

**SF
COMMENTARY
118**

**November 2024
114 pages**

Passengers this trip:

**DENNIS CALLEGARI
ANNA CREER
LEIGH EDMONDS
MARK FRASER
BRUCE GILLESPIE
DAVID GRIGG
JOHN HERTZ
RICH HORTON
JOHN NEWMAN
COLIN STEELE
TONY THOMAS
SUE WOOLFE**



'Gaudi ISS' (Elaine Cochrane + NightCafé)

S F Commentary 118

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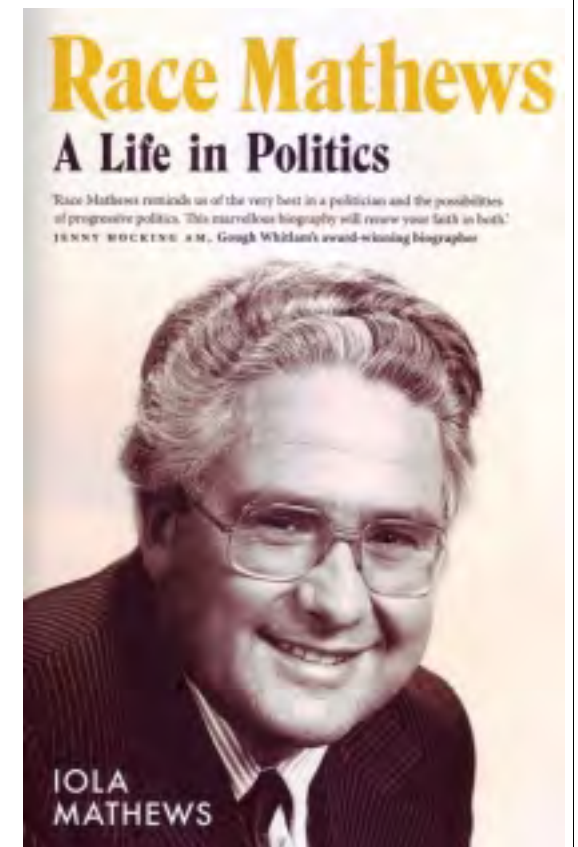
I must be talking to my friends

Celebrating Race Mathews

There is a story told about Barry Jones, polymath, quiz champion, and science advocate, on his first day as a Member of the Federal Parliament. Bob Hawke, then Labor Prime Minister of Australia, turned Barry to look out into the parliamentary chamber. 'They are the Opposition,' he said, pointing to the assembled ranks of the Liberal and National Parties on the other side of the chamber. He turned Barry around to look back at the ranks of his own parliamentary Labor Party. 'They are the enemy,' said Bob.

If Barry hadn't known this when elected an MP in 1983, he soon discovered the truth of this observation. His good friend Race Mathews, however, already knew how deadly the infighting among Labor politicians and staffers could be. But Race never seemed to be dismayed by the opposition he faced when he was involved in reforming the Party during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While working as the Principaal Private Secretary for Gough Whitlam, the new Party leader in the late 1960s, he set about making Labor electable, and succeeded in 1972, when Gough Whitlam led into power the first Labor Government for 27 years.

This appears to have nothing to do with the world of science fiction or international politics. But not even his fellow Labor colleagues would have known that Race had been organising people since he





THIS PAGE

Top: The Victorian Trade Union Choir.

**Second row:
(l.) Gareth Evans.
(r.) Iola Mathews.
(Photos by Sean Davies.)**

NEXT PAGE:

**Top row:
(l. to r.): Jack Dann; Rob
Gerrand; Race Mathews;
Janeen Webb; Bruce
Gillespie.**

**Second row:
(l. to r.): Iola Mathews;
Janeen Webb; Bruce
Gillespie; Jack Dann; Rob
Gerrand.
(Photos supplied by Rob
Gerrand.)**





was a teenager. The result was the Melbourne Science Fiction Group (1952), which became the Melbourne Science Fiction Club during the 1950s, and celebrated its 70th birthday in 2022.

Moreover, Race has been organising people for their own good ever since 1952, with never a bad word said about him. His affability and true friendliness often disguised his iron purpose, but his niceness, usually a fatal flaw in a politician, never let him down. Although, as his biography reveals, it often led to other people letting him down.

It's wonderful to have in our hands at last a copy of ***Race Mathews: A Life in Politics***, by **Iola Mathews in collaboration with Race Mathews** (Monash University Publishing; 358 pp.; \$35.00). It includes the first four chapters written by Race.

Race wrote the first chapter 30 years ago of what was planned to be his complete autobiography: an article '***Whirlaway to Thrilling Wonder Stories: Boyhood Reading in Wartime and Postwar Melbourne***', which I heard first when Race delivered it to the Nova Mob, Melbourne's SF discussion group, on 7 September 1994. Race told of his childhood and teenage interests, especially his interest in science fiction and the early Melbourne Science Fiction Club. I had hoped that '*Whirlaway*' might form the first chapter of the new book, but this didn't happen.

In *Race Mathews: A Life in Politics*, Iola has been able to bring together a vast amount of information about Race's life, but necessarily had to bypass fine detail about some of Race's many interests.

Iola spoke magnificently at the Nova Mob meeting on 2 October, delivering a deft and sparkling summary of her new book, and the circumstances leading to being able to finish it. Race wrote the first four chapters of the new book, and includes five pages about his early interest in science fiction and the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. A much more complete account of Race's involvement

in the early days of Melbourne fandom can be found in **Leigh Edmonds'** recent ***Proud and Lonely: A History of Australian Science Fiction Fandom: Part 1*** (see **Colin Steele's** review later in this issue). During the 1950s Race, an ambitious young man, sold his science fiction collection and took aim at the world of politics. He met his first wife, Jill McKeown, when he was 20, and they remained together until she died in 1970 of cancer. They had three children.

I find it difficult to review this book after listening to Lola's superb account at the Nova Mob meeting — which she told me she created from notes, not a written-out script. There's just too much to tell. It's enough to say that Race's life of progressive politics, creative organisation of disparate groups, and Utopian thinking looks very much like a life animated by visions from the great science fictional and visionary thinking of the twentieth century. Race was Principal Private Secretary to Gough Whitlam. He gained the seat of Casey for Labor in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne for the three years of the Whitlam Government. After a later period serving deep within the Victorian Labor Party, he gained the State seat of Oakleigh in 1979, and stayed there until the Kennett landslide against Labor in 1993.

Race and Lola met during the early 1970s, and were married in 1972, just as Race gained the seat of Casey. Lola's account of being a politician's wife is very poignant. Every promotion for Race, including his three years in Casey and his years as the State Member for Oakleigh, his stint as State Minister for Arts and the Police (in the one portfolio!) and Community Services, took up more and more of his time. Lola and Race had two children of their own to add to Race's three children, but frequently Lola and the family faced personal crises when Race had to be away from home. When you hear politicians saying they are leaving high office 'to spend more time with their families', that's exactly what they are doing.

Race's forcible retirement in 1992 during the Kennett landslide

brought him back to the world of science fiction. This story is also told in Lola's biography. Race got in touch with his old friends from the Melbourne SF Club, now middle-aged, including Dick Jenssen, Merv Binns, and Lee Harding, plus a few other well-known fans, such as the members of the *ASFR* Second Incarnation editorial committee, and Elaine and me. Over dinner, we found that our mutual interest was no longer quite so strongly in science fiction, but focused more on films of all types. Race and Lola had recently moved from Oakleigh to a house in South Yarra, and in the living room Race had set up the largest TV screen he could buy at the time. He also bought a machine to play laser discs, the forerunners of the DVD and Blu-ray. A group of us met every month for nearly 20 years, during which time Race's TV screen became larger as he upgraded to the Latest and Greatest, and he assembled a fine collection of DVDs and Blu-rays. Each month we were all expected to bring a dish of something delicious to dinner, and Race would prepare a tasty casserole and his special ice cream inventions.

During his 'retirement', Race wrote a PhD, which he turned into a book, *Jobs of Our Own*, and about my age (77) finished a DTheol, i.e. another PhD. He concentrated his research on the mighty social experiment that is the Mondragon Cooperative in Spain, which he saw as the ideal model for beneficial change in Australia's social and industrial systems. All this time he was working tirelessly with members of the Australian Labor Party in an attempt to bring in reforms towards which he had been working for over 40 years.

Race began to suffer several health problems during the last years before Covid. He lost much of his eyesight (because of macular degeneration) and also began to lose his hearing. Worse, two years ago he was diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Despite this disappointing turn of events in the life of a highly intelligent man, Race remained as cheerful as ever, still very good company. Despite the added difficulties she now faced, Lola began the task of producing the biography.

On 24 October this year, people made their way down a lane in the Melbourne central business district to a plain-fronted brick, two-storey building, the Kelvin Club. I have no idea whether Race and Lola have been members of what seemed like a very exclusive, very comfortable club, or they held the launch of the biography there simply because of the very large meeting room upstairs. When I arrived, I caught up with Jack Dann and Janeen Webb and Rob Gerrard, but there might have been other SF people hidden in the crowd. I guess that 200–300 people attended the launch, and we were all very pleased to see the tall smiling figure of Race himself wending his way through the crowd. He can no longer see, but when each person was introduced to him his face lit up and he nattered away to them. It was a great night for him and us. Famous Labor politician, former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, launched the book with a speech that was the equal of any he had ever given on any subject. He had read the book with great attention, and illuminated many points that were not clear to me. However, in one sentence he made a slighting remark about Race's interest in science fiction. We flinched. The knee-jerk prejudice against science fiction is still alive and well in Australia. Unfortunately, the lack of science-fictional thinking among intelligent people in this country can be detected in the way in

which Australian politicians are uniformly 'shocked and surprised' by some current crisis or other that could have been foreseen twenty years ago.

Lola gave an elegant speech in reply, followed by a singalong concert of favourite old radical and trade-union songs led by the Trade Union Choir. They included 'The Internationale', 'Joe Hill', 'We Shall Overcome', and 'Solidarity Forever'. The sentiments, however admirable they remain, seemed to some of us left behind in the era when Whitlam gained office in 1972. 'We Shall Overcome'? Maybe then, but not now. Not even the efforts of Lola and Race can hold back the effectiveness of the fifty-years' attempt by forces in both the Coalition and Labor ranks to de-fang trade union effectiveness and general social progress. But most of us in the crowd, including many from the Fabian Society (which Race ran for 50 years), were over 60, and we knew what we stood for.

Any of us who have already read any of Lola's other books and relished her limpid, illuminating prose will be the first to buy this book. Everybody else should, as a famous show-biz Australian once said, do yourself a favour and buy your copy.



'Lace ISS'. (Elaine Cochrane + NightCafé.)

Sudden, shocking loss of Sue Grigg

BRUCE: Many of the people who arrived at the funeral of Sue Grigg on 25 October in Eltham had probably heard of her severe illness only a few weeks before. As David relates, the lymphoma that attacked her system took its toll in a very short time. When Elaine and I last saw her, she was her usual ebullient, funny self. And then she was gone, leaving David without his wonderful partner of 50 years, and his family, relatives, and friends bereft.

I can claim a little part of the story of Sue and David. In 1973 I went overseas for five months, after having finally been able to move into a flat of my own in Carlton. I wanted to hold the flat, so I asked David if he would like to move out of home (out in the semi-rural suburb of Research) and live in my flat for six months. This he did. When I caught up with the SF fans at Degraives Tavern in February 1974, the first piece of gossip I heard was that David's social life had greatly improved, and that he and Sue Pagram, sister of Irene Pagram, were now 'an item'. There might be hope for the rest of we desperate bachelors! David and Sue took a flat (in St Kilda, as I remember) and I was able to move back into my flat in March 1974.

I caught up with Sue only infrequently over the years, perhaps most often when she was the Official Bloody Editor of ANZAPA from 1990 to 1992. She didn't think of herself as an SF fan, but she has had much to do with the SF community over the years. And she was a very good writer.

In recent years Elaine and I have been able to catch up with her at the Knitters' Group in Greensborough, when I've been privileged to have dinner with the group at Urban Grooves café. Even so, I've never been sufficiently aware of Sue's finer, deeper qualities. During the funeral her daughter Kathryn and her sister Irene gave wonderful accounts of Sue's life, times, and contributions to other people. Most of the stories I had never heard. David himself found it impossible to speak a eulogy, which is why I am very grateful for the article he has just sent to *SFC*.



**Sue Grigg in about 2019 wearing two of her own creations.
(Photo: David Grigg.)**

David Grigg: Suzanne Gai Grigg (née Pagram) (1956–2024)

Suzanne Gai Grigg (née Pagram) was born in Mitcham, Victoria on 27 December 1956. Usually called 'Sue' by her friends and relatives, she wouldn't tolerate being addressed as 'Susan' or worse still 'Suzie'.

Her father Keith was a skilled worker and then a manager in a factory making fasteners such as screws and bolts, and her mother Thelma worked as both a pastry cook and a florist over the years.

The date of Sue's birth, only two days after Christmas, meant that she was never really able to have birthday parties when she was growing up as it was too close to Christmas, and many friends had already gone off on holiday. Similarly, too many presents were given by relatives to cover both Christmas and her birthday. She vowed never to do that to any child of hers. Without giving too much away about our daughter's date of birth, let's say that her vow rather failed.

I first met Sue at a dinner party hosted by her older sister Irene and Lee Harding one night. Sue was still in high school. I must not have made much of an impression on her, as Sue had no memory of meeting me that evening, and instead started going out with my good friend Stephen not long afterwards. Sue and I first went out together to a screening of the movie *O Lucky Man*, which she wanted to see because she was enamoured of the Geordie singer Alan Price, whose band is featured in the film. She made me go back a second time and take surreptitious

photographs of the screen whenever he appeared. And that was the start of our relationship, now almost 51 years ago.

Sue's sister Irene being involved with Lee of course immersed her in the local SF community, and Sue followed suit and became involved in fandom, as I was. We both attended Seacon '79, the World Science Fiction Convention held in Brighton in 1979, where she memorably played the role of the cat-girl C'Mell among a Norstrilia-themed group in the Costume Parade (I played a rather low-intelligence underperson).

From childhood, Sue had always wanted to become a nurse, and trained at the Alfred Hospital for several years immediately after leaving school, including spells working in intensive care and operating theatres. Later she spent many years as the Practice Nurse for General Practitioner services, and towards the end of her career joined the Royal District Nursing Service helping people in their own homes.

Sue and I were married in December 1979 in a ceremony in the house in Research we had bought from my parents, and our daughter Kathryn was born two years later.

Sue was a tremendous support to me when (against my will) I ended up as Chairman of Aussiecon Two, the World SF Convention in Melbourne in 1985, a very stressful time.

Though never a fanzine producer herself Sue nevertheless was interested in, and supportive of, my own efforts and through that

eventually served as the Official Bloody Editor of ANZAPA for two years between June 2000 and April 2002.

She had a lifelong interest in craft, and loved colour, for which she had a very accurate sense, and produced beautiful works of crochet, knitting, and tapestry at different times in her life. She made clothes for herself and others for the family, and we all possess many such items we will continue to wear and treasure. Just last year, she joined the local Country Women's Association and knitted many items such as woolly hats for them to sell for charity on their stall.

Other than some trouble with blood pressure, Sue was in fairly good health through most of her life; but in May of this year she was diagnosed with what the doctors later called a 'very aggressive lymphoma'. Though she endured a number of rounds of chemotherapy the lymphoma spread to her spinal column and brain stem, and she passed away in October, less than six months after her diagnosis, far too young at the age of 67.

She was a lovely, lovely person and I loved her with all my heart and always will.

As you may imagine, I am bereft and devastated by her loss, as is our daughter's family, including our two grandchildren, who loved their Nanna dearly.

— **David Grigg**, 2024

Fun, fun, fun

Fun with boxes

When I say 'fun' I mean hard work, and much of the hard work has been **Elaine's**. We are both executors of **Dick Jenson's** estate, which means taking seriously the rules of Executorship. There are quite a few of them, summarised in a booklet we received from Dick's lawyer as part of the process of applying for Probate of the estate. Dick had left everything to us, but he did realise that his vast and magnificent collection would not fit in our house, and many items would be more interesting to other people. It was a major part of Dick's ethos that no items should be sold if they could be given to interested friends. He left a codicil to the will naming the people to whom he would like us to offer first the contents of the many boxes of LPs, DVDs, Blu-rays, CDs, and books. So Elaine made lists of the films and CDs, and has been sending out the lists. But when each person lists the particular items in which she or he is interested, the basic lists have to be amended and items packed into smaller numbers of boxes. In this way, Elaine has cleared quite a bit of the floor of the front living room, but there are still hills of boxes there. We will get around to offering items, especially the boxes of books, to people not on the list, but the process is taking longer than expected.

At the same time Elaine, like various friends, has become fascinated in the process of creating new images via such **AI**

programs as **NightCafé**. Now this is fun! She has had a lot of advice from **Dennis Callegari**, especially about working with NightCafé, but she has exposed many of the limits of that program even while producing some startling images herself by playing around with the text prompts into the program. See the cover of this issue of *SFC*.

For *SFC*, I still have on file some fine images created by **Alan White** of Las Vegas, using various programs, and lots of great images already sent to me by Dennis. Alan produces his own annual collection of artwork, available on efanzines.com, but Dennis has yet to collect his images into a publication. Instead, he has been concentrating on his writing, winning several awards.

Surrounded by all this talent, it seems mundane of me to do nothing but write, but at least I have been able to finish the mailing comments on recent mailings of ANZAPA. For more than a year, the usual page numbers of ANZAPA mailings has been averaging 600 pages or more.

'Fun' is fanzine publishing. 'Fun' for me started at the beginning of August with the task of sending out the notices about the available PDFs of *SFCs* 115, 116, and 117. Once upon a time I

would print all the copies of *SFC* on my duplicator, collate the copies, address the envelopes, add stamps, and place all copies in the bright red pillar box at the post office. **Now I can no longer send any print copies overseas.** I need to send individual emails to overseas people to tell them that the issues had become available on **efanzines.com**. You would think that everybody would check every couple of weeks to see which fanzines had been added to eFanzines, but not so!

It is amazing the people who have written back to me, not just to

thank me for the email reminder, but sending me great (and sometimes gigantic) letters of comment. Only a few weeks after sending out the current *SFC* notices, suddenly I have 70 letters of comment waiting for your delectation. **Robert Day's** is 14,000 words long, but many are 500–1000 words long. Some are WAHFs ('We Also Heard Froms...'), but I value them just as much as long letters. This letter column will appear in *SFC* 119.

I had hoped to take a fan-ed's holiday until the end of the year. Not so.

Fun in Camberwell

The **Friday Night Group** did not survive the Covid lockdowns. The David Jones Food Hall basement, host to the Friday Night Group for some years, not only disappeared, but so did the whole southern emporium of David Jones. Some of the old gang have been conducting Zoom sessions ever since, but I don't do Zoom. Most of us met in person two years ago when Elaine and I played host to the annual **Midwinter Solstice** gathering traditionally held at the home of **Francis Payne** and **Rose King** in Kilmore. But they have been too busy in Kilmore to revive the tradition.

Dennis Callegari and **Alan Wilson** had been meeting regularly at a Chocolat cafe off Burke Road, Camberwell. They had the bright idea of meeting monthly for lunch at some larger eatery in Camberwell. Our first monthly gathering was at Georges of Camberwell in June. It's a large restaurant in Burke Road. It had pretensions to respectability, but the food servings were expensive, meagre, and of surprisingly poor quality. However, our table of 14 was separate from everybody else, and we did catch up with each other, in some cases for the first time in five years. Since

then, Georges has closed.

On Wednesday 17 July, we tried **Sofia's**, also in Burke Road, Camberwell. It's a very large restaurant whose meals had been derided by various fans at various times over the years. However, the food has improved greatly, and the dishes remain as enormous as ever. **Malcolm Gordon** made the mistake of ordering a large pizza, after being warned by me to order only a small pizza. He took most of it home in a doggy bag. My spaghetti bolognese was perfectly cooked, but reached the limits of even my capacity.

Sofia's has its peculiarities. We had ordered a table for 11, but were put in a table for 10, crowded against a wall. Anyway, 12 people turned up, not 11. A cry for a larger table, by changing tables and adding a smaller table, caused great distress to the two waitresses, who in every other way did their job well. We could only guess that during the weekend the space fills to capacity and there is a ban on putting together tables. But there was virtually nobody else in this vast space on a Wednesday lunchtime! When

we returned to Sofia's in following months, we ordered seating for two more people than we expected to turn up.

Christina Lake asked me to contribute to the tributes to CLAIRE BRIALEY AND MARK PLUMMER, who would be Fan Guests of Honour at Glasgow 2024. I almost missed the deadline, but did send in time this little article to 'Claire Brialey & Mark Plummer: An Interconnected Fannish Biography', *Glasgow 2024 Program Book*, pp. 22–7.

Lucky the fan who meets Claire and Mark

Claire and Mark? Mark and Claire? They have been linked together for as long as I've known them. We 'met' through the British apa **Acnestis**. It's all **Yvonne Rousseau**'s fault. I joined Acnestis in 1995 because of the recommendation of my great friend Yvonne Rousseau. I was welcomed by **Maureen Kincaid Speller**, the Official Editor, and the Acnestis experience became a highlight of my life.

In Acnestis I discovered highly literate, witty, and articulate fans who formed a group unequalled by most other groups I've discovered. (The fans who founded and ran *Australian Science Fiction Review*, first series, formed my other special group.) Their knowledge of literature (including science fiction) and most other subject areas far surpassed mine. They wrote funny personal anecdotes, and brilliant reviews and articles. But apart from Maureen herself and Paul Kincaid, around whom things revolved, the most interesting and amusing writers were **Claire Brialey** and **Mark Plummer**. I was lucky — they liked my stuff as well.

In 1999 we met for the first time. **Paul Kincaid** was the GUFF winner, and it seemed that most Acnestis members followed him and Maureen to Melbourne, Australia, for **Aussiecon Three**,

where I was Fan Guest of Honour. On one warm day, most of them visited the little house in Collingwood inhabited by Elaine Cochrane, me, and five cats, and we all (except the cats) went on a bookshop hunt through inner Melbourne.

Mark and Claire decided that Australia was their second home, and visited here regularly in the years after Aussiecon. For reasons never explained, they dropped out of Acnestis, but in 2005, while we all visited **Corflu in San Francisco**, they asked to join **ANZAPA**, the Australian (and occasionally New Zealand) APA. I had just become Official Bloody Editor, so I knew my reign (which lasted 16 years) would be a success.

Claire and Mark's genzine **Banana Wings** is one of the great fanzines of the last 50 years. Claire writes so well that she won a Hugo. Mark's support for me and my fanzines *SF Commentary* and *Steam Engine Time* has been astonishing. He is the only fan who could write a complete bibliography of all my fanzines. His letters of comment have been a highlight of any fanzine I publish.

Lucky the fan who meets and remains friends with fans like Claire and Mark!
(12 April 2024)



**Claire and Mark visit chez Cochrane-Gillespie, 2010, just before Aussiecon 4. Gillespie and Flicker can be seen as well.
(Photo: Yvonne Rousseau.)**

SUE WOOLFE is the author of five works of fiction, none of them intentionally speculative, so she was astonished to find that her *Leaning Towards Infinity* (about a mathematician who discovers a new sort of number) was runner-up in the US Tiptree Awards for Speculative Fiction. She also publishes research articles on creativity and neuroscience.

Sue Woolfe

Gathered up on Mars

Reviewed:

EVERYONE ON MARS

by **Larry Buttrose**

(Puncher and Wattman; 150 pp.; \$29.95)

One of the most famous and memorable opening lines in fiction is Ford Madox Ford's 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard'. *The Good Soldier* has as a subtitle 'A Tale of Passion' — 'tale' implying a discursive telling and an unreliable narrator. But a new, tiny Australian book of short, amusing, even rollickingly funny stories told by a reliable though idiosyncratic narrator tells a far sadder story.

