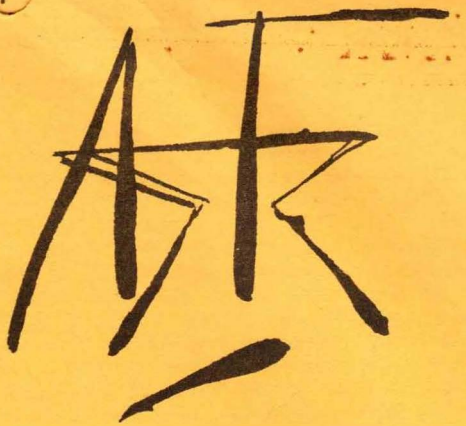

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AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW (Second Series) Volume 1 Number 1

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DICEBAMUS HESTERNA DIE

I don't know a lot about the Spanish scholar Luis De Lêon (1528-91), but I know this: he was imprisoned for five years, and the day he got out he went back to his class at the University of Salamanca and said 'Dicebamus hesterna die' - 'We were saying yesterday ...'

He reminds me of a lecturer we had at the College of the Bible in the late 1950s, Randall Pittman, the loveliest, wisest, most Christian gentle man I have ever met. I can imagine walking back into his classroom these many years after his physical death and hearing him clear his throat and say, in that old, high-pitched voice, 'As we were saying yesterday, gentlemen - and others ...'. Hearing the 'others' chuckle in embarrassment, most of us, in fact, because we were never sure which lot we fell into. Or as he put it, 'Men will be boys.' And how he loved us! Us, his work, his high scholarly calling, his God. I think Luis was probably a lot like Randy Pittman.

For years, whenever the idea has been bruited that Australian Science Fiction Review is about to be reborn, I have thought OK, I'm ready, and my editorial will be headed 'Dicebamus hesterna die'. This is it.

The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature (an unexpectedly large book) says: 'More substantial magazines of SF criticism and commentary began with John Bangsund's Australian Science Fiction Review' &c, and compared with Thrills Incorporated. I guess they did. But I don't really think substantial Australian sf criticism began with ASFR. I think ASFR just happened to come along at the right time, when we had an eager audience here and a neglected audience overseas. There were other fanzines that talked seriously about sf in 1966, but not many, and their audience was small by today's standards. Not only that, but the serious-constructive fanzines of the time seemed to have lost touch with sf fandom, which was disastrous. Through the genius of John Foyster, the enthusiasm of Lee Harding, the extensive contacts both had with fandom, and the innocence of the present writer, ASFR pressed buttons worldwide that went zinnnnng! 'This is what we want, dammit!'

And so I was party to a legend. Looking back at my incomplete run of ASFR I think 'Is that me? Did I do that?' Well, yes, I did, but it doesn't seem like the me with the bald patch and the grey beard I know today. I wonder how it seems to John and Lee, whose fanzine it was in some ways more than mine.

Some ways? No, ASFR was John and Lee's first, and after that mine - John on bass, Lee on oboe d'amore and me on continuo. Now and then we had some pretty distinguished soloists making virtuoso appearances: Sten Dahlskog, Franz Rottensteiner, Ursula Le Guin, Brian Aldiss, Jim Blish, Damon Knight, Chip Delany, Sam Moskowitz, Bert Chandler, George Turner, John Brunner, Michael Joseph, Jack Wodhams, Mungo MacCallum - even Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Leigh Edmonds once remarked that to get into ASFR you need to be Samuel R. Delany, which wasn't true, but I was certainly delighted that such luminaries wanted to be part of it.

Those were the great days of ASFR, the legendary days I look back on with awe and wonder. About a thousand days altogether, not many at

all, but what fun ff had, what fights, what sense of doing something worth while!

In 1968 Leigh Edmonds invented ANZAPA, and I discovered the more immediate and less expensive delights of apazine publishing. But I've always hankered after that big world I shared with ASFR and its distinguished contributors. In 1978 I published a '12th Anniversary Issue' of ASFR, mainly in honour of Brian Aldiss (a stalwart supporter of ASFR from the start), who was a guest of honour at the Australian National SF Convention that year. Since then I've thought of reviving the magazine, especially in recent years as its 20th anniversary came closer. Then two things happened. Bruce Gillespie published Metaphysical Review 5/6, which is as close to the 20th anniversary issue of ASFR as I can imagine. And now John and his colleagues are about to publish ASFR Mark II. And invited me to be in it. I wish them well.

JB 27.1.86

OUR COLLECTIVE WAYS

Five editors may not be too many, but it is a situation that does require some introduction or explanation. In recent years we have all been involved in writing science fiction (Yvonne, Lucy, and Russell), or writing about it (all of us), or publishing it (Russell and Jenny as Ebony Books), or editing it (Russell, Jenny, and Lucy). Yvonne is perhaps best known for the book The Murders at Hanging Rock.

We have all, more or less, contributed in the recent past to two other magazines of a similar nature - Van Ikin's Science Fiction and Bruce Gillespie's The Metaphysical Review/SF Commentary - and we hope to go on doing so, just as we hope that Van and Bruce will contribute to ASFR (Bruce has already done so!). This first edition, by its contents, does reveal something of our attitudes and interests, and although Yvonne's first attributed piece will not appear until the second issue, her role as the Madame Lash of ASFR is revealed in the wielding of her disciplinary will over our syntax - we now know not to hyphenate 'yoga' as 'yo-ga'.

Given that Science Fiction and Metaphysical Review are already appearing, why another magazine? When we started talking about ASFR (Second Series) in April 1985 it was our view that frequency of appearance was a major factor in a magazine's effectiveness, and this is a virtue with which, to put it kindly, neither SF nor MR has been blessed. Our first point of departure from them, then, lies in our regular appearance every two months. Other differences will emerge with time. Our editorial policy is to make sure that at least two of the editors support any published contribution, including our own stuff, and since we have not yet explored all the interstices of editorial thinking we hesitate to make predictions about what will happen. But we do want to publish letters and a larger proportion of reviews, and have in mind several other projects which are better discussed when we have brought them off.

JF 14.2.86

THE LONG VIEW

John Foyster

This study is a longitudinal investigation of the nature of modern science fiction as revealed by its popular magazines. For the first thirty or forty years of its incarnation in mass media most science fiction was published in the magazines. Those magazines, by their continuity, allow us to investigate changes which are less obviously visible when discontinuous publication - such as in book form - is studied.

The study will focus on five periods at ten-year intervals - approximately 1943, 1953, 1963, 1973, 1983. The first year is chosen because in a sense it marks the beginning of modern science fiction - so far as outward appearance is concerned - by the transformation of Astounding Science Fiction to a digest-sized magazine.

Particular magazines will be examined for each year in the study, so that comparisons may be made across the years; in addition, the different magazines may be compared for a given year, indicating the varying nature of manifestations of science fiction at that epoch.

What will be considered? Naturally the published fiction will receive close attention - although more for comparative or collective interest than individual investigation. But there will also be a consideration of as many of the circumstances surrounding the production of the magazine as is possible. Such an investigation can be, to some extent, quite objective, and this will provide strong support for cross-magazine or cross-year comparisons. The details of how this will be done are given as each datum point is introduced.

When a method is introduced it is explained fully - or as fully as seems appropriate. Different magazines and different times require different techniques, and these techniques can only be appreciated in context. In general, techniques will not be re-explained, and so the explanations given in this first instalment for what comparative techniques are used will not be repeated; the reader will have to refer back to this point in the study.

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION 1943

John W. Campbell, editor of Astounding Science Fiction for most of the period being considered, did not hesitate to make changes to his magazine, and 1943 illustrates this very clearly. The changes in format of the magazine - bed-sheet to pulp to digest - are well-known, but there were several other changes in that year which are not perhaps so widely recognized. Here, as later in the study, the first section is given over to consideration of the mundane aspects of the magazine, and the published stories are considered later.

Astounding Science Fiction began the year as a bed-sheet-sized (approximately 22 cm by 29 cm) publication consisting of four signatures of 32 pages (eight sheets) held together by a single staple (a consequence of the war effort, according to Campbell) with a semi-glossy cover. The painting on the cover was actually only about 16.5 cm square, with the magazine title above, publisher identification below, and with the lead story/cover-copper being announced in a box about 4 cm by 5 cm at the lower right corner of the painting. Inside, the material was laid out

in two generous columns (January was the last month in which an old layout, which involved having some pages at the back laid out in three columns, was used).

In May Astounding shifted to pulp-size (about 16.5 cm by 23 cm) and five signatures of 32 pages, still bound by that one weak staple. The cover design was changed so that the painting on the cover remained about the same size as before, the box announcing the lead story was reduced to about 4 cm square, and the interior layout remained essentially the same as for the larger size.

The November 1943 issue was the first of the digest-sized Astoundings. The digest Astounding of this period is about 14 cm by 20 cm, the cover painting is about 14 cm square, and the box announcing the lead story is about 4 cm by 3 cm. The five 32-page signatures are joined by a 16-page rotogravure signature, and the magazine is glued rather than stapled. The two-column format is retained.

The reasons for these changes are more than just a matter of responding to the claims of the war effort. John Campbell took the opportunity to make other changes, and some changes were forced upon him.

In considering these changes the division of the year into three, as marked by the changes in bulk, has been preserved. This results in samples of four, six, and two issues so, where trends are believed to have existed, additional issues from 1942 and 1944 have been added so that six issues may be considered for each trend.

At the beginning of the year, about 7% of the magazine was given over to non-fiction articles of a 'scientific' kind — and of that space about one-fifth consisted of illustrative diagrams. The addition of the rotogravure section was intended to allow the publication of photographs, so it is no surprise to learn that by the end of the year the proportion of the magazine given over to these 'scientific' articles had just about doubled to 14%, of which about 30% was drawing or photograph. This means that the proportion of 'scientific' illustration increased about 300% (from about 1.4% of the magazine as a whole to about 4.2%).

In the same period the proportion of the magazine given over to illustrating the fiction dropped from around 7% to around 5%. By the end of the year fiction and non-fiction was given the same illustration space, and if one disallows the space given to fiction on the cover (the normal pattern) then artwork was, by the beginning of 1944, more for non-fiction than for fiction. This contrasts strongly with the situation at the beginning of 1943 where, again disallowing the cover, the ratio of fiction to non-fiction art was about four to one.

In parallel with the changes in size, Campbell seems to have been trying to make the magazine more respectable and, to the casual reader flipping through the pages, more scientific, both in terms of the amount of space given to scientific articles and the kind of impact the illustrations would have. (In 1983 Omni gave slightly more space to fiction, on a proportional basis, than Astounding gave to non-fiction in 1943.)

Where did the space come from for the additional non-fiction? Space given to fiction remained constant at about 77% throughout the year. While a couple of per cent came from the drop in fiction art, the bulk had to come from elsewhere.

Most of it came from paid advertising. At the inning of the year about 7 1/2 % of the magazine was devoted to paid advertising, with 2 1/2% to unpaid, in-house advertising. By the beginning of 1944 these percentages had dropped to about 3 and 1 1/4 respectively. This is slightly more complicated than immediately appears.

Early in 1943 it was obviously company policy to allocate about 3 1/4 pages per issue to in-house advertising, and this remained steady through the pulp period. There was a drop of about a page an issue in the digest size, exaggerated somewhat in the first issue which had no advertising at all, no doubt because things were a little rushed and no one had time to prepare copy to a suitable size!

