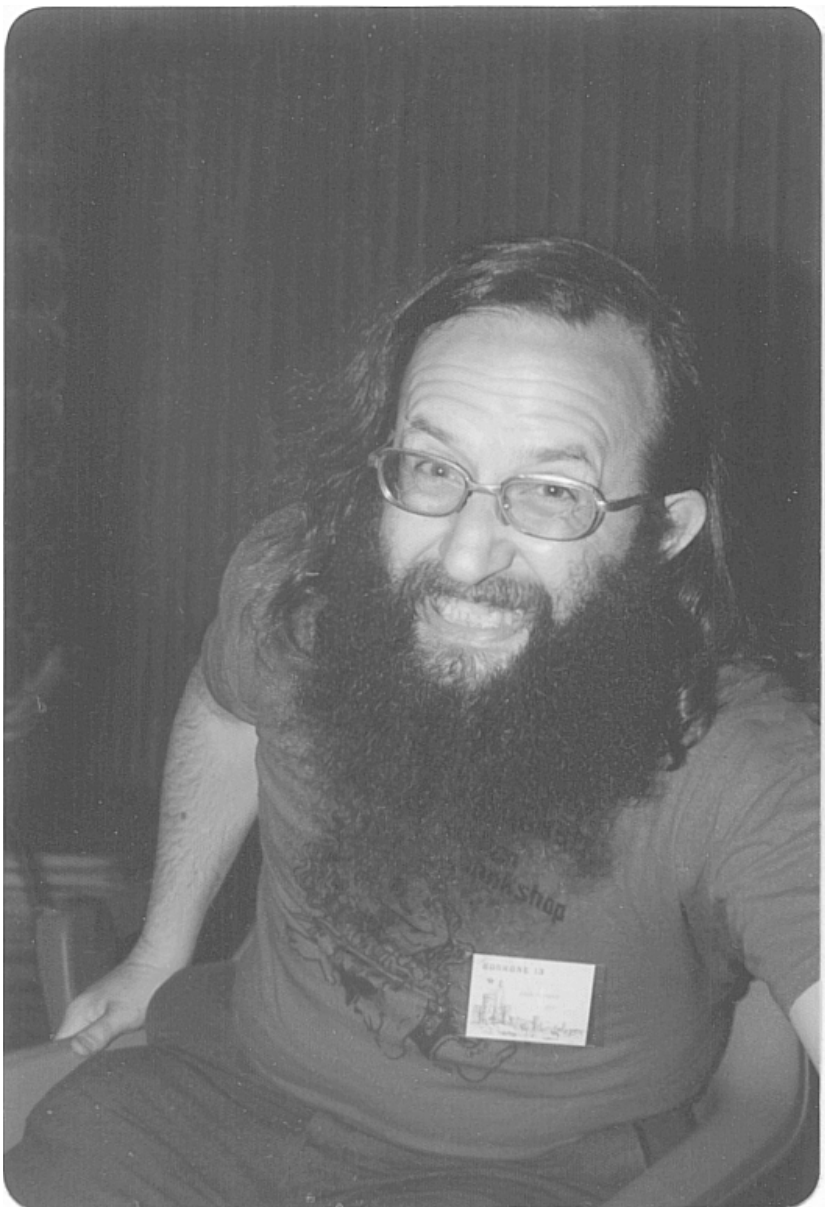
John Maxwell Foyster 1941–2003

‘Wake up, you lot!’



✻ brg ✻

No. 35 August 2003

Produced for ANZAPA by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Collingwood VIC 3066. Phone: (03) 94194797. Email: gandc@mira.net

Cover photo of John Foyster at Monoclave, Monash University, 1977: Mervyn Binns.
Other photos:
Helena Binns, pages 4, 5, 6 and 7
Dick Jenssen: p. 8
Elaine Cochrane: p. 9
Lee Harding: pages 8, 12 and 13
Gary Hoff: Back cover.

The list of lost good companions grows long. This issue pays tribute to perhaps the most interesting SF fan of them all: **John Maxwell Foyster**.

CELEBRATING JOHN FOYSTER

John Foyster died from a brain tumour on 5 April 2003, just a few days short of his sixty-second birthday. It says much about him that so far it has taken three gatherings to farewell him: the funeral in Adelaide on 9 April, the celebration of his life at Linden in St Kilda on 11 May, and the tribute held during Continuum, this year's Melbourne SF convention, on 11 July.

I hope to publish a record of these events, based on Yvonne Rousseau's transcription of both the funeral and the celebration, but *right now* I also need to save my ANZAPA membership.

Linden is an old St Kilda mansion on the crest of the hill in Acland Street. Currently, it serves as an art gallery and social facility for the people of St Kilda. It was chosen for the Melbourne celebration of John Foyster's life by Miranda, his daughter, and she seems to have been the main organiser. Other people who were very involved in preparations included Yvonne Rousseau, Jenny Bryce, and Myfanwy and Tony Thomas.

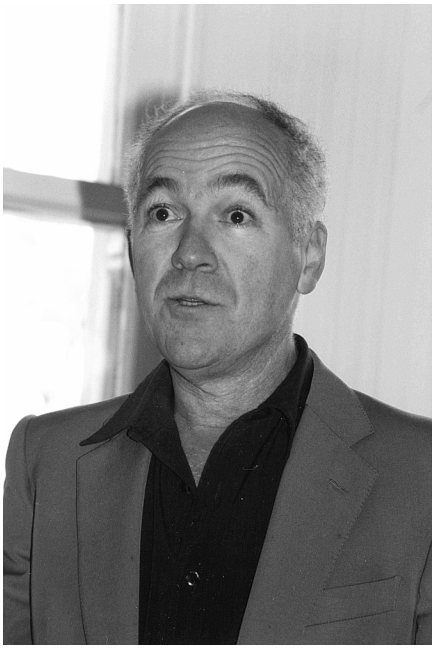
Over a hundred people gathered at Linden on that Sunday morning. There was seating for only about three-quarters of them, but nobody seemed to mind standing. The celebration itself had to be kept to an hour's length, as the organisers wanted people to be able to mingle afterwards over coffee or tea and bagels from Glick's. (When John and Jenny lived in St Kilda, they breakfasted on bagels from Glick's on Sunday mornings.)

I'm not sure why I was chosen as the representative of fandom, but I suspect it was because I could be trusted to keep the length of my talk to ten minutes. Which I did, and everything would have worked perfectly, had it not been for Peter Nicholls.

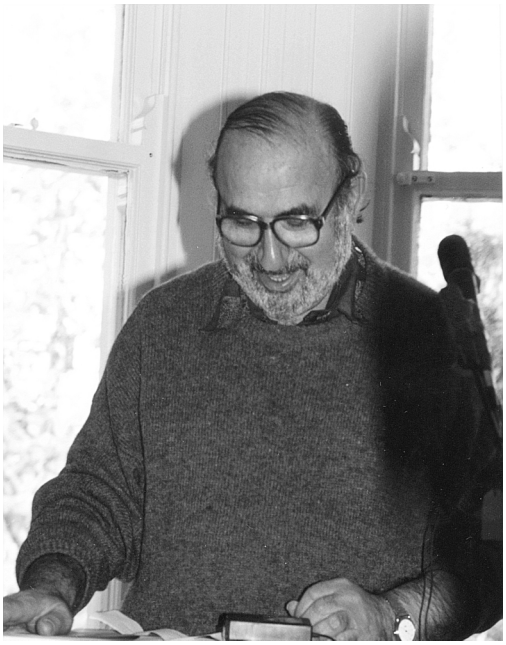
The first speaker was John Schutz, John Foyster's PhD supervisor during the early seventies. John Foyster didn't finish his PhD, but he seems to have made quite a mark at Monash University. Bernie Rechter, John's boss at ACER from 1972 to 1976, spoke much about John's multitude of interests, as well as his ability as a mathematician. I then gave the talk reprinted on pages 7–10.

The MC was Race Mathews, founder member of the Melbourne SF Club. At the very last moment Peter Nicholls asked to be allowed to speak. Peter spoke fourth, recalling John's reputation as *the* Australian fan when Peter was living in Britain during the seventies. Race

THE FOYSTER CELEBRATION AT LINDEN



John Schutz.



Bernard Rechter.

John Bangsund (left) and Merv Binns (right).

(From left:) Lee Harding, Jennifer Bryce, Damien Broderick.

Photos by Helena Binns

Bruce Gillespie.

Miranda Foyster.

(From left:) Helena Binns, Miranda Foyster, Elizabeth Darling.

(From left:) Lyn Smith, Perry Middlemiss, Leigh Edmonds.

Gathering in the gardens of Linden (from left): Roman Orszanski, Irwin Hirsh, Lucy Sussex, Perry Middlemiss, John Bangsund, Leigh Edmonds. (Photo: Helena Binns.)

counted down his printed list, then called speaker 5, John's daughter Miranda. He inadvertently omitted the scheduled fourth speaker, Julian Fraillon, a former student of John Foyster's at Preshill School. Julian was sitting there waiting for his cue, but nobody had met him before. The moment for introducing him passed. Miranda spoke affectionately and amusingly about her father, proceedings finished, and we rose and mingled.

Over bagels and coffee, I did catch up with many of the ancient and glorious, including Leigh Edmonds, who had travelled down from Ballarat, Lee Harding, David and Sue Grigg, and Christine and Derrick Ashby. But I didn't see Lyn Smith, wife of Bob Smith, after the speeches, although I had said hello when I arrived. Both John Bangsund and Sally Yeoland were there. I spoke for a while to John Schutz and his wife, and to Damien Broderick, whom one doesn't see often in Melbourne social circles. Elaine and I went off to lunch with Perry, Irwin, Lucy and Julian, and we swapped some more Foyster stories.

As Yvonne had already transcribed the proceedings of the funeral, Sally Yeoland printed enough copies to give one to each person attending the celebration. She included in her publication two newspaper obituaries for John, John Baxter's in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Vivian Eyers's in the *Adelaide Advertiser*. (Since then, Bill Hall's obituary has appeared in the Melbourne *Age*. Bill Hall was John's boss in Adelaide.)

Yvonne has also transcribed the proceedings of the celebration, but Julian Fraillon has not yet been able to send her a copy of the talk he would have given.

Bill Wright and I would like to publish all this material in one fanzine. John Bangsund is planning to publish everything on his Web site. Perry, Irwin, Damien Warman and I have plans for a *Best of John Foyster*, if we can track down even a small percentage of his lifetime's writings. I would like to republish everything John wrote for *SF Commentary*, but that would be a weighty tome. With our scanner, I should be able to reprint *SFC* 19 (the collected issues of *exploding madonna* and *The Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology*). Lee Harding discovered *Gryphon* 15, February 1965, probably the best single issue of a fanzine ever published in Australia. Foyster published it; Lee wrote it and illustrated it with his own photographs. I've scanned that already.

Good plans all, and maybe some will come to pass. Meanwhile, following my speech and Dick Jenssen's tribute, you will find a brief selection of Foyster writings.

The Melbourne SF Club reunion, FanHistoricon, organised by John Foyster as part of Aussiecon 3, 1999. From left: JF, Merv Barrett, Bill Wright, Cedric Rowley, Bruce Gillespie, John Straede, Tony Thomas, Cheryl Straede, Leigh Edmonds, Dick Jenssen, Robin Johnson, Ramon Mazurak, Helena Binns, Merv Binns. (Photo: Cath Ortlieb.)

FOUR OR FIVE WAYS IN WHICH JOHN FOYSTER CHANGED MY LIFE

Delivered to the John Foyster memorial service, Linden Art Gallery, Acland Street, St Kilda, 11 May 2003

by Bruce Gillespie

I want to speak about four or five ways in which John Foyster changed my life.

Without meaning to, John Foyster changed my life by giving me the entire social world in which I have lived for the last thirty-six years. More than a year and a half before I met him, at Easter 1966, John Foyster organised a science fiction convention in Melbourne. It was the first SF convention held in Australia for eight years, and except for the Melbourne SF Club, which Merv Binns had kept going in Melbourne, and Graham Stone's Futurians in Sydney, it ended a dark period in the Australian science fiction world. During that 1966 convention John Foyster became part of a triumvirate that set out to produce an Australian magazine about science fiction. The editor was John Bangsund, the other member of the team was Lee Harding, and the magazine was *Australian Science Fiction Review*. I bought the second issue of that magazine in August 1966, and it changed my life. The first few issues of *ASFR* (as it was always known) were largely written by the three people who published it, both under their own names and under pseudonyms. John's pseudonyms included Dr K. U. F. Widdershins, DSC and Bar, who mounted spirited attacks on the major science fiction books of the day. Under his own name, John Foyster wrote reviews and long essays about writers such as J. G. Ballard and Cordwainer Smith. His special issue of *ASFR* about Cordwainer Smith was a wonderful treat, and included the story of John's pilgrimage to find out the real name of the author who wrote under that pseudonym. John finally made the discovery that Cordwainer Smith was really Dr Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger, but only in the week that Linebarger died and the whole SF world was let in on the secret.

John, his various pseudonyms, and the other *ASFR* writers, mounted a comprehensive

The *ASFR* team already assembled — in 1966, six months before the start of *ASFR* and several years before the growth of the Foyster and Bangsund beards: (left) Lee Harding and John Foyster (photo: Dick Jenssen); (right) John Foyster and John Bangsund (photo: Lee Harding).

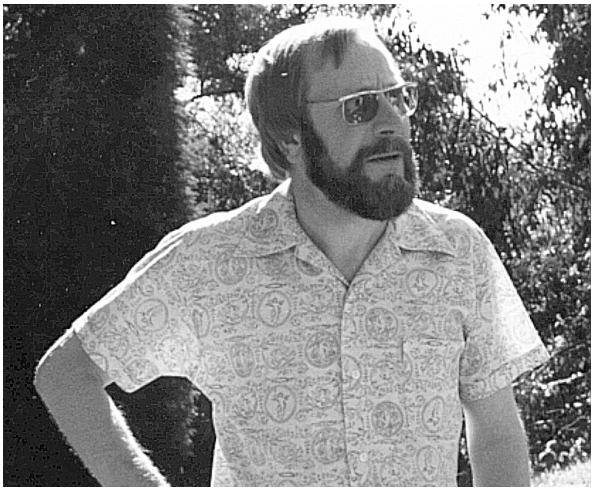
attack on the low standards then prevailing in most published science fiction. If the authors winced, Foyster and co. just stomped a bit harder. Foyster wrote entertainingly, and he never apologised. Anything, it seemed, was possible. The authors wrote back, and seemed to enjoy being stomped on. People like Delany, Blish and Aldiss appreciated that somewhere in the world there was somebody who expected them to be real writers who didn't have to offer excuses for writing science fiction. The letter columns of *ASFR* were packed with famous names. I wanted to get involved in all this excitement, and in 1968 I did so.

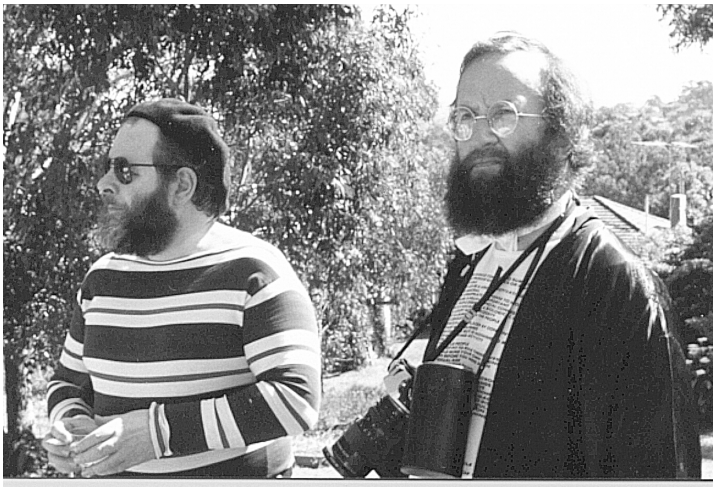
The second way in which John Foyster changed my life was by offering me some treasures that were the basis of my own small success. During 1968 and 1969, John edited a legendary fanzine that he first called *exploding madonna*, then *The Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology* (or *JoE* for short). It was legendary because hardly anybody saw a copy, but eventually everybody heard about it. It won a Ditmar Award in 1970. In his magazine, John gathered together the fifteen best SF critics in the world, forced them to talk to each other, challenged them, goaded them, often laughed at them, and they came back for more. In one memorable headline, he wrote: 'Wake up, you lot!' Delany, Blish, Dahlskog, Aldiss, Turner, Knight, Rottensteiner and several others appeared in *JoE*, whose circulation never went over 20 copies. Franz Rottensteiner in Austria sent to John translations of lots of articles by Stanislaw Lem – the first appearance of Lem's work in the English-speaking world. When John shut down *JoE* in 1970, not only did he allow me to reprint the entire run of his magazine as an issue of *SF Commentary* but he handed me the rights to publish Lem's material, in the same month as *Solaris*, Lem's first novel translated into English, was published. The rest is, as they say, a footnote to history. If I never quite conquered the world, it wasn't for lack of help from John Foyster, who went on to guest-edit four more issues of *SF Commentary*.

The third way in which John Foyster changed my life was by forming teams to organise institutions and events that I and many other people still enjoy.

Not only did he organise conventions in the sixties and seventies, often as a team with Leigh Edmonds, but he revived *ASFR* in 1986, edited by a Collective that included, at various times, Jenny and Russell Blackford, Yvonne Rousseau, Janeen Webb and Lucy Sussex. This arrangement was successful for several years, and is credited by Dave Hartwell as being the inspiration for the team approach by which the *New York Review of Science* Fiction is currently produced.

