole in the ‘must escape’ rule . . . Although the sf audience is used to writers kicking holes in relativity or thermodynamics, don’t you get protests when you tinker with the narrative itself?

Actually, it’s a bit mixed. On the whole, the answer is no: sf readers seem sympathetic to the books themselves, although they don’t always like what I *say* I’m trying to do with them.

I get pretty perceptive reviews from sf critics, while out in the wider world it’s more patchy. The newspaper reviews are often bemused, and give their own game away: few of these critics have the foggiest idea what I’ve been up to for the last twenty-five years. The sf world is more actively tuned in to what writers like me are doing.

***Inverted World* seemed to go down particularly well with the ‘straight’ sf audience, receiving a BSFA award, Hugo shortlisting and so on. Do you remember what set you thinking about that weird, literally infinite world?**

[Long worried silence.] This goes back a long way . . . the middle 1960s, I think. I was wondering about time travel in a topographical sense: a movement to and fro across a certain place that would put you forward and back in time. I remember not getting anywhere with it for ages back then, but that’s where the city on rails eventually came from.

Didn’t time travel by moving to and fro across a special bridge emerge separately in your story ‘Palely Loitering’?

Yes. You can’t stamp out an idea once it’s taken hold!

And how did it connect with the notion of the hyperboloid world?

That came from something I learnt at school . . . one of those defining moments. The point about school was that my brain was stuck in neutral for most of the time. I day-dreamed all the way through senior school and never really

A PRIEST PRIMER

Perplexed about Priest? Croggled by Chris? Want to break down the barriers, and enter the world of subversive shockers? Where to begin?

Langford suggests: ‘Lazy readers can sample the short stories in *An Infinite Summer*, some of which share the “Dream Archipelago” setting also used in the very nifty *The Affirmation*. I’m mightily impressed by *The Prestige*, too.’

Priest says: ‘If you want trad sf, then *Inverted World* must be the one, but it’s no longer typical. *The Affirmation* is a good example of what I’m still trying to do now. *The Prestige* is exactly what I’m trying to do now.’

Internet Freebie: if you know how to do it, that Hugo-nominated Priest essay on Harlan Ellison’s fabled anthology can be had via anonymous FTP from <ftp.dcs.gla.ac.uk>, pathname `/pub/SF-Archives/Misc/Last_Deadloss_Visions-Chris.Priest` . . .

Or send e-mail to info-server@dcs.gla.ac.uk with the following lines in the body of your message:

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request documents
topic deadloss
request end
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. . . . and a copy will magically arrive by e-mail.

listened to what was going on. But even so I somehow got into the high stream for maths, and when I was about twelve we started on calculus. We reached the stuff about drawing graphs, and then rotating them about an axis and measuring the results. I didn’t see much point in that . . . but I started doodling, trying to imagine what the solids would look like. After a bit I came across the one where y equals the reciprocal of x , which even when scribbled on a scrap of paper looks pretty intriguing.

Somewhere along the way I must have conflated the two ideas. I wrote *Inverted World* in 1973. I was young then, everyone wore flares and had silly haircuts . . . that distant era when even Harlan Ellison’s *Last Dangerous Visions* seemed credible.

Speaking of which . . . do you have any idea why *The Book on the Edge of Forever*, your essay about this famous non-event, struck such a chord that it’s gone through many printings and got shortlisted for this year’s nonfiction Hugo?

To be honest I think there are two reasons, only one of which is to my credit. The essay started as a conscious exercise in investigative journalism. You don’t get much of that in the sf world, and the Ellison non-anthology was a God-given story just waiting to be written. I think it came as sheer novelty to most people. All those lies and evasions, the bragging and boasting, the promises and betrayals. The story has a horrid fascination when it’s set out factually.

At first I thought that people would simply read the story, say tut-tut, and pass on to something else. What I hadn’t counted on was the army of Ellison camp-followers. These come in all persuasions, from the worst sort of toady up to a kind of fanatical armed militiaman, bent on crazed revenge against Ellison for some long-ago slight, real or imaginary. When my essay first came out I got piles of mail from these types, respectively threatening me, and urging me to put on camo gear and pack a machine pistol. At this point I realised the thing could run and run.

So long as people keep pushing . . .

Latterly, it’s been egged on by Ellison himself. It seems that

every time interest dies down, Ellison pops up to threaten me with something, or to make up some bizarre new explanation of his inertia. As you know, in recent weeks he's been comparing himself wonderfully with Michelangelo, working slowly but surely in the Sistine Chapel, while an angry pope rages below, insensitive as ever to genius. All this makes me think that in some odd way my essay gratifies his ego.

You've also released the essay on Internet, which helps keep it going. But (he asked for the benefit of puzzled readers), that version is mysteriously called *The Last Deadloss Visions* . . . ?

Years ago I used to publish a fanzine called *Deadloss*, so when I wrote the first version of the essay, that title sort of presented itself naturally.

Have you used the famously vast resources of Internet in other ways, in connection with your books?

The net is still too disorganised and unwieldy to be a really useful source of reference material, but the stuff is there if you know how to hunt around.

For *The Prestige* I downloaded several long texts about Nikola Tesla, but these were only useful in tiny bits. In the end a visit to the science library at Imperial College gave me what I really needed to know about him, and in fact most of the 'hard' research for *The Prestige* was either practical (interviewing magicians and watching them perform) or from books.

But the Acknowledgements do mention a certain Usenet newsgroup . . .

Yes, I discovered alt.magic, where practising stage magicians meet to chat and swap ideas. Or that's what I thought before I quietly joined. As in a lot of literary research, serendipity is the real name of the game. I'd hoped to pick up a few conjuring tips, but the threads in alt.magic actually fell into two much more interesting subjects.

One was obsessive jealousy about David Copperfield . . . this is the magician famous for large-scale illusions (like making the Statue of Liberty vanish), but who is actually much better at smaller stuff, particularly when he works with kids. He's unquestionably brilliant at this, the best of the lot, and the others are all mad with curiosity about how he does his tricks. The other thread was obsessive secrecy about protecting their *own* magical techniques! I had already decided that jealousy and secrecy were to be the main themes, but that newsgroup gave me a real insight into the mentality of magicians. It's all in the novel now.

Many writers go on and on about how serendipity really works: the perfect idea, fact or mood magically pops up in real life just when needed. Are you often lucky that way?

Yes, but you have to create the circumstances in which the luck can strike! Once I'm in the thick of a novel I'm always amazed at how many ideas turn up out of the blue: fragments of overheard chat, bits you see on TV, even some terrible holiday knick-knack which has been lying around your house unnoticed for years. All these can suddenly seem relevant to what you're working on. My novels have stuff like this growing all over them. The point is, though, that the same ideas would instantly wither if the soil was barren.

In *The Prestige* I was struck by what seems a highly significant anecdote about a Chinese stage magician who all his life pretended to be virtually crippled as part of the deception that made his best trick work. A real story?

Yes, that anecdote is genuine, and was what originally suggested the idea of the book. This particular magician is often muddled up with another one with an almost identical name, who is in some ways even more interesting. 'Chung Ling Soo' was actually an American (real name William Campbell) who performed as a Chinese, in a direct lift from my man, Ching Ling Foo. It was 'Soo' who was famously shot while trying to catch a bullet in his teeth.

Maybe he'd written an essay on Harlan Ellison . . . Another link to reality is the memoir on stage magic by your character Borden, with a supposed modern edition from Dover Publications Inc. I idly wondered whether you had in mind the Dover reprint of the 1898 *Magic* by Albert A. Hopkins, of which I've got a copy?

I used the Hopkins book, but the real influence was another Dover facsimile, called *Exclusive Magical Secrets* by Will Goldston. This provided the model for the book within the book. Goldston's original was sold with a lock and key (nodded at in the novel, when we learn a particular notebook has a lock), whereas Borden's book is described as 'oath protected'; they seem to have gone in for these gimmicks in the past. Dover are just about the only mainstream publisher with a magic list.

Did you go to magicians' performances as part of your research? If so, were you still impressed, amazed, baffled?

Last year's meeting of the IBM (International Brotherhood of Magicians) was in Eastbourne, just down the coast from here, so I grabbed the chance and went to their gala show. Ninety-nine per cent of the audience was made up of professional magicians, and highly appreciative they were too. This tends to underline the fact that performance skills matter more than secrets (since presumably most of them would know how the tricks were 'done').

I quickly found my boredom threshold for sleight of hand is very low indeed. About half the show consisted of people doing clever but tedious things with playing cards. What I preferred were the big illusions, which is what my novel is really about.

One of Somerset Maugham's stories opens by summing up the dread card trick syndrome: "Do you like card tricks?" "No, I hate card tricks." "Well, I'll just show you this one." He showed me three . . .' What was your favourite large-scale illusion?

There was one that really intrigued me. Very briefly, a young woman wearing a bare-minimum stage costume was trussed arm-and-leg in ropes, so tightly she could hardly stand. Her colleague then went into the audience, and grabbed one of the men as a volunteer. They went back on stage, where there was a sort of tent arrangement, barely big enough for one person. The woman in the ropes was bundled into this tent, and then so too was the man from the audience, shoved in beside her. The flap of the tent was zipped up, and either by accident or design the man's head was caught in it, so it remained in sight. There was then evidence of furious activity inside the tent!

It all happened in less than five seconds. Next thing, the flap was unzipped, and the man stumbled out on the stage, looking dazed. The jacket of his suit was missing. Then the woman in the ropes staggered out too . . . she was still trussed exactly as before, but now she was wearing the man's jacket, *under* the ropes! They got a lot of applause.

Presumably, having swotted up on millions of magical effects for the novel, you saw through this in a trice . . .

Not exactly! I was extremely intrigued by it. But you *know* something like that is just a trick, and that what you saw isn't necessarily what actually happened. There's a rational explanation somewhere, and you can't help wondering what the hell it is! By this time I'd done so much research into techniques that I felt I ought to be able to solve it . . . so I thought and thought about it, and finally worked it out. The funny thing is, I think they were using the same method that my chap in *The Prestige* was using! There are only about six different methods, anyway. Everything depends on the performance, and on the audience thinking: There's only *one way* that could be done, but they wouldn't have gone to that much trouble! Or would they . . . ? But the thing is they usually would.

In *The Prestige* you yourself seem to play the part of stage magician, with teasing misdirection, devious truths and surprises from unexpected directions. People who like neat genre pigeonholes will be left uncertain for a long time, and then made uncertain again. Fair comment?

All fiction misdirects the reader, or it can do. You hear thriller writers talking about it. What they mean is laying false clues, and all that.

But when a magician uses 'misdirection' he's up to something more subtle and interesting. A magician plays on the audience's own assumptions so they misdirect themselves. The deck of cards still in its seal (so it *must* be brand new), the pitcher full of water (so it *must* be heavy to lift), the rope that has no knot (so it *must* be all one piece).

That was the kind of thing I was trying to get at in *The Prestige*, but as I say it's not all that unusual in fiction. The narrative voice is comparable with a magician's act . . . exactly as you were saying, about devious truths. Most people reading a novel told in the first person singular will reasonably assume that it's truthfully or reliably reported, or that only one person is writing it, or that no one apart from the narrator has tampered with the text before it was printed, and so on, but to me these assumptions open possibilities for a few sneaky reversals. All in the cause of keeping people awake!

It kept me awake well past bedtime, so I'm not complaining! Some people seem to have the dark suspicion that any such

literary tricks are effete, artsy-fartsy decoration, when in fact they can help you construct a really gripping story. And there's an unmistakable science-fictional device lurking there too, with a nice Wellsian flavour. Not invisibility . . . but did I catch an allusion to *The Invisible Man*?

Yes, but almost all sf devices refer back, ultimately, to H. G. Wells. Him being the main man, and all that. Actually, this particular referral was through another of my own books, *The Glamour*.

Everyone in sf owes a lot to Wells. But, er, the specific device also set Langford the Ex-Physicist thinking on perhaps unfair and smart-arse lines. A rough calculation led me to reckon that one electrically powered stage illusion you describe, supposedly performed around the turn of the century, would demand something like the full output of a modern gigawatt power station operating for well over two centuries . . .

I am, as you know, dedicated to the strict observance of scientific accuracy at all times. Ruthless for the truth, is what they say about me. But sometimes it doesn't half get in the way of a good story.

Yes indeed; and of course in your book, it [microphone crackle, shrieking gulls]. What's next in the mighty Priest literary pipeline?