But there is no question that outside advertising did drop substantially, both in absolute number of pages and as a proportion of the magazine. Although this meant a loss of revenue to Street and Smith, the magazine's publishers, it gave Campbell a little more space to play with, and what he did with that space was publish more non-fiction: that, presumably, was the direction he thought science fiction (magazines) ought to go.

As for the fiction, there were changes in policy there as well. From January to September each issue had an episode of at least one serial; from October onwards (and into 1944) there were no serials. We may infer that this was not by Campbell's choice, since serials always (repeat, always) topped the readers' poll during 1943 (further discussion of the readers' poll, THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY, will follow shortly). We must assume that Campbell wanted serials but could not get them; here is a forced change in policy.

But there does appear to have been one deliberate and unforced change in publishing policy during the year; Campbell increasingly favoured longer stories. At the beginning of the year about 30% of the space devoted to fiction was given to stories classified as 'short stories', but by year's end this had dropped to around 23%. (Throughout the year the section given to 'readers' stories', PROBABILITY ZERO, has been included in the 'short stories' classification.) Since longer stories generally fared better in THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY such a change is not difficult to understand.

There was also a slight drop in the amount of space given to readers' letters, BRASS TACKS, but this feature has a large variance anyway.

The basic data for the contents of Astounding in 1943 (and these will be calculated for each magazine/year in the study) are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Feature	Percentage given to feature
Advertising	7.5
Editorials/announcements	1.1
Readers	2.3
Non-fiction articles	7.3
Art for above	1.8
Serial/short novel	28.2
Novelette	28.2
Short story	20.3
Art for fiction	6.0 (distributed between above)

Note: only two book reviews were published in 1943, so this item has been ignored.

One more matter is to be dealt with before we move on to consider the stories and articles themselves. What can we learn about the readers?

Astounding usually published the addresses of contributors to BRASS TACKS, the letter column. From this we can describe the geographic distribution of articulate (?) readers. In 1943 the distribution of readers was as follows in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Location	Number of letters
California	3
Idaho	1
Illinois	2
Kansas	1
Louisiana	1
Massachusetts	3
Michigan	3
Minnesota	3
Montana	1
New Mexico	1
New York	6
Ohio	4
Washington DC	1
Wisconsin	2
United Kingdom	3

The evidence is that readers were widely distributed across the United States.

In dealing with the fiction appearing in Astounding we have invaluable information about readers' opinions not available for any other magazine. Each month readers were asked to rank the stories appearing in that issue. The average rank of a story in readers' letters was then computed and the results for all stories were published as THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY. John Campbell professed to take great notice of the AnLab results, and later used them to identify stories for which bonuses should be paid.

In the January 1980 Analog William Sims Bainbridge published the results of his analysis of all the published AnLab results. One outcome of that study is a series of formulas for estimating the absolute ranking of a story. There are some difficulties, however.

In a longitudinal study such as this one, comparisons across time would be extremely important. Readers' opinions, as revealed by the AnLab, apply only for one point in time, but an absolute scale would give readers' opinions across time. Campbell himself wrestled with this problem of an absolute scale for stories from time to time, but no adequate solution ever arose.

What readers do is simply rank the stories within a given issue on an optional preferential system, and the point score is the average rank. Bainbridge has been misled by Campbell on this. In the September 1957 Astounding, for example, Campbell explains the system as follows: 'Readers' votes for the stories are tabulated, a vote for story A as best-in-the-issue gives it a 1, while a fifth-place vote gives it a 5.

The story-vote total is added up at the time the department is made up, and divided by the number of voters to yield the point-score'. Bainbridge read this to mean that the number of points was divided by the total number of voters - a possible interpretation - and correctly points out that if this is so then stories so bad that they are not rated by a particular reader are effectively given the high rating of 0, resulting overall in a falsely-low point-score. But I believe that Bainbridge is unduly alarmed, and that Campbell didn't do that at all, in fact preferring the mathematically-sensible path - taking the average ranking, which is obtained by dividing the story total by the number of voters who ranked that story. In the January 1959 Astounding Campbell gave the following different - and I believe correct - explanation: 'The votes for each story are totalled, and divided by the number voting on that story - not all readers vote on all stories - to yield the "point score"'. Provided this is what was actually done, Bainbridge's 'missing data' problem vanishes and those of us slaving over calculators, computers, and musty pulps can sleep a little easier.

Bainbridge provides two formulas for obtaining comparative ranks. Bainbridge's Formula I, which merely assigns a new rank which is independent of the number of stories in the issue, rescaled to 1000, is not particularly helpful. Bainbridge's Formula II, which takes the average point score for stories of each rank as an estimate of time-independent worth, and by regression analysis gives an estimate of absolute rank for all stories (on a scale of 1000), is useful not so much because it is accurate - which no one would claim - but because, having been based upon an analysis of all AnLab results, it at least operates from the largest possible data base and produces results which, on the face of them, make sense.

This is not to say that there are not serious deficiencies - such as the difficulties which arise with polarization of opinion on the stories in a given issue as a whole, for example - but when any comparisons are useful, those produced by Bainbridge Formula II are as good as anything else (and probably better). Accordingly, in discussing the stories in Astounding, the AnLab point scores will be given, but so will Bainbridge Formula II ranks. These may provide some useful guidance about reader opinion.

As noted above, we need also to consider the overall reactions of readers to an issue. Some further information is provided in Table 3, which gives four statistics for each of the 1943 issues.

The first two statistics are easily derived from the published rankings - the mean point score for the issue and the standard deviation (i.e. the average deviation from the mean) of the point scores.

The third statistic is calculated in order to get an idea of what proportion of readers rated every story. This is obtained by dividing the mean point score by the mean point score which would have been obtained if every reader had rated every story. For the November issue, as you will see from Table 3, this figure - the participation index - is 0.99, indicating that almost every reader did rate every story (and allowing for rounding errors, probably everyone did rate every story). On the other hand, for the March issue the participation index is only 0.9, indicating a substantial dropout.

The standard deviation, divided by the mean, gives the coefficient of variation. For the fourth statistic I introduce the idea of an index of agreement, which is the result of dividing the coefficient of variation by the maximum possible coefficient of variation (assuming a

participation index (Var 1). For the April issue the index of agreement is 0.89, and readers agreed about the ranking of stories in that issue far more than they did about the stories in the December issue, for which the index of agreement was only 0.40.

Issues for which data are incomplete (i.e. the AnLab point scores were not published for all stories)are indicated in the table by asterisks indicating the amount of missing data. Both the participation index and the index of agreement are severely distorted when data are missing, but reasonable comparisons can probably be made between issues with similar amounts of missing data.

TABLE 3

Issue	Number of stories	Mean point score	Standard deviation	Participation index	Index of agreement
January**	8	3.3	0.47	0.73	0.26
February*	5	2.8	1.38	0.93	0.93
March	5	2.7	1.00	0.90	0.72
April	5	2.9	1.36	0.97	0.89
May	5	2.7	0.99	0.90	0.70
June**	7	3.4	1.73	0.85	0.94
July*	6	2.9	1.22	0.83	0.79
August*	6	2.7	1.02	0.77	0.71
September	5	3.0	1.17	0.99	0.74
October*	6	3.0	1.04	0.85	0.65
November	5	3.0	1.05	0.99	0.66
December	5	2.9	0.58	0.98	0.40

This table will prove useful in selecting stories for discussion. If the April issue were being discussed, for example, one could choose the highest- and lowest-scoring stories and be reasonably certain that the responsive readers of the time would agree that those were the best and worst stories. One could not have the same confidence with, for example, the January and December issues.

Other information about how readers felt may occasionally be deduced, especially for the top-rated story. In May, for example, the rating for the top story was 1.10, which means that at least 90% of readers ranked it '1'. This information is not always useful.

January 1943

'Opposites - React!' by 'Will Stewart' (Jack Williamson) was the lead story for this issue; the second and final instalment appeared in February. This first episode was the leading point-scorer in the AnLab (2.45) and its absolute rank (Bainbridge Formula II) is 46.

However, this was one of the issues about which reader opinion was divided, and this story's rating, far greater than any other winner in 1943, reflects the differences of opinion which existed about it.

In considering stories which appeared in 1943 several different questions will be addressed. What kinds of people are found in them, and how do they interact? What kind of world is it in which the action takes place - and for that matter, what actually happens? Are there any transformations in the elements of the story?

The main character is Captain Paul Anders. His most obvious characteristic is a speech defect which leads him to omit vowels in all sorts of interesting places - 's'pose', ''stounding', ''fraid', ''zactly', 'ex'lent', 'p'raps' and so on. (This is all produced by someone for whom 'But thanks for your solicitude' trips lightly from the tongue.) There are a couple of other speech oddities - a Japanese and a Scandinavian speak with stock racial slang or phrasing. One other character is always referred to as 'Cap'n Rob', although there is not the slightest clue given as to why he should have a contracted nickname.

Now for the plot. Anders is supposed to 'get' contraterrene matter for his employer. Since this stuff seems to be floating freely through the solar system it is not at all clear at first what all the fuss is about. Careful reading reveals that the real problem is handling the stuff. In the course of this episode Anders has various interactions with people - soon to be investigated - and at the end of the episode Anders is in his spaceship, closing on McGee, who has mysterious access to 'seetee' (contraterrene matter).

The opening is intended to let us know immediately what sort of man Anders is, and what sort of environment he is in: 'curt, impersonal voice', 'hollow echo', 'enormous metal room', 'lean and spare', 'black', 'straight attention', 'trying interview', 'crisp salute' - which is responded to with 'a genial, unmilitary smile'. But this turns out to be an illusion, and we have 'small eyes', 'shrewd and cold'.

Anders wants to resign from the High Space Guard and Interplanet (whatever they are). But his commander opposes this. Anders persists. The tension mounts as his commander gets tough: 'things are getting tough' he says. Anders responds to these words by surrendering: 'Anders sat straighter, lean and ready in the black ... "Consider my application withdrawn"', he wimps.

If this constitutes a trying interview, then the level of argument seems likely to be undersophisticated. And we might be in for some undersophisticated relationships. We are.

Two women cross Anders' path in this story: Karen Hood, the commander's niece, and Ann O'Banion. Anders had been attracted to Karen Hood in an earlier story in this series, but he had lost. In the short scene with Karen ('Kay') there is great emphasis on physical movement: 'Karen's fine nostrils widened as she caught her breath', 'her marmoreal shoulders made a flowing shrug of surrender', 'Karen gracefully stirred her tea', 'she looked expectantly toward the door', 'Karen looked hopefully at the door, presenting a breathtaking profile...', 'her red head nodded approvingly', 'the girl merely smiled gayly up at him', 'he resisted the impulse to slap her', 'she tossed her bright hair', 'her eyes turned grave', 'that infuriating sweetness left her smile'. This physical dance is a counterbalance to the plot development in which Karen outsmarts Anders. We already know, from what we have read, that Anders is not hard to outsmart.

The relationship with Ann O'Banion is more complex and, one dares to hope halfway through this first episode, heart a-flutter, destined for Development. When he first sees her, Ann is 'boyish', but Anders is anxious to help a lady in distress; why is he willing to help, Ann asks, and Anders suavely replies: 'Maybe 'cause I like the freckles on your nose'. (Ann decides not to be offended.) But things quickly get physical - 'her pale tongue wet her full, paintless lips', 'her fine shoulders, in the trim blue sweater, made an eloquent shrug of defeat'.