In 1970, John Foyster picked a team who would bid for the right to hold a world SF convention in Melbourne. It's hard to emphasise how unlikely it was in 1970 that this bid could succeed. However, John encouraged every fanzine editor in the country to publish as much as possible during the early seventies and send their magazines overseas. No Internet





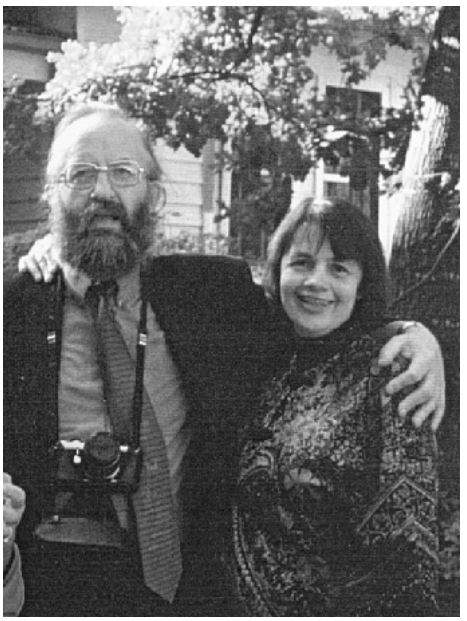
The same people in 1982, twelve years after the end of *ASFR* first series, and four years before *ASFR* second series: (Left) Lee Harding. (Right) John Bangsund and John Foyster. (Photos by Elaine Cochrane.)

in those days — publishing and letter writing were the only ways Australian SF fans could make our mark. In 1971, we Australian fanzine editors produced more than 100 different issues of our fanzines, an achievement never repeated. Australian fans also had to start running large conventions in hotels, so that we would be ready for 1975. In 1973, a large group of Australians travelled to Toronto for that year's world convention, and we won the right to hold Aussiecon I in 1975. John was also important in beginning the bid that led to holding another world convention in Melbourne in 1985, and he encouraged Perry Middlemiss and the team to win the bid for 1999. Being part of the world SF community was always a major concern of John's, and he travelled twice overseas to meet the people to whom he had been writing all his life.

John began the Nova Mob in August 1970. John was always concerned that people should talk about science fiction seriously, but they didn't have to be *too* serious. The idea of the Nova Mob is that each meeting would feature a speaker about some aspect of SF, but that the rest of the meeting, and indeed the meeting organisation itself, should be entirely informal. People should also meet for a meal before the meeting. Since I wasn't at the first meeting, I was dobbed in to speak at the second meeting. About 60 people gathered at John Bangsund's flat in St Kilda. Since the sixty people were split between two rooms, I had to speak to the lintel of the doorway between the two rooms. John liked to throw people in at the deep end. The Nova Mob foundered within its first year, so John revived it again a few years later. It failed again. Its weakness was that each meeting took place at the home of a different person, and people simply lost touch with where the next meeting would be. John revived the Nova Mob again in the early 1980s, when he and Jennifer moved into the huge house in Shakespeare Grove, St Kilda, that we remember so fondly, giving the Nova Mob a permanent home until John moved to Adelaide in 1987, where he started its double, Critical Mass. Since then the Nova Mob has moved to the home of Alan Stewart, and then to that of Lucy Sussex and Julian Warner, where its monthly meetings are so successful that often we don't have enough chairs for everybody to sit on.

A very specific way in which John Foyster and Jenny Bryce changed the lives of Elaine and me was by dragging us off to the old Bridport Cinema in Middle Park to see Ingmar Bergman's film of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in 1982. I had listened to few operas, never seen one on film or on stage, and had given up on Bergman films. Seeing this glorious film launched us into buying versions of *The Magic Flute* (at last count, we had owned 16 versions at some time or another), watching opera movies, such as Losey's *Don Giovanni*, or buying and listening to a wide range of other operas. Thanks, Jenny and John.

John Foyster picked up a few Ditmar Awards along the way. Here are the recipients from the Adelaide National Convention, 1985, but I don't know which of these people picked up a Ditmar for him or herself, or for somebody else. Very top: Leigh Edmonds. Second row: George Turner, Lee Harding, and unknown (representative of a media company). Third row: Jenny Blackford, John Foyster, and Merv Binns.



John Foyster and Yvonne Rousseau, 1997.

The central way in which John changed my life was by offering some basic rules for living. Courage, good humour, a contempt for authority and formal rules — well, I've never been much good at any of these, but John sort of showed me a few useful paths to take in life. The main thing that he showed me was to stop trying to emulate John Foyster, and to set off on my own path in life. Not that John ever generalised about life ideals or any of that stuff. He liked to do things, and he liked people to do things, not for themselves but for each other. It's as if we were all in a football team. When John threw the ball my way it usually flattened me, leaving me gasping on the ground. If I was able to catch the ball, I was expected to pass it on. John began a vast number of exciting magazines, ideas and events, then went on to something else when he was sure that his idea had caught on. If you were around at the time, you were supposed to get involved in the next convention, stay in contact with science fiction fans throughout Australia and the world, and above all, keep publishing your next article or fanzine and tell people what you discovered in life. Even after John knew he was dangerously ill, he still managed to publish fifteen bulky issues of his Internet fanzine *eFNAC* and write several of his best articles, including an amazing article about that trip to hospital in September and October 2001.

Why will we remember John? For his courage and good humour and immense ability in many fields, but also because, as a member of the worldwide science fiction world, he handed on to us events and institutions and fanzines and pieces of writing that will benefit us for as long as we live. There are few people you can say that about. Thanks, John.

Bruce Gillespie, 10 May 2003

JOHN FOYSTER: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

by Dick Jenssen

John Foyster as he appeared on the cover of his fanzine *Satura* No. 7, May 1964. (Photo: Lee Harding.)

I first knew John at the *Melbourne Science Fiction Club* in 1959 when he would have been a mere eighteen years old, but where he immediately impressed me as possessing a maturity much greater than my aged twenty-one years. He was also very smart, which was irksome to me, because then — and even now, I guess — I have a competitive, and sometimes combative, nature. Which in John's case as applied to me was all to the good, for he seemed to thrive on logical, rigorous arguments on all manner of subjects, and these spirited discussions forced me to clarify my thoughts in a wonderfully cleansing way. These interchanges of ideas (even if at times a trifle warm) made us friends, but I was, nonetheless, very surprised — and extremely flattered — when John asked me to be best man at his wedding to Elizabeth Pike.

In 1963 I left Australia for the USA to take up an Assistant Professorship at the University of Wisconsin's Meteorology Department and left the Science Fiction world temporarily. Or so I thought. I returned to Australia at the end of '65, but had been imbued, or brainwashed perhaps, by the US work ethic, and discovered that research and teaching became ever more important and satisfying — so much so that SF was marginalised to an extreme degree. I became increasingly out of touch with its world and its readers. And — I regret to say — with John Foyster. When I returned to the fold in 1992, upon my retirement, John had moved to Adelaide and I saw him only very rarely at the film nights at Race Mathews' home.

When John was diagnosed with a stroke eighteen months ago — September 2001 — that was shocking enough, but to later learn that this was a misdiagnosis, and that he actually was suffering from a brain tumour, was incredibly shattering. It was an incurable tumour, and all the doctors could do was to offer palliative treatment. My last contact with John was two months ago when he 'phoned Race Mathews on a film night, and several of us, myself included, spoke to him. Only a few of us had this privilege because he tired easily.

There are some people who cross our lives and leave them forever changed — and for me, John Foyster was one such, even if *how* he changed my life may have been but incidental to him and inadvertent. On the day before I left Sydney for the US in 1963, I had seen — for maybe the third time

— Resnais' film *Last Year at Marienbad*, and had written a two-line comment on it to John. Which he — quite correctly — tore to shreds with his 'acerbic wit', pointing out that what I had said, where it was not superficial, was incomprehensible. John's comments may have been like slashes of a razor across one's ego, but they were never malicious — and they were always valid. So I rewrote my comments and they became two pages. In the process I began to learn how to think critically and how to marshal arguments to support my claims. John Foyster had made me take my first *real* steps towards rigorous analysis. And those first steps are of a never-ending journey which I am still taking.

But, and to many this may seem trivial, a passing comment John made has enriched my life and continues to enrich it. I had known of a supposedly great novel, *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust, which I thought I should read — but I had also heard that it was a 'difficult' novel, and being lazy, I could not bring myself to pick up the first volume. John, in one of his conversations, told me that he had just finished reading it, and I asked him what he thought of it. His reply was 'I would like to read it every year'. Which was enough for me — I knew I *had* to read it. Which I did — not every year, but five times so far. Just as John had done for me, this book made me think deeply about things which I had avoided. Other people, their behaviour, what determined their motives . . . The novel also is full of humour, compassion, empathy and understanding, and forces open one's eyes and heart.

For having been my friend, for showing me how to think critically about Literature and Film, for Proust, and for the joy which these have brought me, I thank John Foyster.

— Ditmar (Dick Jenssen), April 2003

(From left:) Dick Jenssen, John Foyster, John Bangsund, 1966.
(Photo: Lee Harding.)

John Foyster's greatest hits, Part 1

I've just spent a week trying to write a concise article explaining just what John Foyster achieved in his SF criticism, and so far I've failed. After writing about 5000 words, I found that I had covered only some of Foyster's writing for *Australian Science Fiction Review* (*ASFR*), first series, and some of his material for *exploding madonna*/*Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology* (*JOE*). I hadn't even reached his best work — his material on Cordwainer Smith and his Ballard articles — or his writing for the second series of *ASFR*, let alone his writing for other magazines. Foyster is hard to pin down, so I'll have another go at the article. Until then, here are some of John's greatest hits/knockout punches.

Wake up, you lot!

Here are some of Foyster's editorial contributions to the fanzine that started life as *exploding madonna* in April 1968, was renamed *Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology* in July 1969, and appeared to bite the dust in January 1970. (Several more issues appeared as Foyster-guest-edited issues of *SF Commentary* throughout the early 1970s.) In January 1969 (*em* 4), he wrote to the recipients of *exploding madonna*:

> ***Wake up you lot!*** **Here I am with my critical faculties hanging out in the cold and I haven't interested a single soul in talking about the way stf should be approached. Not one. Probably no one cares: it certainly *looks* that way.**

In fact, Foyster's small circle of readers had been trying to work out how best to reply to the editorial challenge issued in the first issue of *exploding madonna*:

'If you are going to waste time discussing science fiction, then you should at least discuss it seriously' (K. U. F. Widdershins, Melbourne SF Conference, April 1968).

No, this is not . . .
a fanzine to be devoted to discussion of images in the works of J. G. Ballard. In fact, you are reading this precisely because you will have recognised (my fingers are crossed at this point) that Dali's 'exploding madonnas' mean a great deal, and J. G. Ballard's are, to a considerable extent, only borrowings, and misunderstood borrowings at that.

However, as an aside, I might remark that you are also receiving this fanzine because, unwittingly and perhaps unwillingly, you have given me the impression, to quote Widdershins [a pseudonym of John Foyster], that you discuss science fiction seriously. I may be wrong, of course, and please don't hesitate to tell me so if that is the case. There is very little you can do about an impression you have created, but you may, with the greatest of ease, dissuade me from annoying you with little pieces of coloured paper. I can take a hint at least as well as the next person, and if I receive no response from you, or only a piece of white paper with a black spot in the centre, why, I won't trouble you further.

Going even further, I might look with favour upon such a response. In purely financial terms each copy of this will cost me about ten cents. If no one wants to read this, I save a couple of dollars: if the number of readers drops, then I save at least some money. I am not in receipt of an income ('out of a job') at the moment, and this is being financed by the sale of SF magazines at the recent Melbourne Conference: when that money runs out — finis.

But if a couple of you are interested, let us stagger into the darkness together. You are, by the way, Mr Brian Aldiss, Mr James Blish, Mr Red Boggs, Mr Algis Budrys, Mr Sten Dahlskog, Mr Samuel Delany, Mr Damon Knight, Mr Franz Rottensteiner and Mr Harry Warner . . .

Some necessary and sufficient reasons
It is extremely easy to be dissatisfied with the kind of criticism or review handed out to SF books or magazines. It is by no means easy to do anything about it. My impression is that Milford has done something about it, yet the few snippets I have heard have indicated that a fair bit of back-slapping also goes on. This has its place, but I do not agree with Mr Warner entirely when he writes: 'A writer is a delicate organism; equally automatically, a reader may be as neurotic as a writer; his criticism, though merely personal fads, may harm the delicate mechanism' (*Horizons* 113, page 2204) . . .

Writers are not *really* delicate organisms, in general. Jack Wodhams (apparently now grinding the Campbell axe) has been very firm with me on this point: he claims that he has never learned a thing from a reader's praise. This may not be universally true, but, faced with adverse criticism, a writer can really do two things: he can ignore the criticism, as being a 'mere personal fad', or he can try to learn something from it. I don't think he could really get hung up on the choice.

A recent writer of note *is* a delicate organism, and another cause of my ire is that it *was* the comment of a neurotic reader (or a series of comments) that has given him a hell of a time. I refer to J. G. Ballard, and the villain of the piece is Moorcock, or perhaps the school of thought

which Moorcock represents. Moorcock did not damn, but over-praised. Certainly Ballard has talent — considerable talent in the field of science fiction. But he did not have the talent Moorcock claimed for him (in particular, the ideas that Moorcock claimed in his editorial in *New Worlds* 167): he (Ballard) seems to have come to believe Moorcock's propaganda. The result, from where I sit, seems to have been disastrous. Ballard has turned completely away from SF itself (which is disappointing) to another field, that of the small magazine. To my mind this is out of his league. I must admit that I haven't seen *ambit* (Customs regs., you know), but Ballard's weaknesses are of *some* fair size.

Disturbed at the thought that Ballard, who has obviously been teetering on the brink of neuroticism ever since he started writing SF (long before Moorcock got at him, too), might take all that Moorcock said seriously, instead of recognising it as editorial puff by a chap who was trying to save his magazine (and I would be the last to claim that Moorcock was a bad editor), I tried to demolish some of these false notions of Ballard's abilities in two articles in *ASFR* in 1967. Regrettably I have not been able to complete the third article, dealing with Ballard's claims to greatness in science fiction. If you recall that Ballard has published about 75 short stories, then you may realise why this is so. I have notes on half a dozen of them, running to about 4000 words. One day I may complete this project, but it will be quite some time in the future and, more importantly, *too late*. The whole project was ill conceived: who will believe that he is Gabriel when he has already been assured by a close friend that he is Ghod?

Whether or not I am wrong in my assessment of Ballard, I am certain that there is a need to offset irresponsible criticism of science fiction, both favourable and otherwise. Since there is little severe criticism of SF today (thanks to the abdication (?) of Messrs Blish and Knight) the most serious problem is that of irresponsible praise. Of course, there will be all sorts of other troubles into which stf can fall, and maybe some brave knights can get to work on those too, but right now I worry more about Moorcock and Ellison getting Hugos or Nebulas or whatever than about Campbell's idiosyncrasies.

Let's be specific: there is a young and talented SF writer in the field who could very easily be influenced by Unsuitable Friends — *quis custodiet?*

There are undoubtedly many readers of stf who have the impression that Keith Laumer is the greatest stylist to come down the pole since . . . aw, hell . . . Bradbury?

What can be done about it?

But why so secret?

Some of what I have already said, it must be admitted, is best kept private. Clearly *ASFR* is an unsuitable platform. But as a matter of fact this can get nastier. If I had to write about John Baxter and his critical articles, then I *must* be able to say that Baxter's entire knowledge of poetry results from reading Babette Deutsch's li'l intro. Good luck to him if he fools others — but let's play the cards fairly . . .

So what do I want? OK, let's have some

Aims

1 SF can be discussed seriously. It isn't. Can *exploding madonna* be such a place?
2 Can SF be discussed seriously without some jerk butting in? No. But it should be possible to screen out some jerks, some of the time. It is quite unpleasant to have to stop in mid stride to explain just *why* Van Vogt is actually not as good a writer as Tolstoy.
3 Can SF be discussed seriously without that jerk Foyster butting in? Certainly. I read very little SF: checking through issues of *ASFR* should tell you exactly what I have read in recent years. Count also my pseudonyms (Widdershins (!Aldiss and Blish!), Maxwell and Escot, amongst others).
4 I get censored. My review of Joseph's *The Whole in the Zero* was not printed because Bangsund liked the book. I thought it an unbelievable botch — I know at least BWA disagrees. Furthermore, and I have something in common with Mr Knight here, a review I once wrote of Merril's *The Tomorrow People* was also tossed aside by another fan-ed. I didn't like it, either.

Well

Have I buggered it again? Certainly I'm not going to have much room to talk about Brunner ('it took me *five* months to write *Stand on Zanzibar*'). Took Dos Passos rather more than twelve times as long to write *USA*. If I haven't buggered it, and if you are interested in writing seriously about SF, send me something. If not, up yours (politely, of course). I hope to publish another issue in July, in which I may explain why science fiction actually started with *Amazing Stories*, April 1926.

— *exploding madonna* 1, April 1968

In a few words

I favour the retention of capital punishment as protection for the community as a whole. As matters now stand, say in a country like Australia, the blood lust of politicians may be vented occasionally on those citizens who have, to a greater or lesser degree of certainty, indulged their own uncontrollable hates. If capital punishment were abolished, would not those who have political power become frustrated, and lash out even more madly and erratically than is now the case, killing and injuring those who have done nothing to deserve it, except put up with their leaders? If government ever reaches that stage at which power no longer corrupts, then it might be possible to dispense with capital punishment. Of course, this wouldn't be any worry at all if my other solution were adopted: the ritual execution of political leaders at the end of each calendar year, with possible remissions in the event of popular acclaim (vivify de Gaulle?)

If it is true that politicians are as mad as this, then is it not also reasonable that wars should be conducted? How else can politicians exert their loathsome influence on masses of the public? However, Mr Anthony Burgess had the solution to this problem in his novel *The Wanting Seed*. He suggests that armies of the same government should exterminate each other, the results being canned and given to the poor and hungry of the world. My only variation would be to restrict army service to volunteers. Thus two purposes would be served: the desires for power and killing in politicians would be satisfied at minimum cost to the community as a whole, and the hungry of the world would be helped. What is more, many potential politicians would be eliminated . . .

It all sounds rather wonderful, but if Dean Swift couldn't pull it off, how can I?

As for the other matter, my observations in Australia suggest that most, if not all, of the problems of the race are xenophobic, an outgrowth of that hesitance with strangers with which children are instilled (usually for very good reasons). Foyster's patent solution: since psychologists and psychiatrists have been with us for about a century, and have achieved nothing positive, surely this is a project worthy of study. How can xenophobia be cured? Solves a few other problems on the way, of course. It seems certain to me that somehow the human race must learn to conquer this (admittedly fairly rational) fear of others and otherness. That, Mr Aldiss, is what science fiction writers must try to do.