It's probably a long way off, because these days it takes me three to five years to plan and write a novel, but I've already started taking notes for a book called *The Gloss*. It's too early to say what it will be 'about', but I do know that matters of identity and explanation come into it. It's all something to do with mutter-mutter, mumble-mumble, you see.

On the other hand, as I plan more than one book at a time, I have two others in reserve. One of these is called *The Allure* (identity and explanation don't come into this one, but offensive sex and gratuitous violence do), and the other is untitled, and has slightly more mumble-mumble than mutter-mutter at present.

On which uplifting note, it must be time to finish. You know, implicitly we've been chatting on sunny Hastings promenade –but following all our discussion of narrative deceits I'll bet suspicious readers are wondering if this too might be subtly misleading.

cix.compulink.co.uk *** Your e-mail could not be delivered for the following reason: System downtime and seagull cries. Please resend your message at a later time."

Thank you, Chris Priest!

— Dave Langford

PRIESTLY VIRTUES

by

David Grigg, Bruce Gillespie, Gerald Murnane

First published in *SF Commentary* No. 44/45, December 1975, pp. 14–19, 38

In 1975, David Grigg was tipped as one of hotshot up-and-coming Australian SF writers, but for reasons I don't understand, he stopped writing fiction after the early 1980s. Since the early 1970s, he has been publishing a number of highly literate and amusing fanzines, usually for ANZAPA. He has just published *Islands: An Anthology*, a collection of his short stories, on his own Web site.

In 1975, Gerald Murnane had just published his first novel, *Tamarisk Row*, which was highly praised but won no prizes. *A Lifetime on Clouds*, his second novel, was just about to appear. Since then he has published a number of novels and collections of short fiction, including *The Plains* and *Landscape with Landscape* with Norstrilia Press. In 1999, he received the Patrick White Award for a major Australian writer who has been insufficiently recognised.

In 1975, Bruce Gillespie seemed full of promise, but never quite kept it.

David Grigg reviews:

INDOCTRINAIRE by Christopher Priest
(Harper & Row; 1970; 227 pp.; \$US5.95) (Faber & Faber; 1970)
(Pocket Books; 1971; 186 pp.; \$US0.75) (New English Library; 1971)

It isn't Kafkaesque, Chris, it really isn't!

Nor is it, as Gillespie suggested, the least bit Ballardian.

But *Indoctrinaire* is an odd book. This book is neither Kafkaesque nor Ballardian. It's Priestish. The air (literally) of unreality that pervades the first half of the book is very well done. It is, if you like, how a reasonable person might feel if thrust into a ridiculous but frightening situation. Realist unreality.

The main character of the novel, Dr Wentik, is working in Antarctica at 'Concentration' on a new drug, which has dangerous hallucinogenic properties. He has taken some of the drug himself at various times, so there is the doubtful hint that the whole book is a drug experience.

People supposedly representing the US Government 'kidnap' him and take him to South America. They drive him across the jungle and through what we later discover is a time warp into the Planalto district. Here he finds a prison surrounded by shorn stubble instead of jungle as far as the eye can see. This prison is a piece out of the future.

Here Wentik experiences a non-stop nightmare. Everybody in the prison seems insane. One of Wentik's captors, Astourde, questions him incessantly. Astourde also dominates, in an inexplicable way, the other people in the prison, especially Musgrove, Wentik's other captor. The captors put Wentik through an advanced form of maze, evidently as a form of torture. There is a table with a human hand growing up from its centre. A huge human ear is fixed to the wall of the prison. Nothing makes sense.

However, eventually Wentik is told why he was taken to the prison. From that point the novel turns downhill rapidly. It seems pointless to tell you the whys of the situation. At any rate, Wentik drops back into the twentieth century, in the middle of the jungle. He struggles through the jungle against tremendous odds, finds a canoe, travels down river, steals a plane, flies south, crashes in Antarctica, and finds that 'Concentration' is empty.

Despite what he has been told about his own future, he cannot change it. He finds a way back to England, only to arrive just before a Cataclysm. Wentik stays there, waiting. Big deal. The book crashes at the end. After struggling beside the protagonist through the nightmare of the first part of the book, we deserve something better. Perhaps, if there is a point to the novel, it is that a man has only one time to live in, and that is his own. Being transported into the future has destroyed the externals of Wentik's life. He can live neither in the future nor in his own present, but internally it seems to affect him little, for all we discover.

The strength of *Indoctrinaire* is its approach to the viewpoint changes of the human mind. Drugs and the atmosphere of the jail alter people in fascinating ways. Memories and reactions are not changed, but the basis, the viewpoint that controls the thoughts, is changed.

There could have been much more to this novel, but Chris Priest lost control, I think, as it progressed. And that's a bloody pity.

Bruce Gillespie reviews:

FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND by Christopher Priest
(Faber & Faber; 1972; 147 pp.; \$A5.60) (Harper & Row; 1972, as *Darkening Island*)
(New English Library; 1973)

The 'darkening island' of this book's title is a future Britain. The 'darkening island' is also Alan Whitman, a future Briton.

Britain has been 'darkened' by the situation that it seems to fear more than any other — invasion from without. Even worse, and also fitting the book's title, the invaders are black, and they don't care a jot for the customs or traditions of the island they have chosen as home.

'In Britain, the news was taken calmly; the holocaust in Africa was the embodiment of something awful, but not something that seemed to threaten us directly.' However, the 'holocaust' — atomic warfare between neighbouring countries on the African continent — has left millions of people alive in a burnt-out continent. They set sail for anywhere and, inevitably, many of them emigrate to Britain. 'Everywhere they caused social upheaval; but in Britain, where a neo-racist government had come to power on an economic-reform ticket, they did much more.' Their presence, increasing organisation, and resistance to John Tregarth's Conservative Government, leads to civil war.

Alan Whitman has 'white skin', 'light brown hair' and 'blue eyes', dresses conservatively and, as he admits, has 'no political ambitions'. He resolves to ignore the surrounding political situation for as long as possible. Whitman will not acknowledge that his life has also been affected by national events until Afrim settlers take over the house where he lives with his wife Isobel and their daughter Sally. Forced onto the road with the family, Whitman regards himself as a resourceful man. He becomes impatient because his wife complains about the situation. He proves to be an unreliable travelling companion. Eventually he reaches the position where he has abandoned, or been abandoned by, every friend or acquaintance, every light in the dark, he has ever known. *Fugue for a Darkening Island* becomes the story of Whitman's self-impelled moral disintegration, and a metaphor for the destroyed country in which he tries to survive.

In the science fiction field, which is painted with the grins of smug, muscular heroes, it is remarkable to find a figure like Alan Whitman. Not only is he interesting to the reader but he is also the central interest of the author. Even so, this is not a confessional novel: for most of its length, Whitman simply tells what happens to him and the people he meets. Instead, it is a deadpan comedy, in which Whitman condemns himself out of his own mouth by showing us how he reacts to what he sees and knows. The metaphor of the 'darkening island' is effective because Priest has made Whitman just typical enough of a certain kind of inoffensive, well-educated chap for him to represent, and condemn, the way of thinking of a whole nation.

Whitman barely *experiences* the events of the novel; they just seem to happen to him. Like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, he sees the events of his life as happening simultaneously, without significance in time. No event seems to matter more than any other to Whitman, so he tells us his story all at once. Within the first few pages of the novel, we meet Whitman before he is forced to flee across country (that's the white-skinned, brown-haired, blue-eyed conservative dresser I've

shown already); Whitman as he appears after all the events of the rest of the novel have taken place ('dry, salt-encrusted and itchy' hair, dirt-smudged skin and 'smelling abominably'); Whitman on the road, scrounging for food as part of Lateef's guerrilla army group; Whitman and his wife and child on the day they are forced to abandon their house in Southgate; and Whitman during the first few years of his marriage to Isobel. The patchwork structure of the book (or 'fugue', as Priest insists in the book's title) gives the impression that, even after all these events have rolled over Whitman, to him they will still all have equal emotional importance, which isn't much. The effect is strengthened because Whitman observes his surroundings precisely, and because he tells a clear narrative, although it is broken into discontinuous segments.

What is valuable to Whitman? What kind of a person is he? Priest writes so clearly that he makes us want to find out. During the first few pages of the novel, the Whitman family waits in the suburban house for the disturbance to quieten outside. The Whitmans assume that the soldiers will just go away. Just like any Australian family under the same circumstances, they think that events like these aren't supposed to happen. But when Whitman looks into the street, he sees that 'The burnt-out shell of the Martins' house opposite ours was a constant reminder of the violence inherent in the patrols, and the never-ending parade of homeless shuffling through the night past the barricades was disturbing in the extreme'. Priest shows us much about Whitman in including the words 'disturbing in the extreme'; The phrase is just fussy enough, just sufficiently well meant and politely appropriate for us to realise that, somewhere inside him, Whitman is not in the least disturbed by what is happening. He watches and waits to take action. The book hints that he welcomes the turmoil.

The civil war enables him to escape some of the problems he has been having with his wife. Whitman delivers a re-proving little lecture to us and himself:

While being in full sympathy with her feelings, and realising that it is no small upset to be dispossessed in such a manner, I had experienced Isobel's lack of fortitude for the last few months . . . I had made every attempt to be sympathetic and patient with her, but had succeeded only in reviving old differences.

Almost every word picks up a different meaning for us than it does for Whitman. It seems that he has never been in even partial sympathy with anybody in his life, let alone in 'full sympathy' with Isobel. Her 'lack of fortitude', seen by us, is an understandable panic at being deprived of a whole way of life. The rest of the novel shows us that Whitman has little fortitude, but the strength that insensitivity gives him enables him to survive where others cannot. The novel shows us that Whitman cannot be 'sympathetic and patient' with anyone, let alone with Isobel, and the 'old differences' that are 'revived' centre around the fact that Whitman sleeps with every girl he can pick up, and has never hidden the fact

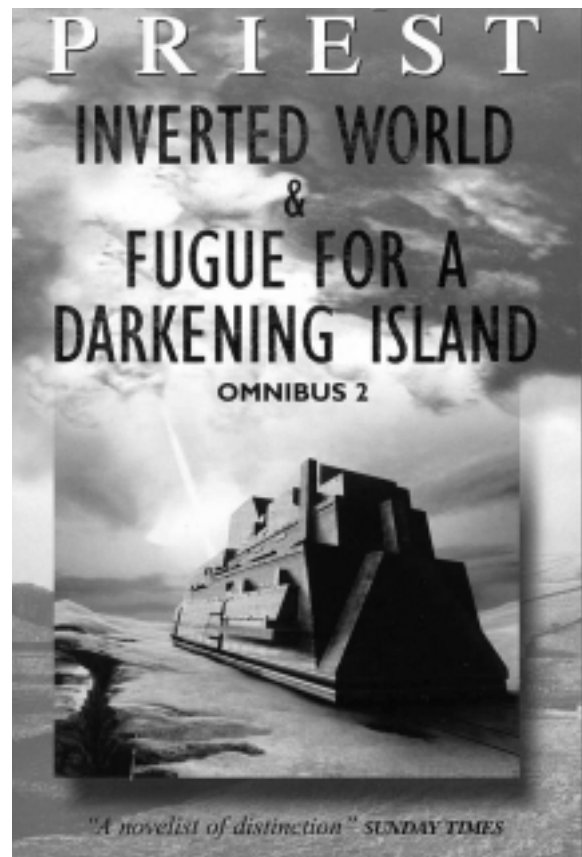
very well from his wife. Whitman has told us already, or will tell us, all the facts that contradict his statements about his own emotions. Our final impression is that Whitman feels little about anything.

Despite all that, Whitman can certainly reveal to the reader what he sees, hears and touches. Whitman is one of the people who see the first ship filled with African refugees arrive at the docks in London. The ship looks like a barely moving hulk but 'I saw from the black smoke still issuing from her funnel and from the white-cream froth at the stern, that the ship's engines were still running.' When the ship reaches the wharf, the people who emerge are 'in an advanced state of starvation. Skeletal arms and legs, distended stomachs, skull-like heads holding staring eyes; flat, paper-like breasts on the women, accusing faces on them all . . . Those whom no one would carry were left on the ship . . . We waited and watched. There seemed to be no end to the number of people on board.' Four and a half thousand survivors leave the ship, and seven hundred bodies are found inside. The power of the passages does not come from Whitman's experience of what he sees, but from the fact that he sees everything. Priest's hidden, central point is that, again, Whitman really doesn't feel much at all. Numbness of emotional response can be a function, not of burying one's head in the sand, but of seeing things too clearly.