But just as we saw Anders outsmarted by Karen, now we are presented with an Anders who - at least for a time - doesn't quite follow what Ann is up to. (She steers his ship to safety through a 'field of automatic mines'.) But as the story develops, Ann and Paul spend more and more time in one another's company.

The other person who might be considered in this context is the man Karen Hood chose over Paul Anders - Rick Drake. Although he appears in a long section of the story, the narrator is strangely silent about him. Anders, although saved by Drake, shows little or no gratitude. Nor does the author bring forward any characteristic which might endear him to Hood. Indeed, the only tie to Hood in the story is that back on Pallasport she runs an expensive office; and by this time the average reader of Astounding must have been beginning to ask questions such as 'Where does all the money come from?' since it is hard to see that it could come out of the seemingly unsuccessful CT operation on Freedonia (the asteroid on which the Drake/McGee/Hood engineering activities take place).

Aside from those human characteristics which have some significance for the plot, there are those which appear to be little more than contemporary references.

Anders' most dangerous opponent is the Martian-German agent, Franz von Falkenberg - who has not yet appeared on the stage of the story, but who lurks in every shadow. The crew aboard Anders' ship are the already-mentioned Japanese (Venusian-Japanese, to be precise), a Callistonian-Ukrainian, and a Martian-Italian.

(To be continued)

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Aphelion is the most recent attempt to establish a science fiction magazine in Australia. The first issue of this A4-sized offset-printed quarterly was launched in January 1986.

At $4.95 for 100 pages (about 80 000 words) it is probably value for money in terms of quality, though those who flick casually through the magazine may be disconcerted by the contrast between the seemingly-sophisticated page design on the one hand and the typewritten text and somewhat amateurish drawings on the other.

In this first issue the single-page editorial is followed by two short stories, two novelettes, part one of a novel (to be serialized over 4 issues) - by George Turner, Terry Dowling, Chris Simmons, Eric Harries-Harris and Patrick Urth - and two departments: book reviews by Michael Tolley and 'Speculation' by Jeff Harris.

The magazine has been well supported by specialist bookshops throughout Australia, and your support would help its further development. Since news-stand distribution is not yet feasible, you may care to subscribe by sending $16 for a 4-issue subscription to Aphelion, PO Box 421, Stirling, South Australia 5152.

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The Nova Mob meets ten times a year on the first Wednesday of the month to discuss science fiction and why the members still read it. In 1986 the Nova Mob is meeting at 198 Nott Street, Port Melbourne. Meetings start soon after 8.00 pm. (The April meeting will be an exception, and will be held on 9 April rather than 2 April.)

GENE WOLFE'S SLEIGHT OF HAND

Bruce Gillespie

[This is a copy of a talk given by Bruce Gillespie at a Nova Mob meeting in June 1981. Bruce had, of course, not yet read The Book of the New Sun.]

Anybody who can see definitely what Gene Wolfe's work is all about is a liar or a fool or Gene Wolfe. So I'll be the liar and the fool, and enlist the help of people like George Turner, who can be nearly as devious as Gene Wolfe when he wants to be.

George's help first. He wrote a review of The Fifth Head of Cerberus in SF Commentary 39. This review says nearly as much about the book as does Peter Nicholls in a considerably longer article in the Magill Survey of Science Fiction. I'll paraphrase George, rather than quote him at length:

The Fifth Head of Cerberus is a series of three novellas which are fairly closely related, although at first sight they seem quite separate. All are set on twin planets - Sainte Croix and Sainte Anne - which circle a common centre of gravity in orbit about a far star. In the first novella, also called 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus', the unnamed main character undergoes an arduous childhood through which he discovers that he is not his father's son, but a younger clone of the man he has always called father. The ending of the novella is misleading, in that it tells us that the 'son' kills the 'father'. This tends to lead away from the more important question, which, as George puts it, is 'If a clone be taken from a man, does the new individual become his son? His twin? Or merely an extension - an extra body and brain? Who is he? Or what?' So, says George, 'Wolfe is posing that old problem of identity'. At the end of his review, George says, 'The identity theme is not one which has ever interested me because it seems a philosophical dead end - a meaningless question shouted into the void, like "What was before God?" or "How can infinite creation have a beginning?" But while Wolfe cast his spell I was interested in it, vitally.'

That's a slightly different way of expressing what I see as the centre of all Wolfe's work, but I think later expressions of the problem are more interesting. In other words, all the time I was reading The Fifth Head of Cerberus, I was desperately trying to work out what the damn thing was all about. When I was satisfied that I had worked out a lot, I was not so sure that I was interested any more. George himself says of the second novella, called '"A Story," by John V. Marsch', that it is 'written in that fake simplistic style perfected by Kipling to cast an aura of romance over his Jungle Books'. The third novelette is written in a cut-and-paste style of diary entries by the anthropologist, John V. Marcsh, and his prison guard. The whole thing, called 'V.R.T.', is novel-length in itself and is so stretched out that one nearly loses any sense of its being a story. Only the urge to find out what the hell is going on kept me reading.

What links together the three novellas is Veil's Hypothesis. This was put forward by Dr Veil, who turns out to be the woman who, so the narrator of the first novella imagined, was his aunt. However, she was

not his aunt, but genetically his daughter. Anyway, the hypothesis is that the French settlers on the twin planets of Ste Croix and Ste Anne did not kill off the natives, called 'abos', but that the abos were shape-changers, and have gradually replaced the migrant populations. However, the substitution, if it occurred, was so perfect that even the shape-changers have forgotten what happened, and so have effectively become the French colonists. However, Wolfe links this with another idea - the engineering concept of 'relaxation'. Wolfe explains it this way, through the mouthpiece of the anthropologist, Dr John V. Marsch:

> There are problems which are not directly soluble, but which can be solved by a succession of approximations. In heat transfer, for example, it may not be possible to calculate initially the temperature at every point on the surface of an unusually shaped body. But the engineer, or his computer, can assume reasonable temperatures, see how nearly stable the assumed values would be, then make new assumptions based on the result. As the levels of approximation progress, the successive sets become more and more similar until there is essentially no change. (p.52 Arrow edition)

This is how Marsch sees cloning in the first story, but it is important for the rest of the book. In the second story, which is told like a folk tale, we hear about the abos who were there when the first French ships landed on Ste Anne. The abos know that they are shape-changers, and that they have taken the shapes of original interplanetary visitors. Meanwhile, the very last remnants of those interplanetary visitors are still around. They are called the Shadow People. The point is that the Shadow People have changed completely, have kept evolving to fit the planet. The abos, the shape-changers, have, as indicated by the concept of relaxation, stayed the same as the previous visitors looked when they first arrived on the planet.

In the final story in the book, we are shown, through successive diary entries, the process by which a native of Ste Anne called Victor Trenchard took over the identity and shape of John V. Marsch during an anthropological trip. The process goes on, although it is not at all clear where that leaves the main characters of the first story of the book. One can only assume that the family is carefully cloning genetic stock which is itself based on the stock of the shape-changers. At any rate, the first story gives a marvellous sense of decaying permanence, of a society where nothing can change; there is only endless repetition of a fairly brutal culture.

It is essential to Gene Wolfe's method, though, that he tells little of this directly. Without his reference to the term 'relaxation', much else would not have fallen into place, but later reading of Gene Wolfe leads me to suspect that he was tempted to leave out even this piece of explanation. I like authors who do not explain things but, even so, it is daunting to find such devotion to sleight of hand. There is a marvellous incident early in the first novella, for instance, when Mr Million, the boy's robot tutor, takes away the little flutes which they fashion out of a local vine. The boy and his brother keep making the flutes. Mr Million keeps confiscating them. The brothers can never work out where they went. Only much later does the boy remember that, occasionally, out of the corner of his eye he would catch a brief flash of light near Mr Million as he went out of the room. Investigation shows that Mr Million, as he has gone out the door, has very quickly put each confiscated pipe on a ledge just outside the door. Once he guesses this, the boy climbs up and finds every single one of the pipes.

In other words, the essence of Gene Wolfe's method is that, while he is telling you a vast number of details about what is happening here, the real action of the story is taking place over there, and you will be damned lucky to find out what's happening at all.

One final point about The Fifth Head of Cerberus. As I've indicated, Gene Wolfe refuses to have the story-teller in the first novella tell us his name. There is only one clue. He describes the statue of Cerberus which guards the front of the house where he grew up.

> It was this statue, I suppose, that gave our house its popular name of Maison du Chien, though there may have been a reference to our surname as well.

The only guess I can hazard for that surname is 'Wolfe', or 'Le Loup'. Maybe the main character's name was 'Eugene le Loup', or 'Gene Wolfe'. Maybe, and although there's no other internal evidence in the book, maybe much of the book is autobiographical. Gene Wolfe grew up in Houston, Texas. The most interesting fact about Houston is that it is, in a sense, a fake city. The old Houston was down by the coast until a hurricane blew it away in 1906 or thereabouts. The entire population moved a hundred miles inland. Houston during summer is very hot and sticky, like the main city of Sainte Croix. Maybe the whole book is some sort of tale of the relationship between the Indians in Texas, the Mexicans, and then the Americans. I don't know, as I don't know enough about Wolfe's life.

Incidentally, the epigraph to the novella, 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus', is from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and goes:

> When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow,
> And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,
> That eats the she-wolf's young.

My case rests.

However, back to the idea of cloning, which seems to be Wolfe's constant metaphor for, as George says, problems of identity. Also back to the idea of the writer as sleight-of-hand magician. One finds most of these things in the story 'Alien Stones', in The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories. On the surface, 'Alien Stones' seems to be the story of an Earthly spaceship which finds the derelict of an alien ship out in space. The alien ship has no air, and it is easy to enter it. The crew try to divide up the task of looking through it for evidences of life. They seem to find nothing. One of the crew, named Youngmeadow, goes missing. His wife becomes particularly upset, and asks the captain, named Daw, to stay in the ship until remains are found. The captain tells Helen Youngmeadow that he has found something informational - someone has attempted to cut the cables of what must be the computer. Youngmeadow's spacesuit floats towards them from out of the corridor, with a shape inside it that looks like Youngmeadow, yet obviously isn't. Contact has been achieved with the invisible inhabitants of the ship, but only after the captain has tried to redress the damage done by the crew member. However, the shape in the spacesuit tells them that they are not friends. In other words, get the hell off.

Okay, that seems to be the story, but all the while Gene Wolfe is telling quite a different story. Early in 'Alien Stones', we find that Daw shares quarters with a crew member named Wad. Helen Youngmeadow is curious about him, and gradually the story comes out that Wad is not really on the ship: he is a simulacrum placed aboard to learn the job of captaining the ship; he is a clone. One gets the impression that Daw himself is a clone. We ask ourselves by the end of the story - is anybody on either ship real or not? For instance, Wolfe shows us

pretty clearly that it the crew of the alien ship are the machines which have been standing around silently during the whole story. In another section, Wolfe makes play with the fact that the last computer readout from the alien ship had not been pointed at their native star, but pointed right back at the ship from Earth. It is like the monkey who stares in at a keyhole only to find his own eye staring back at him.

Hints, hints, damnable hints and clues! That's all there are in Gene Wolfe's stories: little pieces of the jigsaw, and one is never quite sure that there is a pattern to the jigsaw. My guess, after reading 'Alien Stones', is that the makers of the alien ship have done directly what the makers of the Earthly spaceship have done by indirection: wired in all the crew so that they are not, strictly speaking, still alive. The Earth people have been left the comfort of thinking they still have their Earthly bodies; presumably only the captain knows what is their real relationship to each other and the machinery of the spaceship.