Writers of the purple page

Montaigne warns us, in his essay on the art of conversation, never to describe too exactly what it is we like about a particular author. It may simply show, he says, the flaws in our own thought processes, apart from any flaws in the quoted work. I agree wholeheartedly, but maintain that nothing gets as quickly to the crux of the matter as this kind of technique. Consequently, in discussing Cordwainer Smith last year I said, in effect, that because Cordwainer Smith wrote a particular sentence in 'The Burning of the Brain', he was a great writer: shoot me if you will.

On the other hand, Montaigne also recommends as a technique in arguing with someone who deprecates all of his work, as soon as it is mentioned, that we should reply by asking: well, if all of this is so bad, can you show me something which is really you, which you think represents what you really think? This, too, can be a good thing, though I would hesitate to nail any of you on this one (and I hope you would hesitate to reply).

What I'm getting around to, incredibly slowly, is that someone else has gone out on a limb, and the author in question is the late, great John Russell Fearn. Phil Harbottle has put out a beautiful little booklet, which I happen to know is selling like the Edsel, in which he gives opinions of John Russell Fearn (*The Multi-Man*) which are *somewhat* different from my own. It's a labour of love, and largely unrewarded, apparently. Of course, it is just possible that there are writers more deserving of this kind of attention, so that maybe Phil's knuckles should be rapped for choosing so, ah, *unskilled* a writer.

This is where the story really starts. On page 30, Phil says that Fearn (as 'John Slate', on this occasion) produced such great writing as

> 'I mean, lady, is he on the level, the up and come? I wanta know what you think about him. Don't you get it?' Pulp implored. 'Or don't newspapers mean nothin' to you? You must know that a guy named Pollitt has been bumped off, that a Vincent Grey and a Tom Clayton is mixed up in it. I'm engaged on the American end of the case. See?'

in a novel titled *Thy Arm Alone*. I submit that the word 'engaged' is entirely out of place, apart from any other weaknesses the piece may have.

As it happens, I've tried the same form of criticism on Heinlein and Sturgeon, with similar results, but then no one would claim 'The Roads Must Roll' or 'Thunder and Roses' as great pieces of stfnal writing, would they? Next time I decide to write a ten-line filler, I won't!

Short subjects

Although some of the following probably merit lengthier discussion, I'll try to boil the next three subjects down to one page.

The Nebula Awards, 1967

Some aspects of the results announced recently disturb me. Since I haven't read much of last year's output, I guess I should just shut up, but some people never learn. I don't have much objection to the Novel: *An Age* was better, I thought, but *The Einstein Intersection* pretty good. Moorcock's 'Behold the Man' is (a) unbelievably bad and (b) in the past (?). It was published in 1966, just about one year before the runner-up, Anne McCaffrey's 'Weyr Search'. But 'Weyr Search' is much worse, so perhaps 1967 was a bad year for novellae. But a couple of the *If* serials (Farmer, Blish) were better, surely. I dunno about the rest, but generally felt that the whole result was a letdown after seeing the choice of 'Call Him Lord' the previous year.

Fahrenheit 451

I recently saw this movie, in the 16 mm version. What struck me was the fire engine. I've not seen any mention of the fire engine anywhere before, yet the fire engine was the most important thing in the film. It is extremely easy to say, as so many do, that burning books is bad and awful . . . *ad nauseam*. But, dammit, if I could ride on that fire engine I'd burn any book you named and enjoy it. It was so shiny, so red, so beautiful, humming through the countryside, bell clanging, that I just couldn't resist it. I'm told that in addition the firemen sing a song, which was cut from the 16 mm version. This is just as well, because, had it been included when I saw *Fahrenheit 451* (in the clubrooms of the Melbourne SF Club), I'd have turned around and set fire to the club library.

1984

Though I could write with pleasure about Orwell's novel, about which I've recently been hit with a largish chunk of insight, I'm actually going to babble about a survey conducted by *New Scientist* in 1964, in which assorted persons were asked to describe aspects of the world in 1984. You may have seen this either in the magazine or in the Pelican paperback. I direct your attention to the words of Sir Herbert Read, who wrote about the future of the arts:

> Already in 1964 few people read books for pleasure; they 'use' them, or even 'view' them (books will have more and more pictures and less and less text). Poetry, already an arcane activity, will have totally disappeared. Fiction, even now a dwindling form of entertainment, will fade out and the only writers will be script-writers for television . . . Composers like Beethoven, Wagner and Stravinsky will be forgotten.

Punch up

Damien Broderick and myself . . . are normally on the same side, but a recent visit to the Melbourne SF Club almost led to a break.

Poor Damien had read my review of *Faust Aleph-Null*, and found himself to be in complete agreement. Imagine his chagrin at the discovery, via Mr Blish's letter to *ASFR*, that *Faust Aleph-Null* was not cut to ribbons.

He claimed that had I not written my review there would have been no occasion for Mr Blish to shatter his illusion.

Well, we put our heads together and agreed that even if Mr Blish had not written it, we were entitled to the belief that *Faust Aleph-Null* was the bones of a great SF novel. Then we got around to the names. Damien claimed that 'Baines' need not have anything to do with LBJ, as Mr Blish claimed in his letter. I asked Damien how he would feel about a book in which a character named 'Damien' appeared as an evil, sadistic murderer, say. How would he feel about the author's defence that he didn't mean Damien Broderick at all, if Damien were well known to the author, and the author had included the names of other people he knew in the same novel? He conceded the point.

And tackled me about Harlan Ellison and *Dangerous Visions*. I had made some snide remark about having seen the collection, I think, and perhaps I had suggested that it had a cheapish look about it. The gist of his argument was that my feelings about what I had read of Ellison would obscure my vision to the extent that I would not be able to see the virtues in an Ellison story. I was inclined to agree, but doubted the existence of the supposed virtues. Who, I asked, apart from Ellison, has claimed that Ellison is any good? Dorothy Parker, in her dotage, and Theodore Sturgeon . . . Hmm. I thought that perhaps any violence and sadism in Ellison's work would appeal to Sturgeon, and that this was not my cup of tea. We scratched around for others who thought Ellison might be better than Sydney J. Bounds, but could find none.

Anyway, Damien said, I think Ellison's nothing too, but I thought that your opinions might obscure your vision. Up yours, I said, and we parted cordially.

— *exploding madonna* 2, July 1968

Which illustrates the cheerful knockabout atmosphere of *exploding madonna*, but hardly explains why Foyster's agonised 'critical faculties' were 'hanging out in the cold' by *em* 4. Perhaps it's because in issue 4 he finds himself still writing most of the magazine, with only four quotable correspondents. He also appears to answer an unquoted letter from Aldiss. So his response rate was about 50 per cent, about what I receive for *The Metaphysical Review*, and a lot higher than that for most fanzines.

Did Foyster's readers eventually leap into into action, or did he keep adding readers and dropping others until the magazine started firing? He added Richard E. Geis, who later reprinted, in *Science Fiction Review*, the long Delany letter that fills *em* 5 (January 1969); and me. I had begged a copy from Foyster after seeing a copy at Lee Harding's. (Lee and John Bangsund were also now receiving copies.)

In *em* 6 (April 1969), Franz Rottensteiner contributes his long article 'Mr Budrys and the Active Life'. Budrys must have been dropped from the mailing list by this time, since he did not respond to Rottensteiner's savage article.

With *JOE* 1 (July 1969) came a feeling that the scope and readership of the magazine were expanding. Lots of interested people now seemed to be reading the magazine, even if they hadn't been sent copies. Franz Rottensteiner's major attack on Heinlein (through an analysis of Panshin's book about Heinlein) appears as 'Chewing Gum for the Vulgar'. Geis also reprinted that one in *SFR*.

Franz Rottensteiner had the bright idea of promoting his hot new client, Poland's Stanislaw Lem, by translating Lem's articles about science fiction (mainly excerpts from his giant book *Fantasy and Futurology*, which has still not been translated into English). Suddenly *JOE*, with a mailing list that was probably still under thirty, was a much-sought-after fanzine. The fact that Foyster closed the magazine and at the end of 1970 handed me this legacy (and in 1971 and 1972 Rottensteiner kept sending me translations of Lem articles) is one of those strokes of luck that I could fumble or run with. I ran with it. I published Lem and Rottensteiner, while John Foyster turned to other, more fannish concerns (*Boys' Own Fanzine* and *Norstrilian News* with Leigh Edmonds; articles for John Bangsund's new fanzine *Scythrop*; and the campaign to secure Melbourne's bid for the 1975 world convention).

During this period, John was attempting to finish his PhD and teach school, and had become involved in a number of other non-fannish pursuits — but you'd never realise this from reading his fanzines.

At the same time as Foyster was telling his critical brethren to 'wake up!', he published this article in Ron Clarke's *The Mentor*, a Sydney fanzine with a reasonably large circulation among SF fans:

Science fiction versus life

The label 'escape fiction' has probably been applied more often to science fiction than to any other literary form. The reason for this label has recently been put rather strongly by Andrew Sarris in reviewing *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Sarris says: 'People who read and write science fiction have always struck me as a bit creepy for expending so much emotional and intellectual energy to cop out on the human situation. I think you have to be somewhat alienated from human life to sit down to consider its extraterrestrial alternatives.'

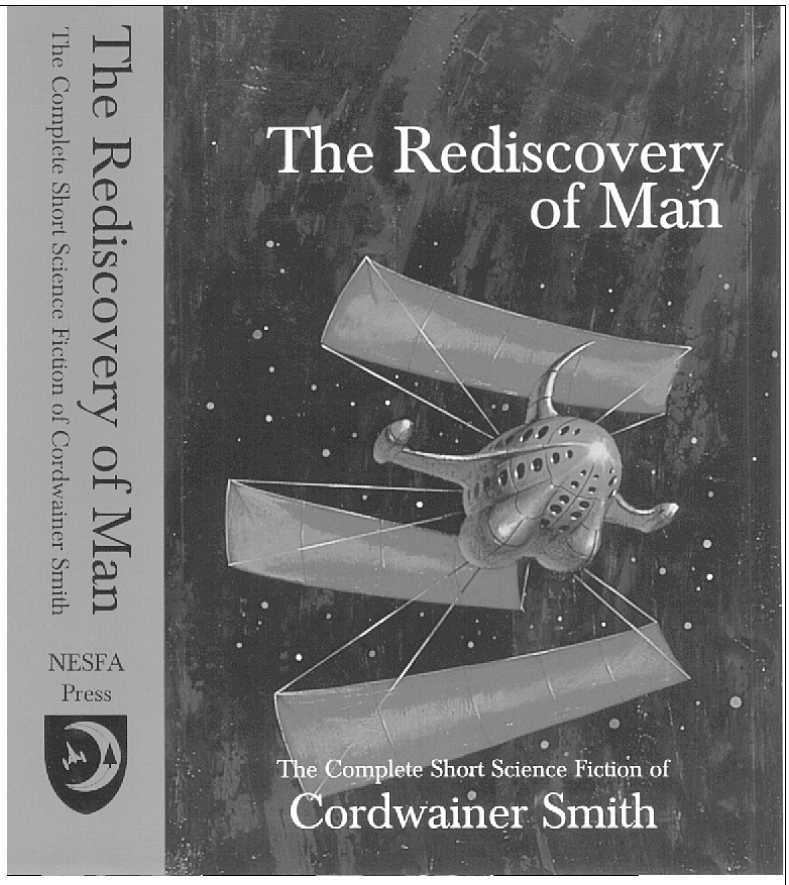
At the risk of over-interpreting Sarris, who can manage quite well by himself, I suggest that Sarris is referring to science fiction, and science fiction readers and writers *as a whole*. He does not claim that every person who reads or writes science fiction has this rather fearful failing. However, it has also been put to me rather strongly that possibly no person can be a complete human being unless he or she has, at one time or another, copped out on the human situation and come back again. But this is an aside.

Perhaps the easy line of defence to this attack might be to question whether writers and readers in general do not suffer from this same alienation: one might even go on to ask the same about film producers and film critics. But this

is to ignore the last phrase of Sarris' argument, for he seems to see the extraterrestrial factor as the decisive one. Here, at last, is the opening we have been looking for, for 'extraterrestrial alternatives'. Perhaps we should divert towards this aspect of science fiction — or is this just a semantic trap? Does not, in fact, Sarris mean by this phrase 'extraterrestrial alternatives' just *alternatives*? Alternatives, that is, to our present world and its problems. If so, and I am sure that this is what Sarris intended (or else it is about the strongest argument along this line), then it is at *this* point that science fiction must be defended — or discarded.

The claim is that science fiction rejects the present world and its horrible realities for a dream world: a world in which terrors may exist without involving the reader. The dream world may even hold no horrors, but merely be a pleasant exercise: yet even then the horrors of our own world, which seep over into the most innocuous piece of non-sf, are barred from the reader's experience.

It must be admitted, I suspect, that much of science fiction does fit into just the mould which Sarris has cast: much of it does amount to an escape from this earth of ours on the part of the writer. And even more accurately, it all too often represents a means of escape for the reader. It is not the case that to momentarily forget this world is necessarily to 'cop out', but rather that if all that one does is directed away from the real world, then this is not just 'a bit creepy', but thoroughly unpleasant.



During 1966, the British science fiction magazine *New Worlds* published a series of four stories by J. G. Ballard, a name possibly known to the thronging millions of Melbourne from the publication in the Herald some years ago of his rather poor novel *The Burning World/The Drought*. Ballard took what he considered to be some of the major myths of our time and threw them together into a hotchpotch in which, so he claims, 'Images and events became isolated, defining their own boundaries'. Not only that, but 'the elements of sequential narrative have been . . . eliminated.' Unpleasant as this may sound, it nevertheless must have been slightly successful, for early in 1967 *Encounter*, then in the throes of self-examination (from a safe distance), printed the last in the series, 'The Atrocity Exhibition'. Undoubtedly the story was used solely on account of its relevance to today's world and use of today's images: it had very few other merits, if any. But it did, to some degree, deal with the world in which you and I and Andrew Sarris live. It is beside the point to recall that Mr Ballard's best fiction has dealt with worlds of fantasy.

Mr Ballard has now ceased to write science fiction, and has been adopted by *ambit*, a small magazine in which he runs competitions of doubtful value. He has, as it were, copped out elsewhere.

Sometimes science fiction writers may try to write of the world in which they live in a very different way. Last year a novel by James Blish told of a hero named Baines who set out to destroy the world: it should be remarked that Blish denies all connection between his fictional character and the present president of the USA.

Of course, these are rather trivial cases: neither of them exhibit anything more than a trifling concern, on the part of the author, for the world in which he lives. Blish himself has done much better, and in his *A Case of Conscience* (1953, 1958) he deals with a matter of some relevance — alien gods. And there are several other authors who have ventured into reality. Gordon R. Dickson, for example, is now slowly starting to examine the differences in human beings (by extrapolating from humans to aliens, admittedly), and Brian Aldiss' latest novel, *An Age*, although superficially a time travel yarn, is essentially concerned with the evil of our pasts. A notable exception to this list is Theodore Sturgeon, whose writing fits Sarris' comment completely. The fact that Sturgeon is so popular is evidence that science fiction readers do turn their backs to the world.

But there are, or have been, two science fiction writers whose whole output is the result of, and to some extent reflects, a complete acceptance of physical reality. 'Cordwainer Smith' is now dead, but his short stories and novels, all written with one master plan, are wholly based on our present world or on those ideas which have grown out of it. Smith has inserted contemporary references into some of his stories, but these little word games are all but indecipherable, since they are only a joke on Smith's part. But Smith has built into his fiction the occurrences of his everyday life — cats, children — and some of the important

events (?) of his time — the Egyptian revolution. His 'Lords of the Instrumentality' is simply the gov't of the USA, and in writing of Norstrilia he expresses in direct language his liking for Australia and his reasons for so doing. His stories can be read as complete fantasy, but only, I suspect, by those readers to whom Sarris' statement applies.

Samuel R. Delany is still living and still writing. He has cast into science fiction parts of his own life, generally distorting the patterns just enough to give the plot an appearance of fiction. His two most recent novels, *Babel-17* and *The Einstein Intersection*, have been exceptionally well received by science fiction readers, winning three or four awards between them. Both are shorter novels, but Delany is now writing longer pieces, with *Nova* (in press) being about the size of an ordinary novel, and the novel he is at present writing (working title *Prism, Mirror, Lens*) will be over 200,000 words. It is not necessarily easy to see present life reflected in Delany's novels, because of the distortion mentioned above, and because Delany writes with extreme care (which makes him unusual, as science fiction writers go). Delany is, however, the only presently active science fiction writer who faces the world in which he lives squarely and writes about it. Perhaps Brian Aldiss and some others should be included, but if so, then this is not so plainly revealed in what they write.

Andrew Sarris is certainly correct in that many readers and writers fit this description. But their numbers are decreasing, and it is possible that at some time in the future it will *not* be true of the majority. Until then, writers like Delany, Aldiss, Blish and others will probably continue to make inroads on the world of science fiction slowly: but when the time is ripe, they may be recognised as major commentators on their times.

— John Foyster, *The Mentor* 13, January 1969

The crack in space

As Elaine describes next page, Our Home and Castle is under threat. Which means that my precious collection, or at least the part that lives in my workroom, will be packed in boxes and taken elsewhere. Hear the sound of my arms being ripped off! I'm not sure where I'll be sleeping for several weeks. (At least two rooms will be out of action at any one time.) The nice people next door have said that I can set up my computer and work in one of their rooms, but occupying space in someone else's house poses problems. It's not clear where Elaine will be setting up her computer. She has an even greater amount of freelance work than I have.

For more than six weeks at the beginning of the year, I had almost no paying work. I went ahead and published *SF Commentary* 78 anyway. It cost a lot more than I had put aside for it — about $4500. By the end of February I was broke. Still am. (Elaine is not broke. That's why we can repair the side wall.)