Into our very perception of our planet's landscape, with its hospitable air and water and soil, is folded centuries and centuries, aeons in fact of human understandings — meaning— metaphors

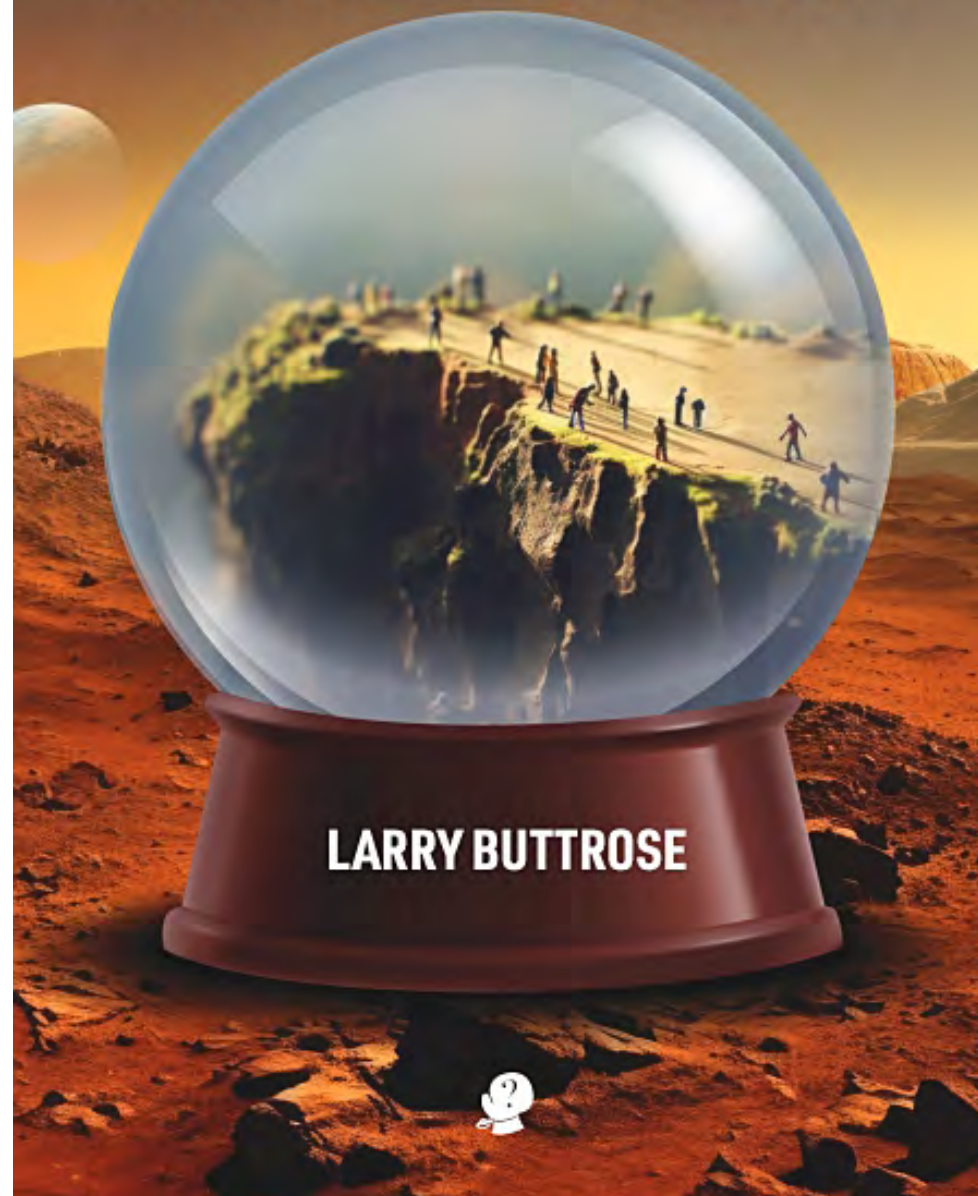
of life and death, hope and despair, all our cultural, intellectual, and spiritual understandings of what it means to be alive, to be alive on this planet, to be alive in this universe, what the universe means and might mean and what it is, and who we are. In the wastelands of Mars, we're not reflected in any way — there is not only no history, no culture, no humans, but the actual planet — its air, its water, and its soil, the planet itself is by its nature totally inhospitable. Humans have to be suited up and helmeted and using the assistance of technology merely to walk outside — no, not walk, go, to go outside, one must be at all times protected by a vehicle — all to withstand the hostility of a planet that we are not made for. Why then would one go? To conquer it? Why? What? For mineral wealth, it seems from these stories.

Now, **Larry Buttrose's** book *Everyone on Mars*: Buttrose depicts a society on Mars entirely of his making. Not any society, for he's done his research: the society Buttrose depicts must

necessarily pay much attention to 'wellness' because, in one character's telling: 'vulnerable people are even more so here There's nothing here but some minerals under its surface.' This is further evidenced when a seismic engineer, facing her suddenly deranged, knife-wielding colleague, in the moment of terror realises the effect of Mars on her colleagues — it 'brings out the worst in them ... The unknown terrain of an alien world, and the equally unknown terrains of their own minds ... In the end, the demons were your own and you had to face them yourself.' On the other hand, a poet laureate illegally escapes out of the severely limited tourist route and in that moment of unprecedented freedom ecstatically sees the ideal of Mars, the one a character in a joke shop envisages in a later story and would give his eye tooth to experience — 'A place naked of life, stripped even of atmosphere, in every sense. ... Without life to screw it up, the universe was overwhelming, commanding, brilliant. These orange-red rock-strewn plains of nothing, these mad gargantuan mountains with no one to stand on them, barren skies that fled before the eyes ... it was pure and exquisite as it was eternal ...'

All novelists necessarily create a world in their fictions, a world on their terms, and Buttrose's society is a very particular expatriate society; stoutly and unashamedly articulate, educated and erudite, self-determined, clear-thinking and ready to explore their feelings. In the first story, a writer in residence, part of the attempt at 'wellness', loves and needs the company of 'real books' despite the weight and space they take up in the ship, for electronic books 'lack the authority and truth of print stamped into paper, something you can touch and hold and that will never alter'. Another equally self-possessed character, the seismic scientist whose male colleague suddenly becomes a would-be rapist, is entirely believable when, rational in the moment of danger, she reasons before she attempts to escape from the vehicle that Mars brings out 'the worst in many of its inhabitants' and considers 'the unknown terrain of an alien world, and the equally alien terrain of their own minds'. (This story in particular set my heart racing. Afterwards, I found myself absurdly worrying if the character —

EVERYONE ON MARS



the character! And I'm a writer! — managed to escape with her life! So Buttrose, a writer's writer, knows how to make a story hum.) Afterwards, I asked myself why I believed a character could be so rational at knife-point — would I be rational? — and I think my answer is the strength, no, the *force* of the writing. We're carried along. Another young shift-worker becomes 'a kind of existentialist Martian rebel' who finally gives up useless (and amusing) vandalism such as writing 'Fuck Mars' in an arrangement of stones, and instead writes his memoirs, delivers them to the writer in residence — of course, since this is a story, another good one — of all the writing submitted to her, it's the best writing ever — and after his shift's end, escapes the confines of his group, takes himself to a summit, removes his helmet, lies down on his back beside his helmet, and dies, smiling with relief. All the time we read on, knowing half-consciously that this is an artificial society, not only in the sense that any human encampment on Mars must be artificial but that it's an authorial creation, the world the author wants to dwell on. Nevertheless, this reader at least was entirely convinced.

Partly my credulity in his characters was won by the witty story telling where the unexpected but totally credible (because of his artful telling) happens before our very eyes as it were — for instance, a Baroness rolls fighting on the floor with her servant over the possession of a secret manuscript, the one she's been sent on the public purse to Mars to write — in front of a reporter from *The Guardian*, who is, deliciously for he's entirely gormless, a distant relative of the great African writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o; a couple on their last night together on Earth before the woman departs to be a psychiatrist on Mars decides at last to get married and to confirm their sacred union go, of all places, to a joke shop to buy rings; a lonely housewife, her husband sent temporarily back to Earth, is intent on fastidiously banishing every reminder of the 'yellow' Mars in her boudoir by be-decking it in shades of blue — 'navy, sky, electric, turquoise, cornflower, periwinkle, ultramarine, midnight, IKB' — in between lonely bouts of drunkenness and masturbation; a PR writer on a nine-month cruise ship

to Mars takes as a lover a dancer in the entertainment troupe and when the virus takes the lives of all on board, she too dies in a naked dance of death on stage, kicking him in the front row of the audience, and he is the only person to reach Mars alive — these stories are lively, well humoured, well turned, and perfectly crafted.

But perhaps more importantly, my credulity was won by Buttrose's images, whose very originality is enough to persuade me that there is indeed a deep well of shared understanding of our planet home. The housewife buying blue wall- paper is served in a shop by an assistant with a face like a rooster, who points out during the conversation that she'll need blue bed linen. 'With that he did his small fowl smile and she wondered if the drumstick would come away easily from the carcass.' (I'm not sure how the drumstick related to his face, but I laughed aloud in recognition of that face.) A judge faced with a woman refusing an application for divorce sees her eyes as 'a sea-green you could wish to sail on'. A printed book (as opposed to reviled electronic books for the writer in residence) is as 'silent and motionless as a cat on a shelf'. A young woman has a mouth 'like a fresh strawberry'. A woman remarks on the colour of a man's tie as being 'like a distant sky before dusk'. A man entering the house of a woman he desires sees 'a sofa you could laze your life away on'. Because of their originality, we not only apprehend these images of 'Our beautiful cripple, the Earth', as he calls it, but yearn for more images, and caught up with the writing, read on.

The stories are told by a dependable narrator, a classic puppeteer, who lurks behind the text, unashamedly erudite in matters of literature and film, just as the characters of his society are. Contemporary fiction often eschews literary and classic film references but they are entirely appropriate to the ruminations of his characters — so, still under the spell of the writing, this reader, swept along by the sheer narrative force, took pleasure in looking up, for example, John Betjeman to discover his comic verse, recalled (though slowly) the short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper',



Larry Buttrose. (Photo: Niobe Syme.)

and discovered Slim Pickins in *Blazing Saddles*, and Josephine Baker.

Many collections of stories begin with the strongest story, but flag somewhat in strength in the middle of the collection. Nearly all these stories are strong (I quibbled with the inclusion of only one) and are ordered in such a progression that the reader first becomes acquainted with the traumas of living on Mars as seen through the eyes of his characters, and then there follow stories about people considering living on Mars, or who are about to set out for Mars, or people actually on the journey there. The strength of the credibility of the Buttrose creation is tested by the

penultimate story 'Science Fiction', the longest and most ambitious. A historian reports the machinations on Earth that follow when a tiny piece of Martian 'slime' is controversially brought to Earth where it is discovered to be toxic, but worse, Earth's hospitable conditions enable it to grow and multiply so that it spreads over Earth's landmass. Hysterical populations and politicians instead of scientists take control of what happens then, and it is a testament to the author's gender agnosticism that we entirely believe his female Donald Trump look-alike as she incites the uninformed masses to create what inevitably becomes the utter destruction of Earth, so that Earth's inhabitants are forced to leave our planet for Mars. The reader, this reader, thinks for a moment, and nods soberly. It could happen.

Buttrose shows no interest in the scientists and engineers, the maintenance workers, medical staff, computer experts, biologists, and botanists that the finding of mineral wealth on Mars requires, although two workers, both tortured, cross the paths of his chosen protagonists, and we read mentions of them socialising in a never explored 'Mess': such people, drawn to Mars because of their research interests, could've provided a more nuanced view of Mars — somewhere between the Baroness's 'nothing here' and 'pure and exquisite'. Certainly they would add to the sum of human knowledge and that knowledge could greatly facilitate life on Earth — but then this little book would still ask, if coupled with the acquisition of that knowledge was the concept that we might one day, foolishly comforted with the thought that there was somewhere to escape to, lose the Earth, could we deal with that terrible, eternal bereavement?

Buttrose's book quietly but unflinchingly argues a thesis so that the reader puts the book down with an emotionally charged conviction: it would be monstrously unbearable to lose this beautiful planet, our perfect home. We cannot let this happen. This, his book artfully argues, would be the saddest story.

— **Sue Woolfe**, 2024

The Tony Thomas Column

Column 1: In the wake of the Clarke Award

MARTIN MACINNES WINS ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD FOR 'INTENSE TRIP' OF A NOVEL

Scottish writer **Martin MacInnes** has taken home this year's Arthur C. Clarke award for what judges described as an 'intense trip' of a novel, moving from the depths of the ocean to outer space. ***In Ascension*** (Atlantic Books, £9.99), MacInnes's third novel, was revealed as the winner of the award, recognising the best science fiction novel of the year, at a ceremony in London on Wednesday.

- MacInnes previously wrote *Infinite Ground*, published in 2016, and *Gathering Evidence*, published in 2020. *In Ascension* was also longlisted for the 2023 Booker prize.
- ***In Ascension*** was shortlisted for the Clarke Award alongside:
- ***Chain-Gang All-Stars*** by **Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah**;
- ***The Ten Percent Thief*** by **Lavanya Lakshminarayan**;

- ***The Mountain in the Sea*** by **Ray Nayler**;
- ***Some Desperate Glory*** by **Emily Tesh**
- ***Corey Fah Does Social Mobility*** by **Isabel Waidner**.

'As always, the judging session was filled with emotion and intelligence and it took a while for *In Ascension* to emerge as the frontrunner,' said judging chair and writer Andrew M. Butler. 'It shows us, in the words of one judge, 'vistas between the cellular and the cosmic'. It's an intense trip and for once it's a winner that is in the tradition of Clarke's own novels.'

MacInnes will receive £2024, reflecting the current year. Since 2001, the annual prize money has risen by a pound each year.

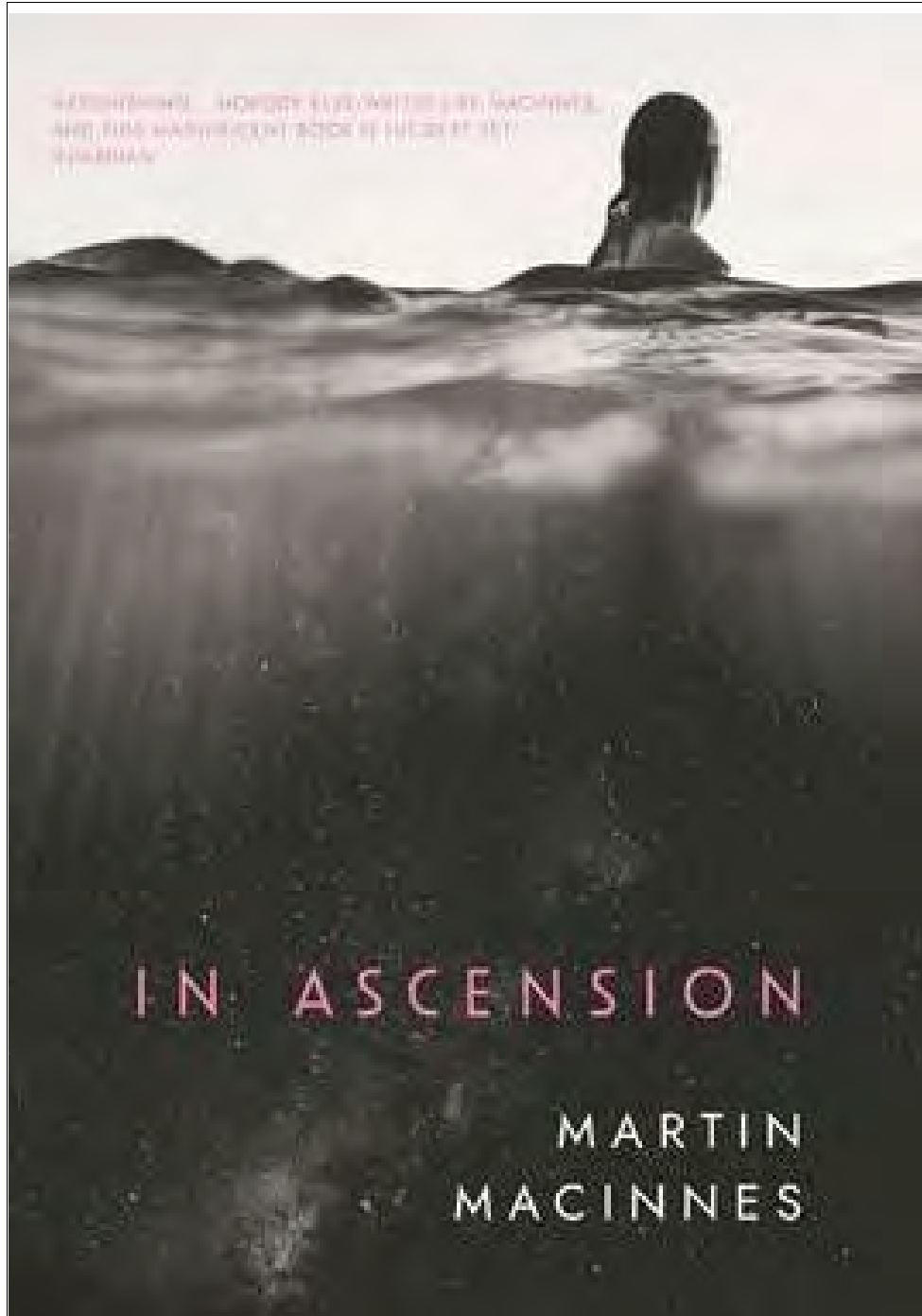
— **Ella Creamer**, *Guardian*, 25 July 2024

Thanks Bruce for sending on the above item.

I'd read about this already this week because, really by chance, I'd read three of the contenders some time ago. ***In Ascension*** I thought was the best of these, though ***The Mountain in the Sea*** was also strong and ***Chain Gang*** was also memorable. I bought the other three contenders and attempted to read ***Corey Fah***, but

thought this was just using sf tropes (with little understanding) for its own gay polemic reasons, and only got through half. The other two sit there on the table, probably never to be opened.

I realise that I've been unforgivably silent since your generous treatment of Jenny and me in recent *SFCs*, and apologise for this.



It's been somewhat of a weird year for me, after recovering from the hip operation last Christmas. I booked a lot of concerts and have spent an enormous amount of time at these, as well as reading an enormous number of books, 82 to nearly the end of July. But I've seen almost no-one except at concerts and a few Shakespeare events. I've also been involved in a fortnightly Shakespeare Zoom, where an Australia-wide and sometimes international cast reads through less familiar plays: two Parts of *Henry VI* so far, and we've just started *Cymbeline*.

My son and some movers helped move the remainder (most) of my CDs from Ferntree Gully recently to the spare room in my daughter's flat underneath mine, where they sit in 20 or 30 boxes waiting for shelves to be fixed and boxes unpacked. I sit at the dining room table surrounded by the CDs I use for my weekly programs in teetering stacks alongside this computer. Teetering slightly further away are books bought in the last year or so, some read, some not. The most recent book buys are teetering on the coffee table, once again, some read.

After interviewing **Michael Kieran Harvey** earlier this year I did some publicity for his solo concert at the Eleventh Hour Theatre in Fitzroy, which was a sellout in a small venue. Michael is going to come and stay in the flat in Elwood that Jenny and I bought to house my library, but which still is mainly waiting to be filled. This is so he can perform at a Melbourne Composers League concert in September.

I notice that a very large proportion of the books read this year have been given my top ranking of five stars. Either my judgment is also teetering with age, or I've been more selective in only reading books I think I'll like. Especially prominent in the earlier part of this year were books by **Peter Dickinson**, whom I've been collecting since reading *Tulku* with my daughter in the 1970s. This year Dickinsons read, some for the first time, include ***Emma Tupper's Diary*, *Eva*, *Earth and Air*, *The Seventh Raven*, *Healer*, *The Green Gene*, *The Gift*, *A Bone from a Dry Sea*,**

***The Glass-sided Ants' Nest*, *The Dancing Bear*, *A Pride of Heroes*, *The Devil's Children*, and *The Sinful Stones*.** The best of these are his YA novels, a huge variety of themes, some sf, some historical, some current time, well described by John Clute in his *SF Encyclopedia* entry.

A few other random highlights from the last six months:

- Several **K. J. Parkers**, including ***The Long Game***
- **William Trevor: *Fools of Fortune***
- **John Banville: *Ancient Light***
- **Alasdair Gray: *Poor Things***
- **George Monbiot and Peter Hutchinson: *The Invisible***

Doctrine (why neoliberalism is ruining the world)

- **Donald E. Westlake: *Enough/Double Feature***, and other Westlakes
- **Jo Callaghan: *In the Blink of an Eye***: a police procedural featuring an AI detective (alongside a human) who can call up 3D images at will (so really sf)
- **Joelle Gergis: *Highway to Hell*** (Quarterly Essay on climate change).

I have to stop now to write my script for tonight's music program.

(30 July 2024)

Column 2: It's Booker time again

I see the Booker short list is coming out on Monday (probably Tuesday our time) so I thought I'd better give you my takes on what I've read from the **long list** to date.

Of the long list of 13, with one, **Richard Powers' *Playground***, still to be published in a few weeks, I've read nine so far, and all were worthy nominees I thought, unlike most other years.

Of the nine, my picks for the short list would be:

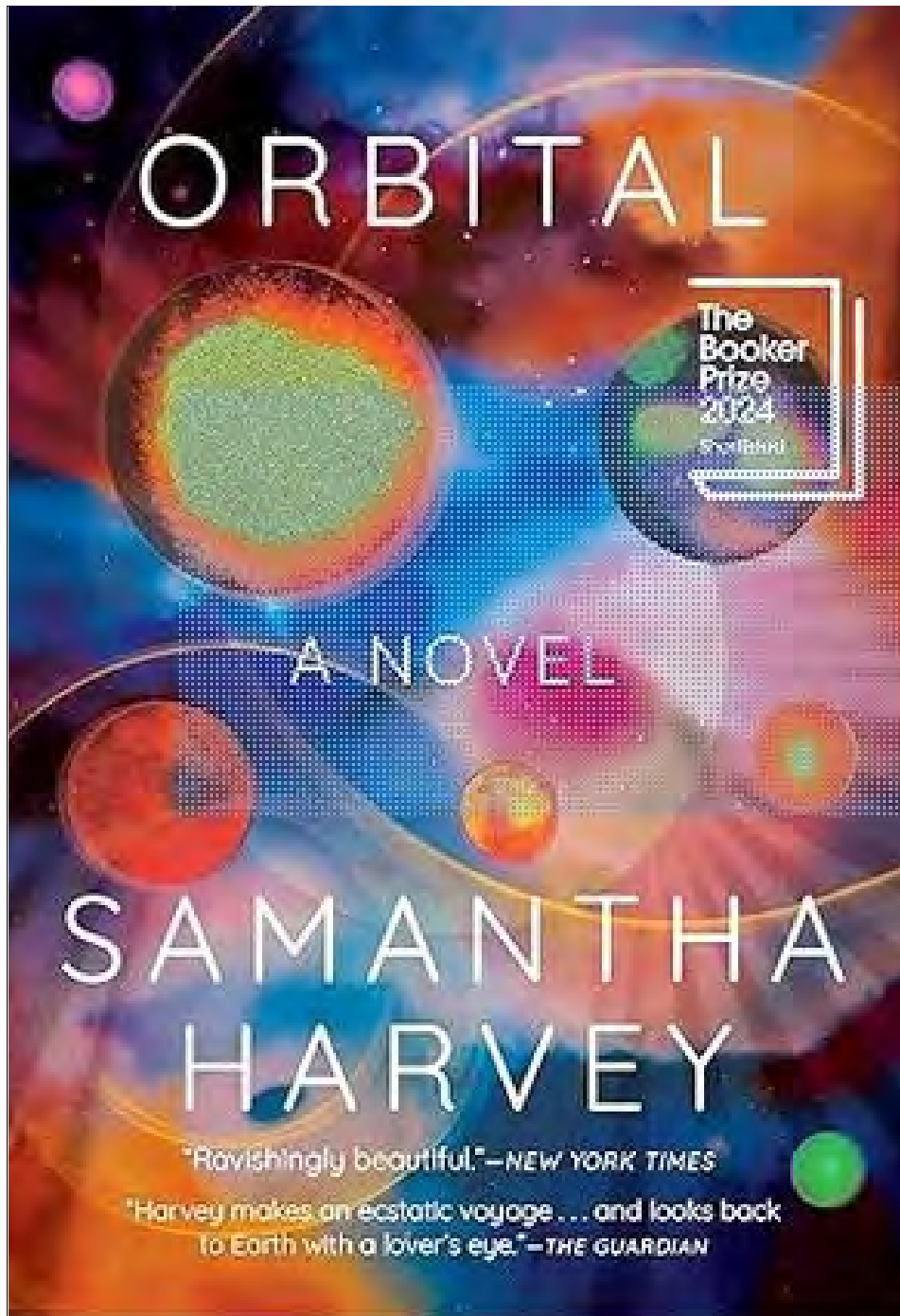
- **Samantha Harvey: *Orbital***
- **Hisham Matar: *My Friends***
- **Claire Messud: *This Strange Eventful History***
- **Sarah Perry: *Enlightenment***

- **Yael van der Wouden: *The Safekeep***

This is already five (of a short list usually of six), not leaving enough room for ones not yet read but which I'm probably going to like, namely **Rachel Kushner's *Creation Lake*** and **Richard Powers' *Playground***. So more paring will be needed.

Missing out, but not by a lot were:

- **Colin Barrett: *Wild Houses***
- **Rita Bullwinkel: *Headshot***
- **Percival Everett: *James***
- **Anne Michaels: *Held***



Also unread

- **Tommy Orange:** *Wandering Stars*
- **Charlotte Wood:** *Stone Yard Devotional*.