I could go on and on through Wolfe's work, showing stories in which the most important pieces of the puzzle are left out for the reader to guess. However, these patterns cannot be entirely esoteric, since the pieces tended to fall into place during my second reading. While I was reading the volume, The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories, I kept saying to myself: 'So that was what that story was really all about.'

For instance, 'The Doctor of Death Island', which is the most interesting story in this volume, except for 'Seven American Nights'. ('Seven American Nights', incidentally, a story in which all the pieces actually fall into place, seems to me a much-improved version of 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus'.) There are three stories here with similar names and, despite the concurrence, they don't really have much to do with each other. 'The Doctor of Death Island' is the story about the man convicted of murder who allows himself to be frozen cryogenically, and wakes up some forty years later, in the same hospital. Alvard and the hospital itself have changed little, but the world has changed a lot. A process of tissue regeneration has become commonplace, and all people currently alive are immortal. Perhaps the most effective passages in the story are those during which Alan Alvard tries to get used to the idea of immortality. The story gives the idea that births have almost ceased; certainly the city outside the window of the hospital prison contains few people. Alvard finds himself the creator of the later culture, which is based on talking books. Alvard invented the books before he found he had cancer and was frozen. Now virtually nobody can read; the books themselves have become mini-people, which often engage in questions and answers with their 'readers'.

Again the story proves to be the opposite of what it seems on the surface. It seems that Alvard is the victim of peculiar circumstances, and finds himself doomed to an endless lifetime in a prison cell. Suddenly he gets news that he is freed. The President of the Unified States and Kingdoms asks for his help. A fault has crept into all the talking books: ghost voices keep creeping into their programs. The society's whole technology is threatened: only Alvard might be able to fix the problem. Gradually it becomes clear that this was probably the reason why Alvard was unfrozen, cured, and given the immortality treatment. But it is also clear that the voices in all the talking books all come from books by Charles Dickens. In turn, Alvard has always been a Dickens devotee. You get very much the feeling that at some time between the crime for which he was convicted and his actual incarceration he has managed to rig the books so that they would gradually

go wrong. There's one sentence somewhere early inpare story, long before Alvard is contacted by the government, that shows he expects to be let out of prison soon. So did he set up the whole thing - who knows? There's no clear answer to this even by the end of the story.

Now why am I telling you this? Because Gene Wolfe's method is to lay down one clue in one paragraph, then another clue, then another, until the whole story is a pattern of these little pieces, few of them directly commenting on each other. It always comes back to the question, what is Wolfe really on about?

For instance, in 'The Doctor of Death Island', Alvard describes himself at one point as a talking book, as a wind-up toy. Is this how Wolfe sees cloning, which pops into nearly all his stories? Is Wolfe suggesting that cloning is the last stage of human manipulation of humanity, by which essentially human features have disappeared? Or is cloning merely the next step in an evolution by which earlier changes have been forgotten?

In 'The Doctor of Death Island', he shows a world that has run down considerably under the influence of a few major inventions, but he does not say specifically that this is a bad thing. The twinge of horror in Wolfe's stories is always in the fact that people in the stories do not know what has happened.

This is what links together all the stories: the fear of forgetting who you really are - the problem of identity, as George puts it. In The Fifth Head of Cerberus, the process of social atrophy is an unfortunate result of the replacement of one species by another; Wolfe makes that clear, when he shows that half the slaves on Ste Croix are the thrown-out failed experiments from his 'father's' laboratory. But what is far more creepy is the process by which the boy has his mind raped by his father's machines, and begins to forget whole slabs of his existence.

Similarly, the native boy mimics John V. Marsch so successfully that he forgets who he was originally; only the fact that Marsch has made notes every day reveals the true situation.

In 'Alien Stones', the horror is not in the fact that the crew of the Earth ship might not be alive after all, but it is in the fact that only the slightest clues show that this is the situation.

In the novel, Peace, which could easily have been the basis for this entire discussion, Alden Weer is shown to be a very peculiar person. At the beginning of the book, one thinks that Weer is just an old man writing his memoirs in an old house. As the book progresses, we realize that we do not know what age Weer is when he writes. All his life he has been under the impression that not only will he suffer a stroke when he is old, making him lame, but that he has always been suffering that stroke, even when four years old. At the beginning of the novel, we think Weer is writing in his room in his old house, but it becomes clear that he is really writing in an office of the factory of which he is president. Was he writing in the old house at one stage, and does he fall through his memory, so to speak, into another existence? And why does he keep forgetting to write down important parts of his story, usually the punchline? Only Gene Wolfe knows.

Certainly Wolfe is hinting that, in Phildickian fashion, reality might be quite the opposite of what we take it to be. But Wolfe is much less melodramatic about the fragility of reality than Dick. In each story,

he shows us that the physical circumstances are solid enough. It's just the people who are elusive, never at all what they seem. Maybe Wolfe is just trying to tell ghost stories, in which we are the ghosts as well as the ghost-watchers. Certainly he is in no hurry to lay any ghosts.

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TAKING WYNNE WHITEFORD SERIOUSLY Russell Blackford

I.

Wynne N. Whiteford is the veteran of Australian sf writers, having published short stories as far back as the mid-1930s; but he is also the most recent Australian sf writer to leap into international prominence as a novelist - Berkley-Ace having recently bought his three novels, the earliest of which was published by Cory and Collins in only 1980. He has just completed a fourth novel for Berkley-Ace, based upon the material contained in the three 'kesrii' stories written for Paul Collins' Worlds anthologies. After Whiteford's many years of consistent effort, it is appropriate now to pay some serious critical attention to his work, which has hitherto been neglected. This essay will focus on Whiteford's Worlds stories, particularly those concerning the kesrii, and the three novels published so far, paying attention particularly to Whiteford's use of the come-uppance mode, or, to give more dignity to what I'm describing, of the pattern of overreaching and failure. At the same time, I'll be discussing how Whiteford has related this pattern to concepts of biological and cultural evolution, and of species or cultural superiority/inferiority.

The first of Whiteford's stories in the Worlds books is 'Beyond Aldebaran' in Envisaged Worlds, which introduces a conflict between human beings and apparently superior aliens. On the first page, Whiteford presents his protagonist, Connor, leader of an expedition team investigating a new planet which we are later told is 'nearly as far beyond Aldebaran as Aldebaran was distant from Earth' (Envisaged Worlds, p. 8); at the same time, the themes of evolution and hubris are presented, though hubris is given no real thematic development. Connor's first substantial thought is that the main centre of the planet in future years might be called 'Connor City' (EW, 3). However, while Connor and his fellows are to undergo experiences humbling them both as individuals and as representative humans, there is no real or continuing emphasis in the story on personal arrogance. Rather, the emphasis is on the blitheness with which humanity conducts its 'spread across the stars', never imagining that it will meet its equal or superior race far from the safety of its home system (EW, 16). The first dialogue in the story, again starting on the first page, relates to something 'wrong' about the spread of species on the planet: there are simply not enough species for them to have evolved naturally - the planet has clearly been terraformed, though I use this word imprecisely, since the planet has been manipulated not by humans but by aliens and to imitate the ecological conditions not of Earth but of some unknown world. However, this initial dialogue about evolution not only establishes for characters and reader the clues that an extra-terrestrial intelligence is at work, but also lays the groundwork for further and more thematically relevant discussions of the process of evolution (which, nonetheless, are not entirely successful).

Whiteford devotes the first few pages to developing a familiar sf frisson: is there someone or something watching? The clues mount up, and the investigations and speculations are handled surely; the biologist Harn speculates that the planet's tall trees were planted five hundred or a thousand years before, 'except that the iso-drive wasn't invented then' (EW, 5). Thereafter, the three humans are actually

captured b he aliens, and Whiteford provides some efficient and riveting descriptions of the powerful, feral aliens in action, as perceived by an uncomprehending Connor.

The effect is somewhat spoiled by Harn's easy production of a theory, which evidently has authorial endorsement, to explain the nature of these aliens: Harn speculates that the aliens are descended from a species of carnivore - he compares them to lion or tiger families, or wolf packs - and says, 'I think they may have an edge on us because they're better integrated' (EW, 14). His point is that carnivores are more capable than human beings of killing swiftly and by surprise, using their natural weaponry of tooth and claw, and so have needed to develop strong inhibitions against intra-species killing. Accordingly, the progress of this story's carnivore aliens may have been more uniform and successful because less marked by wars and lesser forms of disruption and conflict.

This idea - essentially a theory of the inherent inferiority of the human evolutionary path - is an interesting one, and Whiteford ends the story with a particularly vivid demonstration of the superiority of his aliens. They demand that Connor mark on their star chart the location of his home world, and they casually indicate their own home for him - or so he understands. Fearful of the consequences of revealing Earth's location, Connor picks a random star far from our own solar system, only to find that the alien has gone one better: once the chart is understood, it transpires that the alien has marked the location not of his own home world, but that of Earth, which he must have known all along! 'Banzai!' says the oriental Kosaka in explanation of the alien's motive: a shout to unnerve the warriors of the opposition (EW, 18). Certainly, the demonstration of superiority by the aliens is both sudden and direct, like a shout, and sufficiently unnerving. Whiteford has succeeded in creating the image needed to capture and sum up the thrust of his tale, even if Kosaka's explanation is too ready and neat.

However, the effectiveness of the ending has already been somewhat undermined by the way in which Harn has come out with <u>his</u> explanation of the aliens' superiority, especially as it is based upon no more than a confused account of what the aliens are physically like, together with some unsupported conjectures or impressions as to how they might think. The explanation is far too pat, even coming from a biologist who has been shown thinking about the patterns of evolution earlier in the book. As a result the story appears to be little more than an excuse to introduce an idea which in turn stands out as an amusing authorial conjecture rather than an integral part of the narrative movement.

Further, the idea is confusing: despite Harn's impromptu mini-lecture on the subject, exactly <u>how</u> the inhibition on intra-species killing has given the aliens their cultural and technical superiority remains unclear. Harn begins by suggesting that they may be more integrated in the sense that the 'newer' parts of their brains may be less in conflict with the more primitive parts, but ends up arguing that they may have progressed more swiftly because they have had no wars or dark ages to retard their progress. However, it is difficult to accept, merely on the basis of what is presented in this story, that the overall effect of human conflict has been to slow technological progress; indeed, the Dark Ages notwithstanding, the opposite may well have been true. Moreover, we understand from Harn's earlier comments that the planet beyond Aldebaran was 'seeded' by the aliens before humanity even invented its space drive, so the aliens appear to have a technology far older than ours - at least they have been spreading across the stars for far longer. It appears inevitable, rather than surprising, that

they should be more advanced. Their greater bodily po[illegible] is hardly significant in itself, or humanity would also be inferior to the elephant seal, and their ferocious concentrations of thought are only another unfounded speculation by the characters. Leaving these aside, the aliens' technical superiority need tell us nothing about their inherent inferiority or superiority to us, given the clear facts of the story. A sufficiently uncanny critic could possibly interpret the story as an ironical representation of our tendency to generate, and then place faith in, quite unfounded theories to explain phenomena that baffle us - except that such a reading would go against the whole rhetorical and emotional grain of the story.