Christmas was as boring as ever, except for a genuine family gathering at my mother's place (the first time my two sisters and I had been together at Christmas for many years). However, it brought letters from two people I hadn't heard from in — in one case, 15 years, and in the other case, 27 years. I found myself writing daily email messages to the latter person. This is about the frequency that people post to weblogs (blogs). So I wonder: how do they do it? I soon found that the events of my own life are pretty boring, although fortunately the other person's letters have not been. I had no paying work in January, but produced a fanzine. Now I have lots of paying work, I do lots of paying work. In the bits of time left over, I try to answer a few letters, watch a few films or DVDs, and even listen to some CDs. That's life. It's not pretty; it's not exciting; it's really really boring to write about.

Which is why this bit is shorter than you'd expect from Bruce Gillespie. The book list in this issue fills you in on what I've been reading, and what I watched last year. Best films of 2003 include *One Hour Photo* and *Death to Smoochy* (both with Robin Williams acting against type), *Donnie Darko* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which I've seen three times. As usual, I'm way behind on listening to CDs, although I can recommend the new Calexico album, *A Feast of Wire* (each track a different rock genre, although there is a fundamental TexMex sound to about half the tracks), and Tom Russell's *Modern Art* (some of the best songs ever written by one of the best of the singer-songwriters).

Apart from that, all is doom and gloom, with John Foyster succumbing to a brain tumour, despite much pain, cheerfulness and hoping against hope, and Peter McNamara distinctly unwell, also suffering from a brain tumour, Damien Warman recovering from last year's cancer surgery, two non-fan friends of mine, the same age as me, being treated for cancer, and deaths all over. Much missed will be Harry Warner Jr, dead at the age of 80. I'm still planning a feature issue on his life and work.

I can't think of anything to say about The War that other people haven't said. Heath Ledger, local film star made good, said it best on Andrew Denton's TV interview program: 'I feel ashamed of being part of a country whose government has taken part in an attack on another country.' That's part of what I feel about President Shrub's unilateral action, supported by li'l ol' arse-licker Howard. What if the USA suddenly doesn't like *your* country? What hope have you got then?

Much talk in ANZAPA of events a little further west in the Middle East, but nobody's said anything more informative than anything that I've gleaned from radio and newspapers. (I do not regard television as a source of intelligent information.) As one Israeli commentator said on Philip Adams' *Late Night Live*: 'The problem is that there are two groups of people, both of whom believe they are living in their ancient homeland. Until that small bit of land is divided between them, there will be war.' Nice to know that somebody perceptive lives in that fretful strip of land.

I've spent the last two months catching up on a year's ANZAPA (seven mailings) and Acnestis (thirteen mailings), which means I've almost forgotten what it's like to read a book. Sad ANZAPA news includes the retirement of **Leanne** and the loss of various members' companion animals, and some good news, such as the return of

Michael O'Brien. (His first convention must have been the Melbourne SF Conference of Easter 1968, the same as mine.) I'm somewhat surprised to find myself on the same side as **Derrick and Christine** in many matters, and would probably find myself disagreeing with **Jack Herman** (except on films) if I was in the practice of stepping in front of runaway steam rollers.

Delicious moments in the last year's mailings include entire issues of **Bill Wright**'s *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* and **Sally**'s continuing adventures, which often turn out to be the continuing adventures of Elaine and Bruce as well. Special thanks, Sally, for publishing here the proceedings of John Foyster's Funeral.

Surely all the episodes of the Grigg Super Tour of Europe should be collected in one volume. If I were pick one episode as particularly enjoyable, it would be the story of **David and Sue**'s encounter with their Italian penfriend. That's what I call great fanzine writing.

Cath Ortlieb brought me up short with her story of Peter, the teacher from her school who committed suicide. I cannot remember which of my apazines to which you were replying, but thanks for the heartfelt response. I could have so easily been that teacher in 1970 at the end of my two years of attempting to teach, but I read a novel called *So* by 'Adam Pilgrim' (Owen Webster). Not a great novel, but a life-changing book. Owen became a friend, but, like his other friends, I was unable to dissuade him from committing suicide in 1975.

Back to a domestic crisis . . .

Elaine Cochrane writes:

I know we need a bigger house, but this is ridiculous!

Our subsoil is reactive clay, and the depth of foundations used in 1914, when our house was built, did not allow for this. Hence the effect shown. It's a little disconcerting when you see the sun shining through your bookshelves, ten feet from the nearest window.

In the middle of the year we called on a much more competent friend to come and glue it together for us. Trouble is we had precious little rain after that, so we had to get him back again in November. It's since opened up as much again, so much so that we're going to get the whole wall replaced. It will take months just to get the paperwork done before the builders can start, so it could be a very cold and draughty winter. At least the crack is on the east side so we don't get much weather through it. Meanwhile I'm taking cuttings of all the plants along that bed — they won't stand a chance against the builders — and wondering how much else of the garden will be destroyed.

For various complicated reasons to do with land-use regulations we can't extend the house into the garden area — not that I want to lose any garden anyway — and in any case we couldn't afford to. Replacing the wall and restumping the back half of the house is going to clean me out financially as it is.

— Elaine Cochrane, March 2003

It's all Greg Egan's fault, or, I wish I had a Big Brain

Schild's Ladder (Gollancz; 2002; 250 pp.), Greg Egan's most recent novel, arrived in January 2002. I read it to the end, but found that there are entire pages, let alone great looping ideas fundamental to the book, that I do not understand. Greg Egan assumes that thinking like a quantum physicist is as natural as breathing. To him, it is.

Dick Jenssen read *Schild's Ladder*. He had no problems with the quantum physics that forms the basis of the Big Idea in the book. He admired Egan for not providing too many explanations.

How could I catch up on up-to-the-minute physics? I read Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe* in 2001, but string theory didn't seem to apply to the main ideas of *Schild's Ladder*. I read Stephen Hawking's ***A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*** (Bantam Press; 1988; 198 pp.). That filled in some of the gaps, but Hawking assumes that the reader is familiar with the essential notions of quantum theory. I'd read a nice little book on quantum theory, with very clear diagrams, about 15 years ago. I can't find it in our house. Elaine suggested reading ***Where Does the Weirdness Go?*** by David Lindley (Vintage; 1996; 251 pp.). This is an ideal example of how such a book should be written. It includes almost no formulae (a ghodsend for maths dumbwits like me), but offers a series of clear diagrams and thought-models to show how the main ideas of quantum theory were developed. With this essential information precariously clinging to the inside of my brain, I read Lee Smolin's ***Three Roads to Quantum Gravity: A New Understanding of Space, Time and the Universe*** (Phoenix; 2000; 231 pp.) without too much trouble. In the afterword to *Schild's Ladder*, Greg Egan thanks Smolin for his inspiration and ideas.

The trouble with all this scientific stuff is that it is just a bit too rich for my tiny mind. I struggle, but only bits lodge inside my consciousness. I can't recount the essence of what I've just read, in the way I could if I read a history of Russia or a book of literary criticism. I did pick up one theme that recurs in these books: that instead of being a nuisance, an impediment to the writing of galactic adventure stories, the speed of light is an essential building block of the universe. Without it, there could be no structure to matter, because all energy would be infinite ($e = mc^2$ and all that). We do not know anything more about the universe than we can see in the sky. Any or all of those objects might no longer exist, but it doesn't matter until information reaches us at the speed of light. The same principle operates at the size of the smallest object in the universe. The speed of light itself forms the 'edge' of the tiniest element of matter. On this principle, thousands of theoreticians are trying to work out what is the ultimate structure of matter. At the beginning of *Schild's Ladder*, Egan includes a diagram of one of the best-favoured current ideas, that matter is a latticework of joined space, rather than discrete bits of matter. The problem now is: how does the structure of the smallest element of matter imply all the things that have happened to matter since the Big Bang? That's what's needed for somebody to claim to have found a Theory of Everything. What is intrinsic to matter that leads directly to the rules of physics, and hence the evolutionary path of the universe? As Greene shows mathematically in *The Elegant Universe*, the structure of the smallest thing in the universe might also have the same structure as the universe itself. Thus there is a constant interchange between physicists who investigate the largest, oddest things in the universe (especially black holes) and the nuclear physicists who investigate the smallest things in the universe.

I felt that not only was I reading stuff that was much more exciting than anything in SF books (except in some pages of Greg Egan or Stephen Baxter), but I was reading stuff that, if it penetrated the minds of SF writers, would re-energise the field. Yet I also felt that quantum physicists would not think in this freewheeling way if it were not for all the science fiction they've read over the years. I just wish I had a Big Brain, so I could find metaphors from which I could make fiction out of all this fabulous stuff. At least science fiction is lucky enough to have Greg Egan.

The Great Reading Scheme

Elaine has a dream. She believes that, instead of buying more books, we should systematically read the books we have already. This is a crazy scheme. Neither of us will live to the age of 100. If we do, we will probably be too blind to read during our last years.

Elaine revived the Reading Scheme that we both tried in the early 1980s. First, a book from the beginning of the paperbacks. Do not bypass a book. If it's on the shelf, I bought it because I wanted to read it. The only exception would be a book that Elaine bought.

The first book of Paperbacks was Daniel Aaron's ***Writers on the Left*** (Oxford University Press; 1961/1977; 460 pp.). I'm not sure why I bought this; probably because of an early 1980s bout of enthusiasm about things leftish, or perhaps because I wanted to bone up on the New Deal era. I thought I would learn something about left-leaning American writers and their works during the twentieth century. Not so. In what seems to have begun as a PhD thesis, Aaron investigates only those writers who were recruited by the Communist Party of America during the period from just before World War I to the period just after World War II. Aaron

bases his story on the interchanges between writers and various party hacks in the major leftist magazines of the day. American writers who are usually thought of as inspirational to the working-class movement, such as John Steinbeck, are barely mentioned, because they had little to do with the Communist Party. Instead, the book concentrates on a wide variety of writers, unknown to me, who committed themselves to communism during that period, and were then rejected by the party. These days, we see the main contribution of American leftist writers as their analyses of the social and political dysfunctions of America (especially Dos Passos's *USA*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*), but in the 1930s leftist writers were judged by their attitudes to the Soviet Union. Many writers lost their faith (religious faith is the metaphor that recurs while reading this book) after the 1936 show trials in Moscow. Stalin's pact with Hitler didn't help, but Moscow's alliance with Washington during World War II led to some writers returning to the Party by 1945.

This fluctuation of affections and relationships would be an interesting story in itself if Aaron had any of the instincts of a novelist. Instead, he's a plodder. He talks about some people for page after page, yet gives little sense of their personality or value as writers. He sparkles only occasionally; for instance, writing of Kenneth Burke (as he might have written of most of people described in this book) that his attitude to Marxism was 'that of a dog gingerly flirting with a porcupine'.

The most interesting passage in the book is a footnote, a pseudonymous prophetic passage from *transition* magazine, 1928:

> Russia interests me but little. I think that it will become a sort of fast, complaisant, second rate United States. It is rapidly adopting the American economic vision because the revolution cleared a way for it. When the country becomes properly Americanized, say in fifty years, it will be producing hoards and hoards of Russian Harold Bell Wrights and Edgar Guests, while the one time Dostoievskys will have become merely classical legends, like Shakespeare in England today. I do not expect to live long enough to see anything but trash out of the metamorphosis. The country will become industrialized, radioized, movieized, and standardized, the huge population of illiterate peasants will be taught how to read advertisements, newspapers, and bibles, the country will placidly settle down to the preoccupation of money grubbing.

Next category: Hardbacks. I started at the end of the shelves, not the beginning: Stefan Zweig's ***Stories and Legends*** (Cassell; 1955 (1927/1937); 343 pp.). Elaine doesn't much like these 1950s Cassell translations (Eden and Cedar Paul; and Constantine Fitzgibbon) of Zweig's work, but the author's prose shines despite the translations. During 2002 I will find it hard to discover better short fiction than Zweig's 'The Buried Candelabrum', a variation on Jewish folk history so passionate and vivid that I'm surprised Steve Spielberg hasn't made it into a movie; and 'Twenty-four Hours in a Woman's Life', which is one of the world's great stories about a (male) gambler's obsession. 'An Episode in the Early Life of Privy Councillor D.' is also memorable. Presumably Zweig is still almost unknown in English-speaking countries because Penguin, Picador or Vintage has never undertaken a series of convincing translations of his work.

The object of the Grand Reading Scheme is to give some shape to some of the untidy features of the collections, especially Doubtfuls (which were in a bookshelf of their own, but are now stacked behind other books in the new bookshelf that Elaine had built in October) and Books In Boxes. One of the objects of the Scheme is to pinpoint books that might find a better home elsewhere.

It was easy to throw out a Doubtful. Elaine picked out for me to read James Branch Cabell's ***Straws and Prayer-Books: Dizain des Diversions*** (Bodley Head; 1926; 302 pp.). This is a series of essays in which Cabell tries to support the practice of writing fantasy rather than realistic fiction. An interesting enterprise, especially for the 1920s. I know that James Blish liked Cabell, perhaps because opposites attract. Blish wrote plainly and well, but Cabell writes purply and badly. Arguments go nowhere, prose rambles like unpruned rose bushes, and all Cabell does is convince the reader to avoid reading his fiction. (I once attempted *Jurgen*, but also gave up that book after only 20 pages.) I doubt if a first-edition British hardback of Cabell is worth much, especially without jacket. Perhaps I should try selling this copy on eBay?

Next category: I cheated when I reached for a Book from a Box. The box plainly says 'Books to Go Up on Shelves'. But I very much wanted to read Hilary McPhee's ***Other People's Words*** (Picador; 2001; 312 pp.), as it seemed to make a match for Diana Athill's ***Stet: An Editor's Life*** (Granta; 2000; 250 pp.), which Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer had kindly sent me from Britain a few months earlier.

Athill says that she is not going to tell us the story of her life (and has since produced a book of autobiography), but tell us only about the bits of an editor's life that might interest us. In the first half of *Stet*, she tells how she became part of André Deutsch, a firm with which she stayed until it was swallowed up a few years ago. In the second half of *Stet*, which lifts the book into greatness, Athill tells about some of the more vivid Deutsch authors with whom she worked over a number of years. Her essay on Jean Rhys is a major contribution to Rhysology, and her chapter on V. S. Naipaul makes sense of much that is otherwise puzzling about this author. Athill's instincts are those of a novelist; probably she has also written a novel based on her career in publishing.

Hilary McPhee claims to be telling us candidly about her life and editing, yet she doesn't. Her style is self-conscious and a bit lofty-ideal, whereas Athill's is merrily candid. Hilary McPhee has a dazzling reputation as an editor and entrepreneurial small publisher in Australia, yet the independent firm McPhee Gribble did fail after 15 years, for reasons that are not made completely clear in the book, and Hilary McPhee does not give credit where credit is due for the vast improvement in the amount and quality of Australian fiction publishing in the 1970s and 1980s. She does not mention the inspirational role of small presses, such as Hyland House, that lasted much longer than McPhee Gribble. She tells nothing of the essential role of the Australia Council, whose subsidy scheme, which began in 1973, enabled a vast number of adventurous small publishers, including Norstrilia Press, to struggle along until the middle 1980s. In *Other People's Words*, McPhee's three husbands come and go, but we don't learn much about them, and we don't even gain a clear idea of Di Gribble, who was McPhee's partner for those 15 years. McPhee can rightly claim to have nurtured the careers of many of Australia's most famous writers of fiction over the last 25 years (Tim Winton and Helen Garner being her best sellers), but these writers do not come to life in this book. McPhee is best, for example, at describing the horrors

A modern genre

Reviewed:
Sean McMullen: *Eyes of the Calculor*
Tor, $63hb, 589pp, 0 312 87736 6
Matthew Richardson (ed.):
The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction
Halstead Classics, $22.95pb, 192pp, 1 875684 64 6

The last instalment of Melbourne writer Sean McMullen's 'Great-winter Trilogy', *Eyes of the Calculor*, has recently arrived from Tor Books in New York. *Souls in the Great Machine* (1999), the first book in the series, is based on two novels, *Voices in the Light* (1994) and *Mirrorsun Rising* (1995), first published by Aphelion Books, the enterprising Adelaide small publisher. *The Miocene Arrow*, the second in the series, appeared in 2000.

McMullen depicts a future alternative Australia, an inland civilisation whose people may venture no closer than two hundred kilometres from the coast. As in the first two books, humanity has been attacked by the creatures it took for granted: the highly intelligent cetazoids (whales, dolphins and cephalopods). Having been hunted and polluted, they unite in order to initiate the Call, a telepathic impulse that drives most human beings to hurl themselves into the sea. In the year 3900, only a few areas of the world, including the inland plains of Australia and a mountainous part of North America, are free from the influence of the Call.

Human activity is doubly limited. Before the Call, space-faring humans built the Mirrorsun, a vast ring around the sun to monitor humanity's more dangerous impulses. Two thousand years before the events described in *Souls in the Great Machine*, the Mirrorsun stopped the operation on Earth of electrical machines and all other power sources dependent on non-renewable energy.

McMullen's future Australia is a complex place of make-do technology and intricate responses to difficult limitations. The inland towns have become thriving centres of new states: Southmoor, Central Confedration, the Kalgoorlie Empire and the Alspring Ghans. It's not clear whether these states, separated by competing religions, reflect twenty-first-century social and racial groupings in Australia. They are linked, both internally and across the continent, by a network of 'beamflash towers', which transfer messages by mirror semaphores, and 'paralines', trains that are powered by passengers pedalling as fast as they can. These states are controlled by their Over-mayors (politicians) and the Librarians, the top technocrats, operators of gigantic 'calculors', which are computers powered by enslaved computing humans.

In *Eyes of the Calculor*, many of this world's limitations are changing rapidly. Twelve years before, Mirrorsun, quite arbitrarily, allowed humans to build electrical machines. At the beginning of *Eyes*, this limitation has been reapplied. Large numbers of mathematically literate humans are herded back into the calculors. At the same time, the Call has abruptly ceased, for reasons that were, I assume, made clear in *The Miocene Arrow*. The empty world is now open to marauding humans, but some areas have meanwhile been occupied by 'aviads', mutant humans who are trying to create their own civilisation.