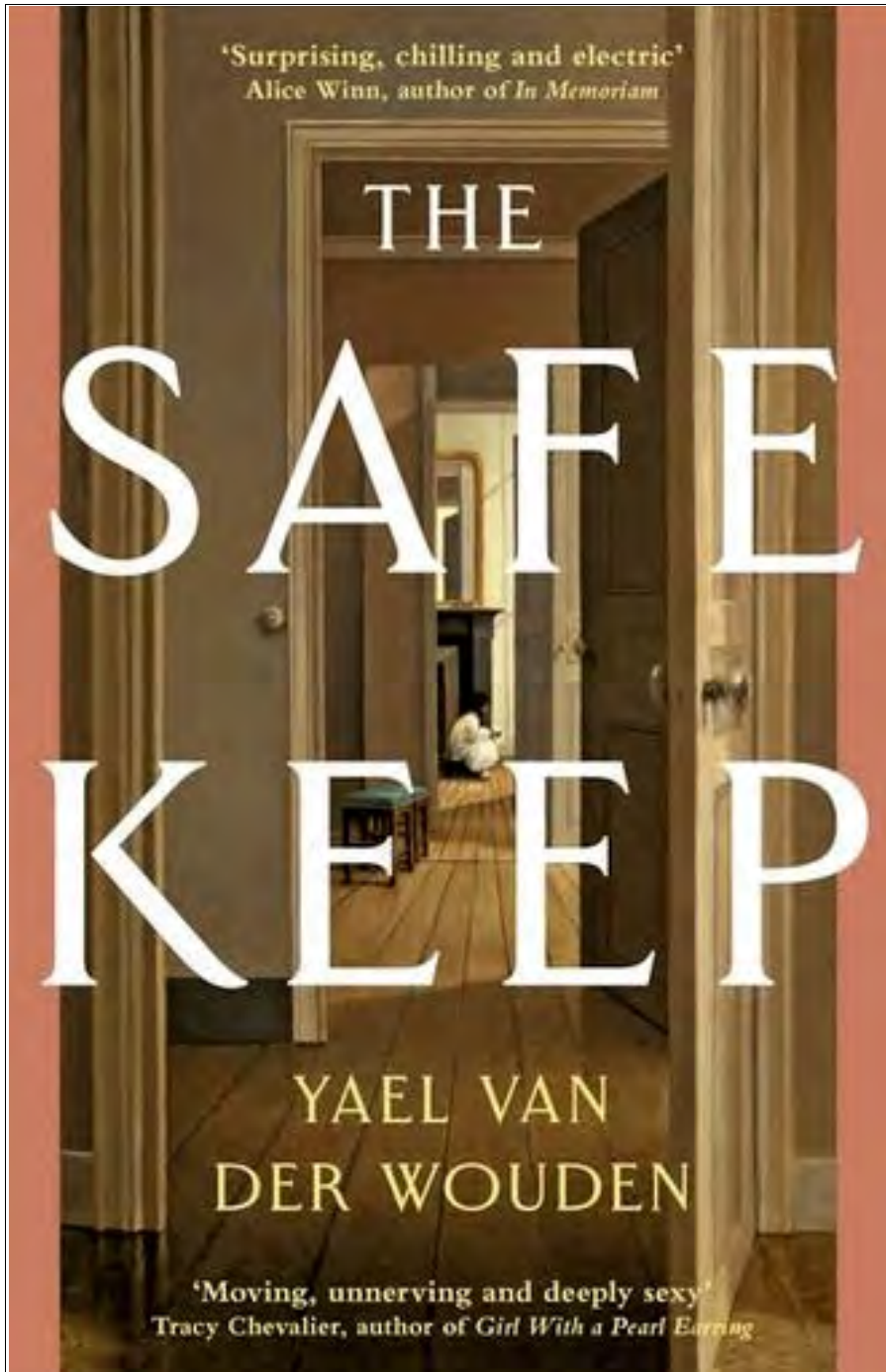
Here are some comments on those I thought might make the shortlist in the order I read them.

***Orbital* by Samantha Harvey**

Orbital by **Samantha Harvey** is by an established English author whose previous novels I haven't read. It's SF, though you wouldn't guess this from the book jacket and blurbs, which as usual won't mention the term for fear it will turn off the readers it hopes to attract. It's a short novel (only 136 pages) set entirely in space, one day in what might as well be the existing space station, but no aliens, warp drives, or galactic empires in sight. And it's slightly in the future, because a manned moon shot is passing by. The six imagined astronauts are mixed nationalities, just as in the existing space station, and the characters are just established enough to be satisfactorily credible and interesting — and there's a lot about their daily lives in a weightless environment, very well researched. But what it's really about is the vision of the Earth seen from space as the space station passes over various locations sixteen times in the day. The descriptions verge on the poetic, but always well under the control of the author, and my sensawonder was often aroused, much more than I can remember happening in any recent sf. As someone on the blurb on the back says: 'It's an elegy to planet Earth in all its splendour and fragility.'

***Enlightenment* by Sarah Perry**

Enlightenment by **Sarah Perry** is by another established English author whose previous novels I haven't read. It's set in a small (probably imaginary) town in Essex, a region the author seems to know well, judging by some of her earlier books. And she thanks her parents 'who raised me in the light of God and science



together'. And so here in this book there is a lot of religion and science too, but set around two unlikely friends, Thomas, a gay long-time columnist in the local paper, 50 when the novel starts, and Grace, a schoolgirl at the beginning. Both of these struggle with their religion, but are somehow kindred spirits. Thomas's active gay life is confined to London, and we hear almost nothing about it, but he is drawn to the straight James, who runs the local museum, and both develop an obsession with a forgotten nineteenth-century astronomer Maria Vaduva, who apparently made some astronomical discoveries, barely acknowledged. Some records of this are discovered in the remains of the local manor where she lived. All of this sounds somewhat like a hodgepodge, but Perry has a remarkable gift in bringing these disparate elements together into a beautiful story of love and friendship, betrayal, faith, and astronomy. The novel is a joy, and beautifully written.

The Safekeep
by Yael van der Wouden

Yael van der Wouden's *The Safekeep* is a first novel by an author with a Dutch background who currently lectures on literature in the Netherlands. Apart from the US and UK it's already been sold in 12 countries. It's extraordinarily powerful, and 'moving, unnerving and deeply sexy', as Tracy Chevalier writes. Set in the Netherlands in 1961, evidence of the war's devastation is still everywhere to be seen, and so is memory of poor treatment of Jews by many in the Netherlands, in contrast with other European countries, though not often spoken about. The repressed Isabel lives alone in her family home — a life of routine, her two brothers having left and her mother having died. When brother Louis has to leave his latest mistress Eva with Isabel for a period, Isabel develops a severe dislike to the very different, more worldly Eva. But it's not much of a surprise to us when this turns into a passionate love affair, though it is to both of the characters. What is more of a surprise is the secrets that belong to the family home, and in the family histories of both women.

This is my pick of the best of the short list so far, a passionate, moving, and surprising novel.

The final two novels are family histories with links to North Africa — and I'm running out of time so I'll be shorter.

***This Strange Eventful History* by Claire Messud**

American **Claire Messud** has quite a number of award-winning novels to her credit, which I haven't read. In ***This Strange Eventful History*** she uses much of her own family history, including naming some of the characters after her own family, to construct a family story covering many decades, and many places. A key event among many is the loss of Algeria as a home to the French colonialists as Algeria gains independence. But this is only one of many strands, and chapters are set in Cuba, US, Australia, Canada, etc as the family members scatter and their lives diverge. Constantly interesting and well written.

***My Friends* by Hisham Matar**

Hisham Matar was born to Libyan parents and spent his early life in Tripoli and Cairo and then lived most of his life in London. Now he's a professor at Columbia. There are several earlier novels and a Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir by this writer. ***My Friends*** is fiction: its Libyan protagonist, Khaled, finds himself an exile in London, unable to be with his family, during the rise of Gaddafi, and then much later his fall, in which some of his friends are involved. I imagine this reflects much of what the author experienced during these years although his own family situation

was quite different. There are many good insights into character and good writing in this 450-page book, and much interest in the Libyan politics. Many found it moving, although Khaled always remained a bit distant for me, and his friends too.

***James* by Percival Everett**

A book that didn't make my short list but has many admirers in America is ***James*** by **Percival Everett**, a retelling of *Huckleberry Finn* from the point of view of the slave Jim, now 'James'. James' voice here is standard American, because James has secretly learned to read and has educated himself by spending hours in his master's study. He can now converse to us about philosophy. Not only this, but he speaks to all the other blacks in the same voice, and they speak to him in it too. Because — guess what? — all this 'Yaas, massa' stuff is put on, as the stupid, violent white 'masters' expect blacks to talk this way. It's so many years since I read *Huck Finn* that I can't remember whether all the adventures that James and Huck go through are replications of those in Twain's story, but the fantasy ending where James is reunited with his wife and child and they manage to find a home in a slave free state is all Everett's. I think, reminiscent of some of Tarantino's fantasies where Hitler is incinerated, and Django manages to outwit and kill just about everybody.

It's 10:40 p.m. on Monday now, and I have to stop. Some more about the Bookers, and about other good things read this year I hope will come in the next few weeks when I think I'll have some more free time.

(17 September 2024)

The Booker short list

As you know, the Booker short list did come out on 17 September (our time) and two of my predictions were on it, **Samantha Harvey's *Orbital***, and **Yael van der Wouden's *The Safekeep***. *Orbital*, I see from the *New York Review*, has now won the 2024 Hawthornden prize for Literature, with a commendation by Christopher Reid: 'Our sense of time, of physical distance, of humanity's relationship to Earth and of the human condition itself are all subtly re-adjusted in the pages of this short, meditative novel about the crew of a spacecraft circling the planet for twenty-four hours. Samantha Harvey has written a work, rare in any genre, that approaches the sublime.' My view, expressed in my last email, is that either of these would be worthy Booker winners.

I can't say the same about **Percival Everett's *James***, which also, as I thought it might, made the short list. This was quite readable, but I'd put several other novels ahead of it, as I said in my last.

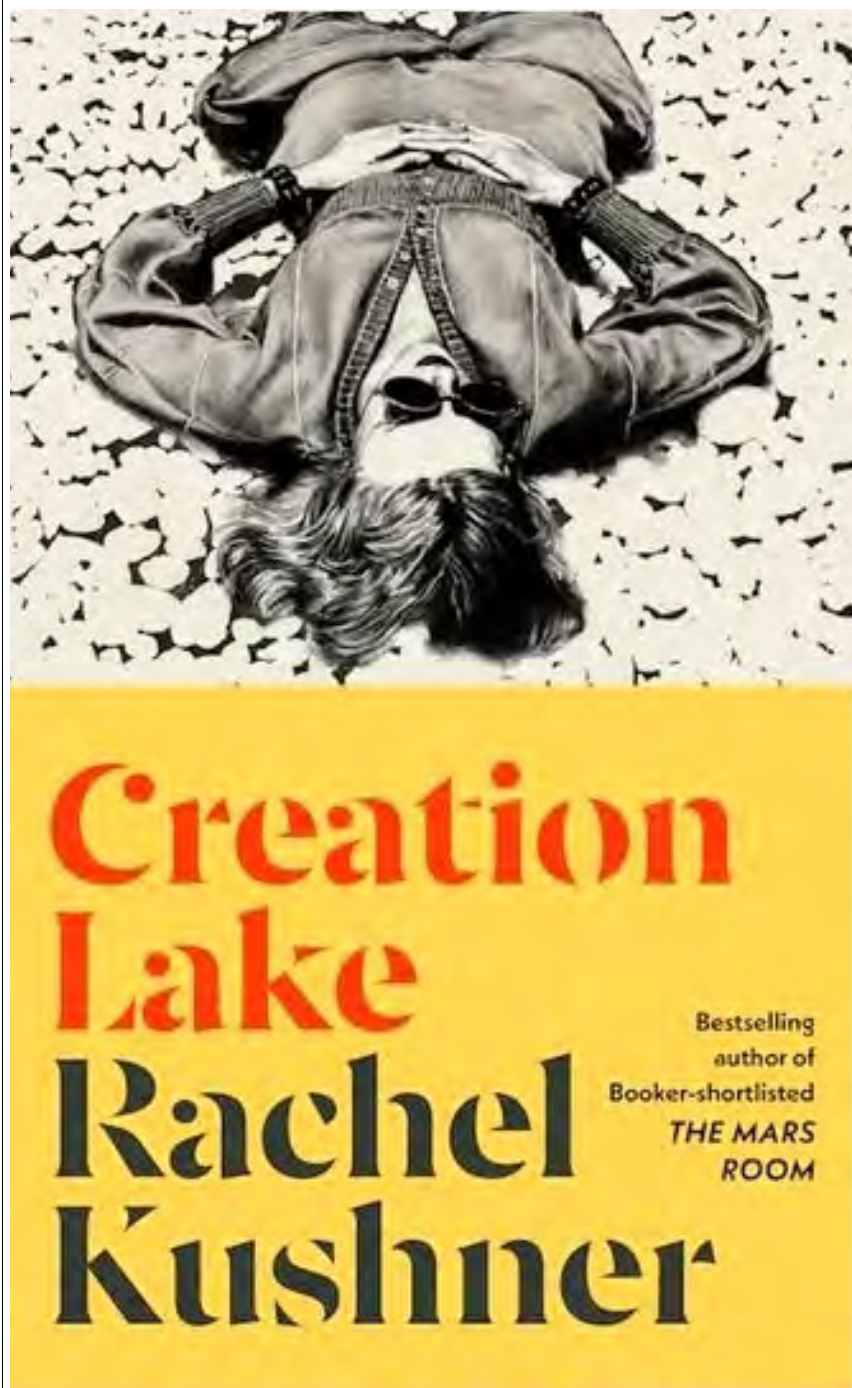
***Held* by Anne Michaels**

Another book that made the short list, which I'd read, was **Anne Michaels' *Held***. This is by a much-awarded Canadian, with a previous novel, but best known for her poetry — she was a former Canadian poet laureate. And the novel takes the form of poetry to a large extent, mostly written in short sections, often less than a page, separated by asterisks, quite often containing bits that are striking, sometimes not so much. It starts in the First World War, and jumps back and forth in time and place, encompassing four generations of characters, so that — to be frank — I had trouble following the action some of the time, or knowing whom

I was reading about. And, to be frank again, my view is that it's the duty of a novelist to make these things clear. I gave up having to re-check what was going on by turning back — and maybe this is a problem for me particularly. But I contrast **Claire Messud** in her novel, with an equally large cast of characters and as many different time periods, achieving clarity with little trouble, if less poetry. I might turn to look at this book again if it wins, but maybe not: so little time, so many books.

***Creation Lake* by Rachel Kushner**

Since I last wrote, **Rachel Kushner's *Creation Lake***, also on the short list, was published and arrived in the mail and I read it. Kushner, as usual, writes a novel that's hard to come to grips with, and this despite my working through a several-thousand-word review by a professor of literature in the *New York Review*. His main point, quite correct I think, is that Kushner is a political novelist, and he has the advantage of having read several of her previous novels, whereas I've only read her fine 2018 Booker nominee, *The Mars Room*, which also made the short list, and which was about prisons, and among other things made an argument for prison abolition. *Creation Lake* is also about politics, this time in France, but is very far from a polemic, as Kushner is first of all a storyteller. There's a thriller plot, told in the first person by a narrator calling herself Sadie who works for money for the government and private corporations infiltrating left-wing organisations to cause them to break the law. She sounds like the ultimate unreliable narrator, but Sadie is full of wise observations about politics, based apparently on real events and real people in France, and full also of wise observations about the state of



Europe, with excursions into French philosophy, and Neanderthals. This sounds like an incredible melange, but Kushner makes it all work. This is another book that I see as a deserving winner this year.

One of the key messages in *Creation Lake* is how capitalism and consumerism have let us and the world down, and how a radical change is necessary, but how also it's difficult to see a path towards it. Rather, the paths being taken seem more and more to be leading to disaster. This was also a message in the latest short book by French economist **Thomas Piketty**, *Nature, Culture and Inequality*, for which I took time off from reading the Booker lists to absorb in an afternoon. Piketty's conclusion suggests some grounds to hope for future change, with climate change a possible driver, but hope remains the key word. In the same week I also saw **Francis Ford Coppola's** *Megalopolis* at a preview screening, a brilliant but messy film, which also lays bare the corrupt nature of our consumer society for two and a quarter hours, and shows a future utopia as no more than a fanciful dream. Some of the music for this film is by the brilliant composer Osvaldo Golijov, whom I have featured a lot on my 3MBS program *Contemporary Visions*.

Stone Yard Devotional **by Charlotte Wood**

The last book to mention from the Booker short list is the Australian one, **Stone Yard Devotional** by **Charlotte Wood**. I've started to read this but am only about 60 pages in as I write. This is the eleventh book from the complete Booker long list, with two others as yet unread, **Playground** by **Richard Powers**, which was only recently published, and **Wandering Stars** by **Tommy Orange**, neither of which made the short list.

Taking my own holiday from more serious fare, in the last couple of weeks I turned my own consumerism to some other books read for pleasure.

Guilty by Definition is a cosy murder mystery by **Susie Dent**, a lexicographer who has appeared for decades on British TV, latterly on *8 out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*, a comic version of what became *Letters and Numbers* here on SBS. Susie has a number of books about language to her credit, but this is her first novel. Using what she knows about to advantage, her cast of characters is a group of lexicographers working for what she terms the CED, the Clarendon English Dictionary, a transparent disguise indeed. Murders occur, but the Macguffin in this case (to use the term that Hitchcock revived) is the unlikely survival of a commonplace book compiled by Shakespeare's sister, Joan Hart, a real person, though not known to have left any writings. This was great fun, revealing 'facts' about Shakespeare that none of us could know, and I read a few extracts to a recent Melbourne Shakespeare Society meeting. [Also see **Colin Steele**'s review later in this issue.]

From my library of unread sf I picked up **Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven***, a Clarke winner of a few years ago which made a considerable impression at the time. This is a pre-Covid dystopian novel in which a plague wipes out most of humanity. It focuses on a travelling troupe of musicians who double as actors performing Shakespeare, travelling between the few surviving towns in parts of America. This was fun, but remarkably benign compared with, say, McCarthy's *The Road*.

In **Candice Fox's** latest thriller, ***High Wire***, the author has turned from America, where she set her recent books, to Australia's remote outback, where an extremely unlikely revenge plot is carried out on the protagonist, who the author says is modelled on Lee Child's Jack Reacher. Like Reacher, he manages to

overcome his adversaries in the most lethal ways, but Fox keeps us turning pages as she piles incident on inventive incident.

After all this action, **Elizabeth Jane Howard's *After Julius*** was a novel more in Jane Austen style. This was originally written in 1965, though I read a much later paperback, and it was dedicated to Kingsley, i.e. **Kingsley Amis**, to whom Howard was married at the time. It's interesting to contrast this book with what Amis was writing about the same time. Howard's main characters are a group of women, a mother and two adult daughters, who get their own chapters a number of times and are sympathetically drawn, though equally their faults are not disguised. A couple of the men they encounter get their own chapters too, and Howard expends a good deal of time trying to make them sympathetic too, but not I think succeeding nearly as well. At about this time Amis was writing *The Green Man*, narrated by a typical Amis male protagonist, all out for himself, with women hardly there at all except to satisfy male needs. Though Jesus gets a walk-on speaking part as well. I keep reading Howard, but haven't yet come to her sequence of the Cazalet Chronicles, her biggest claim to fame, turned into a very successful TV series that I've also never seen.

The Booker winner is not due to be announced until 12 November, so I've got plenty of time to finish the remaining three books on the long list. At which time, I'll write again.

(10 October 2024)

It's 2:00 in the morning and I've been in the middle of preparing to interview Paavali Jumppanen on my program tomorrow, and just realised that in a few hours we'll hear the result of the Bookers this year. So here are my final thoughts before the announcement.

I finished reading the short list some time ago, finishing with **Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional***. This was well written and received glowing plaudits from writers I like, such as Karen Joy Fowler and Claire Fuller. It's about a woman who gives up

everything in her life, husband, job, friends, to go in search of something she believes she's missing — it's never quite clear what — but she ends up in a religious (Catholic) community of nuns, returning to her hometown roots, but without the faith that is the core of the community. When I sat back and thought about it, I couldn't really credit that the community could survive economically, with its motel-like accommodation for guests, and no support from the church. And the giving up everything doesn't seem to include emails and phones. And the rest of the world impinges only slightly. Doesn't sound like anywhere I know.

My final order of preference for the winner from the short list then is:

- 1 **Yael van der Wouden: *The Safekeep***
- 2 **Rachel Kushner: *Creation Lake***
- 3 **Samantha Harvey: *Orbital***
- 4 **Charlotte Wood: *Stone Yard Devotional***

The winner!

I just heard from the *Guardian* that **Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*** won the Booker this year.

This was in my top three, and a deserving winner, I thought, despite a discussion/dispute in the November Nova Mob meeting, where, when I put it up for consideration, there was an attempt to rubbish it as 'not a novel' because it lacked characters and plot. Not, I hasten to say, on **Ian Mond's** part — he hadn't read it, I think, and in any case it was published in 2023, whereas Ian was

5 **Percival Everett: *James***

6 **Anne Michaels: *Held***

From the long list, I've read all but Powers' *Playground* and half of Orange's *Wandering Stars*, and from those I've read I'd put **Sarah Perry: *Enlightenment***, **Claire Messud: *This Strange Eventful History***, and **Hisham Matar: *My Friends*** ahead of the last three on the short list.

But apparently a huge fuss is being made about Everett's *James* and I wouldn't be surprised if this turned out to be the winner, even though *Wandering Stars* is a more honest and better book about race — in this case First Nation Americans.

2:41 a.m. now, and bedtime.

(12 November 2024)

talking about books published this year.

This means that sf novels — **Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*** and now ***Orbital*** — have won the last two Bookers. Some sort of record, I'm sure, though, of course, neither acknowledged as sf by the publishers.

(13 November 2024)

LEIGH EDMONDS began 2024 weighed down by the death of his wife Valma Brown in 2023, but during the year he has been travelling from Ballarat in Central Victoria quite often to catch up with friends, has published and launched *Proud and Lonely*, the first volume of his history of Australian fandom, and has been gathering the materials for Part 2 of his history. He has also attended Corflu in Las Vegas, revived his fanzine *Ornithopter*, written much for lucky fanzine editors such as me, and won not only this year's Ditmar Award for Best Fan Writer but also topped the annual ANZAPA popularity poll. Ever onward, Leigh!

The Leigh Edmonds column

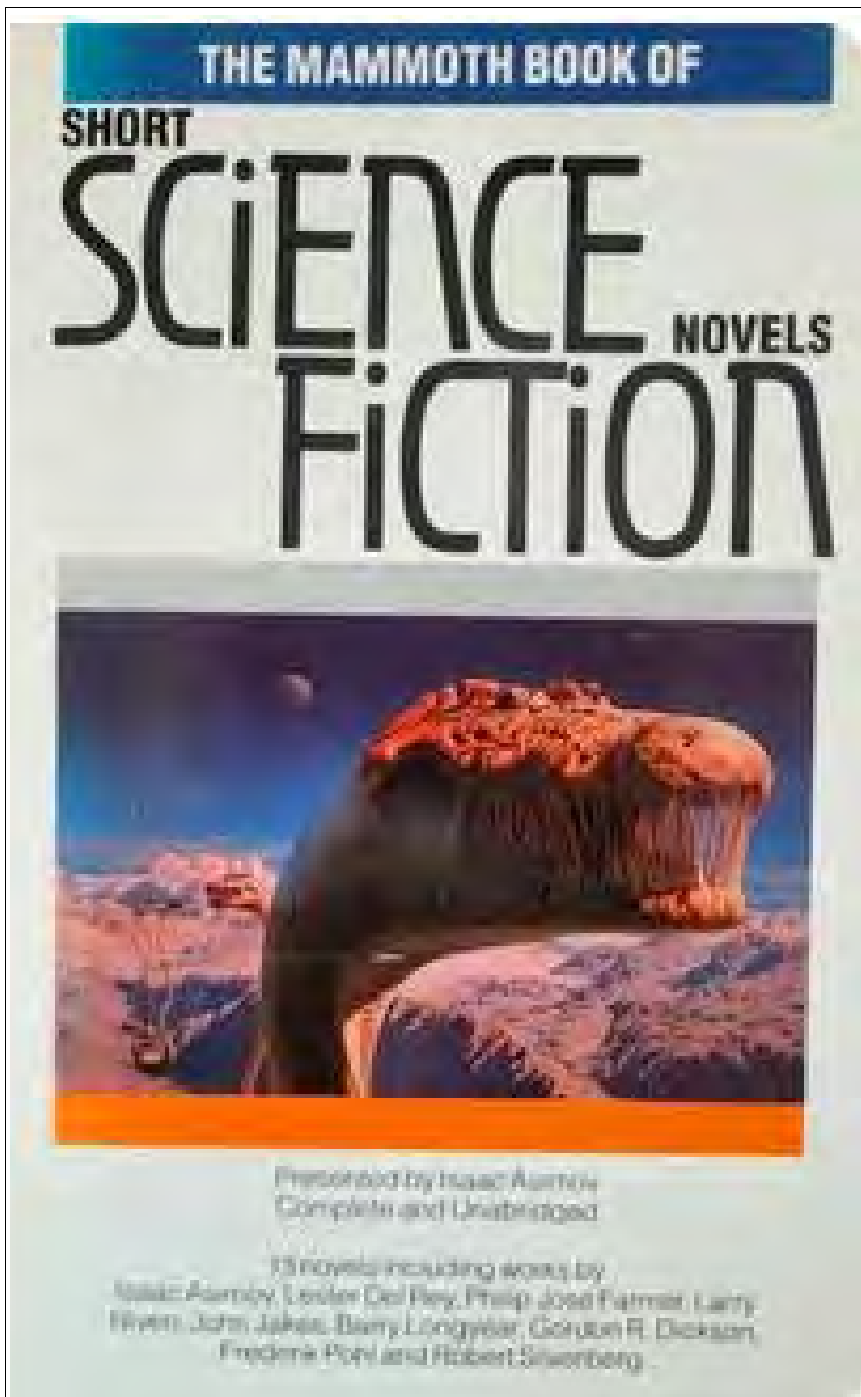
Column 1:

SF, history, and counter-factual history

I had a lovely day yesterday (13 August), visiting you and Elaine, having lunch and enjoying the warmish weather in what seems like an early spring. I was talking to the person who comes and keeps the yard here tidy and she said that everyone must be feeling the same about an early spring because of the number of people who want her to do their yards too. I did follow your instructions on how to get to Greensborough station from Lucky Little Dumplings restaurant but I admit to getting distracted by everything to look at and getting a little lost. This was not a problem, because a couple of pokes at my mobile phone showed me where I was and where I wanted to be. Isn't modern technology wonderful?

I can't say that I've read all of *SFC* 117 so this isn't really a letter of comment. Perhaps it's musings flowing from the train trips to and from your place, the bits and pieces I read in *SFC* and the latest issue of *Captain Flashback* and the various things we chatted about over lunch. For example, I was struck by the thoughts of **William Breiding** in his column at the back of *Captain Flashback 68*, which are to be found after the mailing comments. so you'd most likely miss it if you were not interested in those comments.