Whitman's clarity of vision has some disturbing, and even quite funny effects within the novel. He is a sort of Peeping Tom at the universe. At the age of seven, while trapped in a loft, he watches as a man and a woman copulate beneath him, without realising that he is watching. 'When they were both naked he lay on top of her again and they began to make noises with their throats. The girl's eyes were still closed, though the lids fluttered from time to time.' Whitman sees everything happen in close detail, yet he misses the meaning entirely. Out of his naivety he delivers the best line in the book: 'I was curious to see a girl who could open her legs so wide — all the women with whom I had come into contact (my mother and my aunts) had seemed incapable of opening their knees more than a few inches.' Later in the novel, and in Whitman's life, his friends and their early-pubertal girlfriends play a game that leads to their sexual initiation. Whitman gains his greatest kicks from watching from behind a pile of unpainted window panes. Thus educated by example, 'By the end of the following week I had had sexual intercourse with the girl I had known through my parents, and was proud that I was the only one of us she would do it with.'

The novel shows that Peeping Toms can do little but peep, hide and run. Because he can't feel anything about what he sees, Whitman still lacks any real ability to act. 'In a limbo between what I was doing and what I should be doing, neither was effected well,' says Whitman of his childhood, showing a bit more self-awareness than usual. The only thing he can do well is women, but he can't love them very well, and he doesn't seem to succeed either way with his wife. He claims to love her, but eventually shows that he loves only the distant image of the beautiful, frigid girl she was when they were first married. *Fugue for a Darkening Island* is, as much as anything, the story of the process by which he abandons his wife and daughter.

Whitman lets down everybody who deals with him. In the longest continuous segment of the book, Whitman is part of Lateef's band of guerrillas when they encounter a group of Afrim helicopter pilots. Lateef's group are hiding in the houses of an abandoned village when they hear about twenty helicopters fly overhead. The helicopters attack a target



One of two new Omnibuses of Christopher Priest's early novels from *Earthlight* (Simon & Schuster). Omnibus 1 contains *The Space Machine* and *A Dream of Wessex*.

some miles away, then begin to leave without discovering the hidden men. One helicopter straggles behind. Whitman has the only rifle in the group.

I lifted my rifle, took careful aim and fired.

Olderton leaped over to me and knocked the barrel aside.

'You stupid bastard!' he said. 'They'll know we're here.'

'I don't care,' I said. I was watching the helicopter.

For a moment I thought my shot had had no effect. Then the engine of the machine accelerated abruptly and it lifted away. Its tail spun around, stopped, then spun again . . . I saw the helicopter check its sideways motion, but then it flipped again. It skidded down over the burntout house, disappeared from sight. Two seconds later there was a loud crash.

'You cunt, you stupid bastard,' Olderton said again. 'The others will be back to find out what happened.' . . .

In any event, I had derived a curious pleasure from the incident, as it had signalled my first positive participation in the war. From here I had committed myself.

The other helicopters do not return, as Olderton expected. The men approach the stricken helicopter, and discover that the pilot is not dead, but only wounded. They cannot lift him out, and they cannot relieve his pain while he stays inside the wreckage. 'Lateef, we've got to do something for that man!' says Whitman, sounding unusually concerned. Lateef replies, quite reasonably, 'If you don't like blood, you shouldn't have shot the fucking thing down.'

Whitman offers to shoot the Afrim pilot to put him out of his misery, but he gets cold feet. 'I had no wish to shoot him, my emotion in me having been expended by the act of shooting at the helicopter in the first place.' On the one hand, he feels justified in shooting the man because Afrim soldiers had abducted Isobel and Sally some time before. On the other hand, 'the fact was that the physical act of pulling the trigger and killing the man was too positive an act . . . one in which my commitment would be affirmed.' So, in order to save his philosophical position and save face, 'I lifted the barrel and fired two barrels into the air.' The guerrillas don't bother to check on his action. The pilot stays inside, suffering. Whitman can stay 'uncommitted'. The tail end of the joke is that he loses the power that the rifle gave him. The guerrillas discover that the Afrim pilots had been attacking a munitions van, which split open. Now they all gain rifles for the first time, and Whitman has lost his precarious position of prestige within the group.

Fugue for a Darkening Island is a sardonic moral comedy rather than a science fiction novel, and so unexpected a book to spring up from within the SF field that it has been ignored altogether. Yet I suppose it began with a typical SF proposition, a 'What if . . . ?' idea. I would guess that Chris Priest began with 'What would happen if Britain were invaded by a refugee group of poor, desperate foreigners, most probably Africans?' Priest's general answer is that such an invasion would break down every form of coziness upon which English life is based, and would cause a near-disappearance of information systems. The novel is about, as much as anything, the disappearance of 'Englishness'.

Probably this why Priest makes many of the characters as typically English as possible. Whitman himself is protected by the armour of traditional English middle-class prejudices. He is appalled by conservative attitudes to the refugees when they first arrive, but likes the Afrims no better than does anybody else. He 'solves' the contradiction by ignoring the situation. He has a comfortable academic job until the

worsening political situation makes him unemployed — so he gains the next safest job he can. Ignorance may not be bliss, but it's a lot more enjoyable than thinking. When events force him to begin his circular pilgrimage across the English countryside, he finds himself escaping from different unidentified groups who seem to be fighting each other at random.

England is trapped in the same contradictions. Traditional liberals cry out when the police try to stop the African refugees from landing in England, but they also find their towns and villages being taken over. The traditional conservatives get punch drunk immediately. Civil riots make it easier for the refugees to dig in, take over sections of cities and form armies. As the country divides, each stops information from reaching the others. Eventually no radio programs are left except light music on the BBC and, on Radio Peace, 'prolonged prayer-sessions, Bible-readings, and hymns'. In one very effective section toward the end of the novel, Whitman stumbles upon a whole area that has managed to stay 'suburban', with its houses kept neat and groceries still in the shops. However, the citizens of this area keep up the facade of normality by ignoring every piece of news that might upset their complacent attitudes. Nothing could make them recognise that, a few miles away, the bodies of hundreds of anonymous 'victims of war' lie piled on the beach.

Science fiction writers have never won laurels for exposing uncomfortable truths or telling disturbing stories, and I doubt whether *Fugue for a Darkening Island* will ever become popular. Whitman's myopia is too much like our own in similar situations. It's too much like the attitudes of the typical SF 'hero'. But I think that *somebody* ought to state clearly that *Fugue for a Darkening Island* is one of the subtlest and best-written SF books to appear during the last five years, and a much more penetrating and probable chronicle of our near futures than most other recent books that claim to explore the future.

Gerald Murnane reviews:

THE INVERTED WORLD by Christopher Priest
(Harper & Row; 1974; 310 pp.; \$US7.95) (Faber & Faber; 1974; 256 pp.; \$A7.25)
(New English Library 45002303; 1975; 252 pp.; \$A1.55)

The central event in this novel is a great journey. It wouldn't be fair for a reviewer to reveal where this journey begins and ends, but it's a journey that deserves an epic poem to commemorate it.

Epic poems don't get written nowadays, although plenty of authors trick out their tedious narratives with what they imagine to be epic language. Christopher Priest is not one of them. *The Inverted World* is almost wholly unpretentious, and for this very reason it has a hint of the epic about it.

This much about the journey can be told: A band of people inhabits a city that must keep moving or be destroyed. The life of the city is organised so that the place does move. A guild of experts surveys the land ahead and plots the route. Another guild lays steel tracks ahead of the city (and laboriously tears up the tracks behind it for re-use). When a new stretch of track is ready, a Traction Guild mans powerful winches. Then, watched by anxious guildsmen and guarded by militia men with crossbows, the city rolls a few miles further forward on its mysterious journey. As soon as

it stops, the track-layers put up buffers behind it and start the job of laying down the next few miles of rails.

How big is this city on wheels? Why must it keep moving over hills and plains and even rivers? What planet is it travelling across? How long has it travelled like this? Is there any obstacle that can stop its progress?

To each of these questions (and dozens more that occur throughout the book) there are two possible answers. The first, in each case, is the answer that the citizens themselves consider true. The second is the answer that the reader discovers (and is strongly persuaded to believe) in the last few chapters.

In some cases the reader can be in no doubt about a question that has puzzled him throughout the book — the size of the city, for example, and the true extent of its journey. But the essential questions are left undecided. The final uncertainty is not in the least disappointing or irritating. It seems the most satisfying of all the ingenious features of the 'inverted world'.

There's far more to the narrative than the solving of puzzles deliberately thrown up in the earlier chapters. It's also the story of Helward Mann, an unassuming and likable young fellow (a rarity among SF heroes) from Earth City, as its inhabitants call the city on wheels.

Thanks to the peculiarly protective system of education in the city, Mann has to wait until adulthood before he learns even such facts of life as that his home town is portable. At the customary age, he leaves the creche, where all the young citizens are nurtured and taught, and enters one of the guilds, whose work it is to keep the city in motion. He becomes an apprentice Future Surveyor and ventures out of the city for the first time. Much of the story from then on is an account of Mann's efforts to answer for himself the questions I mentioned earlier. The inverted world is as much of a mystery to young Helward as it is to the reader. This means that the story has none of the irritating gaps or deliberate withholding of information that so many SF writers have to use to keep their readers hanging around. Even better in this novel, the men who should know all the answers — the senior guildsmen and the city's leaders — are far from certain about the world beyond the city or the true beginnings of their journey.

Mann and the other residents of the moving city are recognisable human beings, descendants (they believe) of people from Earth who somehow became separated from their home planet in the past. Mann has received an arid, theoretical education, much of it concerned with his people's ancient home — the planet Earth. Emerging from the seclusion of the creche, he has to learn almost from scratch the customs and way of life of Earth City. And he is totally unprepared for what he finds outside the city.

The strange life of the city is described fairly convincingly. Priest understands a subtle feature of most human setups that too often escapes SF writers. This is the widespread tendency to modify or to evade or to pay mere lip service to any custom or usage whose immediate purpose is not apparent. When Helward Mann is enrolled in the Guild of Future Surveyors, he takes an oath that binds him to say nothing of the world outside the city to those of its residents who are not guildsmen (and must therefore remain forever inside). The penalty for breaking the oath is death.

After his very first trip outside, Mann tells his wife a little of what he has seen, and so violates his oath. Later, he tells a senior guildsman what he has done:

'If you knew I'd broken [the oath] — if you knew at this moment — you'd kill me. Is that right?'

'In theory, yes.'

'And in practice?'

'I'd worry about it for days, then probably talk to one of the other guildsmen and see what he advised . . .'

Helward then tells the guildsman, almost word for word, what he has told his wife. The guildsman tells him he has nothing to worry about.

'But it can't be as simple as that,' said Helward. 'The oath is very firm in the way it is worded, and the penalty is hardly a light one.'

'True . . . but the guildsmen who are alive today inherited it. The oath was passed to us, and we pass it on. So will you in your turn. This isn't to say the guilds agree with it, but no one has yet come up with an alternative.'

Passages like this make the city a place of flesh-and-blood

people. There are no villains or heroes or similar caricatures of human beings — only men and women involved in humdrum tasks and occasionally wondering at the reasons behind their existence. Their leaders, the guildsmen, are busy administrators preoccupied with their worrying duties and using outdated rituals to keep their most important concerns from their subordinates. It could almost be your own municipal authority or a government department.

Not unexpectedly, a time comes when the subordinates in the city (who are not at all badly treated) challenge the guildsmen. Must the city go on moving? What is the awful peril that will overtake it if it rests?

It so happens that when this challenge arises, the city actually faces what is possibly the gravest external peril in its history. The authenticity of the human situation inside the city, added to the sheer physical danger from outside, makes the last chapters convincing indeed.

The book gains in other ways from having characters of unheroic proportions. In the last chapters it becomes apparent to the reader that the guildsmen have accomplished a remarkable feat. At this point, the guildsmen — fussy, harassed, self-effacing fellows — appear as true types of the 'unlikely hero', the character who, for commonplace or even misguided motives, unwittingly performs a marvel.

Probably I have dwelt too much on what I have called the 'feat' of the city-dwellers. Their 'world purpose' is just as fascinating. They inhabit the inverted world of the book's title. Priest supplies us with a mathematical justification of this world. I couldn't understand it, although it seemed vaguely like some of the stuff that caused me to fail fifth-form maths twenty years ago. (Helward Mann, too, found it hard to understand, which endeared him to me.) Late in the book, Helward Mann meets a woman from outside the city, who seems able to disprove all that he has ever perceived of the world.