This a world ripe for vast conflict, but McMullen avoids epic battles. He tells his story entirely through the eyes of small groups of characters, each of which can see only one part of the picture at a time. In a series of short episodes, he gathers his characters in Rochester, which is now the major city on the Australian continent. Some characters are hired as spies of the ruling Highliber (Chief Librarian), while others are playing games of their own. Samondel is an American who has managed to fly her enormous plane from North America to Rochester, only to have it shot down. The aviads are trying to smuggle as many of their kind as possible off the mainland, to settle in Tasmania. No motive or action is ever as direct as it seems.

McMullen knows his world well, but does not yield to the impulse to lapse into Cook's-tour descriptions. We feel we've lived there, yet we still know little about this civilisation's more mundane aspects. Instead, *Eyes of the Calculor* gains most of its energy from the vibrancy and humour of its characters. They never give in to the overwhelming limitations of their world, but are constantly inventing new ways to survive and understand it. However, they are not reflective characters. Given to the quick fix, brisk fight or emergency solution rather than to deep thought, by the end of the book they are no closer to solving the ultimate problems of their civilisation than they are at the beginning. The novel's tone reminded me constantly of Alexandre Dumas's romances, complete with political intrigue, duels, sword fights, rescues and miraculous escapes. *Eyes of the Calculor* is six hundred pages long, but engaging enough to lead you back to the first two books in the series.

After romping through *Eyes of the Calculor*, which plays with all sorts of ideas about the future, I found it something of a shock to encounter *The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction*, whose editor, Matthew Richardson, appears to know nothing about science fiction. Why was the book commissioned? For whom was it intended? I still don't know the answers to these questions.

The Halstead Treasury contains a number of extracts from ancient (pre-1200) texts that might fit into some broad category such as 'wonder stories', as well as pieces that don't fit any category.

The ancient wonder stories include already much-reprinted pieces such as Lucian of Samosata's 'True Story' (second century AD), and 'The Ebony Horse' from *The Thousand Nights and One Night* (1200 AD). 'The Old Bamboo Cutter's Daughter', a Japanese story from AD 900, is perhaps less well known.

Each of these stories recounts wonderful journeys experienced by fundamentally innocent characters. Neither in tone nor content do these pieces have anything to do with science fiction, which is an entirely modern literary form. Science fiction is not, as Richardson claims in his 'General Explanation' at the end of the book, a 'literary tradition', but a response to rapid change in technologically and sociologically evolving societies during the last two hundred years. If Richardson had been able to find a story in which an ancient philosopher speculated on the future history of Athens or Rome, he might have been able to justify the title of his book.

Matthew Richardson knows and loves these works, and has put a lot into re-translating them (sometimes replacing older terms with ludicrous modernisms) and providing detailed commentaries. Ignore the title of this book, and you might enjoy this odd, often entertaining set of classical documents.

— ***Australian Book Review*, No. 239, March 2002, pp. 52–3.**

of roaming the corridors of the Frankfurt Book Fair attempting to sell Australian books, competing against large companies whose large staffs work out of gaudy booths.

Both books are necessary reading for anybody interested in editing and the book trade. But Athill is a generous writer, and McPhee isn't.

Our book collection has a section of Critical Books. I tend to forget about them, mainly because they are usually hidden behind the book mountain. That's the book mountain whose photo appears in a recent issue of *SF Commentary* (you did get your copy of *SFC* 77, didn't you?; I sent a copy of it and *SFC* 78 to everybody in ANZAPA, but so far I've heard little from anybody). This time my pick from the Critical Books section was Paul Fussell's ***Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays*** (Ballantine; 1988; 257 pp.). A provocative title; is Fussell perhaps merely an American cold warrior? He proves to be the kind of American pragmatist who holds an entertainingly skewed view on all subjects. By Australian standards, he has leftish sympathies on some subjects, and right-wing opinions on others. In the title essay, he offers a powerful case in favour of dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Fussell was part of the island-to-island Allied campaign that gradually whittled down the Japanese Empire during 1943, 1944 and 1945. Few people seem to remember the horror of that campaign. It incurred similar death rates, on both sides, to those sustained by World War I forces in France. He believes that Japan would not have surrendered in August 1945 without the dropping of the two atomic bombs, and that such a failure to surrender would have led to the deaths of at least a million American soldiers, and many millions of Japanese soldiers and civilians. His sympathy, as in other matters, is with the ordinary grunts who did the fighting; American ground forces who during World War II, as during the Vietnam War, were almost all from the working classes. In other matters, Fussell's concerns are more theoretical. For instance, he writes a wonderful historical satire about ideas of 'tourism' and 'travel' ('Travel, Tourism and "International Understanding"'). In another essay, he attacks the horrible things being done to language by today's academics ('"A Power of Facing Unpleasant Facts"'). His essay on George Orwell would send any reader to read or reread him. Now I want to find the rest of Fussell's books (though perhaps not his many books about his academic specialty, Augustan poetry).

The book mountain shown in *SFC* 77 comprises the Urgent Urgent Shelf. Elaine's Reading Plan allows me an Urgent Urgent book between books from each other category.

Urgent Urgent books are usually review copies, some needing reviewing more urgently others. Lucy Sussex asked *Australian Book Review* to assign me the job of reviewing ***Eyes of the Calculor*** by Sean McMullen (Tor; 2001; 589 pp.) and ***The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction*** (edited by Matthew Richardson; Halstead Classics; 2001; 191 pp.). See the box on page 22 for the reviews, which have already appeared in *ABR* and — miracle of miracles — been paid for. Before McMullen fans start sending me rude emails about the inaccuracies in the review, bear in mind that *ABR* gave me no time to read *The Miocene Arrow*, the second in the series of which *Calculor* is the third, or reread *Souls in the Great Machine*, the first in the series.

I've cheated on the system in order to read far more Urgent Urgents than I should have. Egan's *Schild's Ladder* was an Urgent Urgent, but I put Hawking's, Lindley's and Smolin's books under the same category so that I could read them together. Patrick O'Leary's ***The Impossible Bird*** (Tor; 2002; 368 pp.), an ambitious surrealist fantasy that I don't like much, falls in this category.

I slipped in Ursula Le Guin's ***The Telling*** (Harcourt; 2000; 264 pp.) and ***The Other Wind*** (Harcourt; 2001; 246 pp.) under the Urgent Urgent label.

The Telling resembles Le Guin's other political fables, in that again (as in *Four Ways to Forgiveness*) she pits a Hainish representative against a repressive regime, but this time the setting is a single-continent world with a bloody huge mountain range in the middle. The journey over the range has some of the imaginative intensity of the journey over ice in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

In *The Other Wind*, Le Guin returns to Earthsea. You can feel her sniffing the wind with delight at the beginning of the novel, as her main character alights in Gont, and she returns to her true spiritual home. Le Guin never writes better than she does about Earthsea, and, despite some irritating kowtowing to kings and nobles, she takes the reader on a harrowing and deeply imagined journey that raises her work far above all other heroic fantasy, including that of Tolkien. The story has its origins in *The Farthest Shore*, *Tehanu* and a short piece called 'Dragonfly'. In those pieces, she developed some powerful metaphors for, as Peter Nicholls put it, 'teaching children the value of death'. In the years since she wrote *The Farthest Shore* and *Tehanu*, Le Guin has been questioning the meaning of her own metaphors and images. During the first three-quarters of the novel, she seems almost as lost as her own characters. The book's ending has no easy solutions. She overturns many of her favourite notions so thoroughly that I suspect she will now have to write yet another Earthsea novel.

'As local as your fingertips': Memos from Stephen Dunn

There is one more category in the Grand Reading Scheme. Every tenth book or so I'm allowed to read A Book For Pleasure. How generous a concession I make to myself! You can see why the whole scheme will fail eventually, as it did in the early 1980s. I can stand reading only so many books out of duty before I kick the scheme and return to reading only for pleasure.

I went to the shelf and picked up a book of poetry, ***New and Selected Poems 1974–1994*** by Stephen Dunn (Norton; 1994; 296 pp.). I bought this in the mid 1990s because I selected it from the bookshop shelf and read a few of the shorter poems. Reading the entire book

only amplified the pleasure I had felt when I first looked at it. Dunn is sensible and funny about ordinary things, but gives a whole-of-life meaning to matters that would be merely mundane in the hands of a prose writer. Sometimes he tells short stories in verse, such as 'At the Smithville Methodist Church', in which he tries to account for the horror he feels when he discovers his young daughter enjoys attending Sunday School, and is absorbing, uncritically, New Testament stories. The volume begins with his most recent poetry (at the time of publication), goes back to his earliest pieces, then works forward through selections from eight books. Only after I read this book did I look up Stephen Dunn on the Net. I knew nothing about him. I found that he had just won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and has published three books of poems since the *New and Selected Poems*.

Here are a few of the Stephen Dunn lines I wrote down while I was reading the book:

Night has come laterally
out of the woods, has risen from the grass. ('A Pretty Thing')

mice are squinching
themselves tiny, getting into homes. ('A Pretty Thing')

and there was my dog Buster with a flea rash,
his head in his privates. Even for Buster
this was something like happiness. ('Something Like Happiness')

I repudiated Zen because it doesn't provide
for forgiveness, repudiated my friend X
who had gotten in touch with his feelings,
which were spiteful and aggressive. ('Something Like Happiness')

I remembered how tired I'd grown of mountaintops
and their thin, unheavenly air,
had grown tired, really, of how I spoke of them,
this exaggerated glamor, the false equation between
ascent and importance. ('Something Like Happiness')

I looked at the vase . . ..
— and realized how wrong it was
to reject appearances. How much more difficult
to accept them! I repudiated myself, citing my name.
The phone rang. It was my overly serious friend
from Syracuse saying *Foucault, Foucault*,
like some lost prayer of the tenured. ('Something Like Happiness')

Tell the dogs and the horses
you love them more than cars. ('Some Things I Wanted to Say to You')

In the converted stable where I work,
after the kerosene warmed the room,
one deadened fly rose to life —
a phenomenon that could turn a boy
from street crime to science
or, if less bright, to the church. ('The Resurrection')

To be a fly
was to fly in the face
of all that could defeat it. ('The Resurrection')

It's vanishing as you speak, the soul-grit,
the story-fodder,
everything you retrieve is your past,
everything you let go
goes to memory's out-box, open on all sides,
in cahoots with thin air. ('The Vanishings')

Then create a list
of what you've learned to do without.
It is stronger than prayer. ('Traveling')

You start with your own body
then move outward, but not too far.
Remember, finally, there are few pleasures
that aren't as local as your fingertips.
Never go to Europe for a cathedral
in large groups, create a corner
in the middle of a room. ('How to Be Happy: Another Memo to Myself')

So many people walk up to me
and tell me they're dead,
though they're just describing their afternoons. ('One Side of the Story')

and again Dunn's most constant theme:

In difficult times, we come to understand,
it's the personal and only the personal that matters. ('Introduction to the 20th Century')

I should tack that to the masthead of *The Metaphysical Review*, if ever I get around to publishing another issue.

These lines, written long before 11 September 2001, are in a poem called 'To a Terrorist':

Perhaps you're hating me now,
I who own my own house
and live in a country so muscular,
so smug, it thinks its terror is meant
only to mean well, and to protect.

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Books read since 22 December 2001

Ratings

** Books recommended highly.
* Books recommended.
ℙ Books about which I have severe doubts.

* **THE BIG BLOWDOWN by George P. Pelecanos (1996; Serpents Tail 1-8524-670-5; 313 pp.)**
Thanks to Jamie Reuel for lending me this book, even if he overpraised it. Pelecanos is supposed to be the Hot New Writer in American crime fiction, but to me this book didn't demonstrate his clear superiority in any branch of the writing game. I found the book's style overwritten and laboured. It has an overcomplicated plot about Americans of Greek background who run into, across and over each other in Washington in the 1940s. I had the constant feeling that it was being pitched at a director such as Sidney Lumet, who might base a Big Serious Movie on it. I like my American crime fiction with a slightly lighter touch than this, which is perhaps why I enjoy mysteries by Lawrence Block. I'll try another couple of Pelecanos's books before giving up on him.

* **A WOMAN'S EYE edited by Sara Paretsky (1992; Dell 0-440-21335-0; 448 pp.)**
A disappointing collection, but not because of any lack of editorial skill by Sara Paretsky. This collection shows that mystery fiction is not a short story medium. With a few exceptions, these stories read like breathless condensations of mystery novels. The exceptions include 'Deborah's Judgment' by Margaret Maron, which is a memorable tale about revenge within a closely knit family, and Dorothy B. Hughes' 'That Summer at Quichiquois', a vividly Gothic story of digging up the past. The best story, 'Lucky Dip' by Liza Cody, is a story full of merry twists and turns, a jaunty jape about an English graveyard and an unlikely con artist.

** **WALKIN' AFTER MIDNIGHT by Lauren St John 2000; Picador 0-330-39182-8; 277 pp.; £7.99/$A20.05)**
Alternative country music (often called alt.country) is not an overwhelming interest of most people I meet. If, like me, you worship the names of Emmylou Harris, Buddy and Julie Miller, Steve Earle, Gillian Welch, and the other people Lauren St John followed around America for a year, you must buy this book. If you have no idea what alt.country is, I can tell you that it's where rock and roll went when it was deleted from the playlists of mass-market radio stations. That's not the whole story: many of the performers discussed by St John are devoted scholars of bluegrass, country blues and other traditional forms of American music. I particularly enjoyed St John's account of Emmylou Harris's and Steve Earle's lives on the road: no pretensions, not much comfort, and sometimes a lot of negative aggro to their leftish (by American standards), cause-motivated benefit concerts. St John has since written a biography of Steve Earle.

* **BLUE SILENCE by Michelle Marquardt (2002; Bantam 0-86325-251-7; 404 pp.; $A17.95)**
Blue Silence won the George Turner Prize ($10,000 and publication by Random House Australia) in 2000, but it took two years for the book to appear, and there is no indication that the prize will be awarded again. Does this mean that *Blue Silence* was the poor best of an uninteresting group of contenders? I fear so, because the book has some major problems. The greatest difficulty is that, after slogging through 120,000 words, the reader is no closer to finding out anything about the aliens who, as the blurb puts it, arrive in a mysterious craft that docks on a space station in orbit around Earth. We find out a lot about the people who are investigating the craft, and have to put up with some very banal spaceship and terrestrial politics, but in science-fictional terms almost nothing happens in this book. Did Michelle Marquardt originally submit a book twice this size, which was split into two for publication? Will there be a sequel? A sequel seems necessary, but I won't bother reading it. Meanwhile, surely there are much better SF manuscripts floating around Australia waiting for somebody to publish them?

* **ENGLISH MUSIC by Peter Ackroyd (1992; Hamish Hamilton 0-241-13257-6; 400 pp.; £9.99)**
This is a very odd book. As the blurb tells us, Timothy Harcombe, apprentice to his father Clement, a faith healer, can pass over to earlier periods of English history and art during his 'visions'. Each vision is supposed to exemplify the artistic essence of the period he visits. The blurb, presumably written by the author, says that the main character is attuned to 'the Englishness of English literature and English art — in other words, he hears English music for the first time'. However, Timothy's 'real' life, as well as the lives he leads in his visions, are so uniformly dreary and ponderous that Ackroyd persuades us that the English should have given up on art, music and the whole damn thing around the time of Chaucer. The idea for the book is attractive, and the book is a convincing work of fantasy, but Ackroyd's lugubrious approach almost parodies the idea itself.

** **IN THE SECRET STATE by Robert McCrum (1980; Hamish Hamilton 0-241-10322-3; 250 pp.; £5.95)**
Robert McCrum is a more compelling writer about English spooks than John Le Carre, because he uses many fewer words to revel in plots that are as convoluted as Le Carre's. In this early effort of McCrum's, we do not even discover the name of the agency in London for which Frank Strange works. Sinister events lead him to suspect almost everybody, and in turn he becomes a prime suspect, although it is hard to find out who is suspected of what. McCrum's theme is not loyalty, as the blurb

claims, but the solipsistic nature of spy organisations. Nobody is much concerned about the Overseas Enemy; instead, the bloke in the room next door is likely to be the real foe.

** **BEWARE OF PITY (UNGEDOLD DES HERZENS) by Stefan Zweig (1938; Penguin Modern Classics 0-14-006807-4; 353 pp.; £4.95/$A8.95)**

I suppose *Beware of Pity* is not well known because it is essentially a nineteenth-century novel, but published just before World War II. Forget this difficulty, and you find yourself reading a rattling good novel that it never pretends to be anything but high melodrama. This novel feels unapologetically anachronistic in style and mood although it tells of events that happened just before World War I. It is also unapologetically German in tone: the main character, the story-teller, is extremely high-minded, pure of spirit, noble, brave, and would be very boring if he hadn't through the novel made a number of ghastly mistakes about human relationships. The slow disaster of his fall is fascinating because we can see what's happening and he can't. We feel the pain he causes to other characters in a way he never quite can, because by the end of the book he's become aware of his predicament and is trying to cover his back. The story is simple: a young, naive officer is offered friendship by a wealthy family in the back-country town where he's stationed. He falls in love with the beautiful daughter of the family, and offers friendship, out of a kind of self-important pity, to the crippled daughter, whose sufferings actually rule this family. In the process, he makes a promise he cannot keep. The plot is predictable, but the maze of agonies and self-lies we find in the story-teller's mind are as original as anything in Proust.

* **JUBILEE by Jack Dann (2001; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6719-2; 443 pp.; $A24.95)**

Several Jack Danns appear in this large selection from a lifetime's short stories (1978–2001). The chatty, avuncular Jack Dann is the least successful writer of short fiction. Even 'The Diamond Pit', a recent story written in this style, seems to be packed with too many words to support its premise. (Many readers might like a sentence such as 'It was dark when they found me, but the moon was so big and bloated that everything looked like it was coated with silvery dust, except the shadows, where the moon dust couldn't settle', but that seems overdone to me.) An entirely different Jack Dann can be found in 'Da Vinci Rising', the award-winning novella that became the core of the novel *The Memory Cathedral*. This Jack Dann relies on clear observation of place and character, slow unfolding of events, and lean, muscular sentences. Yet another Jack Dann, the author of *The Silent*, has become a major American artist, but nothing in *Jubilee* quite hints at this writer except the exquisite short story 'Tea' (first published 1988). I hope later anthologies will contain more stories of the standard of 'Tea' and 'Da Vinci Rising'.