In his column William reviews a book called *The Mammoth Book of Short Science Fiction Novels*, which was published in 1984.



This review runs for over four pages and gives short comments on the 13 novellas in the book, mostly not positive. The article makes for interesting reading but I did feel somewhat let down because it was fairly good reviewing but not the crunchy criticism we used to get in earlier generations of fanzines. Still, there's not much of that around in fandom these days.

This thought leads in two directions. The first is to wonder why fandom rarely deals with that kind of criticism these days and the second one is to ponder, in an uninformed sort of way, about the direction science fiction is taking. Right at the end of his article William writes, 'But much of contemporary science fiction is so well written that when I read older sf I find it completely unsatisfactory ...' I look at the 'so well written' in two directions. One is to simply look down to the way that science fiction used to be written and the other is to look up to the lofty heights of 'literature', which is the direction most sf readers seem to expect these days. I have this sneaking suspicion, however, that being more like real literature does not make for better science fiction.

For example, at the moment I'm absorbing *Caliban's War*, the second volume of the '**Expanse**' series which, on Audible, occupies 21 hours. It is tolerably well written and has lots of personal detail and reflection which are supposed to give the characters greater depth. It also has well-crafted action sequences and all that other good stuff. But, for me all this is flummery obscuring the fundamental fascinating ideas in the text. I recall listening to that classic *Way Station* (Clifford Simak) earlier this year, which runs for only about seven hours. It is a third of the duration of *Caliban's War* and to my thoughts, a far superior and better written novel. I almost long for the days of the Reader's Digest Condensed Books to deal with this bloated work. Is that bad of me?

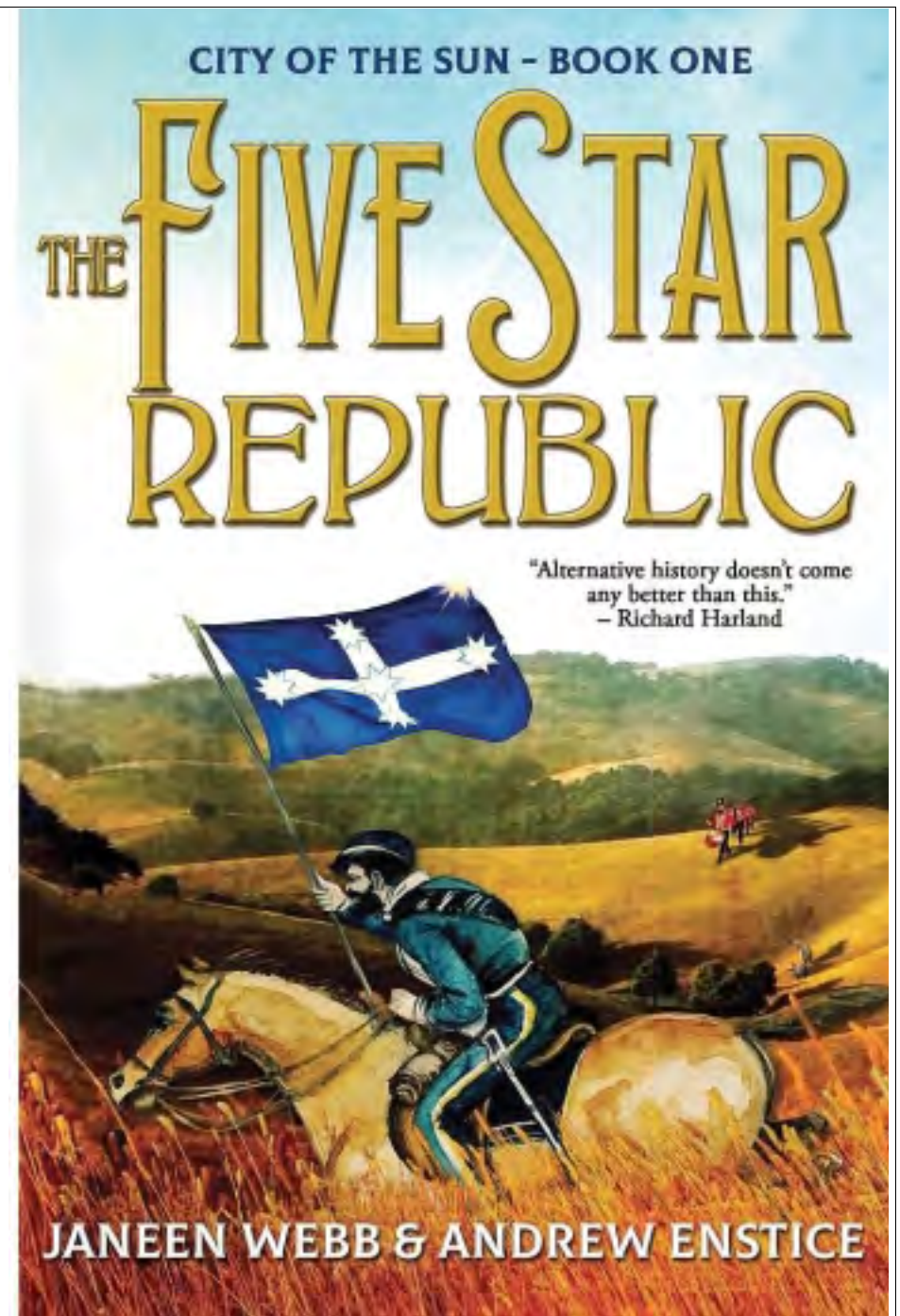
On the other hand, if you look upon science fiction as product, I'm getting much more value from *Caliban's War* than I did from the much shorter *Way Station*. But maybe there is a different kind of

value to be had from science fiction, which is why I will remember the Simak book long after I've forgotten this one.

Back to the other thought: where has the criticism gone out of fandom? I'm thinking back to the page upon page of highly reasoned and passionate argument I read in the fanzines of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the Special Collection at UC Riverside. Partly it is, I think, that the generation of fans still producing fanzines no longer has anything to prove or to compete with each other intellectually as they did back then. These days those who are left have mostly used up their critical faculties and now enjoy quiet (and sometimes not so quiet) reflection. Which is what you find in most fanzines these days.

The other reason, which we discussed yesterday, is that the critical analysis of science fiction has disappeared into the universities. I recall that one of the last things I did in the halls of Murdoch University was to sit in on a lecture in a course about science fiction. I don't recall much about it except for my amazement, astonishment (and so on) that sf was now being taken so seriously that it would almost fill a good-sized lecture theatre. And remembering that only 30 years earlier the best (and perhaps only) place in Australia to find and learn about science fiction was upstairs in Somerset Place, well out of public and academic view.

Being a bit curious about this, I consulted Google and quickly found nine Australian universities offering courses in science fiction and/or fantasy. No doubt their courses are full of students busy churning out three- and five-thousand-word essays that once would have gone into fanzines. Some will be doing honours courses with 15,000-word essays, and there will be Masters and PhD theses on top of that. I feel sorry for the poor souls who have to mark and examine all those words, but it also seems to me that a lot of intellectual energy is disappearing into those courses that might otherwise be of wider interest. However, since these courses seem to be located in the literature departments of universities, the students are never going to be exposed to fandom or fanzines



— which are sociological and cultural phenomena — in a way that earlier generations of sf readers and enthusiasts were.

Thinking about universities reminds me to mention **Janeen Webb**'s excellent piece in *SFC* 117. Around the same time that I was amazed, astounded (etc) by science fiction being taught in universities I was also seeing the idea of counter-factual history beginning to become a thing in history departments. I did not see much of the insides of universities once I left Perth, so I don't know how that idea has developed, but I had a couple of reactions to this counter-factual idea. One was that by using counter-factual techniques historians hoped to be able to find new ways of looking at areas of historical interest that had already been so thoroughly gone over that counter-factual interrogation was all that was left. My other thought was that if you were going to write **counter-factual history** you might as well go the whole way and write science fiction. Which is the path Janeen has taken. Conceptually, it seems to me, there are many important similarities with science fiction, an idea I unpack a little in *Proud and Lonely* (p. 5).

This may raise the question of why I didn't go in the same direction as Janeen. I think the reason is because my historical interests lay in areas which have not been already well gone over so there is still plenty of scope to find and interrogate new evidence. Who, for example, would want to have a look at science fiction fandom in Australia? No great reputations are going to be made there for sure. The other reason for me not writing fiction is that I'm ratshit at dialogue, plotting, and characterisation. In writing history I don't have to write dialogue, the plot more or less writes itself and the only characterisation I can use is what I find in the evidence so I don't have to invent any.

I was interested that the book Janeen talked about began with Eureka Stockade, which must be one of the most well-tilled fields of historical evidence in Australia. In Ballarat every second person you meet has an opinion on Eureka, so I have the policy of having no opinion at all on the matter. I couldn't help notice the Eureka flag on the cover illustration of *The Five Star Republic*, which tells everyone where the book starts at its divergent point. I'm also interested that Janeen mentioned the story running into the 1870s, which makes me think that she might eventually connect with Ned Kelly and Glenrowan, which is another well-known turning point, where one little tweak could have led to a completely different outcome and a very different Victoria at least.

I thought Janeen's discussion of counter-factual history was well done and as well as I could put it, most likely better actually. In the context of science fiction, it occurred to me that all science fiction is counter-factual, but counter-factual to a 'real' history that has yet to happen. Of the hundreds of thousands of science fiction stories it is unlikely that any one of them will foretell the story of what will actually happen. I'm not sure where that idea leads ... needs some more thought.

I was delighted to see and read **Tony Thomas's column**. **Colin Steele's reviews** were enticing, as always, and **John Litchen's extended reviews** were thoughtful and well executed. I liked the way you placed John's thoughts on *The Man in the High Castle* and **William Sarill's reflections** adjacent to each other.

(14 August 2024)

Column 2:

Thoughts from a Ballarat café

Less than a block away I came across a place called **Yellow Espresso** in **Sturt Street, Ballarat**, which I must have walked past a thousand times but never gone into. I had gone into the shop many years earlier when it was a different kind of place, a leftover from the 1950s with food offerings to match. Yellow Espresso is much more modern in its cuisine offerings, with a menu containing enticing sounding breakfast meals for us non-carnivores. After much dithering I chose the Burrito Bowl, which comprised mainly beans and rice, nicely livened with the usual Mexican spices and herbs. The only thing that spoiled it was the avocado, which I left — I can't see what people like about this green slimy fruit (it is a fruit, isn't it), but there was a lot of it on the menu so others obviously like it.

I took a table right at the back of the café, mainly to watch the people coming and going at the front. Most of them seemed to be young regulars on their way to work, picking up something for breakfast. They must have been regulars, because there was a lot of chat between the customers and the people behind the counter. I enjoyed watching them come and go. For me breakfast is usually a solitary affair if we are talking about humans, but rather more populated if we include cats waiting to lick out the bowl.

Thinking about my eating habits, as I did while I watched, I've been eating out rather a lot of late. Sunday night had been at the Lake View Hotel with some people I'd done heritage work with, Saturday had been with a scale-modelling friend at the local fish and chip shop (who do a remarkably good vegieburger), Thursday night had been with Perry, Julian, Lucy, and a couple of friends at

the Mexican restaurant in Sturt Street, and on the Tuesday and Wednesday at several places with my sister, who was visiting for a couple of days.

I've had a lot of enjoyable and enlivening company these past few days and I also felt the same way while sitting in Yellow Espresso. As well as watching the passing parade of Sturt Street as it came to life, I also had **John Baxter** with me. Not the man himself, but his book ***The Most Beautiful Walk in the World***. John is an easy writer to read, and this book is full of amusing and interesting anecdotes, and often unexpected insights. I haven't seen John for 30 years, but this book reminds me of the times and meals I've spent in his company as he tells amusing anecdotes, being the great raconteur that he is. There's a chuckle on almost every page and then a thought-provoking comment or two. John's book has accompanied me through several visits to medical practitioners, a train journey, and then an unexpected breakfast, and I'm loving it.

Mentioning John's book reminds me that I've been thinking about writing and reading a bit of late. This is because John's writing is so fluid and easy to read. In his eulogy about **Lee Harding** he mentions that Lee was a writer who took time to get his writing right and he — John — is more of a get-it-written writer. I fall into the latter category. The quality of writing is also something I talked about briefly with Lucy, Julian, and Perry the other night. I've come to the conclusion that the kind of writing I like best is the kind where the words don't get in the way of the story they tell. This might be why I don't much enjoy what you might call



**Yellow Espresso Café, Ballarat.
(Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)**

'high literature'. Many years ago **John Bangsund** tried to introduce me to that genre with a collection of Turgenev short stories, but the quality of the writing seemed to be as important as the story they conveyed, or perhaps more so, and I lost interest very quickly. Perhaps the quality of the writing was far superior to whatever was in the latest issue of *Galaxy* or *If* that I was reading. I wonder if my tastes have changed and I should see if I still have that collection John gave me, but perhaps not. It's not a test I really feel in need of conducting on myself.

Perhaps there has to be a minimum level of quality of writing to make me appreciate a work these days, which might be higher than it once was. Listening to Audible in the evenings I've been trying to catch up on the 30 years of stf I missed while becoming a historian. Which means that I've only recently 'read' *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I've been trying to catch up on Hugo nominations, and so enjoyed ***The Hail Mary Project***, ***She Who Became the Sun***, and ***Life After Life***. More recently I was impressed by ***The Ministry for the Future*** and ***Some Desperate Glory***. I thought that **Scalzi's 'Old Man War' series** started well, but soon became a series of clichés written in what I tend to call the '*Analog*

style'. The ideas in **Iain Banks's 'Culture' series** were interesting, but I think I'd rather read them as some kind of manual than have to put up with the writing, and the same probably goes for the **Corey 'Expanses' series**. I wish they'd get on with the story rather than blathering on trying to impress me with their writing abilities.

I'm reminded, of course, that one of the reasons to draft, redraft, redraft again, and then again and again, is to make the writing better and, hopefully, more readable. I sometimes wonder how much redrafting has gone on in some of the works I've 'read'. Perhaps some writers simply have the facility to write well without too much redrafting, and **Adrian Tchaikovsky** must be one of them. He seems to have produced a tremendous amount of writing, all of which I have enjoyed a great deal. Other writers are not so blessed, and need to take more time with their work, though I suppose that taking time becomes a problem when one is a filthy pro.

(10 October 2024)

COLIN STEELE, SF and fantasy book reviewer for *SFC* since 1979, received his AM Award on 25 January. He now reviews regularly for the *Canberra City News*, and is also a regular reviewer for *Biblionews*, the quarterly Journal of the Book Collectors Society of Australia.

Apart from book reviews, Colin's main recent ANU activity has been convening and organising the free ANU/Canberra Times Meet the Author events, which he has been running since 1987. See the end of this column for upated details of Meet the Author events for the rest of 2024 and early 2025.

Colin Steele's Bookworld

Feature review: Where we came from

**PROUD AND LONELY:
A HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION FANDOM IN AUSTRALIA:
PART ONE: 1930–1961**
by Leigh Edmonds (Norstrilia Press; \$39.99)

Congratulations to **Leigh Edmonds** and the revived **Norstrilia Press** for the first of a two-part history of science fiction fandom in Australia. It provides, through three decades of the twentieth century, a very detailed account of the emergence of the small Australian SF fan groups and their interaction with the then largely American SF genre. Its coverage of Australian SF history, fandom, conventions, and fanzine publishing will be a gold mine for relevant

cultural, literary, and historical researchers, although it's intentionally not a page turner for the general reader.

Dr Leigh Edmonds, aviation historian, has been active in science fiction fandom for over 50 years, including organising conventions and clubs, and has published over 700 fanzines. Edmonds acknowledges his primary source in the early fanzines, many thankfully preserved in institutional archives and personal collections. He also cites an early major fan figure Vol Molesworth and his *History of Australian Science Fiction Fandom 1935–1963*, although Edmonds notes this is 'a biased and almost impenetrable work'.

PROUD AND LONELY

A History of
Science Fiction
Fandom
in Australia

Part One:
1936 to 1961

Leigh Edmonds

Edmonds places his history within the context of a culturally conservative Australia in which the Australian public had little interest in or knowledge of SF. Fans were largely dependent on imported SF books and magazines, a knowledge made even more difficult given a variety of print restrictions. In May 1938, the Australian Government imposed restrictions on the importation of foreign literature, citing *inter alia* the moral degradation resulting from such importation. American literature, including the pulp magazines in which SF flourished, were critically suspect.

From 1 April 1940 during World War II, importation of all fiction magazines from non-sterling currency countries was banned, bans that were, in a variety of ways, to extend into the late 1950s. During the 1950s, American magazines were often only accessible easily through condensed British magazine reprints. British SF magazines, including *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy*, and *Authentic Science Fiction*, also began to be available widely later in the decade. British paperbacks, which published both original and reprinted American stories, also became available in Australia at this time.

The tyranny of distance also had an impact in a local context. Lack of easy travel within Australia meant that state groups, primarily in Melbourne and Sydney, were often small, argumentative, and incestuous, making national meetings and conventions difficult. The early fan groups were usually young, often teenagers, male and 'isolated from the dominant Australian culture and also from pulp science fiction's roots in America'.

This review will not go into the detailed chronology of state fandom that Edmonds documents, but rather reflect on some major dates and themes. The story really begins on 15 August 1935, when the short-lived Sydney Chapter of the Science Fiction League was established, albeit with small numbers, on the lines of those established in the US and UK. In 1939 the Junior Science Club was formed by Vol (Voltaire) Molesworth and Ken Jefferys, but again only had a short duration.

In October 1939 *Ultra*, edited by Eric and Ted Russell, became Australia's first regularly published fanzine, with 14 issues published up to December 1941. In November 1939 the inaugural meeting was held of the Futurian Society of Sydney, which was to play an important, if volatile, role in the history in Australian SF fan events and publishing. Important names here included Ben Castellari, Vol Molesworth, Eric Russell, Bert and Ron Levy, and in particular Graham Stone, 'the most active fan in promoting Science Fiction in Australia'.

Any thoughts of a unified group of science fiction fans in Sydney were swiftly dashed, as Edmonds documents in detail. Of the major figures, Molesworth, with a 'propensity for legalities', and the equally strong-minded Stone would soon clash. Bruce Gillespie has commented that the original groupings had an 'infinite capacity for feuding among themselves'.

Edmonds details the small beginnings of regional groups. In April 1941 *Profan 1*, edited by Don Tuck, another major figure in Australian fandom, became the first fanzine produced in Tasmania, although, like many others, it did not last long. Tuck is now remembered especially for his editions of *A Handbook of Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

After the disruptions of World War II, 9 August 1947 saw the first meeting of the revived Futurian Society of Sydney. In 1950, Vol Molesworth bought a printing press and registered the business name 'Futurian Press'. The society sponsored the Second Australian Science Fiction Convention in 1953, the first being held in March 1952 with around 60 participants. The 1955 convention had Australian SF author A. Bertram Chandler as the guest of honour.

Visits from overseas SF authors were few and far between, but personal and business travel allowed Robert A. Heinlein in February 1954 and Arthur C. Clarke in late 1954/early 1955 a rare chance to meet Australian fans. This was a period when Australian SF authors were relatively minor figures except for A. Bertram

Chandler. Nevil Shute, residing in Australia, arguably had a more significant SF impact with his two 1950s best-selling novels with SF themes.

1955 saw the first meeting of the Futurian Society of Canberra. In 1956, 22 fans, nine from Sydney, ten from Melbourne, and three from Canberra, gathered in Canberra for Can-Con over the Easter weekend. They were confused by Canberra's concentric roads and bemoaned a lack of night life. Listening to Vol Molesworth's tape recorder was a highlight, as was visiting ANU's Mt Stromlo Observatory.

Given the lack of numbers in fandom, individuals, often with strong views, loom large in the historically small circles of Australian fandom and perhaps none more so than Graham Stone (1926–2013). Stone is now perhaps best remembered for his *Australian Science Fiction Bibliography* and *Notes on Australian Science Fiction*. In 1951 Stone founded the Australian SF Society and in January 1953 he published the first issues of *Science Fiction News* and was involved in early SF conventions.

Stone wrote, in a small 1952 pamphlet *What Is Fandom?*, that to be a fan 'you need average or better intelligence with good ability to visualise the unfamiliar ... the reader of Science Fiction is thus an unusual and special type'. Stone always preferred the serious to the social aspects of fandom and reflected that 'calling themselves "fans" was 'a fundamental mistake'.

Stone was always a serious collector of SF books and magazines. He became involved with the Book Collectors Society after meeting in the late 1940s 'a mainstay of the BCSA' Stan Larnach, who was compiling a checklist of Australian fantasy (see Ross Edmonds' article, 'Stan Larnach — A Brother of the Book' in the *BCSA Bblionews* for March 2024).

Melbourne in the 1950s saw the other Australian major grouping of SF fandom. Edmonds interviewed key Melbourne fans of the

1950s, including Race Mathews (later a noted Victorian Labor politician), Lee Harding (award-winning author), Dick Jenssen (academic at the University of Melbourne), and renowned and redoubtable SF bookseller Merv Binns, featured on the front cover, who formed the Melbourne Science Fiction Group in May 1952. Melbourne's *Etherline*, edited by Ian Crozier, which ran for 101 issues in the 1950s, became Australia's main fanzine for this period.

Here one should highlight the archival importance of *SF Commentary*, and the indefatigable Bruce Gillespie, since much key Australian SF history material is included in its back issues, some of it sadly in the obituaries and recollections of key players like Jenssen, Harding, and Binns.

Graham Stone has written of the 1950s' 'narrow intolerant conservatism' of the Menzies era and the fact that as far as SF was concerned 'Australia was as culturally isolated and impoverished as ever. Science Fiction was little more available to Australian readers than during the war' due to currency and importation restrictions.

Edmonds documents the decline of energy and enthusiasm in Australian SF fandom by the late 1950s but an intellectual fillip was provided in mid 1959, when the ban on importing US books and magazines was lifted, and current and substantial back issues of American SF commercial magazines and prozines arrived.

By the start of the 1960s, a new generation of fans and authors

was emerging, such as John Baxter, who had links to international fandom, and in the early 1960s John Foyster and John Bangsund. This SF 'revival' story will be documented in the final volume by Edmonds.

Edmonds, does, however, break his chronological conclusion in chapter 12 when he continues the story of Graham Stone, although noting he still continued 'the traditions of early Australian fandom rather than engaged with the revived Australian fandom'. Edmonds' summation on his last page of Stone's role after 1960 in Australian SF, in contrast to fandom, is perhaps overly negative, if viewed from a library and bibliographical perspective rather the perspective of fandom and its publications.

As a supplement to Edmonds' first volume, and as a precursor of the second, interested readers should go to YouTube for three conversations between Leigh Edmonds and Perry Middlemiss 'Wrong Turns on the Wallaby Track: Australian SF Fandom — <https://leighedmondslittleboxofstuff.com/2021/12/08/talking-about-the-history-of-australian-sf-fandom/>

PS: **Bruce Gillespie in *SF Commentary 117*** has commented on the problems with the index that he compiled but was subsequently scrambled by a software program that made its own mistakes during the production process. **Rob Gerrand**, Norstrilia Press's publisher, writes: 'The index has been corrected, and all copies now sold have the accurate version, together with a few other typos corrected.'

Science fiction and fantasy

THE MINISTRY OF TIME

by Kaliane Bradley (Sceptre; \$32.99)

The Ministry of Time, by award-winning short story writer **Kaliane Bradley**, attracted much attention at auction, and it is now to be made into a BBC TV series. Barack Obama's included it in his 2024 summer reading list. The question is: does it deserve all this attention?

British-Cambodian author Bradley has described her novel as 'a time-travel romance about empire, bureaucracy and cigarettes'. She says 'there's a lot to parse there, which means people have to think about it and I have time to decide what I'm going to say next ... It centres on two people: a Victorian polar explorer called Graham Gore, who is "expatriated" (forcibly captured) from 1847 to the 2020s as part of a government experiment to test the feasibility of time-travel; and an unnamed civil servant, his "bridge", a former Ministry of Defence translator whose job for the next year is to live with, report on, and help Gore assimilate to the twenty-first century. They smoke a lot of cigarettes and they experience a lot of governmental bureaucracy, some of it increasingly sinister in nature.'

The Ministry of Time is narrated in a near-future London by an unnamed young British-Cambodian woman, which allows Bradley to mix personal and fictional accounts of issues for immigrants in the context of the five 'expats', rescued if that's the right word, from 1645, 1665, 1793, 1847, and 1916.

Like many recent 'time travel novels', Bradley only outlines the concept without any detail or examination of the physics of time



travel. Instead, her limited time travel facility is used really as a device to highlight the underlying themes. The mechanism for time travel is a time-door, utilised by the Ministry of Time, with a view to assessing the viability of time travel, although as it turns out the issues that will confront humanity will come from the future not the past.

The 'expats' have been chosen because they were historical figures who died in isolated circumstances. It is believed the disappearance of single individuals facing death would not be missed in a manner that affects historical timelines. The main character, other than the unnamed narrator, is Lieutenant Gore, a real-life naval officer, who was on the HMS *Erebus* in the doomed 1845 Franklin Northwest passage expedition. Gore's experiences on the expedition are recounted here in a few alternate chapters. Interestingly, Gore, listening to Australia wildfires on the radio, comments that his family lived in Goulburn, which he had visited.

The narrative focuses on the growing romantic and emotional relationship between Gore and his female handler — 'I don't say my name even in my head' — as he attempts to make sense of a contemporary Britain. Gore, with an initial Victorian stiffness, seems to assimilate particularly easily to contemporary technologies but less so to the social mores. His initial 'internal displacement' echoes that of his unnamed handler.