Ultimately, 'Beyond Aldebaran' is a story which can be exploded; it is less than a complete success even on its own fairly modest terms. However, it provides a useful introduction to some of Whiteford's recent concerns, as well as highlighting the genuine strengths of his style of writing. These include vividness, economy, some effective use of action and atmosphere, a sure sense of the placement of significant detail, and the ability to adopt and develop a classic method of structuring his tales. In this case, Whiteford has adopted the ancient structure of overreaching and fall, with a small gang of individuals who represent something like the best achievement of our species coming face to face with a mightier power - and being humbled in the face of it.

'The Hyades Contact', the sequel to 'Beyond Aldebaran', appeared in the next Collins anthology, Other Worlds, and introduced the name 'kesrii' for the super-aliens of the earlier story. It tells first of Connor's attempts to persuade his superiors aboard his home ship of his encounter with the kesrii, and then goes on to the attempt by a team of four to follow and investigate the aliens while the home ship returns. The team comprises Connor, his cyborg boss Nordstrom, Zella, who is one of the home ship's doctors, and is used to provide a modicum of romantic interest, and a military fool called Marek, chosen because he has done an Alien Contact course. There is more than a whiff of satire here: Marek's tuition appears to have been mainly in the deployment and enjoyment of 'laser weapons and neutron-beam projectors' (Other Worlds, p. 17). When contact with the kesrii becomes inevitable after the ship is crippled by a meteor collision, Marek attempts to take command on the basis of a military emergency. The other characters quickly, violently, and efficiently put him in his place, at the end of the story. Then they go with mixed hope, resignation, and apprehension to the alien ship, which is their only chance of rescue.

Unfortunately, the story is thinner and less convincing than its predecessor, mainly because Marek, who has delusions of militaristic grandeur, is a featherweight version of the overweening hero - the fact that he is a complete fool detracts from any serious tension in that aspect of the plot which revolves around whether the kesrii will be met with hopes of peace or with a show of force. Despite some attempts to inject human interest, the story is unable to surmount the problem that it is too obviously a transitional one, looking back to 'Beyond Aldebaran' as well as forward to a revelation of what the kesrii are really like. Whereas 'Beyond Aldebaran' finished with an element of genuine foreboding, 'The Hyades Contact' has exhausted the possibilities of foreboding. It leaves only a sense of 'What happens next?' - and even this is undermined by the clear hints that the next story will answer at least that much.

The third story in the sequence was appropriately entitled 'Transition', since it, too, ends with a sense of combined foreboding

and hope as we await the next stage of human-kesrii relations. The story appeared in the Collins anthology Alien Worlds. The kesrii transport both the shuttle with Connor and company on board and the mother ship, which they have also captured, to a new planet which they are terraforming - with Earth vegetation this time. Incidentally, the unlamented Marek is killed offstage when he attempts to attack the kesrii with his laser-gun. As in 'Beyond Aldebaran', Whiteford provides a succession of clues: the kesrii are creating an artificial environment in which the humans can be studied, much like placing animals in a zoo. Connor looks forward to the chance to study the kesrii as well: when the animals are intelligent the keepers will also be watched. But the overwhelming feeling in the story is that the kesrii are incomparably superior to the humans in power and decision. The story once again ends with a promise of further instalments to show us what happens next, and we get the impression that these stories are open-ended partly because they are chapters from an ongoing novel.

In fact, this is so, but Whiteford's novels tend to end in the same way, as do his other short stories in the Worlds books. 'The Specialists' in Distant Worlds and 'Sawdust Supermen' in Frontier Worlds, the last Collins anthology, both end after somewhat inconclusive encounters with superhuman beings. Of these, 'Sawdust Supermen' has an ending virtually identical to that of 'The Hyades Contact', with a small party about to deal face to face with superior aliens who resemble, and for all the story tells us may well be, the kesrii. 'Sawdust Supermen' actually begins with contact between humans and another species of aliens, the Thekkar, a reptiloid species whose technology is efficient but pre-industrial. It transpires that the Thekkar have previously been visited by a powerful feline species, and they worship these as gods - 'the Sky People'. By glaring and convenient coincidence (one of the few flaws marring an attractive and efficiently-told story), the party landing on the Thekkar's world, Kusthek, to begin exploiting it, arrive in the very same year as the long-awaited return to Kusthek of the Sky People, who have appeared at regular intervals of about an Earth century. As in 'The Hyades Contact', there is disagreement about whether the approach of the aliens should be handled by violence or other means. The character who most obviously merits the sobriquet 'sawdust superman' is Bartley, a militarist, who appears to think only of using weapons to cope with all situations. Bartley is obviously a thematic descendant of Marek in the earlier story, and he comes to a similar end: the other characters, notably the other main sawdust superman, the entrepreneur Sven Fernando, quickly turn upon him and thereafter try to concoct an excuse to put to the Sky People to explain their presence on Kusthek.

The elimination of Bartley in this story resembles that of Marek in 'The Hyades Contact' so obviously that we seem to have a Whiteford mytheme here: sensible people see in the nick of time that knee-jerk militarist responses won't work and put their own militarist out of action before facing the unknown. This is the salient passage from 'The Hyades Contact':

> Marek sprang round to face him, and at the moment of the spring Connor cut the gravity to zero. Marek's arms flailed, and then his head thudded against the metal ceiling. At once, Connor switched the gravity to full - somewhat above earth normal. Marek fell with his feet striking the end of the console and his right arm across the back of a chair. The laser pistol skittered to the floor. As Connor returned the gravity to 0.5g Nordstrom kicked the laser pistol across the floor to Connor, who picked it up and thrust it behind the console. (OW, 25)

Shortly thereafter, Connor displays his little party trophy, the kesrii, 'ignoring Marek, who was out of sight'. All of the key images are present in the following sequence, which takes place at a structurally identical point near the end of 'Sawdust Supermen':

> 'And you - ' Bartley looked at him with wild, unfocussed eyes. At that moment, Fernando's fist crashed into his jaw, and he sprawled headlong to the floor, leaving the rifle in Dolan's hands. He put it behind a piece of furniture.
>
> (Frontier Worlds, p. 88)

Shortly after this sequence, the small party on Kusthek deliberately hide Bartley from the Sky People: '...let's get Genghis Khan out of sight' (FW, 88). The parallel elements are striking: surprise attack by an ally in the human camp, who has the swiftly co-ordinated co-operation of the others, losing the laser pistol or laser-rifle (for such is Bartley's weapon), hiding the laser weapon behind a piece of furniture, facing the cat-like aliens while keeping the militarist out of it. Obviously, the two sequences cannot have been written independently, but Whiteford's point is heavily underlined and reaffirmed by such a similarity of situation and treatment in 'Sawdust Supermen' and 'The Hyades Contact', published three years apart.

II.

In 1980, Cory and Collins (then Void Publications) published Breathing Space Only, Whiteford's first novel. In essence, this tells a simple tale, and it is based upon a variant of a familiar science fiction setting: in a future when society has broken down following environmental disaster and cultural and technical decadence, only a few pockets of recognizable civilization remain, carefully husbanding their remaining resources, and attempting to maintain a technology somewhere within striking distance of what was lost during the years of decline. One such isolated pocket of order can be found in the Australian Snowy Mountains, where the hydro-electric scheme is maintained, albeit at a reduced level of operation, making possible a few recognizable civilized comforts.

The people of the Heights guard their isolation carefully and fiercely, stationing guards to gun down any of the supposedly diseased 'Perms' who approach on the roads leading to the population centres. The novel begins with an action scene, both to focus the reader's attention and to demonstrate immediately the lengths to which the people of the Heights have gone in defending themselves: holing up in a virtual state of self-imposed siege out of fear of the rampant diseases which may be carried by outsiders. On a superficial reading, this opening sequence appears to be a straightforward depiction of an elite's justified defence of itself against the inferior breeds which threaten it - the sort of cultural dualism which we are used to from Heinlein. But in retrospect, or on a closer reading, the actions of the 'good guys' in cutting down intruders with laser-rifles, or, when something goes wrong, a thrown knife, are placed in a far more morally ambiguous and disquieting perspective. For the duration of the scene itself, we feel unease and even disgust at, as well as identification with, the actions of the Heights guard, who shoot two Perms cold-bloodedly, using laser-rifles which are fired only after the donning of protective goggles: 'The world became a dark world of violet and black. Somehow the figures on the cycles became impersonal, stripped of individuality, easier to destroy' (Breathing Space Only, Void edition, p. 7). Roy, who is to be the book's hero, and his partner Stevo then sterilize the bodies of the Perms with flame-throwers in a grim image of the way the

Heights people dehumanize their enemies. At this grisly point, Stevo discovers that one of the two they have virtually murdered is a girl who 'couldn't have been more than fifteen' (BSO, 8). When the third of the Perms appears, he is distraught and enraged at the murder of his companions, helping us to see them as human beings with their own loves and importance. Finally, there is something quite repellent in the attitude and technique Roy adopts in fighting this last enemy - caring mostly about avoiding direct contact with his combatant's infected skin. In Roy's case, this takes priority over normal fear, and certainly over any possibility of mercy.

However the ambivalence of the assumed authorial attitude to Perm-shooting comes not only from the treatment of the opening confrontation. It is also placed in perspective by the confrontation between the Heights people and another group of outsiders incomparably more formidable than the Perms. This provides the basis of the novel's simple movement.

Prior to the breakdown in civilization on Earth, colonists have been sent into space, and an expedition has now returned from the planet Meridak, where a successful civilization has been established. Fearful of outsiders, the Heights people avoid contact with the people of what they think of as the 'satellite', but Roy determines to make contact with them after comparing the photographic image of one of them from a video broadcast with a similar image from ninety years before, when contact was last made between the two peoples. A close comparison shows that the two must be images of the same woman - the features are identified as the same beyond any chance of mere family resemblance. Concluding perhaps rashly, but not incorrectly, that the 'satellite people' have found a way to stop ageing, Roy seeks to do a deal with them to gain immortality for himself and two women who help him, one his girlfriend, the other his research assistant - the local librarian. After going through endless trouble and danger to get his way, in the teeth of opposition from the Heights leaders, Roy finally achieves his ambition: he and his friend Jill (Ev the librarian wisely opts to stay behind) leave for Meridak with their benefactors, but this Faustian success turns to ashes when Roy discovers, too late, that he and Jill are not adapted to Meridak life. After several generations and the use of genetic engineering, the 'satellite people' <u>are</u> so adapted, but are no longer recognizable as human. For his pains, Roy is destined to a virtual eternity spent without the company of anyone he would think of as human except for a presumably resentful Jill, in a civilization he does not understand, on a world where he and Jill will be like retarded children. As in so many of Whiteford's stories, <u>Breathing Space Only</u> ends with a scene of ambiguity and foreboding as the human characters prepare to deal with superior beings who are alien to them.