** **A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES by Lawrence Block (1992; Orion 0-75283-748-6; 339 pp.; £5.99/$A16.10)**

I can't add much to what I've already said many times about Lawrence Block's tales of Matt Scudder. Each of these stories starts in a welter of interesting detail about the lives of people in New York, then acquires a mystery hook, then only gradually tightens its hold around the reader and the main characters. The answer to the mystery is always unexpected — in this case, because it seems that whoever murdered Scudder's client's wife must have had a personal vendetta against the client. Scudder gradually teases out the detail of the true motives of the criminal, then (as often happens in such stories) nearly becomes a victim himself.

** **A TRAMP ABROAD by Mark Twain (1880; Chatto & Windus; 338 pp.)**

This purports to be report of the trip Mark Twain and a group of friends took around Europe in the mid nineteenth century. However, Twain keeps adding shaggy dog stories to his narratives, at first about the places he visits, but then about the adventures of the group. So it all proves to be fiction, but I suspect still gives a good idea of a Germany (in particular) that still had much untamed land and was in many senses still medieval. A very nineteenth-century style of humour; not for the impatient,

* **TIME PAST by Maxine McArthur (2002; Bantam 1-86325-284-3; 554 pp.; $A16.95)**

I read *Time Past* to its end, but found the experience decreasingly enjoyable as I crawled through its 554 pages. This is a clear case of an unnecessary sequel. The time puzzle that Halley seeks to solve becomes less and less interesting as the novel proceeds; I didn't understand the Big Revelation when it came. Events that could have been very interesting — the time trip back to a few years in our immediate future — prove to be a sideshow. The author has sharp things to say about the near future, but has run out of things to say about her far-future deep space station. When Halley arrives back home, she finds it pretty stale and unwelcoming. Maxine McArthur obviously has much promise as a writer, but only when she moves into some other science-fictional territory.

* **HIDING MY CANDY by The Lady Chablis, and Theodore Bouloukos (1996: Pocket Books 0-671-52094-6; 208 pp.; $US22/$A40)**

The Lady Chablis was the most entertaining character in both the book and film of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The success of John Berendt's book gave the Lady Chablis wide scope for what she/he does best — self-publicity. And that's about all that's in this as-told-to 'autobiography': a few good stories, and some insight into growing up black and gay in the southern states of the USA, but when it comes to real insights about what can only be called a colourful life — nothing.

** **THE BURNING SECRET AND OTHER STORIES by Stefan Zweig (1981; Penguin 0-14-011638-9; 250 pp.; £3.99/$A11.99)**

Penguin had this collection in print for many years as *The Royal Game*. In 1988, Andrew Birkin made a movie of *The Burning Secret*, based on one of the stories in this book, so Penguin reissued the book under that title. The film, which starred Faye Dunaway, Klaus Maria Brandauer and Ian Richardson, was not released in Australia. (With a cast like that, it should surely be rereleased on DVD.) The story 'The Burning Secret', like all the

stories in this volume, is a rich melodrama of the kind that Stefan Zweig wrote so well. A more interesting story, however, about obsessive chess players, is 'The Royal Game', as is 'Letter from an Unknown Woman', about extreme sexual obsession. It was made into a movie by Max Ophuls in 1948, and still shows occasionally on late-night TV.

** **FOURSIGHT edited by Peter Crowther**
(2000; Gollancz 0-57506-870-1; 216 pp.; £16.99/$A48.95)

** **FUTURES edited by Peter Crowther**
(2001; Gollancz 0-575-070234; 320 pp.; £12.99/$A39.95)

** **INFINITIES edited by Peter Crowther**
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07355-1; 358 pp.; £12.99/$A39.95)

I've written a long review (which began as a Nova Mob talk) of these collections, each of four novellas, for *Interzone* (March 2003). I've been told since that Peter Crowther, a major promoter of the novella form, published each story separately with his firm, PS Publishing, then collected them in these anthologies as well as in Ace Double-style paperbacks, each of which includes two novellas. To me, that's a major revival of the novella form, for which Crowther cannot be thanked enough. Each of these anthologies contains brilliant stories as well clinkers. From *Foursight*, I recommend 'Leningrad Nights' by Graham Joyce, 'How the Other Half Lives' by James Lovegrove, and 'The Vaccinator' (for light relief) by Michael Marshall Smith. From *Infinities* I recommend 'Diamond Dogs' by Alastair Reynolds and 'Park Polar' by Adam Roberts, and the major stories in *Futures* are 'Making History' by Paul J. McAuley and 'Tendeléo's Story' by Ian McDonald. McDonald's story covers the territory of his novel *Chaga*, but from the African viewpoint.

** **THE BLOOD DOCTOR by Barbara Vine**
(2002; Penguin Viking 0-670-91275-1; 389 pp.; $A29.95)

Perhaps the only mystery novel I've read that has the same feeling as *The Daughter of Time*, by Josephine Tey. In that book, Tey reconsidered the case of the historical Richard II by having her modern detective, laid up in bed, reconsider the case for and against the arch-criminal who might not have been as bad as Shakespeare painted him. In *The Blood Doctor*, the main characters seek the truth about a highly decorated nineteenth-century ancestor who had been a doctor in Scotland and England. As the characters assemble the historical evidence, the 'blood doctor' of the title slowly assembles himself as a living and terrifying character, and the modern investigators discover the story of a truly disturbing crime. This is the most interesting 'Barbara Vine' novel for some time.

** **THE SKY WARDEN AND THE SUN**
by Sean Williams
(2002; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6996-2; 433 pp.; $A27.95)

Usually, as I know, I cannot enjoy heroic fantasy trilogies because (a) the main characters are boring, (b) their narratives are boring, usually with the pace of a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll, (c) their worlds are boring, pale carbon copies of pale carbon copies of Middle Earth. Sean Williams' world is interesting — a harsh equivalent of the South Australian back country, which itself is harsh territory. His characters are interesting — Sal and Shilly, injured during the journey, tag along with Skender, the slightly silly son of the head of the Haunted City, and the three of them have some slimy adults to deal with. And the narrative in *Sky Warden* zooms along at a great pace, taking Sal and Shilly away from the coast, deep inland, forever facing human as well as supernatural dangers. This is one of the few mid-trilogy novels worth reading for its own sake.

* **THE FALLS by Ian Rankin**
(2001; Orion 0-75283-861-X; 399 pp.; £10.99/$A27.95)

Recent replays on ABC-TV of *Black and Blue* and *The Hanging Garden* (but not the others, whose rights are held here by the cable channel UK-TV, and we're not connected to cable TV) reminded me of how complex, perceptive and sardonic are the early 'Rebus' mysteries by Ian Rankin. These qualities have almost disappeared in *The Falls*, Rankin's second most recent novel in the series. A dull mystery with a predictable ending takes at least 200 pages too long to be unravelled. Why bother, Mr Rankin?

** **THE SIDMOUTH LETTERS by Jane Gardam**
(1980; Abacus 0-349-11408-0; 148 pp.; $A16.35)

I keep saying that Jane Gardam is Britain's best writer of closely observed, succinct short stories, but nobody listens. Every Gardam volume contains at least one masterpiece. *The Sidmouth Letters* has 'The Tribute', which should be in every collection of Great British Stories. Three ladies, once grand dames, now down on their luck, meet over morning tea to commemorate 'poor Dench', the nanny who worked for each of them, seemingly without pay or much thanks in her lifetime. Their contempt for Dench nearly equals their self-pity about their current falls of fortune. Only the arrival of an unexpected stranger at their table puts into perspective all their grumblings and self-justification. The surprise ending is delicious. 'For He Heard the Loud Bassoon' is also a miniature miracle of a story about one man's obsessions and self-deception. 'The Sidmouth Letters' is a fine tribute to Jane Austen and Austenologists. 'A Spot of Gothic' is one of those rural ghost stories that Gardam does so well — the kind of story where you can't be sure there's a ghost until the last line.

** **UNITED STATES: ESSAYS 1952–1992**
by Gore Vidal
(1993; Andre Deutsch 0-233-98832-7; 1295 pp.; £25/$A59.95)

This giant book demands a Major Review, which I don't have time to give it. (Such a review would best be done by quoting Vidal's sharpest *bon mots*. Since almost every page includes a cracker, such a list would add up to hundreds of pages.) Collectively, the essays in *United States* have three main propositions: that, in building a Roman-style empire since 1900, the USA has destroyed its pretensions to democracy, impoverished a high percentage of its population, and become a pain in the arse for the rest of the world; that the main method of enslaving or annoying ordinary Americans has been to use the country's law-enforcement facilities to put in jail people whose morals offend those in power ('victimless crime'), instead of prosecuting the true criminals, who run much of the country's economic activity; and that Americans should (a) read instead

of watching TV or movies; and (b) should read for pleasure instead of reading authors such as Thomas Pynchon who (according to Vidal) write books to be taught in university not read for pleasure. Gore Vidal obviously counts SF, fantasy and children's literature as reading pleasures: *United States* includes long essays on 'The Oz Books', 'E. Nesbit's Magic', 'Tarzan Revisited' and 'Lessing's Science Fiction'. He mentions Le Guin favourably, but has not yet written a long essay on her work.

* **BETTER TO HAVE LOVED: THE LIFE OF JUDITH MERRIL**
by Judith Merril and Emily Pohl-Weary
(2002; Between the Lines 1-896357-57-1; 282 pp.)

Thanks to Dick Jenssen for giving me this book, as I might not have tracked it down otherwise. Seemingly the long-anticipated autobiography of Judith Merril, who died in 1997, it turns out to be a difficult book to consider. It includes autobiographical fragments by Judith Merril, probably the most influential woman in the science fiction world since the 1930s, but those fragments don't tell us what we would like to know (how much did Merril contribute to Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, his only complete novel? what role did Merril have in the English and American New Wave movements? what did she actually accomplish after she moved to Canada, apart from her work in the cooperative movement?), and some of the letters and other pieces gathered by editor Emily Pohl-Weary reveal some things we are a bit embarrassed to find out. Merril's tribute to Ted Sturgeon adds greatly to our understanding of that man as a writer and teacher, but her memories of Fred Pohl give us little idea of why they got together in the first place. Merril really does appear to have believed that 'all you need is love', whereas what one remembers is all the fights she was in, including those she won. (I'll never forget the pleasure of discovering her 'Best Of' collections in secondhand shops in the early sixties, and being grateful that somebody Out There had so much greater editorial skills than all the dumbclucks who edited the anthologies one usually encountered. But she doesn't tell us how she won the battles she must have fought to ensure those anthologies were published.) *Better to Have Loved* left me feeling exasperated, wanting somebody to write a detailed biography of Judith Merril.

** **BEARBRASS: IMAGINING EARLY MELBOURNE**
by Robyn Annear
(1995; Mandarin 1-86330-418-5; 290 pp.; $A17.95)

Robyn Annear made herself famous around Melbourne for a few minutes when she described herself, on the half-title page of his book, as 'a typist' who 'lives in country Victoria with somebody else's husband'. She's a lively historian of early Melbourne (one of whose early names was 'Bearbrass', although it could easily have been called 'Batmania', after John Batman, one of its founders), but I kept hoping that the book would show some real depth of insight. Annear is good at showing how Melbourne developed rapidly from a few houses beside the Yarra River when it was settled in 1836, to a bustling frontier town during the 1840s, busily commercial but still made up of streets that were dust in summer and deep mud in winter, to a town that in 1850 could declare its independence from New South Wales, be fully planned if hardly built upon, and claim to be a riproaring kind of place with a real future. Annear skilfully shows a group of people, far from any other outposts of Empire (500 miles from Sydney in one direction or Hobart in the other direction), who set about to build a living town, with rules, town governance, shops, houses and even the beginnings of interesting entertainment, all in 14 years. Some of these people, such as Batman and Fawkner, come to life, but generally this is pop history of the past, the kind of book that would set me off reading more deeply about early Melbourne if I only had the time.

** **MANY MASKS: A LIFE OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT**
by Brendan Gill
(1987; Heinemann 0-434-29274-5; 544 pp.; £9.95)

I read this book because it was next in my reading system, but it proved to be one of the most entertaining books of the year. I'd always known that Frank Lloyd Wright was a bit of a lad, but Brendan Gill shows him as the 'snake-oil saleman' of all time, perhaps the most entertaining and irritating American of the twentieth century after Orson Welles. Wright had an almost limitless level of energy and ego, and his gift of the gab regularly enabled him to persuade rich people to spend millions of dollars more than they meant to on houses that were always on the point of not being built. Wright's private life was a mess, and occasionally a tragedy (a house servant burnt down the first Taliesan, killing the servant and Wright's second wife), and he always owed millions of dollars more than he earned, but he floated above all such considerations. He knew he was a genius, and everybody agreed with him. He even maintained enough self-confidence to survive a financially barren Depression and World War II, and restart his career at the age of seventy with his most famous house, 'Fallingwater', and his most famous public building, the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This books has lots of pictures, but better still, it rattles along with many outrageously funny stories about one man who lived the truth that there is no success like excess.

* **THE SCIENCE FICTION OF CORDWAINER SMITH by Karen L. Hellekson**
(2001; McFarland 0-7864-1149-X; 158 pp.; $US28.50/$A60)

I'm supposed to review this book for another publication, so I won't say much here. Let's just say that one of SF's few truly great writers, Cordwainer Smith, is badly served here by a writer who believes that telling us lots and bits and pieces about a writer's work automatically gives us an insight into that work's genius. Not here.

** **No. 472 CHEYNE WALK: CARNACKI: THE UNTOLD STORIES**
by A. F. Kidd and Rick Kennett
(2002; Ash-Tree Press 1-55310-037-9; 235 pp.)

Rick Kennett has already described the genesis of this book in his article 'Finding Carnacki the Ghost-finder' (*SFC* 78). The finished product is a beautiful piece of bookcraft by Ash-Tree Press, and within limits, a satisfying book of short fiction. The limits are those imposed by the author admired and emulated by Kidd and Kennett — William Hope

Hodgson. The only way I can describe Hodgson, like H. P. Lovecraft, is as a writer who never quite got his rocks off. Carnacki the ghost-finder tells tales of horrifying things that go bump (or worse) in the night, but Carnacki's job is to contain them, send them back, never to find out what they really are or contend with them or the world they come from. The hero of a Hodgson-style story never quite fights the horrors of the night or beats them; he merely sends them back into the stygian darkness. Kidd and Kennett capture this theme of unfulfillment brilliantly in eleven of the twelve stories. In 'The Keeper of the Minter Light', Kennett harnesses his own natural talent, allowing his hero to break the boundaries of the Hodgson world and penetrate the barrier that divides our world from the supernatural world. The result is one of the best fantasy stories written in Australia.

** **TRANSCENSION by Damien Broderick**
(2002; Tor 0-675-30369-8; 348 pp.; $US25.95/$A49.95)
I hardly need to add to the reviews of this book you can find in *SFC* 78, except to add my congratulations to Damien Broderick for placing the emphasis of the novel on its characters. The Big Effects are at the end of the novel, after the real drama has finished. The novel tells two stories, one obviously set in our far future and the other, the Valley, seemingly in a nineteenth-century past. They co-exist. Amanda from one society invades the sheltered, puritanical Valley society. Her escapades cause much bother to Mathewmark and his family in the Valley. Mohammed Abdel-Malik attempts to provide a bridge between the two societies. The characters make congenial and lively company, and dramatise the book's main themes without any need for those closing Big Effects. It seems odd to say it of a writer who has been publishing steadily for nearly forty years, but Damien Broderick is in 2003 Australia's Writer to Watch. (He has just picked up the Aurealis Award for Best Australian SF Novel of the year.)

* **EVIL EARTHS edited by Brian Aldiss**
(1975; Avon 0-380-44636-7; 318 pp.; $US2.50)
This is one of the anthologies of 'Golden Age' (1940s and 1950s) SF that Brian Aldiss edited in the 1970s. Unfortunately, the premise of this particular volume — stories about environmental concerns — is a 1970s premise, and Aldiss tries to pack some very ordinary stories into the 'evil earths' bag. There are no unexpected gems, and there is one unexpected stinker (Henry Kuttner's novel-length 'The Time Trap', a real reputation-spoiler). The successful stories are ones we already know and love: William Tenn's 'Down Among the Dead Men', Aldiss's own 'Heresies of the Huge God', still as refreshingly grim as when it was first published, and John W. Campbell's immortal 'Night' (from 1935).

** **LIARS IN LOVE by Richard Yates**
(1982; Dell Delta 0-440-54697-4; 272 pp.; $US6.95/$A11.95)
These long stories add up to a bit of an oddity — first published from 1978 to 1981, they read as if they were written in the 1940s or early 1950s, and most of them deal with the years before World War II. Not that this diminishes from their quality, but I did have a constant feeling of temporal double vision as I read them. Nearly all of them deal with the mistakes made by young people. 'Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired' tells of a mother from hell trying to survive in New York during the Depression, and the child dragged around, trying to understand what Mother is up to. 'Liars in Love' tells of a young man in London, caught off guard by a fragile love offered by a whore met by mistake on a rainy night. The title of the last story, 'Saying Goodbye to Sally', sums up the rueful tone of the stories. If the tone of the stories were a bit sharper, if the method a bit more rigorous, Yates might be more famous than he is. But I might not have enjoyed the stories as much as I did.

** **THE SEPARATION by Christopher Priest**
(2002; Scribner 0-7432-2033-1; 464 pp.; £10.99/$A27.95)
I've read this novel only once. This puts me at a disadvantage compared to the person who has read it twice, or many times. This I need to do in order to write the long review I've been asked to write. In the meantime, here's an impression, not a review. Christopher Priest writes in a very plain style that is easy to read. The ease of reading his books hides the fact the author does strange things to the perceptions of the reader who is being lulled into the belief he or she is reading a straightforward narrative. However, during this novel, a character who appears to be the story-teller at the beginning disappears by the end of the novel, two twin brothers who live in one version of the years 1936 until 2002 appear to swap into parallel histories, and swap roles with each other, but do not seem to make the difference between these histories, although both sets of twins take part in critical events in both histories. Priest's cavalier skill is in making all this seemingly quite clear until the reader reaches the end of the novel and cannot quite work out which universe is which. The point of these proceedings is not entirely to prove how clever the author is; he gradually develops an original, serious thesis about Britain's conduct during World War II. You might miss this if you have as much fun reading the book as I did.