There has to be some reader suspension of disbelief in his assimilation, as with the two other major delineated time-travel characters, lesbian Margaret, liberated from 1666 Great Plague London, who takes to female dating apps, and Arthur, a gay World War I veteran with PTSD.

Bradley's displaced characters allow her to cover major issues, such as migration, refugees, colonialism, the nature of communication, and government surveillance, but the never quite fleshed out plot line, with a climate change-devastated future trying to change history, detracts from the overall impact. The end result

is a sort of time travel bittersweet rom com, the latter element sure to be emphasised in the TV series.

**LAKE OF SOULS:
THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION
by Ann Leckie (Orbit; \$24.99)**

Hugo, Nebula, and Arthur C. Clarke Award winner **Ann Leckie's** short fiction, comprising 18 stories, is collected in ***Lake of Souls***. The stories are divided into three sections: the space opera 'Imperial Radch Universe' stories, the fantasy 'Universe of The Raven Tower' stories, and an opening third unnamed section of stories.

Leckie's first published SF story 'Hesperia and Glory' was published in 2006, and was followed by others, most published in this collection, before her award-winning novel *Ancillary Justice* in 2013. Leckie notes that in 'Hesperia' she deliberately created a 'kind of an Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiche . . . It was very much a Martian prince thing, very much like the Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars things'. In it, she contemplates whether a door to Mars is open and whether a visitor is really 'a fugitive prince of Mars'.

Leckie has said: 'I can do the short stories obviously, and they are fun to do, but I've found when I went back to doing the novels that it was almost a physical relief that I could stretch out and not have to slice off things that I really thought were important. When I would do a short story, I would write and it would be really long, and then I would have to keep cutting things off. I felt every now and then like, you know, Cinderella's step-sisters cutting their toes off to fit their feet in the shoe? I felt like that sometimes. I'm a lot more comfortable when I have a lot of elbow room to work in'.

Nonetheless there is much narrative and philosophical meat in the stories. The collection opens with the one new story, 'Lake of Souls', which Leckie says 'started as a speculative biology idea my daughter suggested to me, a particular kind of genetic parasitism

"THERE ARE FEW WHO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION LIKE ANN LECKIE CAN.
THERE ARE FEW WHO EVER COULD." —JOHN SCALZI



LAKE OF SOULS

THE COLLECTED
SHORT FICTION

ANN LECKIE

HUGO, NEBULA, & ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



that, while we walked the dog, we worked up into something we thought was cool and interesting. It was such an interesting idea that with her permission I made a story around it'.

A human wakes up alone on a spaceship in which everything has been destroyed and it seems that no one has survived. He makes it down to the planet in search of a missing contact ansible device. The original expedition was to investigate and possibly terraform the planet, but only if no intelligent life was found. The story is told from a dual perspective of the human survivor and Spawn, a lobster dog-like creature, who muses about finding a soul. Leckie contrasts the juxtaposing spiritual and the scientific beliefs before a realistic and moving conclusion.

Communication is a key issue in the title story, as it is in 'Another Word for World', in which a middle-aged woman and a teenage Royal from two warring factions have to communicate through computer translation after their 'flier' is shot down and their interpreter dies. Relying on computing linguistic translations, they ultimately find a deep misunderstanding has arisen through a generations-old computing error, thus raising the question of who do we believe and on what basis.

One of the main issues that Leckie examines in the stories is how we communicate within power structures and belief systems. The stories in 'Lake of Souls' clearly show the then emerging talent of one of today's leading SF and fantasy writers.

THE BOOK OF ELSEWHERE

by Keanu Reeves and China Miéville (Del Rey; \$34.99)

The Book of Elsewhere is **China Miéville's** first novel for nearly 10 years. It is apparently largely Miéville's book, despite having mega film star **Keanu Reeves** listed as the first author.

In 2021, Keanu Reeves developed, with Matt Kindt, what was to become the best-selling comic book series **BRZRKR**, illustrated by

THE INSTANT SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Keanu Reeves China Miéville

the book of elsewhere



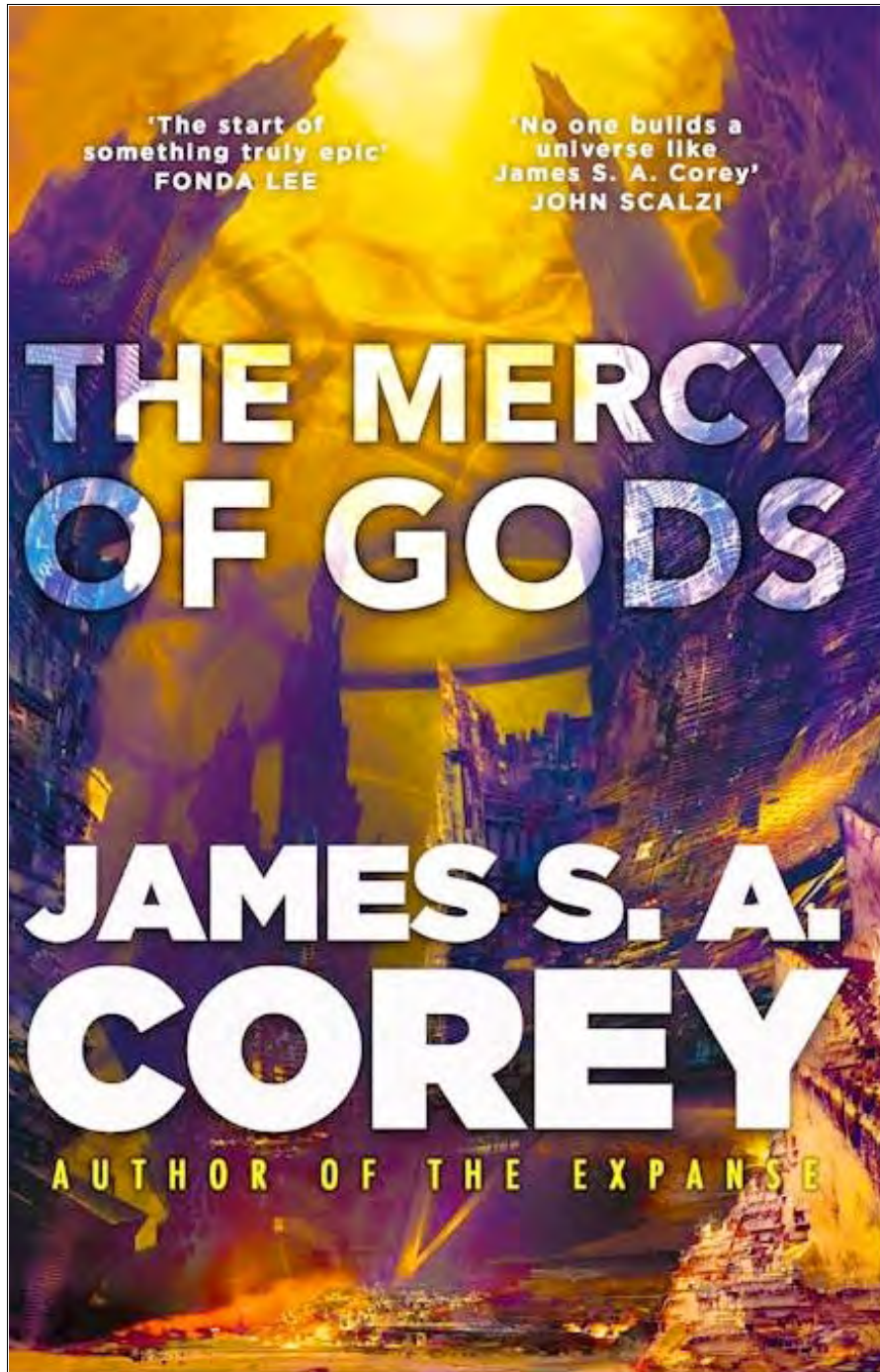
Ron Garney. The title references the Viking 'berserkers'. The main character 'B', also known as Unute, is an 80,000-year-old immortal, who no longer wishes to be an immortal.

Reeves has written: 'The germ of the idea was just a character who could punch through chests and rip arms off. I wanted to do a pulpy, hyper-violent action idea. I've played a bunch of different characters involved in action.' Reeves has apparently signed up to play the role in a forthcoming Netflix adaptation.

The Book of Elsewhere provides a more detailed account of B's back story, including birth and his violent passage through time, righting historical wrongs, to the present day. Now he is part of a US military black-ops unit which is also studying him for research purposes. B can be injured, but not killed, as wounds heal and body parts grow back. His immortal enemy turns out to be an Indonesian deer-pig, which B thinks could unlock the secrets of his own immortality. B's plight is made worse by the fact that he is alone. Friends and lovers die and every child conceived by him is stillborn. B ponders how can life be meaningful if it never ends?

Miéville has written: 'I love an exciting, pulpy fight scene and it would be breach of promise not to have fun, pulpy, dramatic hyperviolence in this novel. But there's also things you can do in the pace of a novel that are much harder to do with a comic.'

The comic book framework is relieved to some extent by Miéville's literary, historical, and cultural references, which include Chaucer, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Samuel Beckett, and *The Matrix*. Ultimately, *The Book of Elsewhere* is a strange fictional mixture that will both delight some and disappoint other readers. The latter will wait expectantly for Miéville's next book in 2025, which has been 20 years in the making.



THE MERCY OF GODS

by James S. A. Corey (Orbit; \$34.99)

James S. A. Corey is the pen-name of **Daniel Abraham** and **Ty Franck**. *The Mercy of Gods* is the first in Corey's 'The Captive's War' trilogy, following on from their best selling series 'The Expanse', also made into a successful TV series.

In *The Mercy of Gods*, the outcome of a massive galactic struggle is foreshadowed on the first page, so in one sense it's a retrospective trilogy. *The Mercy of Gods* thus becomes a story of resistance against an overwhelming Empire. The authors have indicated similarities with the *Star Wars Andor* TV series. Daniel Abraham has written: 'If you didn't have some ray of hope, this would be a brutal read.'

It opens with the omniscient alien species, the Carryx, who have 'ruled the stars for epochs', enslaving species across the galaxy, with the latest conquest, the planet Anjiin with a human population.

A significant portion of the Anjiin population is killed while others are enslaved. The brightest are taken to the Carryx home world, where they are imprisoned with many other species in a sort of galactic research zoo, with different compounds to hold the different atmospheres of the native planets.

The narrative is told from both human and alien perspectives. The aliens include the mysterious Swarm, who observe, for their own competitive purposes, the activities of the Carryx.

The novel focuses on a captured Anjiin research science team on Carryx, a team in which Dafyd Alkhor, the most junior member, is destined to be a key player. The conditions for the human populations on both are dire and, for the research team, it's a sort of *Hunger Games* environment in which the initial purpose is to stay alive and produce valuable research for the Carryx.

Ty Franck has written: 'It's survivors versus authoritarians. It is what happens to you when you are conquered by a militaristic authoritarian regime and you have to learn to live inside that regime.' But there is hope. Franck writes: 'The first book is telling you all the reasons why [the Carryx empire] can't fail: It's too big, it's too powerful. So the tension is: What could this guy possibly have done to bring this about?' Read on!

CREATION NODE

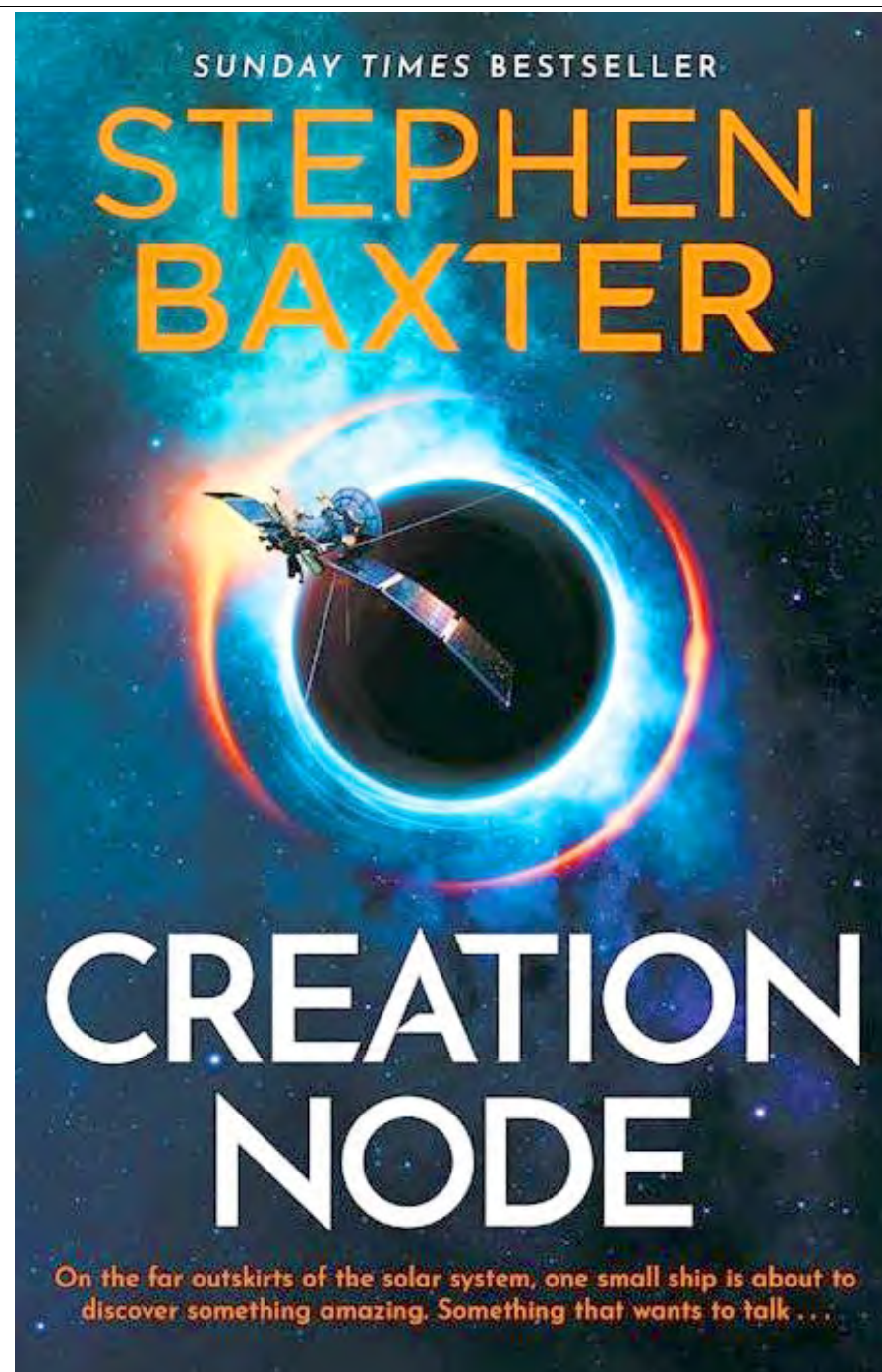
by Steven Baxter (Gollancz; \$32.99)

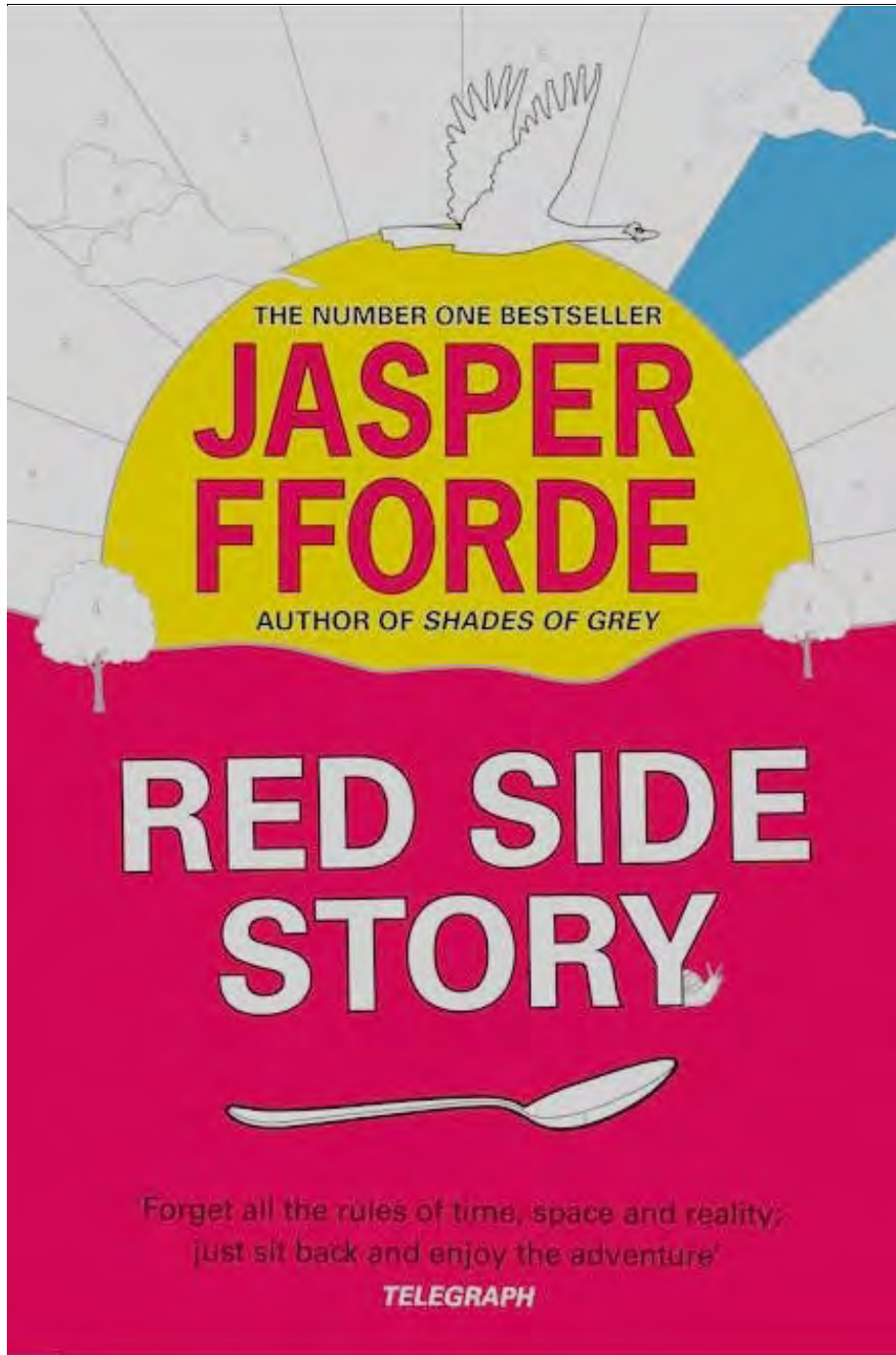
Stephen Baxter's latest novel ***Creation Node*** mixes his usual hard science fiction with Arthur C. Clarke- and Olaf Stapledon-like cosmic themes. It's 2255, and a small six-person human crew on the spaceship *Shadow*, located in the Oort Cloud, is monitoring 'Planet Nine', initially thought to be a small primordial black hole, which suddenly sends out a radiation message.

The crew, influenced by the main character Salma, who was born on the spaceship, reply. Nine then evolves into a habitable planet on which they land to encounter a single strange birdlike creature, dubbed 'Feathers', with whom Salma tries to empathise, initially by sign gestures.

News of this dramatic first contact is sent back to the Earth and the Solar System colonies now dominated by three power groups. The 'Conservers', who sent *Shadow* to Planet Nine, are dedicated to long-term conservation. In contrast, the capitalist Lunar Consortium wants to fully exploit the resources of the Solar System. Balanced against them both is the political-economic establishment on Earth, trying to restore equilibrium after major climate and social disorders during the last century.

Dramatically adding to the factional battles is the sudden appearance of a distant quasar, whose radiation has the potential to dramatically increase heat levels on all planets and which may be connected to that initial contact on Planet Nine.





Baxter takes us through the manoeuvrings of the leaderships of the three factions and a narrative stall, given it takes 11 years for another spaceship to reach the Oort Cloud. Then, Baxter fast-forwards the reader to the cosmic plane and contact from an intelligence called Terminus, 'far away across the quantum-froth multiverse', and the growing awareness of the accidental nature and scarcity of life.

Baxter's imagination is as profound as ever, even if the narrative structure links together somewhat uneasily at times.

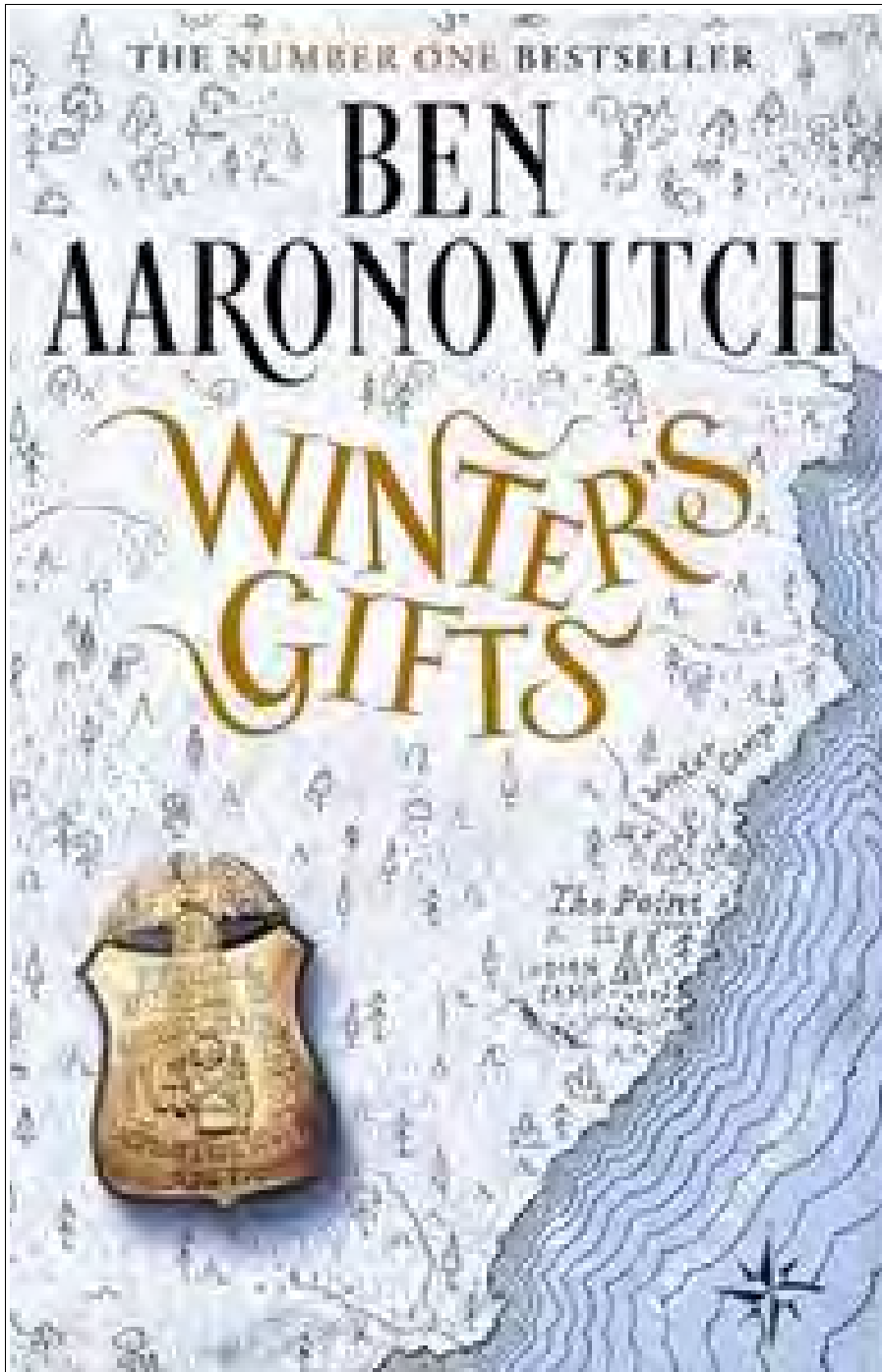
RED SIDE STORY

by Jasper Fforde (Hodder; \$32.99)

Red Side Story, Jasper Fforde's latest novel, is a sequel to his bestselling *Shades of Grey* (2009), the narrative chronology starting soon after its conclusion. Fforde effectively recaptures a world in which colour is the determination of a person's place in society. *West Side Story* is an intended plot literary influence.

The novel is set in a Britain, now called Chromatacia, ruled by a Colortocracy. An unspoken 'Something that Happened', 500 years ago, has led to society being organised within an hierarchical, colour-based system, which means that your place in society is determined by the colours you are able to see. Thus, Purple visionaries rule, Yellows enforce the often absurd and dogmatic societal rules, while Greys perform menial tasks.

Fforde has said: 'If a world like this did exist, then there would be many, many more names for colours, so I stuck to ones that would be familiar to the reader. Once I had decided which colours were the most "important" in society, then a lot of the roles of these colours slipped easily into place. Secondary and Complementary colours had their own special meaning, and the Purples were always going to be top, as it is more of an upper-class sort of colour, even though purples were the first synthetic dyes discovered. I add "Ultra Violets" to have someone above them,



but so long as it all fitted together with some sort of logical order, I was happy. The Greys were always going to be the Worker Bees, no rights, no privileges.'

His colour class system is typically Ffordian. He has referred to it as 'the Khmer Rouge mixed with Eton ... Humans are dismayingly good at creating Social Divisions, so it was really not hard at all, and thereby lies one of the more satirical aspects of the book. Although I sent "three world orders into the future" it looks very much as though someone who went to a private school in the UK decided to mix that up with some colour to make a sustainable, workable, society — but only so long as you follow the rules.'