The stage is set early in the novel for questions of superiority/inferiority to be considered. The Heights people feel superior to others 'outside the team', whom they treat with automatic suspicion. By contrast, Roy says early in the novel, 'Let's not kid ourselves. We're not supermen' (BSO, 11). He goes on to add that they have survived because of the altitude of their home, above the worst pollution, and the proximity of available power, rather than because of any innate superiority. Thereafter, the novel develops the idea that the supposed superiority of the Heights people over the Perms is to be seen in the context of the further superiority of the envoys from Meridak, who have continued to develop their technology, are adapted to their own world, are able to deal with others peacefully unless actually attacked, and maintain a civilization more stable and advanced than any left on Earth. On each of these criteria, the Heights people fare better than

the Perms, but it is a question of having been in the right place at the right time and having had the fortune and discipline to carry out successful cultural experiments. Meridak has now advanced to the point where its people treat those of the Heights with a degree of compassion but also clear condescension, as is apparent to Roy when, on the run after having contacted the Meridak ship, he is assisted by Meridak people. His contact, Vaya, explains that she was able to locate him because 'You were the one by itself' (BSO, 111). Roy is slightly put out by her choice of phrasing, and the question of superiority/inferiority is raised once again:

> It was not quite the way he would have put it. It sounded like someone talking about a lower form of animal life.
> From her point of view, perhaps he was. (BSO, 111)

Explicit comparison of Perms, Heights people, and Vaya's people is made on the next page, where there is some discussion of the experiments in the way of life of both Vaya's people and the Perms. The name 'Perms' is revealed to stand for 'Permissives', though Roy himself does not understand the reference; he merely notes: 'Something about their way of life. I think it was all right at the start, then it gradually went sour' (BSO, 112). This leads into discussion of different human experiments, with Roy idealizing the outcome of the Meridak experience and Vaya speaking of it cautiously. Whiteford leaves us with a sense that the nature of superiority and inferiority in cultural or evolutionary terms is a problematic and relative one. As so often, the 'normal' humans with whom we might be expected to identify overreach themselves and come to a humbling and perhaps unhappy end.

Perhaps the least satisfying aspect is that the correct attitude to be taken to the Perms, and whether they should be tolerated, is never made clear. While the novel criticizes the Heights people for their insularity and aggressive cohesion, it also explicitly develops the idea - in a forbidding expository lump - that the breakdown of civilization has been largely the fault of people who have resisted the development of technology, specifically the use of nuclear power. Throughout the novel there is a sense that Whiteford poses a cultural hierarchy of technological creators (Meridak), technological preservers (the Heights), and technological destroyers/parasites (the Perms). Certainly it is never made clear why the Perms may have started out all right but went wrong; however, it seems that their primary fault is a certain meanness of mind which is reflected in their use of technology: sometimes ingenious, but displaying imagination within constricting limits, keeping their motor-cycles going, developing a powerful spring crossbow to shoot down planes, dipping their arrows in decaying organic matter as a nasty poison. It often appears that the dirty, ill-organized, germ-ridden Perms fall into a category of Luddite cannon-fodder: though the novel contains some questioning of the idea that they are sub-human or even, as Roy maintains, beyond help - 'Nobody can do anything for a Perm' (BSO, 119) - their main function in the plot is to be treated like old-style cinematic Indians, something to fight against and kill, convenient for a few turns of the plot. This sense of a moral schema with the Perms at the bottom is strengthened inasmuch as only three groups are ever presented in the novel: Perms, Heights people, and Meridak emissaries. This is despite the fact that the Perms are the descendants of permissive experimenters; one wonders what has happened to all the ordinary non-permissive people of Australia who happened not to be living in the Snowy Mountains. The novel has produced a three-tier structure of cultures which denies any cultural or historical complexity to its world, even while seeming to insist on

itself as b g a realistic extrapolation. Apart from the problem with narrative r..ism, this tends to cut against any sense of moral complexity and to reduce the people in the three tiers to pawns and symbols.

Following the publication of Breathing Space Only, Whiteford wrote a second novel based upon the same movement from Earth to a more advanced planet. Sapphire Road follows a number of familiar Whiteford lines. The culture, technology and biology of Earthlings are contrasted with those of more advanced aliens, though in this case, as in Breathing Space Only, the 'aliens' are of human descent. At the same time, much is made of the question whether diplomacy or force is more appropriate to deal with the supposed threat of a civilization rivalling or surpassing Earth's.

In Sapphire Road, we are presented with a near-future Earth which has been through a time of instability and dislocation. Australia is now one of the nations at the forefront of culture and technology, and within Australia events are largely manipulated by a semi-secret society glorying in the title 'National Stability Council' which aims to keep order, 'guide' the Australian democratic system, and direct the public mood - largely through covert censorship of all communications. The members of this elite group are a bunch of would-be Ayn Randian heroes: major stakeholders in or controllers of Australia's largest and most essential industries, together with bosses from important Government Departments. They meet through a secret hologram hook-up system (which seems almost puerile in its mystique and elaboration, a children's secret society writ large), and there is an inner cabal which steers the larger organization and seeks effectively to run the country. Surprisingly, we see little of the other forces which take part in the futuristic dialectics of power: politicians, unions, courts - even though these are explicitly mentioned as important elements in the erratic structure of Australian society. A shop steward at the hero's titanium company makes a couple of brief and unsatisfying appearances, but the novel is unhappily dependent on a number of assertions that society is being splintered and destroyed by a multiplicity of clashing factions and interests.

The protagonist of the story is Max Vanmore, who heads a prosperous company mainly devoted to producing sapphires for industrial purposes. At the beginning of the novel, Vanmore's father, uncle, and cousin are all killed, clearly as part of some undefined conspiracy. This leaves him in control of the family's giant titanium business, and with his father's nomination to take over his position in the National Stability Council, and, indeed, the inner cabal. His uncle's position, for which the cousin was being groomed, is taken by the company secretary, Quade Gannon.

Vanmore attempts with Gannon's help to master the complexities of the business he has inherited. Meanwhile, he is followed and intimidated by mysterious men who are first seen stalking him and his friend Rona Gale in a grey airkar. Later, they follow Rona and Gannon's woman friend Bianca Baru, at which point Bianca's physical strength comes in handy: she is a bio-engineered woman from a heavy-gravity planet called 'Chiron', a world in the Alpha Centauri system which has been colonized from Alcenar, the main world of that system, and itself originally an Earth colony.

A further element of intrigue is injected when a starship from Alcenar, now quite independent of Earth and with a technology in advance of Earth's nations, comes to Australia, seeking to trade technology for

useful items including biological specimens, and return two young men who had visited Alcenar following a previous visit. One of these two is Frank Ferris, apparently one of Rona's old loves. In an interview which is duly censored at the behest of the National Stability Council, Frank tells of streets on Alcenar paved with fused sapphire crystals created by 'matter converters', and he produces a sample to verify his story (Sapphire Road, Cory & Collins edition, p. 45). Ultimately, his claim turns out to have been based on a misunderstanding (sapphire is far more common on Alcenar than on Earth, for purely geological reasons, and even on Alcenar matter conversion is a prohibitively expensive process normally used only on transuranic elements and for scientific purposes); however, the Ferris account is enough to lead to two Earth-designed ships racing both each other and the Alcenar ship back to the Alpha Centauri system. One ship belongs to an intelligence chief and National Stability Council luminary, Captain Kranzen. The other belongs to Rajendra Naryan, President of the modern Indian state of Nu Karnatika. Kranzen is a close fictional relative of Marek from 'The Hyades Experiment' and Bartley from 'Sawdust Supermen'. He goes to Alcenar explicitly to 'show the flag' for Earth. His ship, the Endeavour II, is staffed by intelligence operatives (all male), and is equipped with enormously powerful bombs capable of destroying a planet and intended to cow the people of Alcenar into acknowledging Earth's power and sharing their advanced technology. By contrast, the Nu Karnatika ship, the Mohenjo Daro, seeks to engage in diplomacy and trade. Its complement includes Vanmore, Rona Gale, and also Bianca Baru, who is seeking to return permanently to her home civilisation.

Predictably enough, success goes to those who do not rely on force: the Endeavour II is blown to pieces when Kranzen's agents accidentally let off the superbombs by firing on them with laser weapons, while trying to shoot down an Alcenarian intelligence probe which has penetrated their ship. This farcically simple detonation of weapons which are presumably far more sophisticated than twentieth-century H-bombs is one of the least plausible happenings in the body of Whiteford's fiction: together with some of the machinations of the National Stability Council, it tends to drag an otherwise serious novel down to Dr Who level. In 'Sawdust Supermen', Bartley was compared sarcastically to Genghis Khan. In Sapphire Road, Rajendra exclaims that Kranzen is like 'something from the time of Attila the Hun' (SR, 141) - a serious comparison in a novel which concerns itself with the cycles of history and civilization, and one taken seriously by Vanmore. In both stories, the figure of the conqueror is treated without sympathy.

By contrast with the militarists who blow themselves up before the Alcenarians can even consider taking any violent action against them, the Mohenjo Daro people are warmly greeted on Alcenar, even though the locals bargain toughly and send the Earth people back with no paradigm-shattering science or technology. Back on Earth, Vanmore discovers the chaos which he has left behind has increased, and he contemplates creating a quasi-religious movement to popularize a new Truth to bring Earth civilization back together. It appears that the Great Truth he has in mind will be an ideology based on what he has learned on Alcenar, the possibility of diversity without suspicion, factionalism, and intolerance. Sapphire Road ends here, with hope rather than apprehension, but, typically for Whiteford, asking the question of what should or will happen next.

Fully one-third of the novel takes place after Kranzen has been eliminated, effectively bringing the plot which has been established to its resolution, and about a fifth is devoted to a tour of Alcenarian

civilization after Vanmore and Bianca Baru have been forced to make a landing on the planet and have gained their bearings. As a denouement, this is surely excessive almost to the point of self-indulgence, and the book seems to change genre entirely in the final hundred pages, turning into something like a utopian voyage novel.

However, while this part of the book is not properly integrated with the plot as it has been set up, one cannot but admire Whiteford's determination to provide us with a vivid and extensive picture of his ideal kind of civilization: varied, tolerant, flexible, open, individualistic but co-operative, and technologically optimistic and dynamic. Vanmore comes to recognize the key feature as the Alcenarian society's high degree of 'Tolerance to diversity' (SR, 255). Whiteford's premise that our own society has reached a stage of the historical cycles wherein it is being destroyed by diverse warring groups with different values and interests sounds like a prescription for a deadening cultural unitarism. Apart from the historical theory, one thinks of the repeated calls made by moralists for preservation of traditional values to prevent the breakdown of our society - but Sapphire Road makes a point which was never clear in Breathing Space Only: social stability cannot be guaranteed by resisting pluralism, but only by embracing it, so that diversity leads to tolerance rather than factionalism. It seems surprising to find the writer of Breathing Space Only revelling in a great deal of what can best be described as technological kinkiness, including a predominantely lesbian heroine. Though it might be argued that this is a less threatening character type for a male author to have to present to flaunt his breadth of vision and tolerance than, say, a male homosexual, we might add further to Whiteford's defence that Bianca Baru is not merely of a sexual orientation proscribed by our culture: she is also a challenging heroine in other ways, physically superior to men, mentally tough, though not unemotional - she is surely Whiteford's most interesting character yet.

The structure of Sapphire Road is flawed, but the long Alcenar section provides a range of experience for the main characters quite separate and different from what they have been through on Earth and in their competition with Kranzen. It throws the earlier movement of the novel into a new perspective, elaborating a society which has managed to gain an admirable degree of stability in the best sense without relying on the methods used by the National Stability Council. Stability on Alcenar means planning and tolerance and a degree of emotional maturity based on understanding which makes tolerance possible. Whereas the Council has attempted to restrict diversity and maintain the status quo, Alcenar has recognized that the status quo can never be maintained, but that change and variation can be enlivening rather than disruptive if embraced and actually used as a tool for coping with a new and challenging environment - rather than providing a basis for factionalism and suspicion. This theme is worked out carefully at several levels of the narrative, and Whiteford can only be praised for dealing to this extent successfully with thematically serious material. I acknowledge the technical flaw, which has been remarked upon by reviewers, but find that it does not really affect my enjoyment of the novel.