** **LAST ORDERS by Graham Swift**
(1996; Picador 0-330-48967-4; 295 pp.; £6.99/$A21)
Scholars will derive any number of theses and papers on the similarities and differences between Swift's novel of *Last Orders* and the recent Fred Schepisi film. It's a tribute to Schepisi that he has been able to put on film most of the emotional currents that flow through the book. Indeed, it almost needs a film to make sense of the crosscuts in time and experience that make up the book — the intertwined lives of the four men who carry Jack Dodds's ashes to the sea to be scattered, the dead man who inspires such devotion, and Amy, Jack's widow, who is the real centre of the novel. Gradually the reader sees the total pattern of these pieces of conversation, both past and present, and the novel does become a satisfactory whole by its end.

* **GRIDIRON by Philip Kerr**
(1995; Chatto & Windus 0-7011-6503-0; 372 pp.; $A19.95)
This near future technology horror novel has such a great big beautiful cliché at its heart that the author even tells what it is. Yes, the superbuilding in which the characters find themselves is the equivalent of HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Grid-

iron, the ultimate smart building, decides that humans are its enemy. It looks the doors and starts exterminating them. However, since this is the eve of the official launch of the building, its designers and techs are the people trapped inside them. Will they beat the building? Will any of them escape alive? This is not subtle stuff, and it's fun because many of the technological gizmos that Gridiron uses probably exist already. All that's missing is the AI to launch them against humans.

* **BOLD AS LOVE: A NEAR FUTURE FANTASY by Gwyneth Jones (2001; Gollancz 0-575-07031-5; 308 pp.; £10.99/$A29.95)**

I counted myself as a Gwyneth Jones fan after reading two of her YA novels published under the name of 'Anne Halam'. I was looking forward reading *Bold As Love*. The characters, members of rather scruffy rock bands, seemed interesting, and the near-future Britain, disintegrating into its constituent parts as people switch off technology and turn off society, left some room for speculation. But by the middle of the book, nothing in it makes sense. The three main characters, Fiorinda, Ax and Sage, hold some interest. But then we are asked to believe that Ax is given political power in England, but the rest of society, nice suburban Britain, is still operating pretty much as normal. We are also asked to believe that members of bands based on a rivalry between thrash metal and the Grateful Dead would retain any popularity or interest in an early-twenty-first-century world. Hip hoppers and rappers could probably stage a political rally, but not these Deadheads. So is Jones's world a projection of a 1970s world, not our world? Maybe. But even in such an alternative future, why is Ax, who seems incapable of organising his way out of a paper bag, made Dictator of England? Just what is happening in England apart from this tiny circle of friends and rivals? The book collapses into a vortex of unlikely, even unimaginable premises, which means that by the end of *Bold As Love* (the first of a trilogy) I lost all interest in the main characters as well. I have no idea why *Bold As Love* was nominated for the Arthur Clarke Award, let alone why it won.

** **SOUL/MATE by Rosamond Smith (1990; New English Library 0-45055130-X; 281 pp.)**

It's very hard to believe that crime and mystery buffs did not pick 'Rosamond Smith' as a pseudonym of Joyce Carol Oates before this fact was revealed a few years ago. Like Ruth Rendell, her closest equivalent, Smith does not reveal the answers to mysteries, but explores the anatomy of crimes and the minds of criminals. In *Soul/Mate*, we see much of the story through the viewpoint of the criminal, Colin Asch, an attractive liar who ingratiates himself into families, then commits murders seemingly without retribution. We see the other half of the story through the eyes of Dorothea Deverell, a well-meaning, attractive yet lonely academic who is isolated enough to become entangled with Asch's obsessions. The enormous skill of the unfolding revelation of character and action surely reveals that its author must be one of America's leading novelists.

** **CHAGA by Ian McDonald (1995; Gollancz 0-575- 06052-2; 413 pp.; £16.99/$A49.95)**

I liked the novella 'Tendeléo's Story' (*Futures*) so much that I wanted to read McDonald's novel *Chaga*. Sometime during the least couple of years I had sold or given away my copy of the novel without reading it, so I had to borrow it from Alan Stewart. (Thanks, Alan.) That'll teach me to get rid of any SF novel, no matter how unlikely it is at the time that I will get around to reading it. Both the novella and the novel are much more interesting than anything else I've read by Ian McDonald. Both tell of the mysterious alien flora that drops in pods on a number of landing spots situated across tropical Africa, Asia and South America. The flora spreads outwards from the spots, converting all terrestrial life into an alien equivalent. The UN takes over Africa, and makes vast number of people into refugees by moving them from the path of the expanding circles. In both stories, the real subject of the story is Africans' lives destroyed and fractured by becoming refugees. In 'Tendeléo's Story', the protagonist is an African girl (then woman) Tendeléo. In *Chaga*, Gaby McAslan, an Irish network journalist, is the hero, covering the spread of Chaga, then seeking a way to enter the alien areas. To me, Tendeléo rings true as a character, but Gaby seems too much like a romanticised superwoman (who of course falls for a romanticised superman, Dr Shepard, a UN administrator). For its landscapes and visions, *Chaga* is as enjoyable an SF romp as any I've read in recent years.

* **NO HEROICS, PLEASE: UNCOLLECTED WRITINGS by Raymond Carver edited by William L. Stull (1991; Harvill/HarperCollins 0-00-271253-9; 239 pp.; £7.99/$A19.95)**

During the brief Carver boom of the late eighties, several collections such as this one were scrabbled together. Perhaps these writings of Raymond Carver had remained uncollected because most of them aren't very interesting. Although Carver wrote well about writing, his reviews collected here are not very skilled, and the five stories here could well have remained in a desk drawer. I always enjoy reading Carver; hence my disappointment at reading a book showing that he wasn't always at his best.

** **THE BABES IN THE WOODS by Ruth Rendell (2002; Hutchinson 0-09-179456-0; 323 pp.; $A29.95)**

A few years ago, Ruth Rendell seemed to become bored by Inspector Wexford. Something horrible happened to the TV series, and it finished, and the penultimate Wexford novel was badly constructed and unsurprising. All the more reason to welcome back Wexford and Kingsmartin, and discover that it's the place, people and weather that fascinate Rendell, rather than its murders. The ending to this book is not very surprising when it arrives, but I was still left with the feeling of enjoying good company for 323 pages.

** **ALL OF US: THE COLLECTED POEMS by Raymond Carver, edited by William L. Stull (1996; Harvill 1-86046- 168-9; 386 pp.; £20/$A35)**

This was the collection we Carver fans relished receiving when it appeared in 1996. So much so

that I put off the pleasure of reading it until 2002. Nothing in the short stories prepared me for the power of the poems. Seemingly written in plain verse, without rhyme or much rhythm, they slowly open out their pleasures to you while you are reading them. All but a few early poems are rich in the rhythm of surprise. Carver will start with an ordinary event, then abruptly stand it on its head so that it looks extraordinary. But it's the mind observing the 'ordinary' that's extraordinary, a mind constantly seeing visions in the patterns of existence where another observer would just trip over his feet because he didn't see the rock in the road. Critics have tended to concentrate on the 'subject matter' of Carver's poems, particularly the poems and stories that arise from his long battle with alcohol, quite failing to see that even the blackest of subject matter is for Carver a path to magic insight.

* **THE STORM WEAVER AND THE SAND by Sean Williams**
(2002; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6998-2; 438 pp.; $A29)
I wanted so much for *The Storm Weaver and the Sand* to make a satisfying conclusion to 'the Change trilogy' (which the publisher now calls it) that I gritted my teeth as the hundreds of pages rolled on, and waited, and waited. I got to the end of the book, and the trilogy, and said 'bother!' After being captured by the people who run this far-future world, the three main characters, Sal, Shilly and Skender, sit around and wait for decisions to be made about their future. Various people find out who their mothers or fathers or other relatives are, but there is no Big Revelation, no Great Truth Discovered About the World. Why else would one wade through 1200 pages of a trilogy? My feeling is that Sean Williams felt under pressure to write the third book of the trilogy long before he should have. The narrative works wonderfully until the end of Book 2 (*The Sky Warden and the Sun*), then collapses like a soufflé. If only the last book had been allowed the time to cook properly in the author's mind before being written. (The Aurealis judges of the Best Fantasy Novel disagree with me; they've just given this book, rather than the middle book of the trilogy, the top prize in its field.)

PEBBLE IN THE SKY by Isaac Asimov
(1950; Galaxy Novel No. 14; 153 pp.; 35c)
For years I avoided reading this book because it is always described as Asimov's 'first novel'. But of course it is only his first novel to be published for the first time as a book. He had already written all the 'Foundation' stories when *Pebble in the Sky* appeared, and had written as serials most of his best books, such as *The Naked Sun* and *The Caves of Steel*. All appeared later as books as it became obvious there was a market for SF among 'real' readers. So I don't quite know how to place *Pebble in the Sky*, which comes across as a pallid footnote to many of the stories that preceded it. It has one good sentence, its first: 'Two minutes before he disappeared forever from the face of the Earth he knew, Joseph Schwartz strolled along the pleasant streets of suburban Chicago quoting Browning to himself.' When Schwartz arrives in the far future, his adventures become propressively less interesting. In the 1953 Galaxy Novel edition, the book is 153 pages long. I was tapping my foot and jigging in my seat with boredom by about page 50, and it goes downhill from there.

* **AURORA: NEW CANADIAN WRITING 1979 edited by Morris Wolfe**
(1979; Doubleday Canada 0-385-14610-8; 237 pp.; $Can7.95)
Terry Green sent me a copy of this volume of *Aurora* in 1979 when one of his early stories appeared in it. Terry has written much better stories since then, but I was glad to get around to reading the anthology 23 years late. I presume that this issue of *Aurora* remains famous in Canada because it is the first appearance of W. P. Kinsella's Shoeless Joe and the man who resurrected him by building him a baseball field in which to play. 'Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa' is only 14 pages long, but it later became a novel and then the film *Field of Dreams*. Other fine stories that presumably have remained famous in Canada are Anne Collins' 'First Flight', David Blostein's 'The Doulton Man' (surely this was picked up for the Best Fantasy anthologies of 1979?) and Jim Christy's 'My Fate'. Keeping it all in the family, Terry Green's story is 'Of Children in the Foliage', and Sharon Barbour has an interesting piece called 'Billy the Kid Is Dead' and Doug Barbour has two poems.

* **DIFFERENT SEASONS by Stephen King**
(1982; Futura 0-7088-2360-2; 560 pp.; £4.99)
During his talk about Stephen King to the Nova Mob in early 2002, Ian Mond said that some of King's best work is contained in his novellas and short novels. *Different Seasons* contains four such pieces, plus Stephen King's Afterword. It took me a while to find a copy in a secondhand bookshop, and I was anticipating a reading feast. I was very disappointed. The novella 'Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption', for instance, is very much less interesting than *The Shawshank Redemption*, the movie based on it. I haven't seen the movie *Stand By Me*, but I can't believe that it is more diffuse and ill organised than 'The Body', the short novel upon which it is based. The whole time I was reading the story, I kept wanting to edit this elegy to the last days of childhood, and shape it so that its potential was released. Probably the script writers did this. 'Apt Pupil' is again much less effective than it should be. A boy gains altogether too much power over an old man escaping from his past; King overwrites and destroys many of his own effects. The only effective story in the volume, 'The Breathing Method', is the only one that has not been made into a film. A magnificent fantasy superstructure is used to enclose a startling little fable that works cinematically in a way the other stories don't. Does nobody at publishing houses have the courage to put up his hand to edit Stephen King?

DEAD AIR by Iain Banks
(2002; Little, Brown 0-316-86054-9; 408 pp.; £16.99/$A45)
If *The Company* was a stinker, *Dead Air* is even worse. What has happened to Iain Banks? Page after page of this novel is nothing but disorganised rant. The story itself, which has some suspenseful moments, amounts to about 50 pages of the book. And the ending is really saccharine. Won't somebody at Little, Brown tell Banks to take a holiday, stop ingesting strange substances, or simply reread his own work?

** **CRADLE WILL ROCK: THE MOVIE AND THE MOMENT by Tim Robbins, Eric Darton, Nancy Stearns Bercaw and Robert Tracy**
(2000; Newmarket Press 1-55704-399-X; 140 pp.; $US32.95/$A70)

Cradle Will Rock is the best recent film entirely unreleased in Australia. I don't know whether or not it had a theatrical release in America; Dick Jenssen imported it on DVD as soon as he could. A labour of love by Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, and a brilliant cast, including John Cusack, John Tuturro, Emily Watson (in one of her first roles), and Steve Martin, it seems to have fallen through all the holes in the movie industry. Fortunately, Tim Robbins and co. kept detailed photographic and audio records of the making of the film, which are brought together in this beautiful coffee-table book that reads as well as it looks. *Cradle Will Rock* tells of the attempt to stage a musical of that name during the heyday of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project in the middle of Depression in New York. By the time the production was rehearsed, the Theatre Project was closed down under pressure from Congress (all those commernist actors) and the law was brought in to ban *Cradle Will Rock* from being performed. The last 20 minutes of the film tells of the way the cast got around the ban; and that one-off performance itself had to be filmed in real time so that the excitement of the original occasion could be brought to life! The story of the making of the film became nearly as exciting as the events in 1936 had been. See the film (somehow); order the book (from somewhere).

** **FIRES: ESSAYS, POEMS, STORIES by Raymond Carver**
(1985; Picador 0-330-29389-3; 204 pp.; $A10.95)

All the poems in this collection can now be found in *All Of Us*, but five of the stories and the four essays can only be found here. The essays 'My Father's Life' (first published as a contribution to *Granta: Autobiography*), 'On Writing', 'Fires' and 'John Gardner: The Writer as Teacher' are so inspirational that they nearly sent me back to trying to write fiction. For Carver, writing was a way of saving him from almost every discouraging aspect of his life; even so, he realises, when asked what has had the most influence on his writing life, 'nothing . . . could possibly be as important to me, could make as much difference, as the fact that I had two children.' The other major influence was novelist and writing teacher, John Gardner, who saw the potential worth of Carver's early work and insisted that he could become a success. Carver's tribute to his father is one of the great American essays.

** **CONSIDER PHLEBAS by Iain M. Banks**
(1987; Macmillan 0-333-44138-9; 471 pp.; £19.95/$A26.95)

After suffocating in *Dead Air*, I went back to Iain *M.* Banks' first science fiction novel, *Consider Phlebas*. I didn't get past page 75 when I first tried reading it, but this time I found myself flying along with Banks's amoral hero, Bora Horza Gobuchal, as he is rescued from certain death on page 15, escapes from a mercenary raid that kills lots of fellow crew members, nearly dies at the hands of a vile, very funny tinpot dictator, then . . . And that takes us to about halfway through the book. This is Cinema-Scope adventure, furious and lunatic, written the way *Star Wars* should have been filmed but wasn't. It has so many mighty leaps and bounds that the ending is a bit of a shock, but at least it doesn't leave the way open for a sequel.

** **THE PIED PIPERS: INTERVIEWS WITH THE INFLUENTIAL CREATORS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE interviews conducted by Julian Wintle and Emma Fisher**
(1974; Paddington Press 0-8467-0038-7; 320 pp.)

I'd be interested to know what, if anything, historians and critics of children's literature in the UK think of this book. Published in 1974, it appeared just as the mighty wave of Children's Lit was about to break all over the place. It arrived a bit before most of the other major books in the field, which gives Wintle and Fisher the advantage of interviewing many illustrators and authors who died during the 1970s and 1980s. The disadvantage of this advantage is that some of the older authors prove themselves to be right old prats, embodying the tone of conservative moralism that Children's Lit has tried to dispel over the last twenty years. Richard Adams says: 'I believe there are fixed moral values from the time of Plato onwards, and that right and wrong have been revealed to us for all time by Our Lord Jesus Christ.' (I never could read past page 20 of either *Watership Down* or *Shardik*.) Many of the authors confess to being caught unawares by the social revolution of the late sixties and early seventies. Other authors were already as hair-raisingly crazy as they remained (Alan Garner and Roald Dahl), and some of the illustrator/authors say some quite wise things. Edward Ardizzone makes this distinction: 'the born illustrator doesn't draw from life; he draws from knowledge, which he picks up everywhere' (p. 46). The people interviewed are: Maurice Sendak, Edward Ardizonne, Charles Keeping, Richard Scarry, Laurent de Brunhoff, Charlotte Zolotow, Roald Dahl, Dr Seuss, E. B. White, Richard Adams, Nicholas Stuart Gray, Joan Aiken, Scott O'Dell, Rosemary Sutcliff, Leon Garfield, Lloyd Alexander, Alan Garner, John Rowe Townsend, Madeleine L'Engle, K. M. Peyton, Lucy Boston, Rumer Godden (who hated the film of *Black Narcissus* and confesses to fudging the ending of *An Episode of Sparrows*), Maia Wojciechowska, and Judy Blume.

* **LIGHT by M. John Harrison**
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07025-0; 320 pp.; £17.99/$A49.95)

British fans have been quite excited about *Light*, but I was struggling to finish it. The trouble with a Big Metaphor is that it must have some Big Objective Correlative (as T. S. Eliot used to say) that has a precise physical meaning to match the abstract meaning of the metaphor. In the end, the bloody big source of light means nothing, because it is supposed to mean everything to all the characters in three different stories. I like much of Harrison's writing, but find many of the proceedings and much of the language in this novel vague. I was pleased to see that *The Separation* beat it in the major British awards this year.

** **THE CRYSTAL WORLD by J. G. Ballard**
(1966 (this edition 1976); Avon Equinox 0-380-00758-4; 160 pp.; $US2.25)

I read *The Crystal World* straight after *Light*, and it

really put a smile on my lips. Here's Ballard 'doing metaphors' just right, all those years ago. Every menacing gesture and strange adventure in the world where everything turns crystalline is matched by believable (if Gothic) human behaviour. Ballard distances us from the action through the intensity of his language, but the same unwavering intensity draws us into his total pattern. And Ballard's sentences are delicious compared with Harrison's. I've felt for thirty years that Harrison has been trying to become the latter-day Ballard, but he hasn't taken enough lessons from the master.