Fforde's main characters Eddie Russett and Jane Grey/Brunswick are respectively within the red and green spectrum, which prohibits them getting married but more troubling is that they face trial on trumped-up charges for a murder that they did not commit.

As Eddie comments in the introduction, 'the ever-present Green Room beckons us toward its soporifically deadly charms ... But it's not all bad. At least Jane and I get to figure out the riddle of existence. Not the riddle, I should add, just ours, and we also learn there is a literal truth to the adage that you can't go home.'

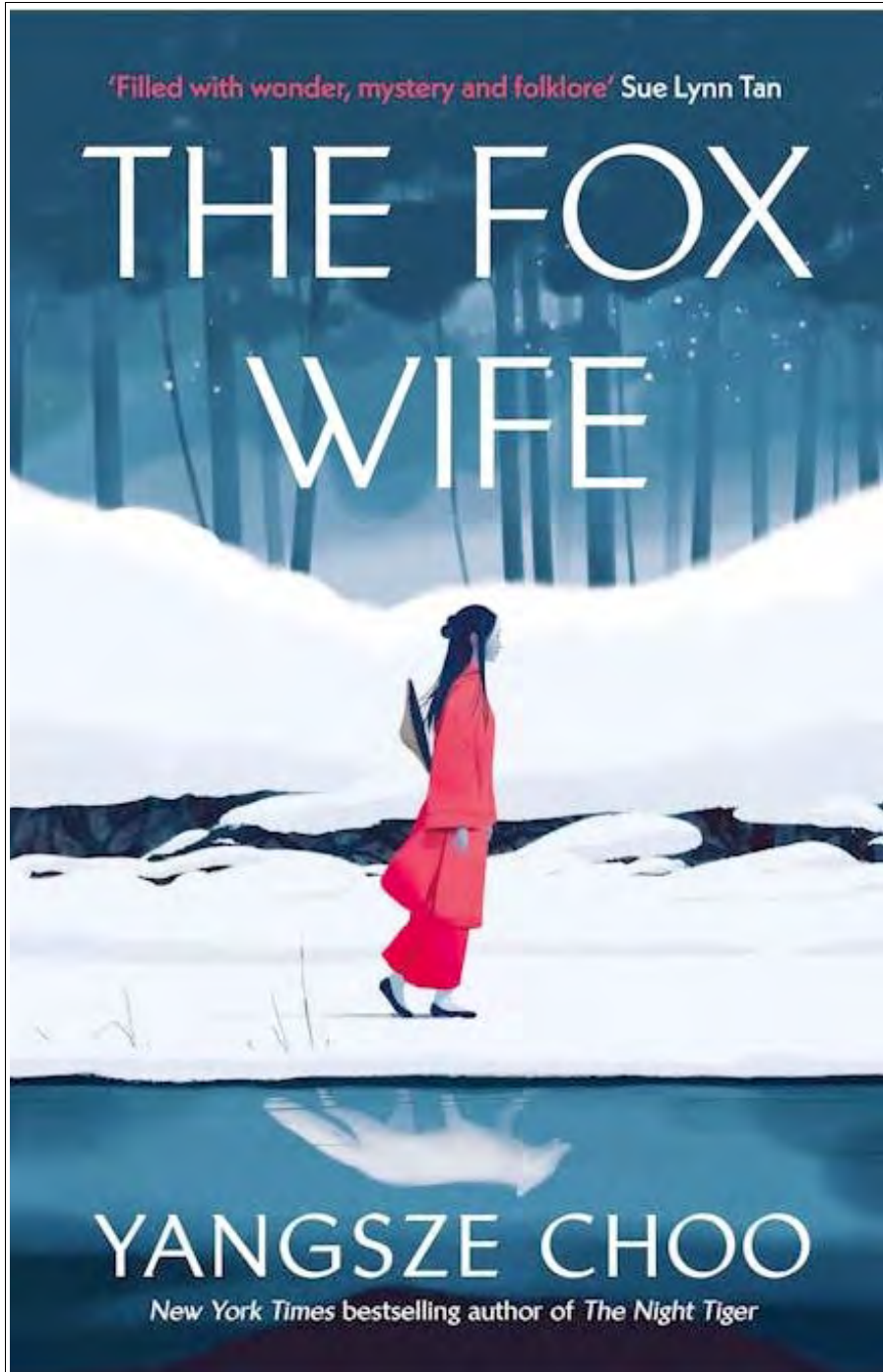
It's a race against time for Jane and Edward to confront the entire social structure of Chromatacia and the Emerald City rulers. Here Fforde deliberately evokes Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*.

Jasper Fforde's many fans have been waiting for this novel, which now constitutes the second volume of an inventive and humorous trilogy. As ever, Fforde does not disappoint with his inspired zaniness and reflections on contemporary society.

WINTER'S GIFTS

by Ben Aaronovitch (Orion; \$26.95)

Winter's Gifts, a novella, is the latest instalment in the best-



selling supernatural 'Rivers of London' series, which as the title implies has largely been set in London, apart from one side travel to Germany in *The October Man*.

The main character is FBI Special Agent Kimberly Reynolds, trained to recognise and investigate strange, seemingly magical, occurrences. She is summoned to a small town in Wisconsin by a retired FBI agent, but when she arrives he has disappeared and a significant part of the town has been destroyed by an unusual winter tornado.

She soon finds that events are going from weird to worse as she investigates a cold case in more ways than one from 1843, when an expedition disappeared in the frozen wastes of Wisconsin. The town is cut off and 'snow monsters' appear. Working with a small group of town citizens, including the town librarian and an officer of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, both of whom seem to know a lot about animal and tribal spirits, Kimberly realises that a malevolent force has awoken from the past.

Aaronovitch has been criticised by some American readers for not capturing exactly some American geographical and linguistic detail, but most Aaronovitch fans will be simply happy to see a new publication in the series and a possible main character to reappear in future books.

THE FOX WIFE

by Yangsze Choo (Quercus; \$34.99)

Yangsze Choo is a Malaysian writer of Chinese descent and bestselling author of *The Ghost Bride*, now a Netflix series. ***The Fox Wife*** uses the Asian tradition of fox folklore in a decidedly original and inventive novel, which begins in Manchuria in 1908, amongst the last years of the dying Qing Empire. Choo reflects 'It was an interesting time at the end of China's last continual dynasty.'

The main character, Snow, is a fox, who shapeshifts to become a woman, Ah San. Choo has written: 'I've always thought that the legend of the fox is so fascinating. In Chinese literature and also Japanese and Korean legends, the fox is a shapeshifter, as you mentioned, who can turn itself into a very attractive person.'

Snow, who reflects that neither a young woman nor a fox are 'safe forms in a world run by men', is on the track of a photographer, Bektu Nikan, who she believes is responsible for the death of her young daughter. Her pursuit will take her across Manchuria and to Japan in her efforts to locate Nikan.

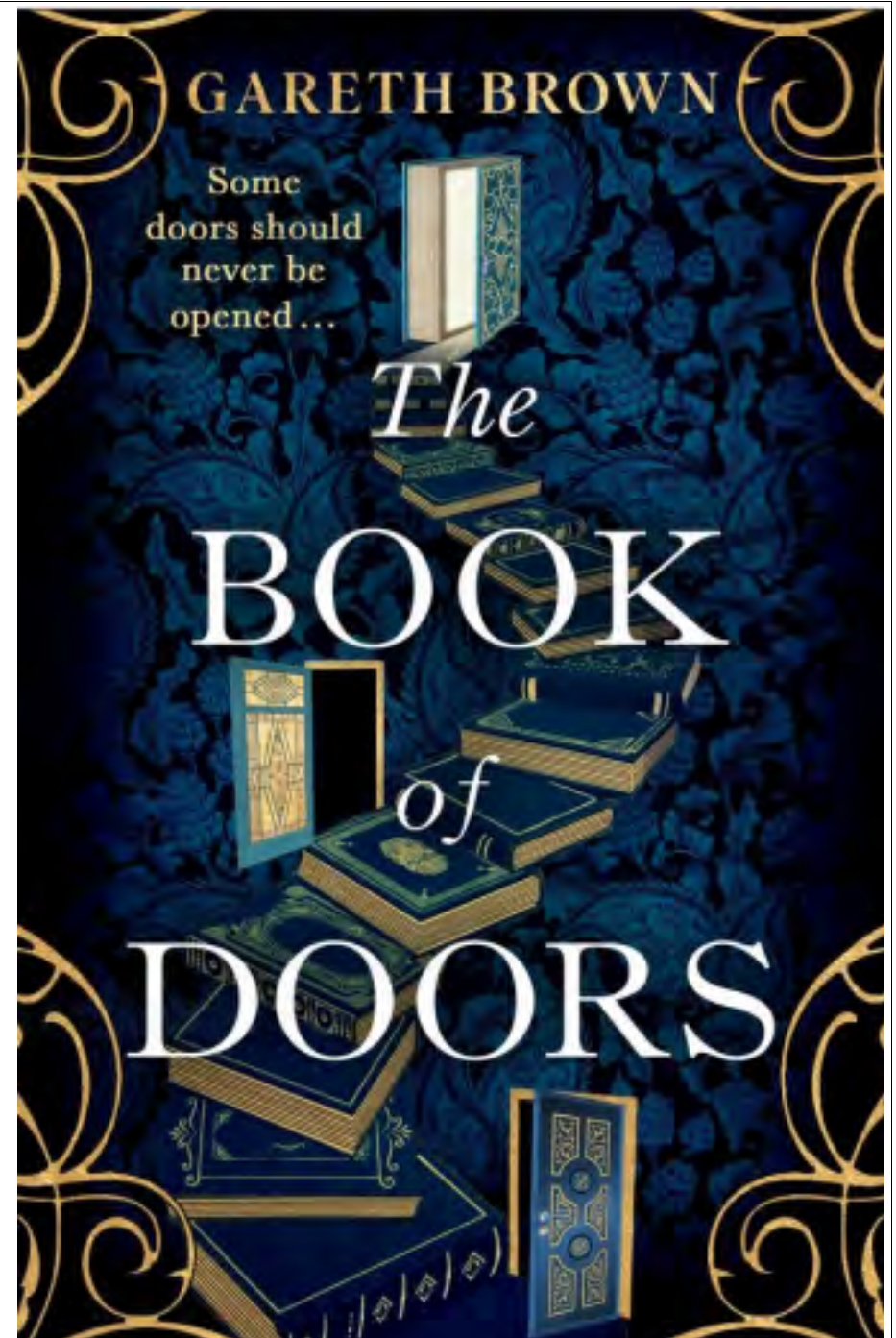
Parallel to her quest is the story of Bao, a retired detective, who can 'hear truth from lies' and who takes up the case of a young courtesan found frozen in a restaurant alleyway. Has she been killed by a fox?

Bao's investigation will eventually bring him into Snow's orbit. Their searches become inextricably linked, and further deaths occur before a final resolution of vengeance and second chances.

Choo skillfully blends Asian folklore, feminism, love, loss, and the nature of cultural identity in an intriguing novel set against the fall of an Empire.

THE BOOK OF DOORS
by Gareth Brown (Bantam; \$34.99)

Gareth Brown, Director of Screening for NHS Scotland, had had the idea for *The Book of Doors*, his debut novel, for some years, but 'during Covid lockdowns, I found I missed travelling and I would daydream about being able to open the door of my study and step through to somewhere else, as if I had that "book of doors". In a moment of unexpected inspiration, I wondered what would happen if such a book existed in our contemporary world. That was the start of it.'



His main character, Cassie Andrews, works in a New York City bookshop, shelving books, until one day one of her favourite customers dies, leaving behind a small book whose few words of English include 'This is the Book of Doors. Hold it in your hand, and any door is every door ... Cassie, This book is for you, a gift in thanks for your kindness'.

Cassie and her roommate Izzy indeed find that the book will magically open doors, but will also attract the attention of rare book collectors, who are aware of the existence of a number of other magical books such as *The Book of Luck*, *The Book of Memories*, and *The Book of Shadows*, 'books that affect external reality of the physical world'.

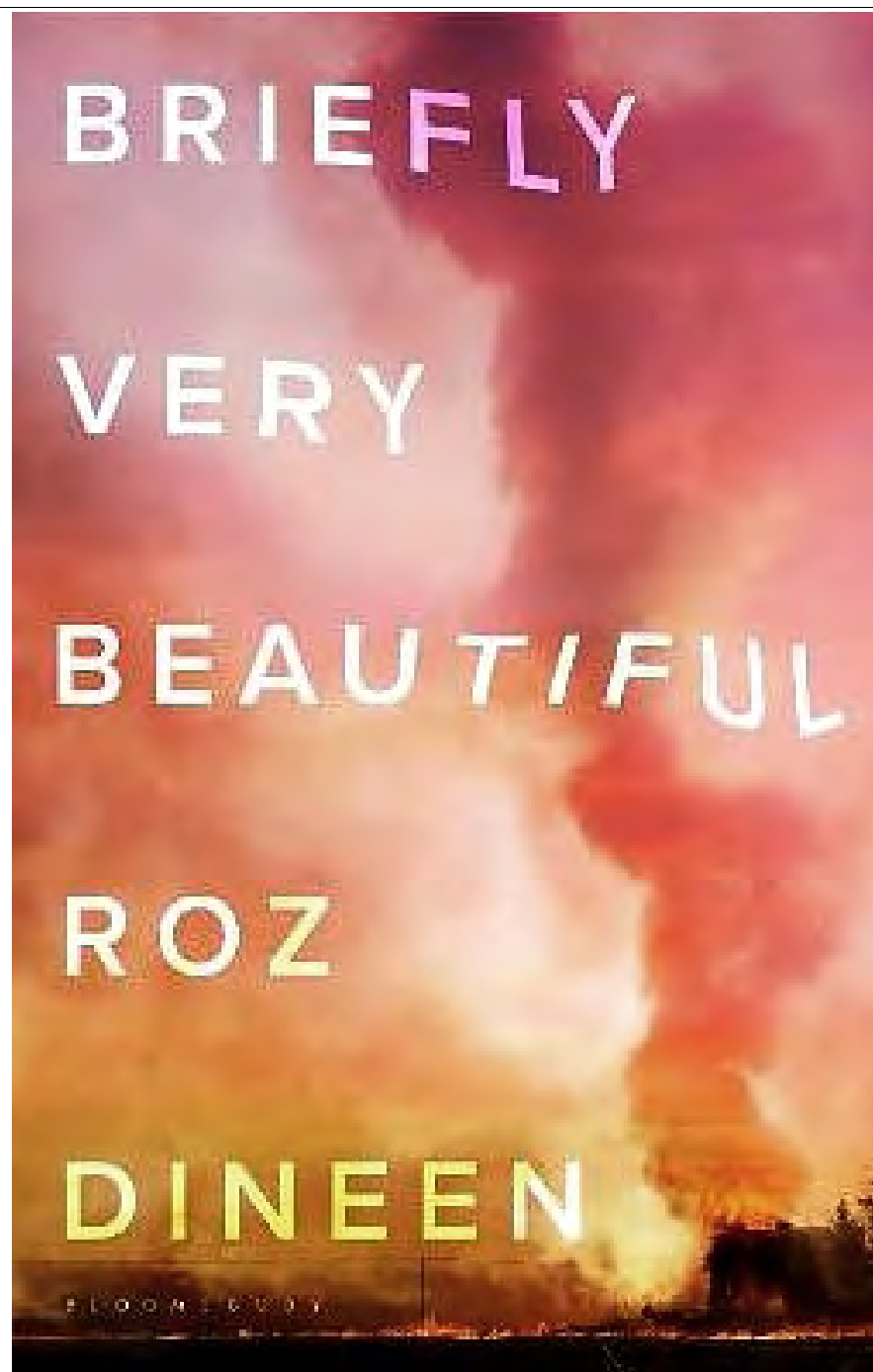
The Librarian of the secret Fox Library, Drummond Fox, seeks to protect Cassie from the people wanting *The Book of Doors*, notably a ruthless sadistic character known only as 'The Woman', who will stop at nothing to obtain it, using her own *Book of Destruction*. Brown has said: 'I wanted the woman to be silent, mysterious and terrifying, almost like a force of nature, a storm that blows in unpredictably and causes devastation.'

Cassie will soon find out to her peril that books are to kill for as she ricochets back and forth in time and place, before reaching personal and bibliophilic 'joy at the end'. Brown's debut novel was well worth waiting for.

BRIEFLY VERY BEAUTIFUL

by Roz Dineen (Bloomsbury; \$32.99)

British author **Roz Dineen**'s debut novel *Briefly Very Beautiful* postulates a near-future world on the edge of collapse because of climate change, but deliberately she does not detail its global framework. Rather, Dineen uses this setting as a dramatic backdrop to the travails of her main character Cass and her three small children.

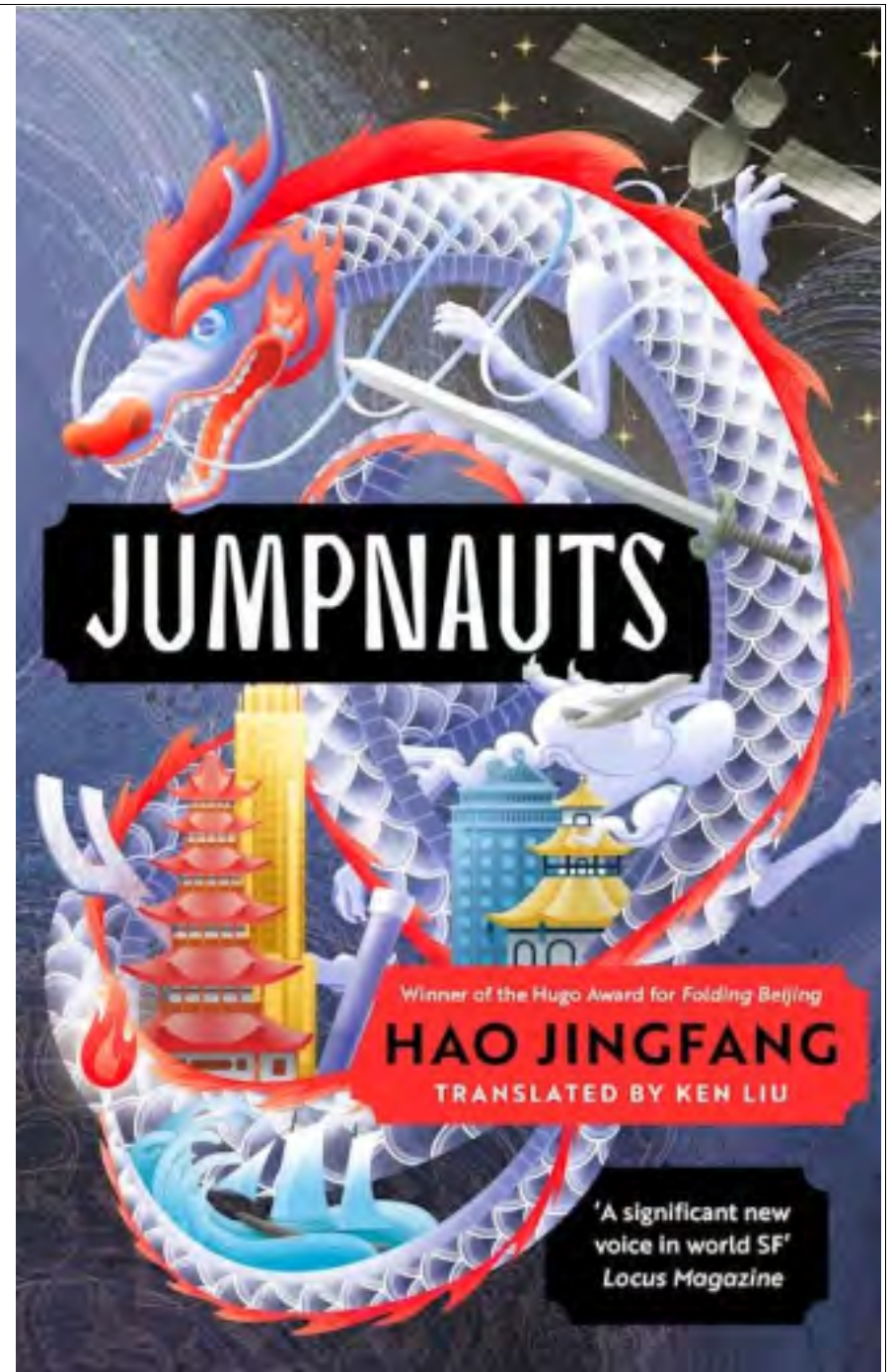


Dineen says that her novel is essentially one 'about characters ... I believe fiction is most effective when it focuses on character, story; an internal rather than external sense of self and other. The apocalypse in this novel is a low-key backdrop ... To my mind, the fate of the mother and the fate of the Earth are interconnected. There are many ways to enter this idea, but a simple one might be to wonder if our societies mistreat the mother and the Earth in similar ways. *Briefly Very Beautiful* is therefore really therefore not an SF novel but rather the story of personal struggles with a muted SF background.'

Cass is very much alone in the world. Her husband Nathaniel is working overseas as a medic and her parents are dead. Ecological breakdown has resulted in an unstable government with financial and political instability. London is on the edge of collapse through civil unrest and lack of policing. Cass understandably decides to travel north to her husband's family to seek safety. But Cass will learn that family is not always accommodating and safe houses are not what they seem, as she discovers how far how far she'll go to protect her children.

As she travels north, Cass confronts new problems, such as border patrols, eco-terrorists, and increasing food shortages. The wealthy have retreated into secured private compounds. Her husband Nathaniel eventually returns, but now exercises coercive control and is accompanied by a pregnant teenage mistress.

Dineen's focus is resolutely inwards: 'What do you do with the thing that is actually too huge to comprehend (the apocalypse)? How do you approach it? You take it for granted as a backdrop. Then it feels real. I think that even during the apocalypse, people will still be preoccupied by their relationships, their bowel movements, their anger at or worry for their parents. Even when the world burns down, petty human concerns and matters of the heart will continue; it's just they'll be happening in a more intense setting. I think that focusing on character is always the way in to big ideas'.



Cass is not the determinant of her fate. She is buffeted by family problems, particularly her mother-in-law's selfishness and, more generally, male desires and manipulation. When Cass ends up in a commune, she quickly realises that the seemingly harmonious community — 'no one dominates, nor manipulates, for power here' — ultimately has a dark side.

Briefly Very Beautiful is an increasingly claustrophobic novel, but one in which maternal love and personal fortitude ultimately prevail in a struggle for survival in a dystopian world.

JUMPNAUTS

by Hao Jingfang (translated by Ken Liu; Bloomsbury; \$42.99)

Hao Jingfang, one of the leading talents of Chinese SF, first came to the attention of English-language readers through 'Folding Beijing', which won the 2016 Hugo Award for best novelette. Hao, who has an undergraduate degree in physics and a PhD in economics, was the first Chinese woman to win the Hugo Award.

Jumpnauts, translated by Ken Liu, is superficially a first contact SF novel, but within its densely packed 350 pages comes an examination of weighty issues of philosophy and history, within a Chinese framework. At times, the talking heads discussions, with explanatory translation footnotes of Ken Liu, slow down the narrative, but ultimately *Jumpnauts* is another example of contemporary Chinese SF pushing genre boundaries.

Jumpnauts is set circa 2080 with the United Nations based in Geneva and the world with a Cold War between 'The Pacific League', which is largely East Asia and China, and the Atlantic Alliance, which is largely the United States and Europe.

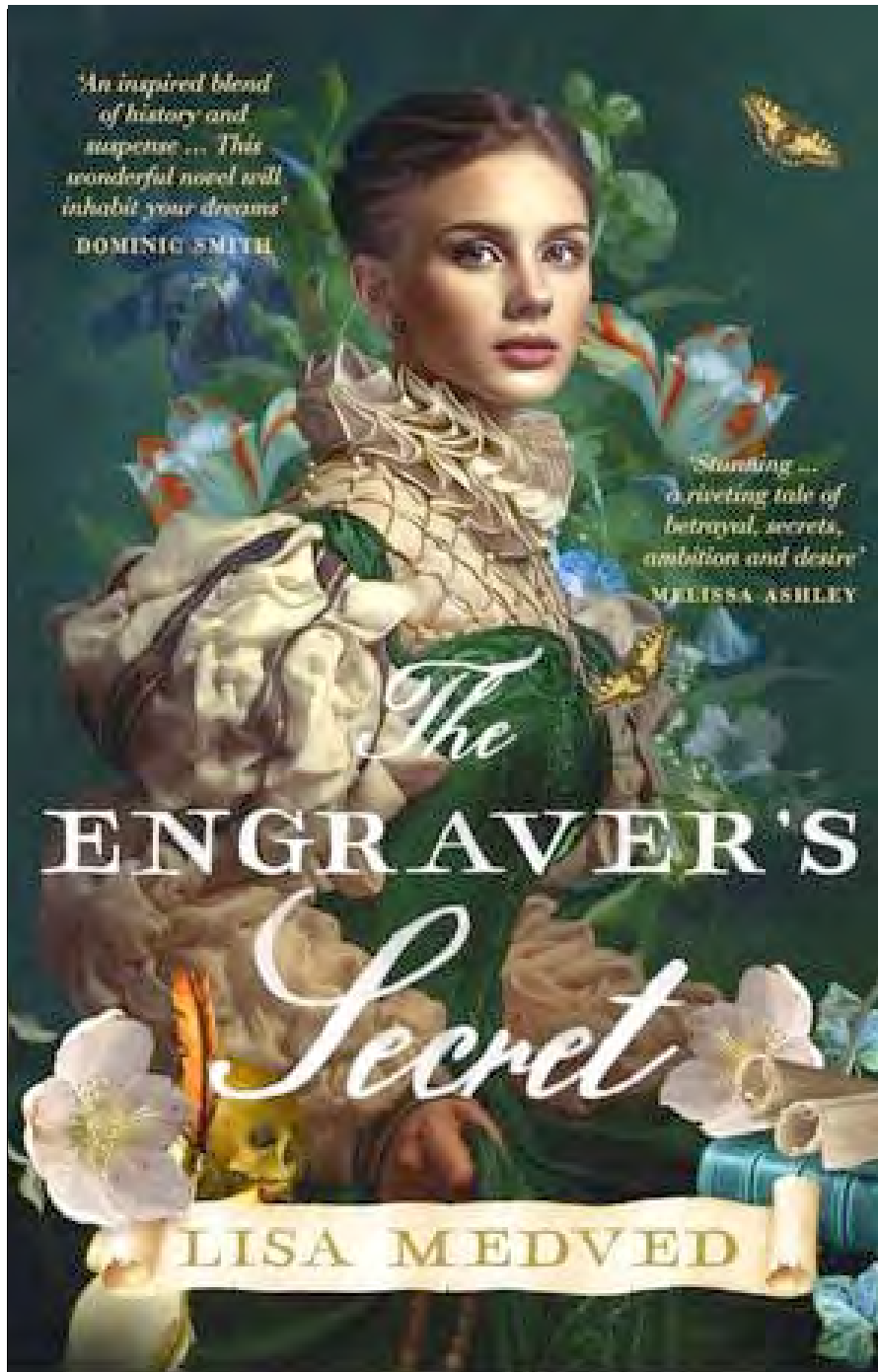
Yun Fan, a young archaeologist based in Xian, believes that highly intelligent aliens have visited Earth numerous times in the past and facilitated advances for humanity. She believes there is evidence they are en route to return. Echoes here of the themes of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Yun Fan seeks the help of AI researcher Qi Fei plus Jiang Liu, independently wealthy through blockchain technology. Together they form an uneasy alliance, not helped by the two males vying for the attention of Yun Fan.