He took her arm again, and whirled her round. He pointed upwards.

'What do you see?'

She shielded her eyes against the glare. 'The sun.'

'The sun! The sun! What about the sun?'

'Nothing. Let go of my arm . . . you're hurting me!'

He released her, and scrambled over to the discarded drawings. He took the top one, held it out for her to see.

'That is the sun!' he shouted, pointing at the weird shape that was drawn at the top right of the picture, a few inches away from the spindly figure that he said was her. 'There is the sun!'

In its full context, this is one of the great moments of the book. For me it is rich in allusions. It called up what is surely one of the 'primal scenes' of human history. Two people, having exhausted all arguments over which of their two ways of seeing is the true one, finally appeal to evidence that surely cannot be refuted. 'Look,' says the first and points to the sky or the grass or perhaps at the empty air. 'Look, and see what I see!' And the other looks — but does not see.

This is only one of many passages in *The Inverted World* that seems to describe not just an event in a particular novel but an episode of larger significance in human affairs. *The Inverted World* is no parable or allegory, but it seems to me a wonderfully detailed meditation on the irreconcilable differences between subjective and objective worlds.

The novel, unfortunately, has many of the faults that seem to plague even the finest SF works. It begins slowly and with much emphasis on details that later prove irrelevant to

the main story line. It has a Prologue, which the author perhaps thought as the first, ominous notes of a grand symphony, but which comes across like the noises of the orchestra tuning up.

The reader is advised to skip the Prologue unless he enjoys the spectacle of a capable author writing with his left hand.

Another irritation is the author's urge to close each chapter with a drum roll in prose:

I watched the city from a distance, seeing it as alien as it was; not of this world, no longer even of me. Mile by mile it hauled itself forward, never finding, nor even seeking, a final resting place.

Or:

He lay down, only too aware of Caterina's body lying close beside him in the next sleeping-bag. He stayed awake for a long time, trying to rid himself of a fierce manifestation of his arousal. Victoria seemed to be a long way away.

(Helward Mann, by the way, has a sexual appetite that is mild and uncomplicated. The only person it bothers is the author.)

At its best, however, the prose of *The Inverted World* does its job well. The many descriptions of physical work, discomfort, and day-to-day drudgery emphasise effectively the immensity of the labour that keeps the city safe.

The silence was broken abruptly. With a loud cracking noise that echoed round the rocky walls of the chasm one of the winching cables snapped, and whiplashed back, slicing through a line of militiamen. A physical tremor ran through the structure of the bridge, and from deep inside the city I heard the rising whine of the suddenly free winch, sharply cut off as the Traction man control-

ling the differential drive phased it out. Now on only four cables, and moving visibly slower, the city continued on its way. On the northern side of the chasm, the broken cable lay snaked across the ground, curling over the bodies of five of the militiamen.

In the end, when it finally seems that the years of journeying may have been all for nothing, these pages of sinewy prose reinforce the irony and tragedy of Priest's theme.

The awesome point of the book's final pages is that it is quite possible that the guildsmen of Earth City may have done what they did as a result of a delusion. It is this possibility that put me in mind of a comparison that may well seem bizarre. Reading the last chapters of *The Inverted World*, I found myself recalling parts of *Don Quixote*.

Heaven forbid that I should be thought of as comparing the two books. But I repeat: the ending of Priest's novel produces faint but distinct echoes of Cervantes. The world that Don Quixote sees before him is invisible to others. But the deeds he does in it and the injuries he suffers on account of it are all too real. He thrusts his lance at some imaginary enchanter and a stout Spanish traveller hurls him into the dust with blood spilling from his cracked head. The world that Mann and his fellow guildsmen travel through endlessly rests perhaps on a doubtful mathematical proposition. But they fix their great steel rails into place and drag their lumbering wheeled city a few miles further each year. They drag it across mountains and streams. And when they come to the most daunting river of all, a river so wide they cannot see its farther shore, they drive in the first timbers of a bridge only heroes or madmen would undertake.

So what are they — heroes or madmen?

I can think of no higher praise for Christopher Priest's novel than to say that it raises some of the same kinds of questions as Cervantes' masterpiece.

— Gerald Murnane, May 1975

Never before published! (until very recently)

HELWARD'S HYPERBOLE

by Bruce Gillespie

The following article was written in 1978 as an entry for the *Magill Survey of Science Fiction Literature*. Most of my entries were accepted, but not this one. It was rejected in favour of a piece by Brian Stableford. Ouch. (But I was paid for my article.) Gerald Murnane's excellent discussion of the same book makes mine just a bit redundant. But the following is previously unpublished (until very recently, in my *Acnestis* fanzine). Enjoy it!

To read *The Inverted World* is to receive an education in the nature of its world and the people who live in it. But the education is one of experience rather than theory, and the book is written to reveal to the reader somewhat more than experience teaches the main character, Helward Mann.

Hierarchical societies based on guilds, gerontocracy (in this case, the 'Navigators'), and secrecy are all too common

in science fiction novels. The reader can be excused for finding *The Inverted World*'s society, as revealed in the first few pages of the book, all too familiar.

All his life, Helward has lived in the creche of an entirely enclosed city, most of whose inhabitants have never seen the surrounding countryside. Six guilds — Traction, Track-laying, Bridge-building, Militia, Barter and Future Survey —

employ most of the city's able-bodied men in a secret enterprise that lies outside the city. All members of the guilds swear an oath to maintain these secrets. What, asks Helward and the reader, can the outside be like that information on its nature must be guarded so rigidly?

Christopher Priest adopts a disarmingly direct narrative style to lead Helward and the reader through a series of ever more puzzling discoveries. Each new piece of information about the world of the city, each presented concisely and clearly, extends Helward's knowledge, and magnifies his dilemmas.

Helward has been invited to join the guild of Future Surveyors. First he must undertake an apprenticeship during which he takes part in the work of each of the other guilds. He steps outside the city for the first time. It is dark, and for the first time he smells fresh soil and feels a cold wind. He watches his first sunrise — and discovers, to his amazement, that the sun does not look spherical, as shown in the school textbooks inside the city. Instead, it looks like a 'long saucer-shape of light, spiked above and below with two perpendicular spires of incandescence'. His observations have set him the first of his puzzles: what kind of a world is he on, that the sun looks like a spindle in the sky?

For some time, he must accustom himself to the strange realities of the city itself. His first assignment is Track-laying, working under the direction of the phlegmatic Malchuskin, who has little information to impart because he asks few questions himself. Malchuskin's aim is to get on with the job, no matter what the obstruction. It takes Helward some time to find out what the job is. He is set to work digging up rails and sleepers and concrete stays on one side of the city, which proves to be a compact mobile building several storeys high. Helward's job is then to supervise workmen who are hired from villages in the surrounding countryside. They speak another language, and are recruited for poor wages from poverty-stricken areas. Helward (and the reader) eventually discovers the point of all this activity: the rails and sleepers are laid on the *other* side of the city, cable emplacements set up, and the powerful engines pull the city several hundred yards along the newly laid tracks. Then the process is repeated. The city, it seems, must keep moving ever northwards.

If *The Inverted World* were merely a problem story, it would fail to hold the reader's interest after the first hundred pages or so. However, Priest is interested in showing the reader more, perhaps, than Helward is capable of understanding. Helward realises that he has lost interest in actually living in the city, although a marriage has been arranged already between him and Victoria Lerouex, a daughter of one of the guildsmen. Helward now finds the city life stultifying. Victoria proves to be (in his eyes) a prickly woman who resents the fact that women cannot leave the city and join guilds, but must stay behind and have babies. (Few female children are ever born, so all available women must bear as many children as possible, in the hope that enough will be female in each generation to keep the city viable.) Helward feels guilty because he tells Victoria more than the oath allows him. She is not allowed to leave the city, and he must continue with his training. The society in the city is one that covertly discourages close human relationships, and the city's system prevails in all matters.

A constant difficulty for the city is its relationship with the people through whose lands it passes. Even the non-reflective Malchuskin shows he understands the situation of the hired workmen: 'Well, it's people like these poor sods who work their skins off just so you can eat one genuine meal a

day'. The 'tooks', as they are called, go back to their villages having been paid only in kind, and having glimpsed a privileged species richer than they can imagine. The city Barter guild negotiates with the villagers, paying as little as possible for the resource that the city needs most — extra women might stay in the city, bear new children, then be sent back home. In the long run, the villagers gain nothing from the experience except a feeling of resentment and loss. To the city, the relationship is rational and useful — not intending cruelty, its haughty self-sufficiency invites attacks from the tooks. In what is effectively a colonial relationship, human qualities such as sympathy, empathy and spontaneity have little place. A kind of well-meaning coldness of spirit and well-armed carefulness take their place. These are the personal qualities that we find increasingly in Helward as he becomes better educated into the ways of the city.

The main aim of the guild system's training program is to show the trainee that he has little choice in any of his future professional actions. This aim is rarely expressed openly. A guild apprentice like Helward works it out for himself: 'I would have to discover for myself how the men came to work on the tracks, what other tasks they performed, and in fact all the other matters concerning the continued existence of the city'.

A sobering experience occurs when the slowly moving city approaches a chasm across the plain. There is no question of stopping the journey: the city must keep moving toward what is called an 'optimum'. The Bridge-builders guild sets to work, and makes a railway bridge that will support the whole city in its slow crossing. Desperation among the workers marks every stage of the operation. As the city finishes its difficult passage over the chasm, 'With a loud cracking noise . . . one of the inching cables snapped, and whiplashed back, slicing through a line of militiamen'. The bridge-building completed, 'There was no sense of relief, no cry of celebration . . . The city itself was safe for the moment . . . Soon [it] would be winching again . . . ever onward, ever northwards, heading for the optimum that managed somehow to be always a few miles ahead.'

Throughout the novel, Helward Mann's personality is made up of an interesting mixture of contradictions. When he leaves for the south, for instance, he is a successful man in the city's eyes. He is married, and a child is on the way. He has done well working with most of the guilds. He is a 'man with whom the city's security could soon be trusted'. Yet he is a man who likes to spend more time out of the city than in it, who likes solitude more than leadership. The direction of his life is not yet decided; he still asks too many awkward questions, mainly of himself. The journey to the south gives him direction and propulsion, and at the same time takes away his complacency.

Helward's formal assignment is to accompany three 'took' women back to their villages after they have given birth to children for the city. The actual intention of the controllers of the guild system is to show every new guildsman the real nature of the city and the world it crawls along. Helward Mann is an ideal student for the lessons he must learn. He measures everything; notes every distinguishing detail of the landscape. During the journey, he must follow the remaining signs of the tracks southward. He notices that the space between sleepers is getting shorter and the rails further apart. The chasm that the city crossed seems much narrower and shallower than he remembers it.

Helward's assumptions about himself are called into question. At first the three village women ignore him or taunt him. Soon, however, they begin to shed their clothes

as they trudge over a hot plain. Somewhat to his surprise, and despite his own convictions about marriage, Helward finds himself willingly seduced by two of them. He meets a guild apprentice coming back from the south: Torrold Pelham cannot put into words what he has seen.

What has begun as a galling, boring task soon makes Helward very puzzled. The women seem to be changing shape: their bodies look shorter and fatter as the journey proceeds. The baby, born in the city, stays the same size. It can no longer eat food gathered *en route*; it must have city food, which the women can no longer eat. Soon Helward notices a constant pressure against him: what seems like a second gravity dragging him south against gravity itself.

In what are the two finest pages in *The Inverted World*, Priest describes what happens when Helward reaches as far south as he can go without falling off the edge of the world. For soon Helward finds that the women have disappeared below him, and even the mountain ranges diminish into wrinkles on the earth's surface. Helward finds himself facing north, his eyes above the clouds and his nose below them so he can breathe. The southward pressure is so strong that Helward must hold onto the earth with a rope and pickaxe to stop himself flying away. 'He was flat along the surface of the world, a giant recumbent across the erstwhile mountain region.' Helward is now so large in relation to the rest of the world that he can see its shape — for which sight he was sent on his journey: 'At the centre, due north of him, the ground rose . . . in a perfectly symmetrical, rising and curving concave spire. It narrowed and narrowed, reaching up, growing ever more slender, rising so high that it was impossible to see where it ended.' Helward sees continents, clouds and seas before him. And the shape of the whole world? It is the same as that of the sun, which Helward sees setting before him: 'A broad flat disk that might be an equator; at its centre and to north and south, its poles exited as rising, concave spires.'