* **OPERATION ARES by Gene Wolfe (1970; Berkley Medallion 425-01858-X; 208 pp.; $US0.75/$A0.90)**

There was a time in American publishing when promising new authors were allowed their apprenticeship novels. *Operation Ares* was Gene Wolfe's. It doesn't work; the plot, about a future war between humans living on Earth and those in space, is all over the place and quite forgettable; but Wolfe's initial strength was his creation of interesting characters. Not interesting enough to save the novel, but they did have an independent life that one can't find in the novel as a whole. Fortunately for Wolfe's career, his next novel was *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. (Yes, I have had the book on my shelf since paperbacks cost 75 cents each. No book will be thrown out of this house until it has been read and judged unworthy.)

** **SIRENS AND OTHER DEMON LOVERS edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (1998; HarperPrism 0-06-105372-4; 304 pp.; $US14/$A22.95 2002; Eos 0-06-105782-7; 404 pp.; $US7.99/$A19.95)**

I'd bought this collection in the American trade paperback edition when it first appeared, but finally got around to reading it when local HarperCollins released the mass market paperback in Australia. This collection is worth hunting out, and shows that Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling are still the most formidable anthologists in the English-speaking market today. *Sirens and Other Demon Lovers* begins with some fairly conventional stories featuring some fairly conventional demon lovers. As Ellen Datlow often does, she encourages her authors to think way outside the bounds of convention. Authors in the collection who take up the challenge include Garry Kilworth ('Mirrors') and Pat Murphy ('Attachments') feature hauntings way outside clichéland. 'Attachments' is a story about people who are 'haunted' by each other because they are joined to each other, but in love with each other's wives. No tricks here, just story-telling of world-class quality. I liked 'The Eye of the Storm' so much, for its sheer enjoyment of life's possibilities, that I ordered Kelly Eskridge's recent novel, and Mark W. Tiedemann's 'Private Words' is a dark parable that reminded me of Christopher Priest's best short fiction.

** **WONDERLAND by Joyce Carol Oates (1971; Vanguard 8149-0659-1; 512 pp.; $US7.95)**

I'm probably wasting my time and yours by recommending this novel. It was published in hardback in 1971, and I bought it in a remainder basement in 1977 for $1.95. In 1971, Joyce Carol Oates was probably the best novelist in America, but it took me until now to discover this. *Wonderland* is so outrageously ambitious that it should be known as one of the major English-language novels of the century, but I suspect it's been out of print for many years. *Wonderland*'s language seems naturalistic, and its manner is frenetic, yet Oates's ambition is to render a spiritual state: the novel's main character is a man who grows up without a personality. Orphaned by his father (who killed his mother and siblings and nearly killed him, then shot himself), Jesse launches out into the world, amply equipped to survive, but not somehow to exist. He is constantly betrayed by parent figures, by all those people to whom he might have attached himself and enabled him to find out who he is. He resembles most closely John Sladek's little robot Roderick in *Roderick* and *Roderick at Random*. Oates's specialty is a ferocious rhetoric: America itself buffets Jesse and forces him to turn into the strange creature he becomes by the end of the book. Yet Oates's rhetoric hides cool analysis, rather in the way Sladek's comic infernos do. *Wonderland* is quite original, with some of the most enjoyable passages of prose and memorably monstrous characters in American fiction.

** **WHEN THE SACRED GINMILL CLOSES by Lawrence Block (1986; Orion 0-75283-699-4; 263 pp.; £5.99/$A16.95)**

There's a plot in this book. It involves a memorable robbery in the first few pages of the book, and lots of visiting of bars as part of the investigation, which leads Matt Scudder to realise how much he depends on bars and what you drink there, and how much he needs to kick that dependence. A melancholy novel, whose real subject is the Dave Van Ronk song that gives the book its title ('And so we've had another night/Of poetry and poses/And each man knows he'll be alone/When the sacred ginmill closes') more than the capers of the crooks. In the next novel in the Matt Scudder series, *Out on the Cutting Edge*, Scudder has kicked the grog and is deep in his love/hate relationship with Alcoholics Anonymous, so there remains a missing novel in the series about the leaving of the bottle. (According to Ted White, he, Dave Van Ronk and Lawrence Block were part of a kind of subfandom in New York in the sixties. Dave Van Ronk died recently. Ted White is 65 and has diabetes. I trust that Lawrence Block remains in good health.)

* **WILD SURMISE by Dorothy Porter 2002; Picador 0-330-36380-8; 293 pp.; $A22)**

Several years ago, Dorothy Porter sold (it was reported) over 100,000 copies of *The Monkey's Mask*, a detective novel in verse that was later made into a film. When *Wild Surmise* was released, the forward publicity made it sound like an SF novel in verse. It's in verse, some of it good, and much of it fairly pedestrian, but it is not SF. It is about a lady astronomer who, while her husband is dying, falls in love with another lady astronomer. These torrid emotional storms are described in metaphors taken from the main characters' interest in the moons of Jupiter, especially Europa. Nobody takes a trip to Jupiter, or even considers taking such a trip. A pity. The book, which has beautiful cover, would have been much more interesting it had proved to the teeniest bit science fictional.

** **HOPE TO DIE by Lawrence Block**
(2001; Orion 0-75284-817-8; 340 pp.; £5.99/$A17.95)
Hope to Die comes from much later in Scudder's career than *When the Sacred Ginmill Closes*. Scudder has licked the grog, is happily married, and has come close to retiring altogether from his own special brand of detecting. He is drawn into helping solve what looks like a double murder committed by thieves, and finds himself stalking, and being stalked by, a serial murderer. Serial murderers are hardly the glamour criminals you expect to find in a Scudder novel, but this one is rather original, if in the end unbelievable. Perhaps if you write detective novels long enough, you just have to resort to unbelievable crimes or criminals.

** **THE SIZE OF THOUGHTS: ESSAYS AND OTHER LUMBER by Nicholson Baker**
(1996; Vintage 0-09-957971-5; 355 pp.; $A16.95)
The literary persona of Nicholson Baker reminds me a bit of the character played by Christian Bail in *American Psycho*, the movie: just a bit too gleamingly witty and New York to be believable, but you love what he says anyway. At his worse, he is nearly as incomprehensible as John Clute on a bad day; at his best, he says the right thing the right way but takes a few too many words to say it. I mainly like his essays for what he says: nice philosophical plays on concepts like 'The Size of Thoughts' and 'Rarity', unexpected forays into the history of technology, especially his brilliant outline of the story of 'The Projector', and really useful guides, such as 'The History of Punctuation'. The essay that makes this book a necessary part of the library rather than merely a nice accessory is 'Discards', which tells of Baker's investigation of the extent of the vandalism that has been wrought by libraries discarding their card catalogues and resorting to computer catalogues. If you want to know the exact extent to which the our sum knowledge is being degraded by this practice, read this book. (In a later essay, presumably still to be published in book form, Baker says similar things about libraries' attempts to throw out old newspapers and magazines. Baker himself is spending all his spare cash filling a vast empty old warehouse with collections of paper publications that have been dumped by institutions.) Nearly one-third of *The Size of Thoughts* is devoted to an essay on 'Lumber', which shows much learning, but had not progressed anywhere by the time I gave up halfway through.

** **HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE by J. K. Rowling**
(1997; Bloomsbury 0-7475-5819-1; 223 pp.; $A15.95)
Insofar as 2003 has any shining rays to it, one of those rays has to be the afternoon I first saw the film of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which eventually led me to reading the book. I suspect I would have rather enjoyed reading the novel even if the film had never been produced, but the film does seem even more alive than the book. This is so much the sort of children's novel I wanted to read when I was a child (and occasionally Enid Blyton delivered the goodies) that I can only stand and admire and watch the film over and over again. Invention, humour, likable characters — what more could one want?

** **KITTYHAWK DOWN by Garry Disher**
(2003; Allen & Unwin 1-86508-981-8; 275 pp.; $A19.95)
Garry Disher in popular mode is Australia's best writer. After a series of novels about Wyatt, ace thief who is forever being betrayed by confederates, Disher has written the second novel about Detective Inspector Hal Challis, whose remorseless yet melancholy personality reminds me much of Wyatt's. Being on the right side of the law does not prevent Challis from making some stupid (and even near-criminal) mistakes from time to time, and he usually doesn't like what he finds when he solves the crime. The real star of *Kittyhawk Down* is the southern end of the Mornington Peninsula, which Disher seems to know inch by inch. A combination of sand, tea-tree, beach and rough, weird, hoonish, mad, dirt-poor and over-rich people, the area is bristling with action. Without even the benefit of a serial murderer, this novel has a high death rate. I began to wonder if any of the interesting characters would escape alive.

** **MAPS: THE UNCOLLECTED JOHN SLADEK edited by David Langford**
(2002; Big Engine 1-903468-08-6; 359 pp.; £9.99/$A29.95)
Thanks to Dave Langford for sending me *Maps*, which he edits and introduces. Slow Glass Books is not stocking Big Engine Books at the moment, so I was glad to see this book about which I had heard so much. The collected pieces in *Maps* add up to a highly entertaining and satisfying mixture, but I still had the feeling at the end that I not read a great deal of fiction. Sladek mistrusted fiction; all his instincts caused him to subvert the methods and assumptions of fiction. Almost every fictional style is parodied — and then, when you think that Sladek has explored all possibilities, Langford introduces the pieces Sladek wrote with Disch. There is something genuinely manic in the Disch personality that gives a special foetid flavour to the Sladek/Disch stories (with titles such as 'Sweetly Sings the Chocolate Budgie' and 'The Incredible Giant Hot Dog'. It's hard to pick favourites among the stories in *Maps*: 'Love Among the Xoids' seemed to work best as a conventional short story, but the detective stories, such as 'By an Unknown Hand', should be better known as major contributions to their field. I'm glad that Dave Langford's detecting skills have unearthed so many strange fruits; perhaps I should have not have eaten them all at once.

** **GATHERING THE BONES edited by Jack Dann, Ramsey Campbell and Dennis Etchison**
(2003; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-7024-3; 463 pp.; $A29.95)
It's not too clear what went wrong with the marketing of this book in Australia. Copies lie unbought on bookshop shelves, or you cannot find copies at all. Instead of the rave reviews I expected, in the general press as well as the SF press, there has been silence. *Gathering the Bones* is by far the most intelligent horror/dark fantasy collection published in this country, with major stories from most of the top people in the field. Perhaps that's the trouble — newspaper arts editors associate horror with Anne Rice and crap movies, don't know the names here, and don't even know to whom they should send the review copies. To people in the SF community, the names Jack Dann, Ramsey Camp-

bell and Dennis Etchison guarantee the quality of the product. It's hard to pick favourites from among the treasures here, but my own picks are 'The Dove Game' (Isabelle Carmody), 'The Bone Ship' (Terry Dowling), 'Mother's Milk' (by Adam L. G. Nevill — weird, weird, weird), Chris Lawson and Simon Brown's 'No Man's Land' and 'Memento Mori' (Ray Bradbury showing he's still one of the best in the biz). This is a book you must buy.

* **NOT THE END OF THE WORLD**
by Christopher Brookmyre
(1998; Warner 0-7515-3184-7; 503 pp.; £6.99/$A19.95)
When I think how good Brookmyre can be, and how good he has been (especially in his first two novels and *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night*), it seems a pity to watch him throwing away most of the good ideas in this book. There's a nice science-fictiony-disaster idea at the centre of the action, and lots of scattergun ideas zipping around the edges, but the ideas never quite connect. The characters aren't as interesting as in most Brookmyre novels, and he's writing about California, which he doesn't much like. At 503 pages, the book is at least 200 pages too long. (Aren't they all these days?) I'll keep hoping that Brookmyre returns to form with the *next* book.

** **AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT: MY LIFE — A LIKELY STORY**
by Robyn Williams
(1995: Viking 0-670-85521-9; 327 pp.; $A22.95)
Not many science broadcasters write their autobiographies before turning fifty, but then, there are very few science broadcasters in the world, let alone people like Robyn Williams. With his cut-glass English accent and John Cleesian mixture of charm, pomposity and absurdity, Williams has done the impossible — keeping the hour-long *Science Show* going since 1972, through endless budget cutbacks and changes of government, often with no staff or only one producer, yet creating, week after week, year after year, seemingly out of thin air, the ABC's highest-rating and most entertaining radio show. Further inducing envy, the man writes superbly. This book is one of the few well-written Australian books of the last decade: not a word too many, it's full of funny and fantastic stories, and Williams overflows with a sense of the breathless enjoyment of living that left me wanting a much longer book than this one. I hope that Robyn Williams, like Barry Humphries, writes a second autobiography when he's old enough.

* **THE TREE OF HANDS by Ruth Rendell**
(1985; Arrow 0-09-943470-9; 269 pp.; £5.99/$A17.90)
A Ruth Rendell book published before I discovered her novels. These days I'm only too familiar with the theme of *The Tree of Hands* — baby snatching. Rendell has used this theme a few too many times in the last decade or so, most memorably in the 'Barbara Vine' novels *A Fatal Inversion* and *Grasshopper*. There's only one twist on the theme in this book, so I won't tell you what it is. This book is well enough written, but offers little to anybody but the Ruth Rendell completist.

* **THE SILVER DOVE (SEREBRYANYI GOLUB)**
by Andrey Biely; translated by George Reavey
(1909 (this edition 1974);
Evergreen 0-394-17859-9; 419 pp.; $US3.95)
If you think the Russian novel, as exemplified in some of Dostoyevsky's lesser known works, is a peculiar creature, try this book. See how peculiar a novel can be. On the surface, the prose seems realistic, yet the author expects the reader to laugh at absurd pratfalls whose meaning stays hidden from all but his Russian readers. The main character is an odd failure, his motives tantalisingly incomprehensible. Perhaps the problem is in George Reavey's translation. The writer of the back-cover blurb compares *The Silver Dove* with *Ulysses*, yet what we read here reminds us only of *Love and Death*, Woody Allen's parody of Russian fiction. I didn't get past page 189, despite enjoying the rich prose describing the Russian countryside of the early 1900s.

— Bruce Gillespie, 10 July 2003

Favourite Novels Read for the First Time in 2002

1 *Beware of Pity (Ungedold des Herzens)*
Stefan Zweig (1938)
2 *The Separation*
Christopher Priest (2002)
3 *Soul/Mate*
Rosamond Smith (1990)
4 *The Telling*
Ursula K. Le Guin (2000)
5 *The Other Wind*
Ursula K. Le Guin (2001)
6 *The Blood Doctor*
Barbara Vine (2002)
7 *Chaga*
Ian McDonald (1995)
8 *A Walk Among the Tombstones*
Lawrence Block (1992)

Favourite Books Read for the First Time in 2002

1 *All of Us: The Collected Poems*
Raymond Carver (1996)
2 *United States: Essays 1952–1992*
Gore Vidal (1993)
3 *New and Selected Poems*
Stephen Dunn (1994)
4 *Stories and Legends*
Stefan Zweig (1927/1937/1955)
5 *Beware of Pity (Ungedold des Herzens)*
Stefan Zweig (1938)
6 *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*
Brendan Gill (1987)
7 *The Separation*
Christopher Priest (2002)
8 *Soul/Mate*
Rosamond Smith (1990)
9 *The Sidmouth Letters*
Jane Gardam (1980)
10 *The Telling*
Ursula K. Le Guin (2000)
11 *The Other Wind*
Ursula K. Le Guin (2001)
12 *The Blood Doctor*
Barbara Vine (2002)
13 *Walkin' After Midnight: A Journey to the Heart of Nashville*
Lauren St John (2000)
14 *Stet: An Editor's Life*
Diana Athill (2000)
15 *Where Does the Weirdness Go?*
David Lindley (1996)
16 *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity: A New Understanding of Space, Time and the Universe*
Lee Smolin (2000)

Favourite Short Stories Read for the First Time in 2002

1 'The Tribute'
Jane Gardam (*The Sidmouth Letters*)
2 'The Buried Candelabrum'
Stefan Zweig (*Stories and Legends*)
3 'Leningrad Nights'
Graham Joyce (*Foursight*)
4 'Tendeléo's Story'
Ian McDonald (*Futures*)
5 'The Royal Game'
Stefan Zweig (*The Burning Secret and Other Stories*)
6 'How the Other Half Lives'
James Lovegrove (*Foursight*)
7 'Diamond Dogs'
Alastair Reynolds (*Infinities*)
8 'The Doulton Man'
David Blostein (*Aurora: New Canadian Writing 1979*)
9 'Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired'
Richard Yates (*Liars in Love*)
10 'Liars in Love'
Richard Yates (*Liars in Love*)

Favourite Films Seen for the First Time in 2002

1 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*
directed by Ang Lee (2000)
2 *State and Main*
David Mamet (2000)
3 *The Godfather Part 2*
Francis Ford Coppola (1974)
4 *The Godfather Part 3*
Francis Ford Coppola (1990)
5 *The Four Feathers*
Zoltan Korda (1939)
6 *Minority Report*
Steven Spielberg (2001)
7 *The Pajama Game*
George Abbott and Stanley Donen (1957)
8 *The Gypsy Moths*
John Frankenheimer (1969)
9 *Open Your Eyes (Abre les ejos)*
Alejandro Amenabar (1997)
10 *Following*
Christopher Nolan (1998)
11 *High Noon*
Fred Zinneman (1952)
12 *Stir of Echoes*
David Koepp (1999)
13 *The Time Machine*
George Pal (1960)
14 *The Devil's Backbone (El espinaza del diablo)*
Gillermo del Toro (2002)
15 *Insomnia*
Christopher Nolan (2002)
16 *Happiness*
Todd Solondz (1998)
17 *Zulu*
Cy Endfield (1964)
18 *Down from the Mountain*
Nick Doob, Chris Hegedus and D. A. Pennebaker (2001)
19 *Victor Victoria*
Blake Edwards (1982)
20 *Victor Victoria*
Blake Edwards, Matthew Diamond and Goro Kobiyashi (2000)