With the help of Chang Tiang, an ex-military pilot, the trio embark into space to meet the aliens, intending to forestall the probable aggressive action of the two power alliances. The two male characters Jiang Liu and Qi Fei represent different belief systems embodied in Chinese philosophy, which will be played out when the aliens are contacted.

The aliens, wishing 'to help your civilisation ascend the ladder of wisdom', represent the Confucian concept of 'Ren'; which promotes the concept of coexistence, or being human together. In the context of the novel it rejects the fictional concept that alien civilisations are aggressive predators. The eventual contact follows a complex spatial and philosophical path before they return to Earth for a crucial vote in the United Nations.

In the process, the trio discover themselves and a pathway for the future of humanity. The overall message is that only peaceful civilisations will advance. Given the aliens believe that humanity in 2080 is in the 'Age of Expansion', not caring about the future, this is clearly a message from the author to current nation states.



Crime and mystery

THE ENGRAVER'S SECRET

by Lisa Medved (HarperCollins; \$32.99)

Lisa Medved is an Australian author who has lived in The Hague since 2008. Her novel *The Engraver's Secret*, which was previously published in a slightly different Dutch version in 2022, sees Medved juxtaposing her narrative of secrets and father-daughter relationships between the present day and the art world of seventeenth-century Antwerp.

Medved has said: 'The process of writing *The Engraver's Secret* has been rather convoluted, but very exciting. I completed the first draft in 2015, and it was an action-packed, modern-day crime story. But I wanted it to have more layers of interest, for the plot to have more thought-provoking elements, and the characters to be more compelling. As I redrafted the story, I strengthened the historic elements, emphasised the seventeenth-century part of the story, and contrasted the differences between the two eras. As I developed the plot and characters, various themes emerged: ambition and ownership, trust and betrayal, family connections, and control. All of these contributed to making it a multi-genre story with strong elements of crime, mystery, family drama in an historical and modern-day setting.'

The timelines revolve around two strong women seeking the truth after familial deathbed confessions. Medved has said she reflects 'the constraints placed on women and the challenges women face in controlling their lives'.

Antonia is the daughter of Lucas Vorsterman (1595–1675), a significant engraver for the artist Peter Paul Rubens. Between

1619 and 1621 Vorsterman was the sole engraver of Rubens' paintings relating to printmaking sales, but they had a major falling out over 'operating privilege', in later terms copyright. As a result, Vorsterman moved to England in 1623, where he engraved the portraits of King Charles I among others, before returning to Antwerp in 1630.

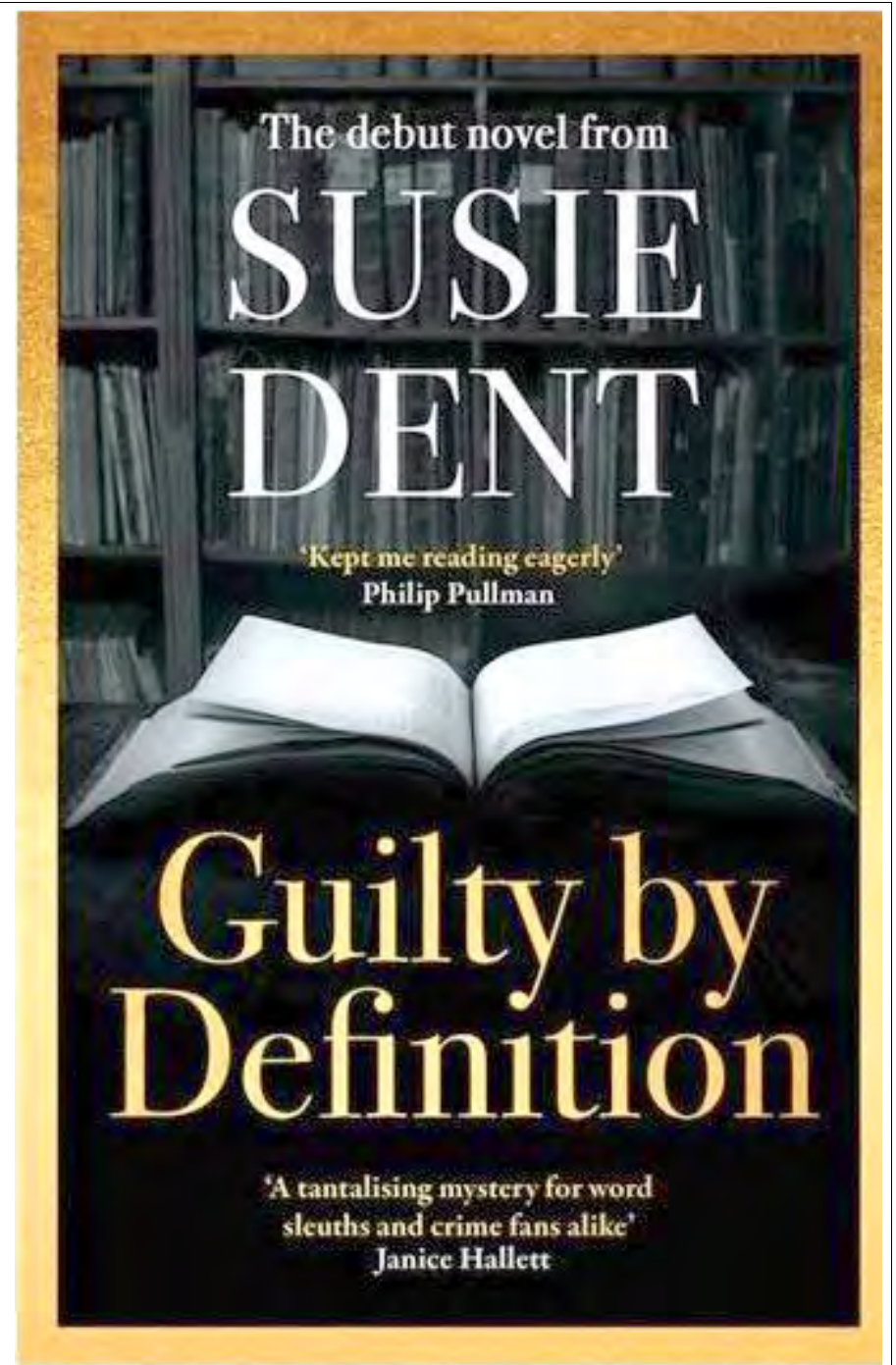
Antonia writes in 1675: 'I adored my father until the day he died', when he asked her to keep a dramatic secret from the earlier falling out with Rubens. This secret will play out through to the present-day narrative, where Charlotte Hubert, a art historian researching Rubens, has just been appointed to the University in Antwerp. Here she will find her father, his existence only recently revealed by her dying mother. Another deathbed secret that will play a vital role in the narrative.

In a department riven by academic jealousies, Charlotte is made aware of a 1686 map folio, which links back to Antonia and sets Charlotte on a dangerous archival path, leading right back to Rubens. *The Engravers Secret* ultimately reaches a resolution that cleverly links past and present.

GUILTY BY DEFINITION
by Susie Dent (Zaffre; \$39.99)

Susie Dent is a British writer and broadcaster on language, including 30 years as a co-presenter and the resident word expert on UK Channel 4's *Countdown*. After several non-fiction books on words and language, she makes her fiction debut with ***Guilty by Definition***.

Dent, who graduated from Oxford University, lives in Oxford and initially worked at the Oxford English Dictionary, here renamed in the plot as the Clarendon English Dictionary. Her main character Martha Thornhill is now a senior editor at CED, after 10 years in Berlin, where she went to escape the trauma of her older sister Charlie's dramatic disappearance in Oxford 10 years before.



All memories of Charlie come flooding back when cryptic letters and postcards begin to arrive from 'Chorus' on the CED desks and home letter boxes of the main quartet of Clarendon lexicographers, Martha, Simon, Alex, and Safi. The three women, of different ages and nationalities, bond together, while Simon still nurses a grudge that he was passed over when Martha was appointed.

The consultant editor of the CED unit, the charismatic TV personality Professor Jonathan Overton, a best-selling Shakespearean scholar with an historic eye for his female students, has his own motives when he is made aware of the first letter, in which Chorus writes, 'I have been afraid of the truth; I have kept secrets. I believe I am not the only one who does so and so I come to you ... the secretaries of English.'

Dent has written: 'This is my first move into fiction, and a lot of writer friends advised me to write about what I know. And so I decided to set the story in a world I have inhabited myself. It involves a team of lexicographers whose task is to unravel a series of linguistic clues to get to a truth they didn't know they needed. And the story is set in Oxford, a place I love and which, beyond its dreaming spires, has its own secrets. *Guilty by Definition* draws on my work as a lexicographer and etymologist; both jobs involve

clues and evidence, and the parallels between word detectives and the real kind seemed a perfect basis for a mystery novel.'

The letters, with many literary allusions, often from Shakespeare, take the reader down some esoteric yet stimulating paths, which increasingly reveal that Charlie, the golden child of Martha's family, might have been less than golden and that she may have made a discovery that would shake the literary world.

The trio's investigations take them wider and wider in Oxford circles, from antiquarian bookshops to a book launch in the Ashmolean Museum, and finally to a plot denouement in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian Library.

Susie Dent cleverly juxtaposes the interpersonal relationships of the three women with a mystery that can only be solved through 'the unravelling of language', made more urgent after a murder occurs and the quest becomes a deadly pursuit.

The ending is a little forced and improbable, but certainly resolution is reached on a number of levels. Dent is decidedly her own voice, but for lovers of Oxford mysteries she brings back memories of the excellent Oxford academic crime novels of J. I. M. Stewart writing as Michael Innes.

Books and society

THE BOOK BLINDERS:

ANNALS OF VANDALISM AT THE BRITISH LIBRARY: A NECROLOGY
by John Clute (Norstrilia Press; \$79.90)

Critic, editor and novelist **John Clute** is one of the legends of

science fiction, especially his key role in compiling *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. See the incredible output at <https://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?147>

Clute's awards include three Hugos and a World Fantasy Award.

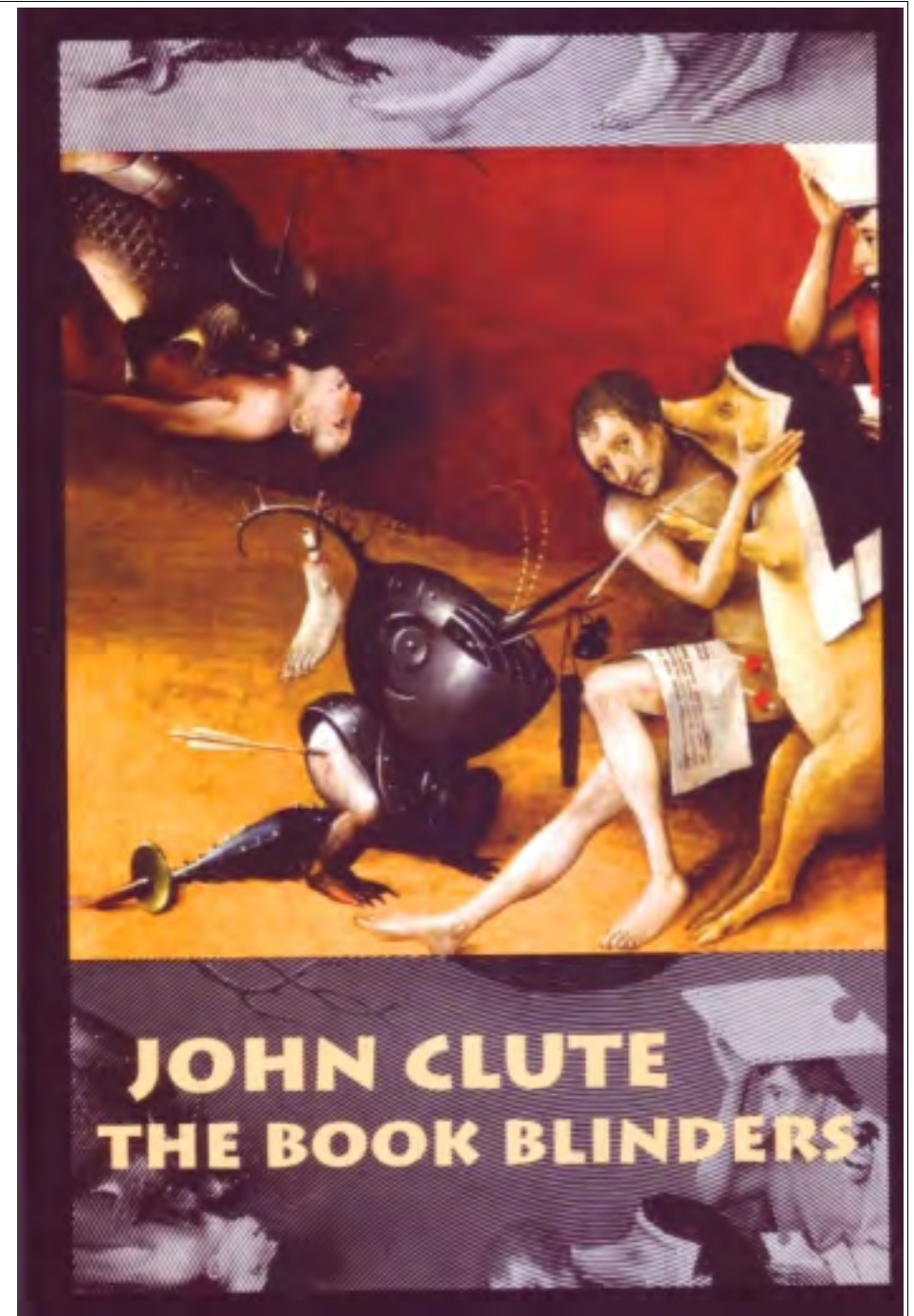
Now he has, with Melbourne's Norstrilia Press, compiled a beautifully illustrated book to expose the scandal that the British Museum, and subsequently from 1973 the British Library, had disposed, over nearly 150 years, all the legally deposited book dust jackets/covers, which Clute terms 'annals of vandalism'.

The discarding and destruction of dust jackets was also the practice in the other British copyright libraries. There was also a reluctance by them even to take under deposit 'ephemeral material' such as science fiction, romance, and pornography, now essential research material. SF critic and academic Tom Shippey and I, when we were in Oxford in the early 1970s, were able to identify some of the historical lacunae in SF and fantasy in the Bodleian Library.

The story begins for Clute in 2011 when the British Library decided to put on its first ever exhibition of science fiction, 'Out of this World'. But, of course, many of its classic SF and fantasy hardbacks were lacking covers, so presenting only 'blank faces to the world'. Clute was able to provide 50 key works with covers from his personal collection, but the original exhibition had to include numerous 'replicants'.

Clute decided after this 'near-debacle' to investigate, as an 'anthropological mystery', why the British Museum had not decided to keep dust jackets since their first appearance in 1819. Dust jackets, with their advertisements, author biographies, and plot summaries, provide, as Clute demonstrates, invaluable and often unique references. Now, we automatically accept the importance of dust jackets, as well as noting value on the rare book market. A copy of a first edition of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* can sell for around US\$10,000 without a jacket, but with a dust jacket it can apparently sell for up to \$150,000, depending on condition.

In addition, the dust jackets often have distinguished cover art, such as illustrated covers by Osbert Lancaster, Nicolas Bentley,



and those famous Jonathan Cape James Bond covers of the 1950s. Clute notes that apparently no front cover remains anywhere of the first edition of H. G. Wells classic *The War of the Worlds*.

In ***The Book Blinders*** Clute chooses 115 books whose jackets are reproduced from copies that have survived outside of the British Library, a significant proportion from Clute's own collection. Clute says the selection was 'an inevitably skewed sample, about one example for every 8000 books mutilated by the BL'. Early versions of most of the 115 entries first appeared on Clute's Facebook pages, and can still be found there.

Clute stops his book survey in 1990. He records that from 1993, 'bookjackets of hardback fiction recorded on legal deposit have been retained at Boston Spa (the British Library repository), in boxes sorted by year. From 2016 eligible jackets are registered on accession in the relevant catalogue record and are technically available for research purposes. Attempts to order any have failed. From January 2019 ... the cover matter for each newly accessed accession hardbound volume of fiction tagged 'Nov' is now retained with the book'.

Clute concludes: 'Does this mean the British Library now recognises it is destroyed millions of them in error?'. At the time of the writing of this review, I can find no response from the British Library on its destruction of the book covers and Clute's indictment.

Clute's selection of the books is often eclectic, depending on the source material. Authors range from famous names, such as Ezra Pound and Albert Camus, to lesser known names such as H. M. Tomlinson and Raymond Mortimer, but Clute's commentaries on the covers, their authors, and their content are always revealing, learned, provocative, and informative.

Thus when commenting on the cover of Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (1973), he remarks 'Aldiss,

of course, though a man of intellect and gravitas, could sometimes rather resemble Terry Thomas storming St Trinians'. After commenting on Aldiss's use of the word 'The', Clute concludes 'the book jacket is a message straight from the creator ... Look inside, you heathen, and be saved, says Brian Aldiss; I dare you'. Similar wonderful, occasionally over-the-top commentary is scattered throughout the entries.

To conclude, four specific titles emphasise Clute's general thesis:

Katharine Burdekin's famous 1937 novel ***Swastika Night***, written as **Murray Constantine** (because selling SF by a female author was thought more difficult than for a male), was the first 'Hitler Wins' story documenting a global Nazi triumph. The publisher, Gollancz, filled the dust jacket with a summary of the plot, beginning: 'It is the seventh century of the Hitlerian era'. Clute dramatically calls its cover destruction 'an act of appeasement'.

Clute tells us that the dust jacket of the first edition in 1961 of **C. S. Lewis's** ***A Grief Observed***, written as **N. W. Clerk** after the death of Lewis's wife Joy, had an anonymous flap copy written by T. S. Eliot. Few purchasing the book at the time would be aware of this, and thus the retention of the cover is even more valuable.

The Gollancz cover of **Edgar Snow's** 1937 ***Red Snow over China*** was destroyed. It showed an early full-size cover photograph of the then little-known Mao Zedong.

Charles Chilton's ***Journey Into Space*** was an extremely popular BBC radio series in Britain in the 1950s, but the first edition books from the series seem, according to Clute, to have all ended up in Australia and perhaps South Africa. Copies with the cover are still extremely rare, after their 'wholesale destruction in the killing fields of Australia'. Clute was not able to add them to his collection until he visited Melbourne in 2006 and 2010, and had to lend his copies to the British Library exhibition in 2011, as its

own 'blinded copies' were undisplayable.

The Book Blinders is a stimulating and often entertaining, despite its overall setting, investigation into what Clute calls 'the mind of the book'.

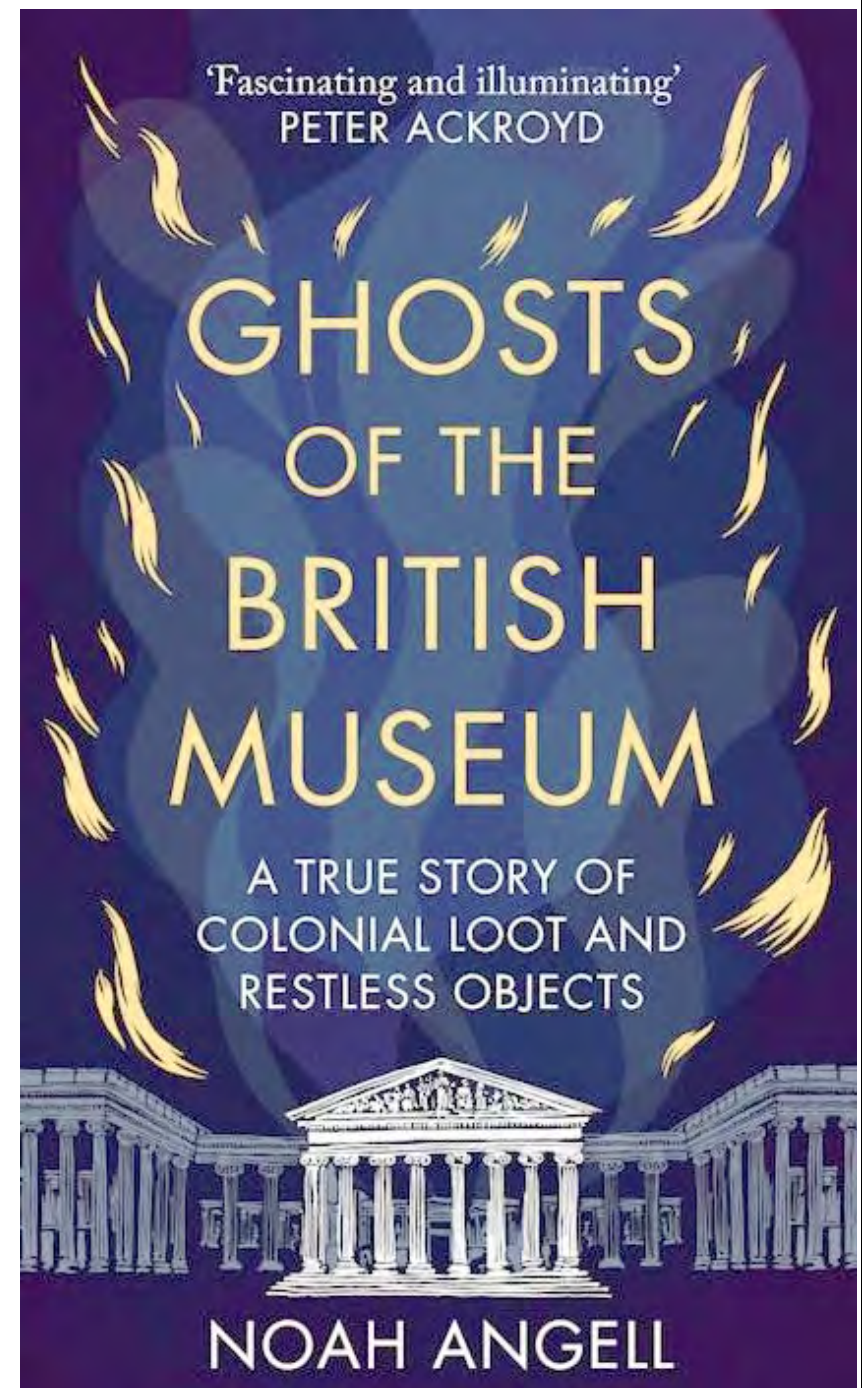
**GHOSTS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM:
A TRUE STORY OF COLONIAL LOOT AND RESTLESS OBJECTS
by Noah Angell, with illustrations by Hendrik Wittkopf
(Monoray; \$34.99)**

Museums and their collections have become topics of wider interest in recent years in terms of colonialism and issues regarding returning historical artifacts to their original country. The Elgin Marbles in the British Museum are the most publicised and discussed objects in this context.

Noah Angell, a Berlin-based writer and artist, originally from North Carolina where slave plantation 'trauma is soaked into the land', now works with orally transmitted forms, such as storytelling and song. In *Ghosts of the British Museum* he comes at the museum controversy from an unusual angle by investigating alleged ghosts in the British Museum, a narrative based on seven years of interviews with former and current British Museum staff, such as security personnel, visitor assistants, curators, and sales personnel.

Despite the numerous tales of strange goings-on, especially at night, there is a lack of realistic scientific evidence to back up the description of, for example, the ghostly appearances of strange figures and self-opening security doors. Angell sees the British Museum as a sort of black hole, a void that 'captures other times within it'.