It is perhaps disappointing that Christopher Priest places this breathtaking spectacle in the middle of the book, instead of at the end. However, the vision is not there for its own sake, as watching it does not settle any questions for Helward. It only raises a vast number of questions that he (and the reader) need answered. Helward's education has only just started.

Helward struggles against the force that seems to be propelling him along the 'equator' of this world. Eventually he crawls forward far enough so he can stand upright again. Objects return to their usual dimensions, and Helward begins a long journey home. There is no rest when he reaches there. He meets his boyhood friend Jase, who has been acting as scout against the attackers on the city. Helward arrives just in time to witness a bomb attack on the city. It destroys whole sections, including all the city's children in the creche. Helward's city life has dissolved while he has been away: Victoria has had her baby but it is killed in the attack on the creche; she has dissolved the marriage and now lives with someone else; Helward's father has died — and Helward finds that he has been away nearly two years, although he was away only a few months by his own reckoning.

The education of Mann has been successful in its main aim. Now that he has seen what the world looks like, and what happens to objects that get too far south of optimum, he devotes all his efforts to keeping the city moving. Slowly he works out a patchy explanation for it all. 'Optimum' is the place where the city diverges least in distortions from area through which it is passing. When he becomes a Future Surveyor, he is sent 'up north' and finds that time goes much

slower than it does for the city. He has much leisure during which to digest the lessons of his southward trip. For instance he remembers a graph that he had been shown in mathematics lessons: 'It showed the curve of an equation where one value was represented as a reciprocal — or an inverse — of the other. The graph for this was a hyperbola. One part of the graph was drawn in the positive quadrant, one in the negative. Each end of the curve had an infinite value, both positive and negative. The teacher had discussed what would happen if that graph were to be rotated about one of its axes . . . The teacher had drawn on a piece of large card what the solid body would look like should this rotation be performed. The product was an impossible object: a solid with a disk of infinite radius, and two hyperbolic spires above and below the disk, each of which narrowed towards an infinitely distant point . . . In the indirect manner of all our education, that day I had seen the shape of the world on which I lived.' By contrast with a spherical world, it is a body of infinite matter in a universe of finite size. The city itself is clinging to the only usable point on the side of the hyperbola. A physical impossibility, thinks Helward — but working in this impossible way is a matter of life and death to the city's inhabitants.

While Helward becomes more and more determined to serve the city by keeping it moving, the city itself is changing rapidly. Because of the attacks on the walls, most of the inhabitants now know what the outside is like. They cannot believe that the city is in danger. The Terminator movement gains strength. It is a rebel group aiming to stop the city. Victoria Lerouex is one of the movement's leaders. The crisis becomes important when the city reaches a river without a further shore; that is, an ocean. At the same time, the city has been contacted by a woman who speaks English but is not of the city.

We see this, of course, as part of Helward's experience. Helward is greatly attracted to Elizabeth Khan, the visitor. He has met her during his Future Surveyor's work. Through her, she gains entry to the city and realises that it is a relic from two hundred years past. Helward enjoys his solitary work 'up future' and has done much sketching. He offers Elizabeth a series of sketches, including one of the sun. In Helward's sketch, it has a spindle shape. Elizabeth points at the sky and tries to show Helward that the sun is spherical. It is at this point that the reader's impression is confirmed that the city of Earth has never left the planet Earth — that in some way it has wandered across the surface of Eurasia for two hundred years and, for some reason, it has an entirely different perception of the planet from that held by everybody else.

Helward is not willing to concede that his entire world-view might be wrong. He is more determined than ever to defend it. Elizabeth Khan had had half a mind to seduce Helward — but their difference of conviction separates them. Elizabeth returns to the city and explains its true nature: it is a relic of a scientific experiment made before the world economic Crash two hundred years before. The experiment generated an energy field that warped perceptions but provided boundless energy; it cut off the research station from the normal world, and it became committed to chasing a 'translation window' across the globe. Because of Elizabeth's explanation, the force field is discovered inside the city and turned off, just as the city is about to make emergency plans to set off on a ship across the Atlantic.

What troubles many readers about *The Inverted World* is its ending. Helward's spirit seems broken because he still sees the sun above him as spindle shaped; he still believes

that only a few months separate him from certain death unless the optimum is followed. Always separated from the earth he lives on, he is now equally separated from the city he is sworn to protect. He has backed himself into a psychological corner — one rather like that of a strongly religious person who feels turned against by God. Even Elizabeth Khan cannot reach him anymore; she rides away from the beach as he swims out into the Atlantic.

Two possible accounts of the ending are left to the readers' discrimination: was the city's experience of reality completely generated by the force field, and now that it is

turned off, can it rest in peace?; or, does the fact that Helward still sees the sun as spindle shaped indicate that the hyperbolic world is a permanent legacy of these people, and that they should begin building a boat right away to cross the Atlantic?

Even at its end, Christopher Priest has no easy solutions to the problem of inverted world — which proves to be Helward Mann himself.

— Bruce Gillespie, 1978

BOOK READ since August 2000

Ratings

- ** Books recommended highly.
- * Books recommended.
- ☞ Books about which I have severe doubts.

** **MARTIN DRESSLER:**
THE TALE OF AN AMERICAN DREAMER

by Steven Millhauser
(1996; Vintage 0-679-78127-7; 293 pp.)

Thanks again to Paul Kincaid for persuading me to read Millhauser. Like much of the rest of Millhauser's fiction, this starts in 'reality' and ends in dreams, but you would be hard put to find the dividing line between the two. Dressler, whose great successes occur during the early years of the twentieth century, embodies the 'American dream' of success, yet is so propelled by his own personal vision of himself and his destiny that he almost misses the point of his whole life. The contradictions in his story are best worked out in the terms of his strange marriage to a distant, cold woman, a person he seems to have married because of rather than in spite of her wraithlike frigidity. Millhauser's vision is authenticated by the spare, seemingly offhand beauty of his prose. The Book of the Year.

* **THE MAKING OF 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY**
edited by Stephanie Schwann
(2000; Modern Library 0-375-75528-4; 326 pp.)

I'm glad I read this book (thanks, Dick Jenssen, for lending it to me), but I felt it could have been a lot better. Much of the material was already available when the Jerome Agel book with the similar name appeared in the early seventies, and I have a vague notion that the new book is really an update of Agel's. Here is lots of bowing and scraping to the sacred memory of St Stanley, plus enough information to make one realise that Kubrick really was the ultimate control freak.

** **FIGHT CLUB**
by Chuck Palahnuik
(1996; Vintage 0-09-183513-5; 208 pp.)

Fincher's film of *Fight Club* is rather better than the book, although the film follows the action of the book precisely, except for two scenes. Yet the book feels like a secondary creation — not quite a book-of-the-film, but sketchy compared with the film's epic texture. Yet I can't underrate Palahnuik's writing, sarcastic and dippy and funny and vivid, and I look forward to read-

ing his other novels before somebody makes them into films.

** **DON'T OPEN YOUR EYES**
by Ann Halam

(2000; Dophin 1-85881-791-9; 179 pp.)

'Anne Halam' (Gwyneth Jones) seems to be writing one of those pious little YA books about the middle-class kids who come into conflict with the down-and-out kids they've moved next door to, then make friends with them — until suddenly *Don't Open Your Eyes* turns into a humdinger of a horror story. Some nice neck-bristling moments here. Just shows that a good writer can still do a lot with both the YA novel and the horror story.

** **COLERIDGE: EARLY VISIONS**

by Richard Holmes

(1989; Penguin 0-14-012440-3; 409 pp.)

COLERIDGE: DARKER REFLECTIONS

by Richard Holmes

(1998; HarperCollins 0-00-255577-8; 622 pp.)

I read this as one book, although Richard Holmes completed the first volume ten years before the second and for some time had no intention of writing *Darker Reflections*. That would have been a pity, because it takes the second story to make sense of the first part of Coleridge's life. In *Early Visions*, Holmes is willing to forgive all of Coleridge's peculiarities because, after all, he was a brilliant young man who had already completed many of his best poems before he set out to destroy himself through opium and drink and a general carelessness about the circumstances of life. In volume 2, we find Coleridge really hard at work at self-destruction, so Holmes focuses on what he managed to retrieve from the continuing mess. It proves to be quite a lot — all Coleridge's major critical and philosophical work, his one big financial success (a play that everybody has now forgotten), and many of his best poems. Time and again, the reader feels that Coleridge is out for the count, yet he crawls back and does something brilliant. Holmes doesn't pretend to understand the connection between self-destruction and brilliance, and often you can almost see him gritting his teeth as he writes yet another tale of vain battles or needless betrayals. Coleridge was a more interesting person than anybody else of his generation. I didn't know a lot about his generation, I must admit, which was another reason for enjoying these books.

** **ON STRIKE AGAINST GOD**

by Joanna Russ

(1980; Women's Press 0-7043-4074-7; 108 pp.)

As you might remember, my Joanna Russ article, originally a Nova Mob talk, has been gathering dust on a diskette for more than two years. Before I set out to write a final version of my essay, super-sleuth Alan Stewart found for me *On Strike Against God*. This is Russ's most satisfactory novel, because it's a simple tale of a first love affair with a woman, which involves the storyteller reassessing everything about her life, not just her ideas about sexuality. I find Russ's storyteller's solution of what to do about men (get a gun and get 'em) more American than feminist, but it does add to the frenetic charm of the book. My only regret is that *On Strike Against God* seems to have been Russ's book-end work of fiction. She's published none since.

📖 **THE DREAMING JEWELS**

by Theodore Sturgeon

(1950, new edition 2000; Gollancz 0-575-07140-0; 156 pp.)

I had never read a Sturgeon novel before I picked up *The Dreaming Jewels*, which I did because it has been republished in the current series of Gollancz 'yellow jackets' (the trade paperback SF Collectors' editions). Whoever selected it for the series must have relied on misty memories, because *The Dreaming Jewels* is putrid. George Turner once wrote an essay (which I should have reprinted in *SFC* 76) called 'Sturgeon's Sadism'. That's a good two-word description of this book. People do very nasty things to each other. It's difficult to tell who are the goodies and who are the baddies, because the goodies are as good as the baddies at crushing their enemies. This book has buried within it an interesting SF idea about really alien aliens, but the idea disappears under the lumpy action. To celebrate the work of Sturgeon, Gollancz Millennium should have published a one-volume compilation from the multi-volume Sturgeon short stories that is appearing at the moment in America.

** **WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL**

A LIFE OF JANET FRAME

by Michael King (2000; Picador 0-333-36228-3; 583 pp.)

New Zealand's Janet Frame has never sold a lot of copies of her books, but her main publisher, New York's George Braziller, has stayed with her for nearly 40 years. Britain's Women's Press republished all her books about 15 years ago, and Jane Campion's film *An Angel at My Table*, based on the three volumes of Janet Frame's autobiography, did very well. I suspect not a lot of people have read novels of hers other than *Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water*. Few SF readers seem to be aware that *Intensive Care* is partly set in a twenty-first-century New Zealand. I knew very little about her until Michael King's biography appeared, because the three-volume 'autobiography', which takes her up to the age of thirty-seven, hides as much as it reveals. King writes that on several occasions Frame has turned up at conferences about her work, only to realise that those people on the platform really were talking about her, which was all a bit too much, so she fled. She would not answer King's questions in conversation, but only in writing. She did allow him to read all her letters, enabling him to piece together an absorbing account of a person who's spent a lifetime moving house in order to find a quiet spot to write. It's notable how much of her biography and

Coleridge's are taken up with the economics of providing the bare necessities. For many years, an organisation in New Zealand has been campaigning for a Literature Nobel Prize for Janet Frame — and I hope she will be the next winner from the antipodes (Patrick White won in 1973), provided she can stay alive long enough. She's in her seventies, and has already survived several life-threatening health problems. She's not writing much now, but it's certainly worth haunting second-hand and remainder book shops to find her novels and books of short stories and poetry. I had them more or less handed to me. In 1976, during a visit to Adelaide, copies of all her Braziller hardbacks was sitting on a remainder table in Mary Martin Bookshop, at a dollar per copy.

** **DEEP SECRET**

by Diana Wynne Jones

(1997; Vista 0-575-60223-6; 383 pp.)

I grabbed this after reading the Frame biography, just for the pure reading pleasure I know I will gain from a Diana Wynne Jones book. I was surprised by the originality of the fantasy concepts, found that Jones 'caught' media fans at SF conventions rather better than did *Galaxy Quest*, and was swept away by the intensity of the last thirty pages — a journey sequence that any other author would have placed in the middle of the book. For me, this journey is a dark allegory for the process of writing novels such as *Deep Secret*. Or perhaps it's Life Itself, deeper and scarier than a journey through, say, a William Burroughs novel.