III.

Whiteford's most recent novel, Thor's Hammer, is also his shortest, simplest, and least interesting. The plot involves an attempt by an unbalanced fanatic stationed in the asteroid belt to destroy Earth-based civilization by redirecting a small asteroid onto a collision course with Earth itself. This character, Anton Slade, has been

embittered by self-serving financial decisions made on Earth, including those made by the head office of his own employing company Astrogold, and is obsessed with his theory that the people of the asteroids are at the forefront of cultural and, indeed, evolutionary progress. In a spectacularly naive reinterpretation of evolutionary theory, he intends to destroy the progenitors which the new breed has left behind.

Pitted against Slade is King Hannan, a top operative of Astrogold who, like Slade, is the product of 'hormonal engineering' designed to capitalize on early promise. The novel is pretty much a straightforward battle between these two supposed supermen, with a predictable victory for the good guy and a reprieve for Earth. King Hannan receives assistance from Slade's former lover Gail Busuttil, a woman who has been bio-engineered with a computer linked to her brain (among other modifications, including engineering of her allegedly superb breasts). In the process of defeating Slade, Hannan and Busuttil find each other, and the book ends with Busuttil's advice that 'King, there is a special way to make love to a domehead girl' (Thor's Hammer, Cory & Collins edition, p. 150). Hannan also becomes friends with a couple of asteroid belt outcasts who are extremely effective in their own environment: a female dwarf called Yetta and her man, Des Marston, who has lost his legs in a rocket accident. Though Marston is like Slade in feeling bitterness against Earth and championing the cause of independence for the asteroids, he is unwilling to contribute to genocide and soon develops personal loyalty to Hannan.

There is no doubt that the rhetoric of the novel overall endorses Slade's theory that the asteroids have become the home of the cutting edge of human progress, even while treating his method of acting on the theory as simply villainous. Presumably, we are to understand that it is best that Earth just be left behind in the cultural evolutionary race than be subjected to deliberate global massacre. In one of the few thematically meaningful passages in Thor's Hammer, Busuttil discusses Slade's idea with King Hannan:

> 'He did a lot to begin the present view, current in the roids, that the Earth is decadent. It's true, from an engineering and astronautical viewpoint, Out There is where it's all happening. But life has other aspects.' (TH, 32)

What these other aspects may be from Busuttil's point of view is never really explored, though she goes on to explain that her highly-developed and expensive computer/brain link-up was not fully used, and so was wasted, in the simpler asteroid civilization. Basically, though, we are allowed to fill in our own idea of what may be the superior aspects of Earth civilization (its luxuries, such as the drink Busuttil is sipping as she speaks? its complexity and human interaction?). However we fill in the implied blank, we are able to set up Slade as a dangerous madman and King Hannan as a saviour - after all, this is our planet that is being threatened with doom.

None of this is to imply that Thor's Hammer is an unreadable or worthless book. But it is certainly undemanding, and something of a disappointment after the thematic complexity of Sapphire Road. The recognition that Earth has something to offer which the 'superior' asteroid civilization lacks may be thought of as an advance, but it is really little more than a narrative convenience, since it is never really analysed. At this stage, it seems we will have to wait for the kesrii book, which will be the longest of Whiteford's novels to date, for a

fuller analysis of the notion of superiority in a civilization and how Earth may justly be assessed on the scale.

While the tone of this essay has often been critical, this should not be taken as a sign of scorn for Whiteford's work, but rather as a sign that I consider it significant enough and competent enough to subject to serious analysis. In recent years Whiteford has created a unified and meaningful body of fiction which has deserved more attention than it has received. Hitherto, critics and reviewers have tended to see him as an unexciting writer of rather old-fashioned science fiction stories. If other critics are now encouraged to pay his work some serious attention, this essay will have achieved one of its main aims, and if further studies of Whiteford's work are more approving than my own I will be far from displeased. The positive qualities of Whiteford's writing which I listed above at the conclusion of my discussion of 'Beyond Aldebaran' are to be found throughout his work, and if I have not concentrated on these it is because other approaches are more interesting and illuminating than simply providing examples of crisp, entertaining writing.

Whiteford's recent fiction has not only been unified: it has worked a distinctly narrow area of ideas and themes. Even the recent stories outside the 'kesrii' sequence have been closely related in subject matter, as I have attempted to show with 'Sawdust Supermen'. As mentioned above, 'The Specialists' in the Collins anthology Distant Worlds is another story which involves contact between homo sapiens and a superior form of life. In this case, the superior form is the product of DNA experimentation carried out on Mars by the Kranson Foundation under the direction of an eccentric genius, Harl Kranson. The protagonist is Lance Girrith, a newsman specializing in specious reports on possible extraterrestrial contacts. He is sent to Mars to investigate what at first appears to be contact with extraterrestrials conducting an expedition to investigate contact signals sent out by Kranson from Mars years before. Girrith builds up a picture of what has happened which turns out to be incorrect: rather neatly, Whiteford outsmarts his character with an explanation which includes the one piece of crucial information which Girrith has not treated as important - Kranson's experiments in genetic engineering. By contrast, the emphasis which Girrith puts on Kranson's attempts to communicate with distant intelligences proves to be misguided. As we might expect in a Whiteford story, Girrith gets his come-uppance. He is humbled when the superior people leave him in suspended animation for possibly decades so that he can explain them to the people of Earth after they've gone.

This is one of the most effective of Whiteford's stories: competently and clearly written with virtually no lapses of style or language, though it has some flaws in its development. The most important of these is perhaps the handling of the character of Girrith, who is shown at first as a somewhat shallow journalist who cares more about effect than facts and does not hesitate to mislead his audience in the name of entertainment. The structure of the story demands that he should be a character who thinks of himself as superior but gets his come-uppance when he encounters genuine superiority, and early on he does display the nessary speciousness and arrogance. Once he arrives on Mars, however, Girrith starts to behave like a normal resourceful hero depending on his own insights and capacities to cope with trouble and search out truth. His eventual come-uppance takes place only after we have really lost track of his ill-deserving arrogance, and the structure of the story appears, therefore, not to make sense. It is also hard to integrate his troubles on Mars, before the ultimate climactic scenes, with the main movement of the story. Mysterious strangers follow him at

might (as they follow Vanmore in Sapphire Road) but what do they have to do with the superior Kranson folk or their freakish agents the Ambon twins?

The forms taken by Whiteford's superior beings are somewhat repetitive: Whiteford favours descriptions of four-armed adaptations in 'The Specialists', Breathing Space Only, and in Sapphire Road, though, in fairness, the latter novel has a multiplicity of alien forms. Even the names Whiteford chooses for his characters have a certain sameness, and in some cases bits of names or forms of names are repeated. We have 'Kranson' in 'The Specialists' against 'Kranzen' in Sapphire Road; 'Max Vanmore' in Sapphire Road resembles 'Max Ashman' in Thor's Hammer; 'Rona Gale' in Sapphire Road becomes 'Gail Busuttil' in Thor's Hammer - and so on. I see no profound meta-textual significance in any of these similarities of names, but note simply that the overall effect is part of a sameness of ethos that has built up through Whiteford's work, contributing to the sense of unity but also to that of narrowness.

The values and concepts in Whiteford's work also seem unified - which is hardly a criticism - even though we have seen that they are developed from slightly different perspectives in the three novels. Underlying it all is an optimism about technology which is not uncommon among science fiction writers but is perhaps unfashionable in literary circles generally. This may have contributed to Whiteford's not being taken seriously to date. Whiteford also preaches tolerance and diversity, but this has perhaps not been trusted because there is a sense that he sees diversity as arising out of the possibilities of technology, and seems to devalue alternative cultures and life-styles based upon the rejection of technological development. This is especially true in Breathing Space Only and in Thor's Hammer, where, however, it comes through most clearly in some justified if over-easy satire on people who want to reject technology as 'unnatural' - on a highly selective basis, of course.

Technology for Whiteford is to be praised for its peaceful uses, especially in meeting the challenges of environment. This is discussed by Whiteford's more advanced characters throughout his recent work, and even the examples which Whiteford offers are sometimes repeated. In particular, Whiteford obviously has great admiration for the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme, which is referred to in 'Sawdust Supermen' as a model for a grander scheme to be introduced on Kusthek, and which provides the base for a viable if decadent society in Breathing Space Only. Conversely, war is never treated by Whiteford as a technological impetus (in what may be an example of wishful thinking). Rather, war is a source of cultural disruption which can set evolving cultures centuries behind and so slow the movement of progress. Whiteford is scornful of militarists and professional agents of violence, though he allows his characters to meet violence with violence, as long as it is done out of swift necessity to pave the way for more peaceful and intelligent approaches.

Perhaps the most serious reason why Whiteford's work has been neglected in the past is that it has been seen to have ideas but not themes. His ideas about where the cutting edge of human development might be or what a superior alien species might be like have not hitherto been seen as more than mildly thoughtful bases for science fiction stories: they have not, I suspect, been seen as involving genuine questions about the human condition. In part, this has been fair: only Sapphire Road has developed such ideas with an impression of real thematic determination. But once Whiteford's recent work is examined as a whole a unified body of ideas, philosophies and values emerges. The science fictional idea that intelligence and even superiority may take forms which are

unconventiou or disturbing soon becomes a tired one in itself, but it gains context and complexity when combined with its thematic corollaries of what sort of society is best, how it might evolve, and how individuals can contribute to it. At the same time context and complexity of meaning are given to the images which dominate Whiteford's novels, even though he introduces them with respect and restraint: the strange folk, the frightening or freakish alien shapes which appear in his fiction, sometimes as major characters, sometimes as revelations of the alien to be deployed at crucial moments. Much of the fun in science fiction for Whiteford is obviously the opportunity to realize alternative possibilities of what intelligent beings, human or alien, might be like. While not always totally successful, Whiteford's realizations are memorable, especially once they are understood as more than bits and pieces in unrelated stories. We can thank Wynne Whiteford for having provided them for us. We owe it to him to pay some serious attention to his efforts - even if he may not thereupon be wholly enamoured of the results of our own.

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REVIEWS

Jan Green and Sarah Lefanu, DESPATCHES FROM THE FRONTIERS OF THE FEMALE MIND, Women's Press, 1985, 248 pp., 2 pounds 50

reviewed by Lucy Sussex

Ishtar knows, there have been some ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL short stories by women, and some were ideologically sound too: Zoline's 'The Heat Death of the Universe', Carol Emshwiller's 'Sex and/or Mr. Morrison', Moore's collaborative 'Vintage Season' and a list of tales each by Le Guin, Tiptree and Russ. Therefore, a collection of original sf by women, including three of the authors named above, should be an occasion for throwing the knitting in the air and getting out the champagne.

Unfortunately, Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind, edited by the Mses Green and Lefanu, is nothing to write home about. Written by women it is, and science fiction it is in part, but original is not a word that can be applied to it. There is not one ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL story in the whole communiquè.

So where did the ideologically correct editors (Green was a member of a women's rock band, the gloriously named Devil's Dykes) go wrong? One good idea was to reprint Joanna Russ's witty essay 'The Clichès from Outer Space', but it was less clever to include several tales illustrative of Russ's clichès. Russ's fictional editress Ermintrude threatens unnameable things if faced with another 'Weird-Ways-of-Getting-Pregnant-Story', and one hopes she never sees Penny Casdigli's 'Mab', in which women achieve parthenogenesis via yoga. Or does the fact that 'Mab' is misandrist rather than misogynist absolve all?