** **THREE EARLY NOVELS**

by Philip K. Dick (2000; Millennium 1-85798-912-0; 422 pp.; comprises *The Man Who Japed* (1956), *Dr Futurity* (1960), and *Vulcan's Hammer* (1960))

I had not read these early novels of Philip Dick until Millennium recently rereleased them in one volume. The early novels are not much talked about, although everybody's now talking about Philip K. Dick, but they are worth reading to discover how competent he was at this early stage in his career. They are all minor novels, in that the struts and concrete piping of the plots are more evident than the overall architecture of each book. Standard SF ideas are the bases of these books, but the ideas are nicely subverted. There is something original in each novel (each started as one-half of an Ace Double). In *The Man Who Japed*, we meet one of the first of Dick's characters to take responsibility for his actions, instead of having things merely happen to him. *Dr Futurity* has a time-paradox knot that Silverberg reused, rather blandly, in *Up the Line* a decade later. Dick's style is relentlessly clean and precise, without yet showing the variety and colour of his great novels.

* **PIRANHA TO SCURFY AND OTHER STORIES**

by Ruth Rendell

(2000; Hutchinson 0-09-179368-8; 248 pp.)

The short story is not Ruth Rendell's strength, but I had to read *Piranha to Scurfy* to see if she could stretch herself in this form. She can. Most of the very short stories are short of breath, mere sketches that might eventually find their way into novels, but the novella 'High Mysterious Union' is one of Rendell's best pieces. On the surface, it's a familiar plot about outsiders who take a house near a village of country yokels who don't welcome outsiders. Is the village enchanted, or is something much more subtle going on here? Rendell works out some disturbing implications of what could have

been a very ho-hum story.

** **A LONG LINE OF DEAD MEN**

by **Lawrence Block (1994; Avon 0-380-72024-8; 338 pp.)**

I hadn't read Lawrence Block until now, although his reputation as a mystery writer is high. It seems he's even had some connections with SF people. (Ted White has been known to write about his old friend Larry Block.) Matthew Scudder, Block's private eye, has a long past, which is fairly easy to pick up from reading a mid-series book such as *A Long Line of Dead Men*. The style is dry, and the story ambling and discursive. What sets this book apart from the products of most other current American 'hardboiled' mystery writers is its main idea. A group of men agrees to meet every year at dinner, but after thirty years one of them works out that their death rate (fourteen out of thirty-one) beats the actuarial rate somewhat. One of the men hires Scudder to find out whether there is any peculiar pattern of death. When this is established, he must try to work out a pattern to the deaths. Block makes the process convincing, basing it on Scudder's slogging footwork and his keen eye and ear for the peculiarities of the people of New York. I'll be reading more Lawrence Block soon.

** **THE SWEET SHOP OWNER**

by **Graham Swift (1980; Penguin 0-14005161-9; 222 pp.)**

Graham Swift's *Waterland* is one of the great haunting British novels of the last few decades. I don't remember a thing that happens in it. All I remember is a sense of trudging around the fens, seemingly half in water and half on dry land. The geography of *The Sweet Shop Owner*, Swift's first novel, is more conventional: a very ordinary small area of London, changing little over the years, except for a spot of bother between 1940 and 1944, inhabited by people who don't move around much. The book's Englishness is almost risible. Its main characters are a married couple who seem to have little feeling for each other; the daughter escapes smothering by leaving home as soon as she can; and the older people in the town just give up living at some point or another. The book's sense of stay-at-home desperation is so suffocating that the reader wants to shake all the characters, even while the author reveals intangible, almost non-existent emotions and perceptions, which are eventually shown to justify their lives. A haunting book, with some parallels to Steven Millhauser's *Martin Dressler*, but I'd rather read later books by Swift than read this one again.

** **REBUS: THE EARLY YEARS**

by **Ian Rankin (2000; Orion 0-75283-799-0; 598 pp.; comprises *Knots and Crosses* (1987), *Hide and Seek* (1990) and *Tooth and Nail* (1992))**

One of the few useful functions of television is to point me towards books I should have read already. The ABC here recently ran two of what I presume were quite a few episodes of *Rebus*. Its main character, John Rebus, was invented by Scottish mystery novelist Ian Rankin. The two telefilms that were shown here, *Black and Blue* and *The Hanging Garden*, from late in Rebus's career, provided hours of excellent television. Months ago, Yvonne Rousseau had recommended the books of Ian Rankin, so I bought this convenient omnibus volume, *Rebus: The Early Years*. (But wouldn't it have been pleasant if Orion's distributor had imported a few copies of the hardback instead of this ugly, awkward trade paperback?) When I began reading, I discovered that the John Rebus of the TV series is much too young. He is a

already forty in the first novel. He has led a hard life, so he should be appearing and acting a well-worn fifty in *Black and Blue*. In the introduction to the book, Rankin tells how he discovered by accident that he wrote crime novels. *Knots and Crosses* was meant to be a realistic novel based on updating Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for modern Edinburgh, whose mean streets are very mean indeed. I find Rankin's introduction hard to believe, since *Knots and Crosses* is a classic crime novel, including plenty of the obvious procedures of the genre. It is based on bonds between brothers, some sticky psychologising, and a fair amount of action set convincingly on the cold streets of Edinburgh. The plot of *Hide and Seek* is a bit more conventional than that of *Knots and Crosses*, but *Hide and Seek* for the first time fully reveals Rankin's cackling gallows Scottish humour. In *Tooth and Nail*, much of the humour comes from the clash between Rebus and the British constabulary when he is sent to London to help solve a series of murders. London itself is brought to life (one of the high-rise estates is so tough that it is used for SAS training), but the solution to the mystery is disappointingly conventional. Killers ain't upper middle class. Every mystery writer should remember this. I'll try some later Rebus novels to see whether or not Rankin eventually turned into a conventional crime novelist. (Why should crime novels be about murder? Surely some of the more spectacular and mysterious robberies would provide more interesting plot ideas than current squads of dreary serial murderers?)

** **FURY**

by **Henry Kuttner (1947, reissued 2000; Gollancz SF Collectors Edition 0-575-07141-9; 208 pp.)**

I read this first in 1960 and 1961. All I've remembered since have been vague images of a savage pterodactyl Venus . . . And that wonderful last sentence. Today *Fury* seems an example of the kind of science fiction that started me reading the stuff and I have rarely found again. Romantic gestures and enormous energy; romanticism more in the Victor Hugo tradition than the Hugo Gernsback tradition. Spectacular characters in lifelong contention with each other. The remains of humanity confined in underwater cities on Venus (an idea surely pinched from Olaf Stapledon). And a brief but vivid description of the effort to terraform Venus. Now that the special effects people are up the task, why not film *Fury*, even if 1947's Venus has little to do with the real thing?

** **SAVAGE PARIS (THE BELLY OF PARIS)**

(**LA VENTRE DE PARIS**) by **Emile Zola (1873, translated 1953; Elek Books; 296 pp.)**

I searched the Web for this book, but couldn't find it. That's because its title has rarely been translated correctly. One publisher even called it *The Fat and the Thin*. Eventually I found it (at Alice's Bookshop in North Carlton) in the ugly but well-translated Elek Books edition from the fifties. (Because Penguin has translated very few Zola novels, the Elek editions are still the only way of collecting the whole 'Rougon-Macquart' series. Frequently the Elek retitling of the books is so bizarre that it's difficult to work out which novel matches the French original.) Zola has always been called a 'naturalist' of human life, but not even Hugo could match the exuberant romanticism of many of this book's descriptions of the vast food markets of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Zola sees everything, tastes

everything, smells everything. He writes vivid word portraits of human wildlife. The only disappointment is the way Zola sets up the plot in order to bring down the main character, who is a very admirable bloke.

* **IRON TEARS**

by R. A. Lafferty

(1992; Edgewood Press 0-9629066-2; 219 pp.)

A disappointing Lafferty collection, especially compared to his early successes, such as *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*. The only distinctive stories are 'You Can't Go Back', about people who occasionally revisit a tiny moon that hovers above a canyon, and 'Or Little Ducks Each Day'.

** **ARCHANGEL**

by Michael Conner (1995; Tor 0-312-85743-8; 350 pp.)

Thanks to Justin Ackroyd for recommending this 'alternative past' novel. What if the world had, during the 1930s, not been ravaged by the Depression but by a virus, similar to the modern Ebola virus, that kills most of the White population of the world and leaves alive most other racial groups, especially Blacks? And what if a few thousand average white people hole up in the ruins of a city that rather resembles Minneapolis and pretend they can keep the traditional midwestern lifestyle going? *Archangel* slowly loses momentum after a memorable beginning, although the fundamental situation remains interesting. Conner's characters are more interesting than the situation itself, and the situation is depicted rather better than the plot, which creaks. There's an awful lot of obvious heroes-and-villains stuff at the end, which distracts the reader from the fact that the world has just unravelled and can't be put back together. Conner is a good writer, but he's published no novels since.

** **IMAGINARY CRIMES**

by Sheila Ballantyne

(1982; Viking 0-670-48022-3; 265 pp.)

Has Sheila Ballantyne published any novels since *Imaginary Crimes*? I hope so, but I haven't heard of them. This book shows her developing into a fine novelist. It's hard to describe the book in a way that would make you search for it, since it seems to be only the story of growing up. Only slowly is it revealed that this is also a mystery novel. The main character takes many years to discover and come to terms with the fact that her father 'earnt his living' as a con man, that he used his wiles to give her a secure way of life. She turns herself into an amateur detective, and her quarry is her father. The last section is overdone, but the novel as a whole is assured and very readable.

** **STRAIGHT, BENT AND BARBARA VINE**

by Garry Disher

(1997; Allen & Unwin 1-86448-524-8; 254 pp.)

I've discussed some of these stories as they've appeared in various anthologies during the nineties. The best of them, from the *Crimes for an Australian Summer* series, include 'Trusthouse' and 'Scrapings', two of the best Australian short stories I've read. Several others, such as 'The Two-Hundred-Dollar Picasso' (which indirectly

features our own Race Mathews) and 'Stalking Moon', have fairly conventional mystery structures. Disher has become Australia's best prose writer during the last decade: not a waste word, not a trace of bullshit, nothing but memorable details and gimlet-eyed observations.

** **SEVEN**

by Richard Dyer

(1999; BFI Publishing 0-85170-723-8; 88 pp.)

I don't usually read critical books about films, but Dick Jensen lent me this, and it proved a lot better than most of its kind. I was puzzled by aspects of the film *Seven*, but Dyer clears up most of the problems. I disagree with his overall interpretation — but so far I've seen the film only once.

** **THE ALLEY CAT (LE MATOU)**

by Yves Beauchemin, translated by Sheila Fischman

(1981; Henry Holt 0-8050-0157-3; 450 pp.)

This is the oddest book I've read for years. I don't read many Canadian novels (almost none since I read a lot of Robertson Davies during the 1970s), and I haven't before read a French Canadian novel. French Canada seems much more French than Canadian — at times, much more French than France. This is the story of a bloke who is given the chance to make a success of running his own restaurant (lots of French talk about yummy food in this book) by a mysterious old man who later mysteriously turns on him and becomes his nemesis. The book becomes the story of a group of characters who stay cheerful and resourceful despite monstrous bad luck. You feel they will win through some day, and they do, except for one very unfortunate incident right at the end of the novel. This book is cheerful, quirky, memorable for its characters and locales, and unlike anything else I've read. A cat is one of the main characters of the novel, but it is not the 'alley cat' of the title. But you ask yourself at the end, which of them is?

** **THE AVRAM DAVIDSON TREASURY**

by Avram Davidson, edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis (1998; Tor 0-312-86731-X; 447 pp.)

** **THE ENQUIRIES OF DOCTOR ESZTERHAZY**

by Avram Davidson (1975; Warner Books 0-446-76981-9; 206 pp.)

* **WHAT STRANGE STARS AND SKIES**

by Avram Davidson (1965; Ace F-330; 188 pp.)

** **STRANGE SEAS AND SHORES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES**

by Avram Davidson (1971; Doubleday; 219 pp.)

** **THE INVESTIGATIONS OF AVRAM DAVIDSON**

by Avram Davidson, edited by Grania Davis and Richard A. Lupoff (1999; St Martin's Press 0-312-19931-7; 246 pp.)

I'm not going to write about these books, except to recommend them to you if you can find them. A review of the *Treasury* should appear sometime in *Nova Express*. A long article will probably appear here eventually.

— Bruce Gillespie, 6 February 2001

The Best of 2000

Favourite Novels Read for the First Time in 2000

- 1 *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*
Steven Millhauser (1996; 293 pp.)
 - 2 *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943–1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright
Steven Millhauser (1972; 305 pp.)
 - 3 *La Ventre de Paris*
Emile Zola (1873; 296 pp.)
 - 4 *Snow Falling on Cedars*
David Guterson (1994; 345 pp.)
 - 5 *Happenstance*
Carol Shields (1980/1982/1990; 193 + 197 pp.)
 - 6 *The Late Mr Shakespeare*
Robert Nye (1998; 400 pp.)
 - 7 *Quite Ugly This Morning*
Christopher Brookmyre (1996; 214 pp.)
 - 8 *Grasshopper*
Barbara Vine (2000; 406 pp.)
 - 9 *A Long Line of Dead Men*
Lawrence Block (1994; 338 pp.)
 - 10 *Knots and Crosses*
Ian Rankin (1987; 184 pp.)
-

Read those words in the heading again. 2000 was a rare year because during it I read some books for the *second* time. I still don't know whether or not to include Henry Kuttner's *Fury*. I read it first during 1960 or 1961, and haven't read it since. Does that qualify it as having been 'read for the first time'? If so, it would come in at No. 5 on the list above.

Not much to talk about here, because I've discussed each of these books already in *Cosmic Donut*. Thanks to Paul Kincaid (and before him, John Foyster and Tony Thomas) for putting me onto the work of Steven Millhauser. Thanks to the Billingers for sending me *Quite Ugly This Morning*.

Thanks to Yvonne Rousseau for recommending Ian Rankin, and Justin Ackroyd, Ted White and others for recommending Lawrence Block. These are all authors who will feature in Best Of's during the next few years.

I didn't read *La Ventre de Paris* in the original language, although I suspect Zola is the one author I should tackle if ever I try reading fiction in French again. But I cannot bring myself to use the name *Savage Night*, which is the title of the Ellek Books translation. The name is *The Belly of Paris*, and it's a good name too.

Best Books Read for the First Time in 2000

- 1 *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*
Steven Millhauser (details already given)
 - 2 *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943–1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright
Steven Millhauser (details already given)
 - 3 *La Ventre de Paris*
Emile Zola (details already given)
 - 4 *Snow Falling on Cedars*
David Guterson (details already given)
 - 5 *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame*
Michael King (2000; 583 pp.)
 - 6 *South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*
Veronica Brady (1998; 586 pp.)
 - 7 *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*
Richard Holmes (1998; 622 pp.)
 - 8 *Coleridge: Early Visions*
Richard Holmes (1989; 409 pp.)
 - 9 *Happenstance*
Carol Shields (details already given)
 - 10 *The Late Mr Shakespeare*
Robert Nye (details already given)
 - 11 *Conversations with Wilder*
Cameron Crowe (1999; 376 pp.)
 - 12 *Quite Ugly This Morning*
Christopher Brookmyre (details already given)
 - 13 *Travel Arrangements*
M. John Harrison (2000; 262 pp.)
 - 14 *Grasshopper*
Barbara Vine (details already given)
 - 15 *A Long Line of Dead Men*
Lawrence Block (details already given)
-

Again, there are a few *re-read* books that I haven't allowed to muscle into the list. If I allowed it, at No. 1 would be Italo Calvino's short fiction collection *T Zero*, mysteriously called *Time and the Hunter* by Jonathan Cape when first released in Britain (that's the edition I have, but later English-language

editions have reverted to the Italian title *T Zero*). During 2000 I reread my favourite SF novel, *Hothouse*, which would hold No. 2 position if I allowed it to sneak in. High on the list, too, would be three of the books I read for my 'Biographies' project: Damon Knight's *The Futurians*, Brian Aldiss's *The*

Twinkling of an Eye, and Frederik Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* (a lot better than I remember from my first reading of it).

Nothing much to say about the others except thanks to

Dick Jenssen for lending me Cameron Crowe's funny and stimulating conversations with Billy Wilder, and no thanks to the Australian distributor, who failed to distribute it. (I ordered it in March, but it didn't arrive.)

Favourite Films Seen for the First Time in 2000

- 1 *Fight Club* (directed by David Fincher) 1999
 - 2 *My Father's Glory* (Yves Robert) 1990
 - 3 *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch) 1986
 - 4 *Point Blank* (John Boorman) 1967
 - 5 *The Limey* (Steven Soderbergh) 1999
 - 6 *Napoléon* (Abel Gance) 1927
 - 7 *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze) 1999
 - 8 *Three Kings* (David O. Russell) 2000
 - 9 *Le Samourai* (Jean-Pierre Melville) 1967
 - 10 *The Spider and the Fly* (Robert Hamer) 1949
 - 11 *DOA* (Rudolf Maté) 1950
 - 12 *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross) 1998
 - 13 *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott) 1990
 - 14 *Beat the Devil* (John Huston) 1953
 - 15 *Royal Wedding* (Stanley Donen) 1951
-

Again, if I left off 'seen for the first time in 2001', this would be a very different list. I saw two of my four favourite films this year (Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and several more of very-near-the-top films, such as Carné's *Les enfants du paradis*, Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, Bergman's *The Magic Flute*, Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, and Shamalyan's *The Sixth Sense*, all because of Dick Jenssen and his marvellous DVD machine. Heartfelt thanks from Elaine and me.

If the reviewers didn't give away the ending of *Fight Club* (none of the locals did), you might have thought, as I did, that you had some idea of what kind of film it was before seeing it. It appears to tell the story of two disaffected men who, pretty much by accident, set up Fight Clubs all over the city, then throughout America. At these clubs, men choose to fight each other, not for glory or money or anything else much, but because this structured, secret activity gives their lives a meaning that is nothing else in American life can give them. That is the basis of the first half of the film, told through one of the wittiest scripts for years and the nineties' most dazzling cinematography. As Dick and some reviewers have said, the film is not even about violence; it's about a society that has pretended to give prosperity to its people but has removed all justification for purposeful action. Having told that story, the film suddenly takes a flying leap upwards — but no spoilers here. Brad Pitt, Ed Norton and Helena Bonham Carter (unrecognisable if you've only seen her in Merchant-Ivory productions) are brilliant.

I had resisted seeing *My Father's Glory* for years, because Dick made it sound too nice. It is totally nice, charming in a purely French way, and you can't take your eyes off it from the first to last frame. I'm not sure how Robert gets away with it. Splendid acting, photography and direction, of course. But also, I suspect, an almost mystical sense of France itself, especially Provence. The film's sustained climax takes place in a breathtaking plateau region of southern France.

Blue Velvet, on the other hand, I had resisted because reviewers had made it sound shocking beyond belief. One scene does, indeed, take erotomania about as far as mainstream cinema can go (not in eroticism, but in mania — thanks to good old Dennis Hopper). Other memorable scenes are disturbing because they are very strange, but they make you feel this could happen to you. *Blue Velvet* is the story of the rapid growing up of a very naive young man (played

by Kyle McLachlan), who encounters all the forces of evil you might very well find in any small American city. If I lived in such a city, after seeing *Blue Velvet* I don't think I'd ever venture beyond the lawn sprinklers.

Point Blank and *The Limey* are basically the same story: one man's revenge upon the people who dun him wrong. Lee Marvin, in *Point Blank*, and Terence Stamp, in *The Limey*, are equally imposing in their remorseless sweeping away of obstacles as they track down the enemy. The difference is that Lee Marvin is pretty much the Lee Marvin we've always known, villain or hero, whereas Terence Stamp is acting much against type, adopting an exaggerated East London accent, monotonous voice and unexpressive face. What kind of character will he develop into? *Point Blank*, from 1967, absorbs every French New Wave technique effortlessly, so seems more experimental than 1999's *The Limey*, virtually a return to straightforward *film noir*. Why has *The Limey* not been shown commercially in Australia? It's not, after all, that we are going to have any problem with Stamp's accent, which the Americans did. *The Limey* was shown at the 2000 Melbourne Film Festival.

Thanks to Race Mathews for showing us the laser disc of *Napoléon*. This 1927 four-and-a-half-hour epic (shorter, I'm told, than Gance's original, bits of which are still being discovered) includes almost every film technique used during the rest of the twentieth century, including complex overlay shots, split screen and three-strip wide screen (as in the first Cinerama technique). The acting is astonishing, and because Gance could count on the French to know their history, his exploration of historical moments is complex and realistic, often paying tribute to the great romantic paintings of the late 1700s. If it's not my favourite film, it could have something to do with the fact that the Napoléon shown in the film is a puritanical pill, and Gance makes an unapologetic call to arms at the end of the film. (The pageant of Napoléon's new army getting ready to attack, burn and pillage Italy is surely meant to defy the deep post-World War I pacifism of France. Gance must have been unsurprised when German tanks rolled into Paris.)

Being John Malkovich is one of the most original films of all time, so much so that most of the time I was watching it I was overcome by disbelief that Spike Jonze and his crew could have been allowed to make it. Since it's one of the great weird fantasy films of all time, with voyeurs popping in and out of John Malkovich's head (only to be expelled onto

the edge of an out-of-town freeway), strange people occupying the hidden floor of an office building, and John Cusack unrecognisable until I read the end titles, I'm surprised I haven't placed it Number 1. Perhaps it's too brilliant for its own good; at the end I wasn't quite sure what I had been watching, and I haven't had an opportunity to see it again. Also, a film that glories so much in its own brilliance does not have the sense of urgency of a *Fight Club* or *Blue Velvet*.

David O. Russell's *Three Kings* might even be a better film than *Being John Malkovich*, since its story of a group of over-enthusiastic soldiers rampaging around Iraq in search of 'treasure' sometimes seems as fantastical as Jonzes's story. Films like *Fight Club*, *Malkovitch* and *Three Kings* show that American cinema is more vibrantly alive than it has been since the early seventies. *Three Kings* relies on intense, even intrusive camerawork and sound sculpture for its effects, a script that switches constantly from humour to horror or satire, and some fine actors, including George Clooney. Since seeing this film, I've seen Russell's *Flirting with Disaster*, whose script is as edgy as that of *Three Kings*.

Le Samourai, all 1967 French New Wave cool, was originally banned from Australia, for reasons now incomprehensible. Fortunately, it was remastered and rereleased recently. Alain Delon is the silent, remorseless hired killer of the title, but the hero of the film is the music/sounds director, who might have claimed to have invented 'sound sculpture' if Hitchcock hadn't done it already in *The Birds*.

The Spider and the Fly and *DOA* are two black-and-white films released within a year of each other, both thrillers, but the former is English and the latter is American. *The Spider and the Fly* is an ultra-cool encounter between the hunter and

the hunted, while *DOA* is the ever-so-slightly-hysterical 'film noir' about a man who, we know from the first scene, has already been fatally poisoned. Today the film is most notable for its roving documentary-style footage of San Francisco, very different from the studio-bound quality of most crime films of the period.

Pleasantville is a film I should have disliked, but didn't. The fantasy gimmick is familiar — two teenagers step through the TV screen into the world of the 1950s family sitcom, black and white and sexless. Their presence gradually destroys that world, as colour and passion take over. What makes the film interesting is that the teenagers realise that they have corrupted this world, not improved it, and try to take responsibility for their actions.

I already knew the ending of *Thelma and Louise*, but that didn't stop me enjoying the sheer energy that Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon bring to what proves to be a fairly stupid plot. The landscape photography is great.

Beat the Devil must have begun as an attempt to emulate the success of *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon* by making one film that combined elements from both. Unfortunately, the plot is farce, not melodrama, Jennifer Jones is no substitute for Ingrid Bergman, and Edward Underdown is downright odd as the wronged husband. However, Peter Lorre and Humphrey Bogart are here (recommendation enough). Robert Morley, looking exactly as he did forty years later in his last film, is an effective substitute for Sidney Greenstreet.

Royal Wedding's offputting title is the only wrong note in one of the last of the great film musicals. Fred Astaire has some of his best routines in this film.