Other clichès besides those noted by Russ appear (are mentioned?) in Despatches. One is the 'Mischievous-Rewrite-of-Elderly-Patriarchal-Myth', an area of literature over which Angela Carter has hegemony, and very well she exercises it too. Margaret Elphinstone's 'Spinning the Green' is a version of Beauty and the Beast, which is a legend La Carter has had two stabs at already, the last being the sumptuous 'The Tiger's Bride'. This is not to suggest that fairytales are forbidden to feminists, simply that in this field stories have to be bloody good or inventive to better the existing standard. An example is Josephine Saxton's 'Woe, Blight, and in Heaven, Laughs', an evil deconstruction of Snow White which was commended by Carter herself. 'Spinning' lacks the originality of 'Woe', and is awkwardly written, being facetious for much of its length before a deep and meaningful conclusion. This Beauty lives happily ever after with a pack of feminists dressed in Lincoln green - a near perfect example of what Russ calls 'Noble Separatism', that is, women simply too nice to be true.

Another clichè is 'Deck-the-Corpse-in-Green-and-Purple': done-to-death old sf themes clad in the suffragette colours. Lannah Battley's 'Cyclops' is an aliens-visit-ancient-Greece story, and Mary Gentle's 'A Sun in the Attic' a prosaic tale of suppressing an invention in a post-industrial society. Both of these stories resemble 'fifties sf fodder, marginally updated by the presence of female pilots and polyandry. In

either case, the female elements seem trimmings to trad tales: Gentle's inventor, for instance, is a caricature scatty male genius. Preferable, in a volume whose very title implies the taking of risks, would be a radical reworking of these tired narrative structures, not mere surface decoration of them.

However, there is more to Despatches than unknowns who could have done better: the big names, who have done better. While Sheldon, Lee, Mitchison, Tuttle and Zoline slaved over hot typewriters, their muses apparently went out to a publisher's lunch. Mitchison and Lee contribute well-made tales, without snap, crackle and she bop. Campbell award-winner Lisa Tuttle writes of Armageddon, from which all the whales and dolphins have been saved by friendly aliens - well, so long Lisa, and thanks for all the fish. The title of this story is 'From a Sinking Ship', which implies that these cute cetaceans are rats.

Pamela Zoline's 'Instructions for Exiting this Building in Case of Fire' is problematic, with her hallmark fragmented style applied to an idea possibly conceived over a bottle of port after a CND meeting. Concerned women conspire to kidnap the children of cold warriors, reprogram them, then instal the American kid somewhere in Russia and vice versa. This technique is applied to other contentious groups: 'in Northern Ireland such is the nature of the horrid conflict that Catholic and Protestant babies have been exchanged and reworked so that they are often living down the street from their biological parents' (p.109).

The notion is appealing, but one is reminded of the medieval magnate who, when his son was held hostage for his good behaviour, promptly sacked a castle, declaring: 'I have the hammer and anvils from which I can forge many more sons'. It also seems likely that Ulster Protestants (for instance) would regard any child of theirs being reared a Catholic as irrevocably damned. In other words, this wishful thought appears unworkable in practice.

We come now to two highly emotive stories, which underneath the adrenalin are somewhat dodgy. Sheldon's 'Morality Meat' and Saxton's 'Big Operation on Altair Three' are concerned with the exploitation of women for masculine and commercial ends. Saxton's is a despatch from a frontier planet with an advertising industry even crasser than usual: a car is promoted as stable enough for a hysterectomy to be performed in the back seat, and they prove it, too. A singularly unattractive commercial, one would think, but this planet is a naughty sexist place. 'As you know, hysterectomy is very fashionable as the ultimate contraceptive, any women who has had one stands a better chance for a job, those few days a month more of maximum output impress a male boss' (p. 12). Altair Three is therefore a case of the bad old days revisited (grotesquely) and, as such, déjá vu tends to undermine the futuristic setting. Unless Saxton is trying to suggest the gains of the women's movement are illusory, the green and purple spacesuit of this satire seems unnecessary: it could very well have taken place in the 'sixties.

The last thing one would expect in an anthology of feminist sf would be the ghost of Dean Swift; nonetheless, in 'Morality Meat', an unholy combination of Right-to-Lifers and meat animals (power to the former and a dearth of the latter) produced his 'A Modest Proposal'. Well, there has to be a use for all the unwanted babies. This idea, though hackneyed, gains force from Sheldon's ruthless use of racism and economics: black babies, being less adoptable, get the chop, get to be chops. However, the power of this story is diluted by some silly

mistakes, like the way in which the baby carcasses are disguised for transportation - with sewn-on piggy tails. One wonders where the supplies of tails come from, in a world stated to be desperately short of meat.

So far, the thumbs-down to Despatches has been total. However, after the lengthy bad news there is some short good news. Gwyneth Jones's 'The Intersection' is simply the best story in the collection, and not entirely because the rest are woeful. To quote Ms Jones: '...a Dystopia that would have enough guilty attraction...an exercise in vindictive conservation, on the grounds that if I ruled the world I might be sorely tempted to tidy the bulk of the human population into hygienic confinement, prevent all kinds of pollution and destruction by force....And I would never go to parties' (p. 35). While not an ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL story (it reads too much like an extract from a novel), 'The Intersection' is sufficiently adventurous to seem frontieral. And this is surely what Despatches should have been all about, if it was to live up to its packaging.

The other story firmly refusing to play safe is 'Relics', by Zoe Fairbairns, which amusingly posits the Greenham Common women resurrected as a tableau in a museum of the future. Like Jones's story, 'Relics' is structurally imperfect; in fact it is distinctly formless (but not spineless). However, this amorphous narrative is considerably redeemed by quantities of panache.

Apart from these two stories, Despatches raises the question: if this is the frontier, what are the hinterlands like? Perhaps the title is a misnomer, the Despatches instead hail from some other part of the female mind (the lowlands? the swamps?). Otherwise the frontier would seem to be tedious indeed.

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Robert Holdstock, MYTHAGO WOOD, Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1984, 252 pp., 8 pounds 95 (Australian RRP $21.95)

reviewed by Jenny Blackford

Like Robert Holdstock's earlier novel Earthwind, Mythago Wood is written in the first person. I have never really believed that an author has to be the same sex as his/her narrator to be convincing. I suspect that the gulf between all human beings is so wide, and so narrow, that a difference of sex is the least of our problems of understanding. Nonetheless, Robert Holdstock (sadly) wasn't very convincing as a stunningly beautiful woman born on an exotic planet, with diamonds set into her breasts, yet. In Mythago Wood, he does a much more convincing male English twit - the narrator and hero, Steven Huxley, is the well-off son of a loony father, living in a spooky house near an even spookier wood (that of the title).

Steven's father, George, has discovered that this wood - 'three square miles of original, post-Ice Age forestland' - is inhabited by mythagos. (The emphasis, by the way, is on the second syllable.) George Huxley thinks that he brought the mythagos - manifestations from the collective unconscious - into being by using 'a sort of electronic bridge which seems to fuse elements from each half of the brain', but this claim is plausibly disputed by a Neolithic river-guardian skilled in necromancy (a mythago himself, of course). Other mythagos in Ryhope Wood include Robin Hood, several other Jack-of-the-Green types, King

Arthur, 'the Guardian of the Horse Shrine', the terrifying Urscumug, who goes right back to the time when forests were claiming the land left by the retreating glaciers of the Ice Age, and a Celtic Earth-goddess type from Roman times, but whose precursors in legend go back to post-Glacial legends.

This brings us to Robert Holdstock's apparent obsession with Celtic and pre-Celtic mysticism. Ancient European mysticism is all very interesting, and many people have made a reasonable living exploiting the public's deep-held belief that somewhere beneath their boring Anglo-Saxon surface is a wild, natural, nay, mystical Celt trying to get out, little golden sickle and all; and that England is really an exceptionally mystical and wonderful place, where all the layers of the mystical past can be read by those who have the true eye to see it (i.e. the reader). Now, Mythago Wood exploits those beliefs rather well. Robert Holdstock gives better-than-average pseudo-scientific reasons why this particular wood is mythago-haunted, and thus much more mystical than most. The narrator's atmospherically spooky childhood memories - always fun - build through his deceptively practical worries about his obviously insane father (obsessed by the wood) and his increasingly erratic elder brother (seduced by the wood), until our hero is The Hero taking part in a legend in the midst of a magic wood almost without our realizing it. This is good fun, for those who like that sort of thing. And, I'm afraid, the Celtic and pre-Celtic blood in me that keeps me short (people from my father's village are built like the pit-ponies that they worked with) makes me a sucker for exactly that sort of thing.

Sucker though I am, I was not in the least enchanted by ancient European mysticism turning up, on the slenderest of pretexts, on a distant planet. Earthwind would have us believe in aliens responding to similar conditions to those in early England (to tell you what conditions would ruin the plot for you) by drawing similar pictures. These pictures - of the Earthwind - have a mystical function which must also be concealed from you, gentle reader. Suffice it to say that this function is revealed in a mystical denouement which strikes one as amazingly silly, set as it is on an alien planet amongst the highest of technology and the lowest of galactic politics.

On to another couple of Holdstock's obsessions (I suppose it would be kinder to call them themes...) - sex and psychology, intermixed and intermingled. Mythago Wood gives us a lovely baroque picture of family life. Our hero's Oedipal feelings for his father swell until his father becomes the appalling Urscumug; his elder brother (and therefore, of course, rival) Christian gradually becomes the villain in the magical story they enact in the wood; hero, father and brother compete bloodily and single-mindedly for the affections of the mythago Guiwenneth.

Guiwenneth is a Celtic Earth goddess from Roman times, who for the men is the embodiment of all things good in woman, and with whom each falls passionately in love. (Possible Freudian note: the name Guiwenneth, as one of the characters remarks, is pretty close to Guinevere; Steven's mother (who dies of a broken heart, neglected by her husband for the wood, and particularly for Guiwenneth) is called Jennifer; Jennifer is the Welsh form of Guinevere...) At any rate, Guiwenneth loves our hero above all others, and Steven's (heroic) struggles to rescue her from Christian - who has become The Outsider, terrorizing all the mythagos of the wood - make up much of the book. Guiwenneth is really rather a nice creation. She picks up moderate English and the use of modern plumbing very fast. She has the practicality of some of Dr Who's more

exciting, long-past female companions, and is much better at dealing with either spear or dead deer than Steven.

The ending of the book is masterful. We gradually realize that the protagonists are making legend, not re-enacting it. Fate and the pattern of legend have forced Steven, as The Kinsman, to hunt and try to kill Christian, The Outsider, who is blighting The Realm. Their hated father, the Urscumug, pursues them both. Steven's companion Keeton gradually becomes The Companion, and wonders whether, ultimately, he becomes Sir Kay. The mythagos in The Realm know many forms of Guiwenneth's legend so far, but not what happens afterwards. Let it suffice to say that the ending is sufficiently mythically fitting, psychologically satisfying, and poignant.

In the next issue

Yvonne Rousseau's 'Sf and the Dirty Little Virgin'
Sneja Gunew's 'Forms of Power in Australian Science Fiction'
John Foyster's 'Long View', continued
The Rousseau-Turner correspondence
Reviews
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