Favourite Short Stories Read for the First Time in 2000

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1 'High Mysterious Union' (Ruth Rendell) <i>Piranha to Scurfy and Other Stories</i></p> <p>2 'Empty' (M. John Harrison) <i>Travel Arrangements</i></p> <p>3 'Seven Guesses of the Heart' (M. John Harrison) <i>Travel Arrangements</i></p> <p>4 'Hell Hath Enlarged Herself' (Michael Marshall Smith) <i>What You Make It</i></p> <p>5 'Flying Carpets' (Steven Millhauser) <i>The Knife Thrower and Other Stories</i></p> | <p>6 'Paradise Park' (Steven Millhauser) <i>The Knife Thrower and Other Stories</i></p> <p>7 'You Can't Go Back' (R. A. Lafferty) <i>Iron Tears</i></p> <p>8 'When God Lived in Kentish Town' (Michael Marshall Smith) <i>What You Make It</i></p> <p>9 'The Man Who Drew Cats' (Michael Marshall Smith) <i>What You Make It</i></p> <p>10 'Old Women' (M. John Harrison) <i>Travel Arrangements</i></p> |
|---|--|
-

Not a highly competitive list this year, because in 2000 I read mainly novels and biographies. Ruth Rendell is usually an offhand writer of short fiction, but occasionally she produces a piece as vivid as the novella 'High Mysterious Union'. At its beginning it seems to offer a familiar type of horror fantasy, as its luckless main character attempts to stay in a house rented on the edge of village whose inhabitants don't want him to stay. Hints of magic powers give way, by the end of the story, to a suggestion of a much more interesting collective power. As usual with Rendell, it's the house, the village, and the forest (the architecture and the geography) that are the most vivid elements in the story.

Otherwise, I don't remember the fine details of most of the other stories. It's enough to say, for instance, that the Harrison stories I've picked are the most atmospheric, paranoid, gloomy and vivid examples of the collection *Travel Arrangements*, which seems designed for a reader such as me,

who believes there is nothing cheerier than gloomy fiction. Also, I love chewy sentences, and nobody chews them finer than Mike Harrison.

Michael Marshall Smith, on the other hand, tries to tell disturbing stories without having the emotional or lingual skills adequate to the task. Hence, the best story in the *What You Make It* collection, 'Hell Hath Enlarged Herself', works best because it is basically a conventional end-of-the-world science fiction story. When Smith tries to be mysterious, he often isn't. 'The Man Who Drew Cats' and 'When God Lived in Kentish Town' work because they are neat, vivid variations on fantasy ideas that are usually done badly.

Some brilliant ideas in Steven Millhauser's collections (as in 'Paradise Park', one of the two stories I've picked from *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories*) work much better when incorporated into the novels. Otherwise, many of these stories seem more like Borgesian lecture-*ficciones* than liv-

ing pieces of fiction.

Elaine pointed out to me 'You Can't Go Back' as the best story in *Iron Tears*, a Lafferty collection that appeared from

a small publisher. Typical Lafferty, visually and conceptually effective in a way most of the other stories in *Iron Tears* are not.

Favourite CDs Bought for the First Time in 2000

This is a very approximate list because (shame!) I still haven't heard many of the CDs I bought during 2000.

I was surprised at how many of my Top Ten Pop CD titles were also on *Mojo's* list for 2000. Perhaps my taste is not as

terminally unfashionable as I had suspected. Also, *Age* 'Green Guide' columnist Mike Daly's Top 10 CDs for 2000 had many that were contenders for my own list.

Pop CDs 2000

- | | | | |
|---|--|----|--|
| 1 | <i>You're the One</i> (Paul Simon) | 7 | <i>Live@Antone's</i> (Joe Ely) |
| 2 | <i>American Recordings III: Solitary Man</i> (Johnny Cash) | 8 | <i>Smile</i> (The Jayhawks) |
| 3 | <i>Red Dirt Girl</i> (Emmylou Harris) | 9 | <i>The I-10 Chronicles</i> (various artists) |
| 4 | <i>Life'll Kill Ya</i> (Warren Zevon) | 10 | <i>Lonely Street</i> (Bap Kennedy) |
| 5 | <i>One Endless Night</i> (Jimmie Dale Gilmore) | 11 | <i>Covenant</i> (Greg Brown) |
| 6 | <i>Chinese Work Songs</i> (Little Feat) | 12 | <i>Duke Elegant</i> (Dr John) |
-

(120 contenders for the Top Ten.)

None of these is the *best* CD for the year. That honour, by a long way, goes to Loudon Wainwright III's *The Atlantic Sessions* (Rhino Handmade). But under my own rules I can't place that at No. 1 because *The Atlantic Sessions* is a repackaging of *Loudon Wainwright III* and *Loudon Wainwright III Volume Two*, which I bought in 1972. Two of the best albums ever made, they were reissued on vinyl by Demon in the late eighties, but this is the first time they have appeared on CD. All the classic Loudon songs are here, especially 'Motel Blues', 'The Suicide Song', 'Be Careful There's a Baby in the House' and 'Old Paint'. Listen to this brilliantly funny man proving just how good a singer-songwriter can be. For his trouble, Loudon Wainwright was dropped from Atlantic after these two albums.

The list itself is, for Gillespie-watchers, all too predictable. (What a concept, 'Gillespie-watching'. Like watching paint dry — slow-drying paint.) Most of the performers on my list could get up on stage with each other, and probably do. Most of them play on each other's recording sessions. They're the country singers that country radio doesn't want to know about: the people who stay away from Nashville, are seen in Austin, New York or Melbourne, but never on the Grand Ol' Opry or TV. They can sing, they can play guitar, they can write songs, but their main worry is finding a new record company each time the previous company dumps them for being 'uncommercial'.

A major exception is Paul Simon, who on *You're the One* shows he is still the best songwriter in the world. After listening to his previous record, *The Capeman*, you'd have thought he'd lost his touch. But Paul Simon remains as brilliant and ironical as ever, is backed by a great percussion band on this CD, and writes at least four of his best songs ever (including my anthem, 'Old').

Emmylou Harris doesn't fit any patterns, except that she is now judged as too old to be played on American country radio. She remains under the influence of New Orleans high-tech pop, but the shimmering bass and synth lines serve

only to make her sound, on *Red Dirt Girl*, even more epic and truly Western than it's sounded before. She wrote all the songs on this CD. A recent issue of *Mojo* included a comprehensive interview with her.

Mojo magazine picked Johnny Cash's *Solitary Man* as its No. 1 CD for the year, and in most other years I would have also done so. It's not every singer who, having been told he has Parkinson's disease, records a CD of anthems defying death. 'I Won't Back Down', he sings with a conviction never suspected of the song's writer Bruce Petty. Australia's Nick Cave and Mick Harvey contribute 'The Mercy Seat', with Cash convincing as the bloke tied to the electric chair, and other songs, such as 'I See a Darkness' and 'Field of Diamonds' give the sense that good ole Johnny Cash means to tramp right through hell and out the other side again, singing all the way.

The singers on my list who could appear on the same stage include Jimmie Dale Gilmore, whose *One Endless Night* is just about his best CD, Joe Ely, whose *Live@Antone's* is the best concert CD of the year (Joe and Jimmie Dale were in the Flatlanders together many years ago), Greg Brown, Bap Kennedy, and even the Jayhawks.

In the seventies, the category for the Jayhawks' style would be have been mainstream rock and roll; a few years ago they were recognised as competitors with REM, but now synth junk rules the charts, so the Jayhawks are called 'country'.

The problem of categorisation also threatens to ruin Little Feat's career. The booklet for *Hotcakes and Outtakes*, Little Feat's recent four-CD box set, describes how the group had real success after re-forming in 1988, then foundered with several later CDs, ending up on near-bankrupt labels that could not support them. Fortunately, the group has hung together, sounds better than at any time since the mid 1970s, and has produced *Chinese Work Songs*, a rock and roll CD that I like to play over and over. I keep hoping Little Feat will visit Australia. There is a fairly firm rumour that they are coming out for the Byron Bay Blues Festival, but there is still

no sign of them playing in Melbourne afterwards.

The best box sets for 2000? A bit hard to fit them into the above list, because I haven't had time to listen to each CD in each set. What I've heard from the following sounds good:

- *The Duke: Essential Collection 1927–1962* (Duke Ellington) (3 CDs)

- *Love God Murder* (Johnny Cash) (3 CDs)
- *The Man Who Invented Soul* (Sam Cooke) (4 CDs)
- *Hotcakes and Outtakes* (Little Feat) (4 CDs)
- *Complete Studio Recordings* (Doors) (7 CDs)
- *So Many Roads* (Grateful Dead) (5 CDs)
- *Box Set* (Linda Ronstadt) (4 CDs)

Classical CDs 2000

- 1 Corrette: *Six Organ Concertos* (Concerto Rocco)
- 2 Beethoven, arr. Wagner: *Symphony No. 9* (Nonko Agawa (piano), Masaaki Suzuki (cond.) & Bach Collegium Japan)
- 3 Mozart: *Symphonies Nos. 24–41* (Nikolaus Harnoncourt (cond.) & Royal Concertgebouw Amsterdam) (6 CDs)
- 4 *Scott Ross* (7 CDs of solo harpsichord pieces by d'Anglebert, Bach, Handel, Soler, Rameau and Scarlatti)
- 5 Biber: *Missa Salisburgensis* (Ton Koopman (cond.) & Amsterdam Baroque Orch. and Chorus)
- 6 Shostakovich: *Cello Concerto No. 1*/Kodaly: *Cello Sonata* (Pieter Wispelway (cello), Richard Tognetti (cond.) & Australian Chamber Orchestra)
- 7 Schubert: *Fantasy in F minor, Variations in A flat, Grand Duo in C major* (Benjamin Britten & Sviatoslav Richter)
- 8 Mozart: *Sonatas K521, K448*/Schubert: *Andantino, etc.* (Benjamin Britten & Sviatoslav Richter)
- 9 Part: *I Am the True Vine/Berliner Mass* (Paul Hillier (cond.), Theatre of Voices & Pro Arte Orchestra)
- 10 Mozart: *Sinfonia Concertante/Piano Concerto No. 22/Adagio and Fugue* (Benjamin Britten & Sviatoslav Richter (pianos), Norbert Brainin and Peter Schidlöf (violins) & English Chamber Orchestra)

(19 contenders for the Top 10.)

Every month many hundreds of classical CDs are reviewed or listed in *Gramophone* magazine, and of those, perhaps 20 or 30 per month are released in Australia. Sometimes I take the trouble to order through Thomas' a small number of the CDs reviewed in *Gramophone*, but usually I feel too broke to do so. A few years ago, I tried ordering CDs from the BBC Legends label. I was told that, since the label had no distributor in Australia, Thomas' could not stock its CDs! The label now has an Australian distributor. Suddenly far more BBC Legends CDs than I can buy are flooding into the classical shops. The best of them include recordings by Benjamin Britten, both as pianist and conductor, with various instrumentalists and singers. All these recordings have that special concert hall atmosphere that is missing on most sterilely studio-bound classical CDs.

John Bangsund was kind enough to think of us when he needed to sell a few CDs early in 2000. By far the best of them is the Concerto Rocco version of the Corrette organ concertos. I hadn't heard of the group before, and I'm not sure that I had heard any Corrette. This is magic music from the height of the early baroque, meticulously recorded in a church, not a recording studio.

John Bangsund likes the Hogwood/Schroeder versions of the Mozart symphonies slightly better than the Harnoncourt/Concertgebouw versions, but the CDs he sold us will do me for the rest of my life. Harnoncourt can harness the weight of the Concertgebouw's sound, yet somehow make

the orchestra dance, so that it shows all the flexibility of the smaller 'original instruments' groups. No wonder *Gramophone* listed Harnoncourt the Conductor of the Decade (presumably the 1990s, although he made many of his best recordings in the 1980s).

One of my more-than-usually-unachievable dreams is that one day I will suddenly awaken with the ability to play the piano, so I will begin make piano transcriptions of all the world's great orchestral pieces. If this happens, I will try to find the sheet music of the Wagner piano transcription of Beethoven's 9th symphony and play it. Written before Wagner had written anything else, the transcription is magical, especially on the recording I've listed by Nonko Ogawa and a group of brilliant Japanese musicians and singers. It is quite different from the leaden Liszt transcription, and works well on this CD because the last movement retains a small chorus and soloists.

And Scott Ross? Doubly unfortunate bloke: not only did he die from AIDS some years ago, but for awhile he became more famous for the manner of his death than for the fact that he recorded all of Scarlatti's harpsichord music, on 34 CDs, before he died. Fortunately he also recorded much else. The 7-CD set that John sold us is a well-packed sampler, including many treasures. With any luck, all Scott Ross's recordings have been committed to CD somewhere out there in the world.

— Bruce Gillespie, 7 February 2001