Angell categorises the historic artifacts under discussion in his specific chapters as 'restless spirits clamouring for attention'. He writes in the introduction in this context: 'Hauntings arise from



untended trauma, festering in its irresolution, and made worse by ongoing injustice in the world of the living. Perhaps simply to put material heritage in a museum is to make a ghost of it. After all, the creation of a collection often involves the violent or underhand extraction of artifacts from their original settings, and their indefinite exile as a mere object in the cell-like setting of the museum display'. He believes British Museum is an 'imperial-era detention centre still processing and imprisoning millions of ancient beings and lost gods who desperately want out'.

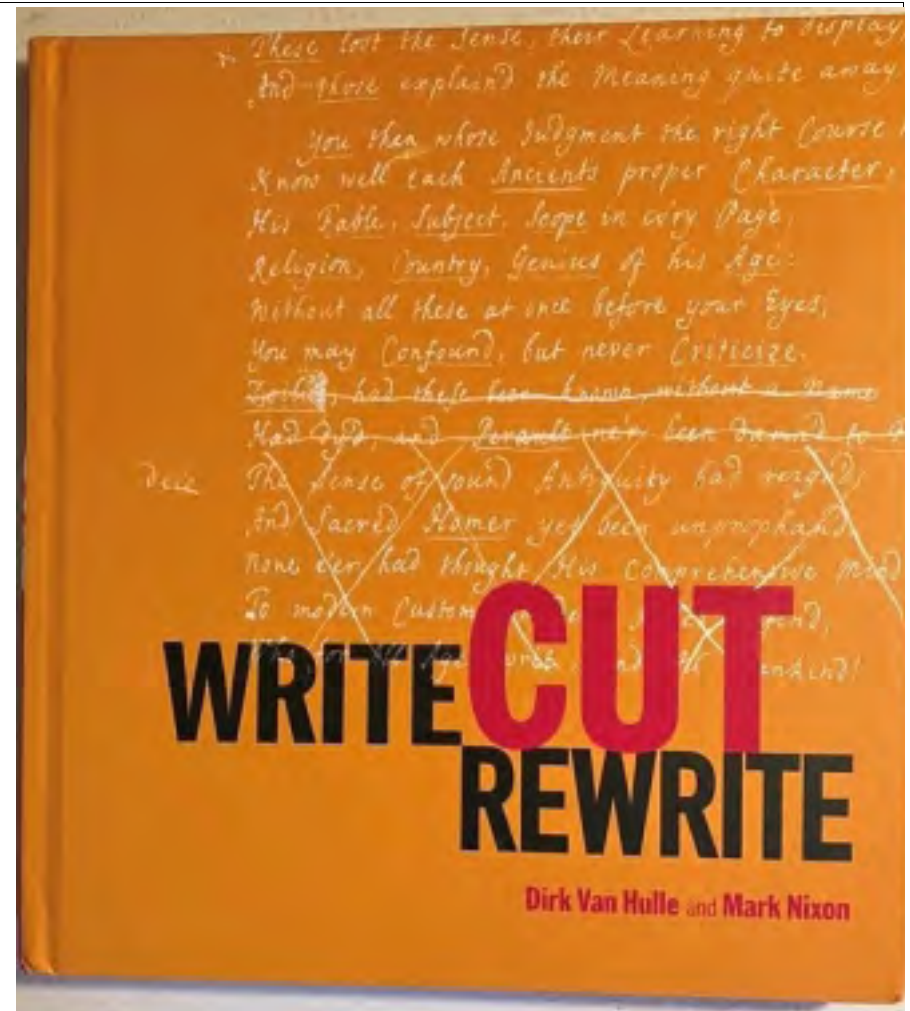
Each chapter begins with an illustration of an artifact, such as the Benin Bronzes, an Aztec double-headed serpent, a statue of the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet, and Greek antiquities, followed by details of each artifact in terms of its acquisition and its place within his overall thesis.

Irrespective of the somewhat mystical framework of the book, Angell's comments, such as 'The colonial museum has lingered too long and become an unfortunate ghost, a relic of an earlier time', places his lively and unusual book squarely within the contemporary debate on the role and mission of national museums and their collections.

**WRITE CUT REWRITE:
THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR OF MODERN LITERATURE
by Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon (Bodleian Library; \$79. 99)**

Write Cut Rewrite: The Cutting Room Floor of Modern Literature spins off the exhibition held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, 29 February 2024–5 January 2025, curated by **Dirk Van Hulle**, Professor of Bibliography and Modern Book History at the University of Oxford, and **Mark Nixon**, Professor of Modern Literature and Beckett Studies at the University of Reading.

Their aim is to 'unveil the mysteries of writing, cutting, rewriting and publishing exceptional creative works ... Before a book can be read, it needs to be written first. To write a great work of



literature a writer needs to make sure that it "works", that it somehow strikes a chord. A major element in this process is to "kill your darlings" or the act of cutting. This form of creative undoing involves more than just authors cancelling words in their drafts. Writers are also readers; they take notes, some of which are processed in their own work, but many of which remain vestigial. Like vestigial organs, they have no direct function in the finished product, but they did have a function in the creative

production process. The writer decided not to include them in their work. One would expect these “cuts” to disappear in the waste-paper basket. But very often, writers do not throw them away and many of them are carefully preserved in libraries and archives. This peek behind the scenes, into authors’ workshops, reveals ideas that did not make it into our best-known novels, poems or plays, the evidence of which can only be recovered in manuscripts, held in archives and special collections’.

They quote the phrase ‘Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart’ from Stephen King, but note the phrase’s lineage as being by William Faulkner out of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the editor of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, who used the phrase ‘Murder your darlings’. Less colloquial is the subtitle of the book, ‘The Cutting-Room Floor of Modern Literature’.

In ten themed chapters, the authors investigate the reasons for editing a book, the impact of censorship, the influence of publishers and editors, how various writers revise their own works, and whether certain books would have been better with or without editing.

Beautifully produced as ever by the Bodleian Library, with full-page manuscript illustrations, Van Hulle and Nixon cover, mostly, from the Bodleian Libraries’ MSS collection, a list of authors that includes Jane Austen, Christina Rossetti, James Joyce, Raymond Chandler, Ian Fleming, J. R. R. Tolkien, Alan Bennett, Barbara Pym, Philip Pullman, and Franz Kafka.

Richard Ovenden, Bodley’s Librarian, reflects in his introduction what would have been the impact of *The Wind in the Willows* if it had remained titled as originally *The Mole & the Water Rat*. And if Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem ‘The Raven’ had remained with its title as ‘The Parrot’.

Van Hulle and Nixon, overviewing the Bodleian’s Mary Shelley’s

manuscript of *Frankenstein*, reflect on Percy Bysshe Shelley’s small editorial suggestions inked into the margins. Mary originally wrote that Victor Frankenstein describes his creation as ‘handsome’. Percy suggested altering to ‘beautiful’, which appears in the final text.

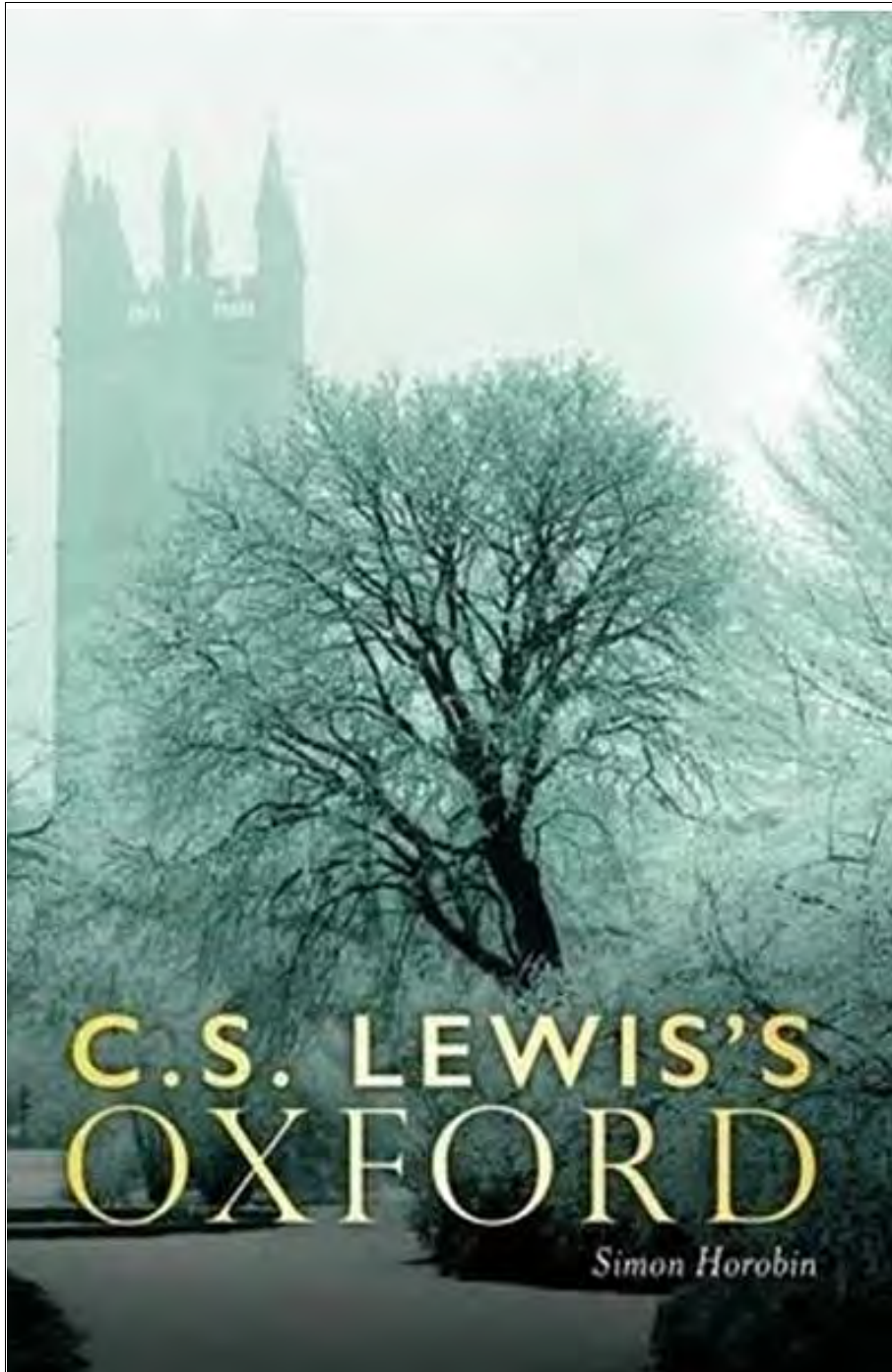
In the chapter ‘Censorship and Self-Censorship’, the authors reveal how Stephen Spender and Samuel Beckett had their texts affected by both censorship and self-censorship. The analysis of Franz Kafka’s manuscript of *Das Schloss* illustrates how Kafka decided to substitute the third-person ‘K’ for the first-person ‘Ich’, and then how he had to go back and alter the first-person narrative to the third in the preceding 42 pages.

John le Carré apparently played with for some time, as revealed in the various handwritten drafts and typescripts, the opening of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* before deciding on ‘The truth is, if old Major Dover hadn’t dropped dead at Taunton races Jim would never have come to Thursgood’s at all’.

Van Hulle and Nixon include a chapter ‘Cuts in Born-Digital works’, noting there is now a software which allows a writer to track every change in a manuscript. Jane Austen or Philip Larkin would not approve?

Jacques Derrida, of course, was the great book deconstructionalist, noting that books in their essence were artificial constructs made of paper and glue. Peter Salmon has noted, in discussing Derrida, that the first copies of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* available in the UK were cut up from the original printings and ‘smuggled across the Channel stuffed down trouser legs and even tucked under shirts’. Van Hulle and Nixon comment on the corrections, including deletions, that Joyce made after publication to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Write Cut Rewrite is a fascinating exposition of the impact on authors’ works over the centuries in the context of writing,



revising, and publishing their creative works.

C. S. LEWIS'S OXFORD
by Simon Horobin
(Bodleian Library; \$59.99)

C. S. Lewis's Oxford follows *Evelyn Waugh's Oxford* in the Bodleian's beautifully produced and illustrated series on major writers and their life and times in Oxford. **Simon Horobin** delivers a vivid and detailed picture of the Oxford in the first half of the twentieth century in the context of Lewis's significant role within it and his enduring reputation.

Lewis is perhaps most remembered today for his 'Chronicles of Narnia' series, although during his lifetime he had great commercial success with his 'religious' books, such as *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*, and his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. Written after the death of his wife Joy, he documents how he was an atheist before turning to Christianity, a conversion that owed much to his friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien.

Simon Horobin, Professor of English Language and Literature and Fellow and Tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford, incidentally Lewis's old college, draws on Lewis's personal diaries, letters, and even marginalia from the books he read, to offer new insights about Lewis and Oxford. The illustrations include letters, manuscripts, including an unpublished poem, relevant Oxford colleges, and Lewis's pubs, notably the Eastgate and the Eagle and Child, where he drank with Tolkien and fellow academic 'Inklings'.

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963), known to his friends as 'Jack', was Fellow and Tutor in English at Magdalen College from 1925 to 1954, before he took up the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge. Lewis's first visit, from his home in Belfast, to Oxford came in December 1916, after which

he wrote to his father: 'The place has surpassed my wildest dreams: I never saw anything so beautiful, especially on frosty moonlit nights'. He arrived as an exhibition student at University College in 1917 but because of war duties only resumed his studies in 1919.

Lewis achieved a double first in Literae Humaniores, the study of Classical languages and literature, before embarking on an academic career in English Language and Literature. Tolkien encouraged Lewis in studying philology after their first meeting in 1926. Horobin writes: 'It was quickly apparent that the two were kindred spirits, deeply affected by the mythology of the ancient North.' Each was to comment on each other's writings in draft form.

Lewis's 'Space Trilogy' — *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945) — features a philologist named Elwin Ransom, partially based on Tolkien. This reviewer still remembers Oxford SF great, Brian Aldiss, pointing me to the December 1962 discussion on science fiction by C. S. Lewis, Kingsley Amis, and Brian Aldiss. This was first published in 1964 in the short-lived critical magazine *SF Horizons*, and subsequently published as 'Unreal Estates' in the March 1965 issue of *Encounter*. In it, Lewis comments that 'some SF really does deal with issues far more serious than those realistic fiction deals with; real problems about human destiny'.

Horobin covers Lewis's influence as a teacher and writer involved in Oxford intellectual life, including his clubs and societies, such as the Martlets, the Coalbiters, the Socratic Club, and the Inklings. He writes that today 'hordes of tourists flock: to enjoy drinking at the Eagle and Child, to sit in Lewis's pew at Holy Trinity Church, to visit his study at The Kilns and to retrace his footsteps around Addison's Walk'. Lewis's memory lives on in Oxford!

HOW TO BECOME FAMOUS:

LOST EINSTEINS, FORGOTTEN SUPERSTARS, AND HOW THE BEATLES CAME TO BE

by Cass Sunstein

(Harvard Business Review Press; \$49.99)

What does it take to become famous? Professor **Cass Sunstein** from Harvard Law School, himself famous in his own field, notes that fame requires talent, resilience, and a large dose of serendipity.

His book *How to Become Famous* is not a self-help manual to fame, but rather a commentary, mixing personal reflection with experimental psychology and behavioural science studies, on how and why people like the Beatles, Taylor Swift, Bob Dylan, Muhammed Ali, Jane Austen, and Stan Lee, or films like *Star Wars*, or works of art like the *Mona Lisa*, became famous.

Sunstein is talking about really famous people, not the faux celebrities, like the Kardashians, nor the net social media influencers. He quotes Samuel Johnson, who pointed out 'the bubbles of artificial fame, which are kept up a while by a breath of fresh air, and then break at once and are annihilated'.

Sunstein notes: 'Taylor Swift is really famous in the sense that people know not only her name but also why they know her name. This is also true of Barack Obama, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and the Pope.'

Sunstein offers a new understanding of the roles played by ability, luck, and contingency in the achievement of fame. Sunstein observes, 'There is no set of shared characteristics that famous people have. Success and fame depend on 1001 different factors, and there isn't a unifying set.'

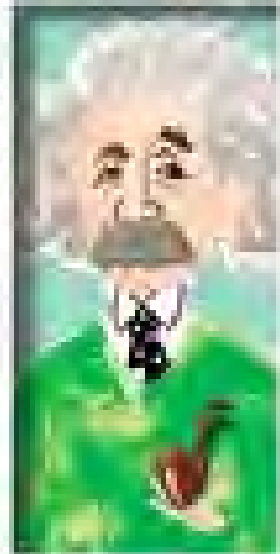
He admits there is no easy answer for 'How To Become Famous', and that his choice of subjects is based on his personal favourites,



HOW TO BECOME FAMOUS

Lost Einsteins,
Forgotten Superstars,
and How the Beatles
Came to Be

CASS R. SUNSTEIN



whose success he often places in the context of chance. Thus, what if Brian Epstein had not seen the Beatles that lunchtime in the Liverpool Cavern in 1961 and then later managed to persuade George Martin to record them?

Sunstein writes, 'What would the world be like if the Beatles never existed? This was the question posed by the playful, thought-provoking, 2019 film *Yesterday*, in which a young, completely unknown singer starts performing Beatles hits to a world that has never heard them. Would the Fab Four's songs be as phenomenally popular as they are in our own Beatle-infused world? The movie asserts that they would, but is that true? Was the success of the Beatles inevitable due to their amazing, matchless talent? Maybe.'

Sunstein similarly recounts the story of the then Cassius Clay who, after his bicycle was stolen when he was 12, told the police officer: 'I want to whup that guy.' The officer responded, 'Well, if you want to whup somebody, you better learn to box' and enrolled him in his boxing gym. Again serendipity and timing, allied to obvious talent, ambition, mentorship, and hard work.

And what of the 'lost Einsteins', people who might have been famous but never made it? Sunstein writes: 'There are a zillion people in human history who could have been iconic, or something in that direction, who never made it. One reason is they may have been born in a time and place where they had the wrong gender or the wrong demographic or the wrong skin color or wrong religion. (By wrong, I mean unfavorable for opportunity or success.)'

Sunstein notes there was 'no age of Shakespeare in 1600'. Shakespeare owed a great deal, in terms of posterity, to the posthumous publication of the *First Folio* in 1623 which preserved a number of his plays. Scottish novelist Mary Brunton was thought by contemporaries to be as talented as Jane Austen in the early nineteenth century but Sunstein believes she lacked a 'champion'.

He explains why Bob Dylan made it, and talented songwriter and folk singer Connie Converse did not, in the New York music scene of the 1950s and 1960s.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, arguably the most famous painting in the world, was not immediately considered a masterpiece. Sunstein believes that its theft in 1911 was 'critical to the

emergence of the *Mona Lisa* as the most famous painting in the world. Without that theft, it probably would now be one of a set of paintings that people think are very good'.

Clive James once wrote 'a life without fame can be a good life, but fame without a life is no life at all'. *How to Become Famous* is a fascinating analysis of the nature of fame.

Biography

NOT YOUR CHINA DOLL: THE WILD AND SHIMMERING LIFE OF ANNA MAY WONG by Katie Gee Salisbury (Faber; \$55)

Anna May Wong, Dr Fu Manchu, and Charlie Chan were significant figures, both real and fictional, in shaping or confirming Western attitudes to Asians in general, and Chinese in particular, in the first half of the twentieth century. With China at that time inaccessible to most of the world, their images became the norm.

Christopher Frayling, in his 2014 book *The Yellow Peril: Dr Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia*, has traced in detail the impact on popular culture of 'the evil genius Dr Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man'. Frayling notes, 'in America, the literary image of the Chinese as alien 'other' — a sinister villain or dragon lady' largely grew out of anxieties about immigration, leading to the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 and its subsequent extensions.

Anna May Wong (1905–1961) was the first Chinese-American actress to become a major Hollywood box-office attraction. Her career stretched from silent cinema through the talkies to TV in

1951, when she became the first Asian-American to be the lead in an US television show. In 1960, Wong was the first Asian-American woman to be awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and remained alone until Lucy Liu joined her in 2019. In 2022, she became the first Asian-American woman to be depicted on American currency when the US Mint released quarter coins bearing her likeness.

Wong's legacy has been largely forgotten until recently. Yunte Huang's 2023 publication *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History*, and now Salisbury's biography restore Wong's place in cinematic and cultural history. Salisbury, Chinese-American herself, brings an Eastern, rather than a Western, perspective to a multi-layered, well-researched biography.

Salisbury writes: 'As Hollywood's first Chinese-American movie star, Anna May Wong faced more challenges than most actresses of her era. In spite of the racism she experienced — studios balked at casting her in leading roles and often relegated her to China doll or dragon lady stereotypes — Wong persisted and even thrived, working in silent films, talkies, radio, theater, and



'Orientally yours'.

She lamented the fact that many white actors, termed 'yellow faces', played Asian characters. Charlie Chan, the famous fictional police detective, was played in 16 films by Swedish actor Warner Oland. Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu has apparently never been played by an actor of east Asian heritage, Christopher Lee being one of the most famous examples.

Charlie Chan was seen, in contrast, as an 'amiable Chinese', a more positive role model, but recently critics have seen Chan as being portrayed in a condescending framework because of his lack of idiomatic English and polite nature.

Wong herself often found herself 'caught between two worlds — neither of them will accept her fully'. The Chinese government decried the Chinese characters she played, but Wong often had no choice in the roles she was offered. Later in life she worked diligently to reshape Asian-American representation in film.

television across four decades'.

Wong rose to stardom as the exotic Mongol slave girl, 'very very easy to look at', in Douglas Fairbanks's 1924 epic *The Thief of Bagdad* but, resisting stereotyping, she moved for work to Europe in 1928. In London, Wong starred in the 1929 West End production of *The Circle of Chalk*, in which a young Laurence Olivier was criticised for his performance.

In Germany, she met Marlene Dietrich, with whom, after returning to Hollywood, she was to star in the 1932 film *Shanghai Express*. In 1931, she had featured as the exotic dancer and daughter of Fu Manchu in *Daughter of the Dragon*, later commenting 'why is it that the screen Chinese is nearly always the villain of the piece? ... We're not like that.' Sardonicly, she always signed her photos,

Wong became known in Hollywood as 'a beauty no one was allowed to kiss' on screen but, while she never married, she had numerous affairs off screen. Salisbury outlines the darker periods of Wong's life, including her bouts of depression and alcoholism, but hopes that her new biography will help 'people see Anna May in a new light. There are definitely tragic aspects to her career, but there's so much more joy and inspiration and triumph to be found in her story. I hope that people focus on the things she did and her legacy ... Anna May's final act was to hand on the torch to a new generation of Asian-American hopefuls'.

— **Colin Steele**, 10 October 2024

ANU/Canberra Times Meet the Author dates 2024

If you cannot attend any of the Meet the Authors gatherings, follow the link <https://www.anu.edu.au/anthe-canberra-times-meet-the-author-series> and you can see the podcasts listed under each of the past events.

**All at 6–7 p.m. Free events.
Registrations at [anu.edu.au/events](https://www.anu.edu.au/events)**

27 Nov.: George Megalogenis

George Megalogenis will be in conversation with **Niki Savva** on his new *Quarterly Essay* **Minority Report: The New Shape of Australian Politics**.

Vote of thanks by **John Warhurst**. Harry Hartog Bookshop, ANU.

28 Nov.: David Marr

David Marr will be in conversation with **Andrew Leigh** on his updated version of **My Country: Stories, Essays & Speeches**.

Vote of thanks by **Allan Behm**. Harry Hartog Bookshop, ANU.

10 Feb. 2025: Juno Gomes

Juno Gomes in conversation with **Linda Burney**, mediated by **Ann McGrath**, on her new book **Until Justice Comes**.

Kambri Cinema, ANU.

1 Feb.: Andrew Dix

Andrew Dix in conversation on his new book **The Promise: How an Everyday Hero Made the Impossible Possible**. Kambri cinema, ANU.

26 Feb.: Geraldine Brooks

Geraldine Brooks in conversation with **Alex Sloan** on her new book **Memorial Days**.

Vote of thanks by **Karen Viggers**. Manning Clark Auditorium, Kambri, ANU.

12 Mar.: Robert Dessaix

Robert Dessaix in conversation with **Andrew Leigh** on his new book **Chameleon: A Memoir of Art, Travel, Ideas and Love**.

Theatre 2, Kambri Cinema, ANU.

15 Apr.: Kate Grenville

Kate Grenville in conversation on her new book **Unsettled: A Journey through Time and Place**. Kambri Cinema, ANU.

30 Apr.: Dervla McTiernan

Dervla McTiernan in conversation with **Chris Hammer** on her new crime fiction novel.

Vote of thanks by **Anna Creer**. Kambri Cinema, ANU.

14 May: Judith Brett

Judith Brett in conversation on her new book, **Fearless Beatrice Faust: Sex, Feminism and Body Politics**.

Theatre 2, Kambri Cinema, ANU

ANNA STEELE was head of English at Canberra Grammar School, before retiring in 2005. Since then, using her maiden name **ANNA CREER**, she has been a regular reviewer of crime fiction, historical fiction, as well as non-fiction about Jane Austen and Shakespeare. Since July 2023 Anna's reviews have been appearing in *The Canberra City News* once a month.

Anna Creer's Bookworld

Recent British crime fiction

TO THE DOGS

by **Louise Welsh** (Canongate; \$32.99)

Award-winning crime writer **Louise Welsh** is Professor of Creative Writing at Glasgow University and it's therefore not surprising that the university at the centre of her latest novel ***To the Dogs*** feels totally authentic.

Although the son of a criminal 'hardman', Professor Jeff Brennan is a successful academic. The Principal of his university has indicated that Brennan is his preferred choice to succeed him.

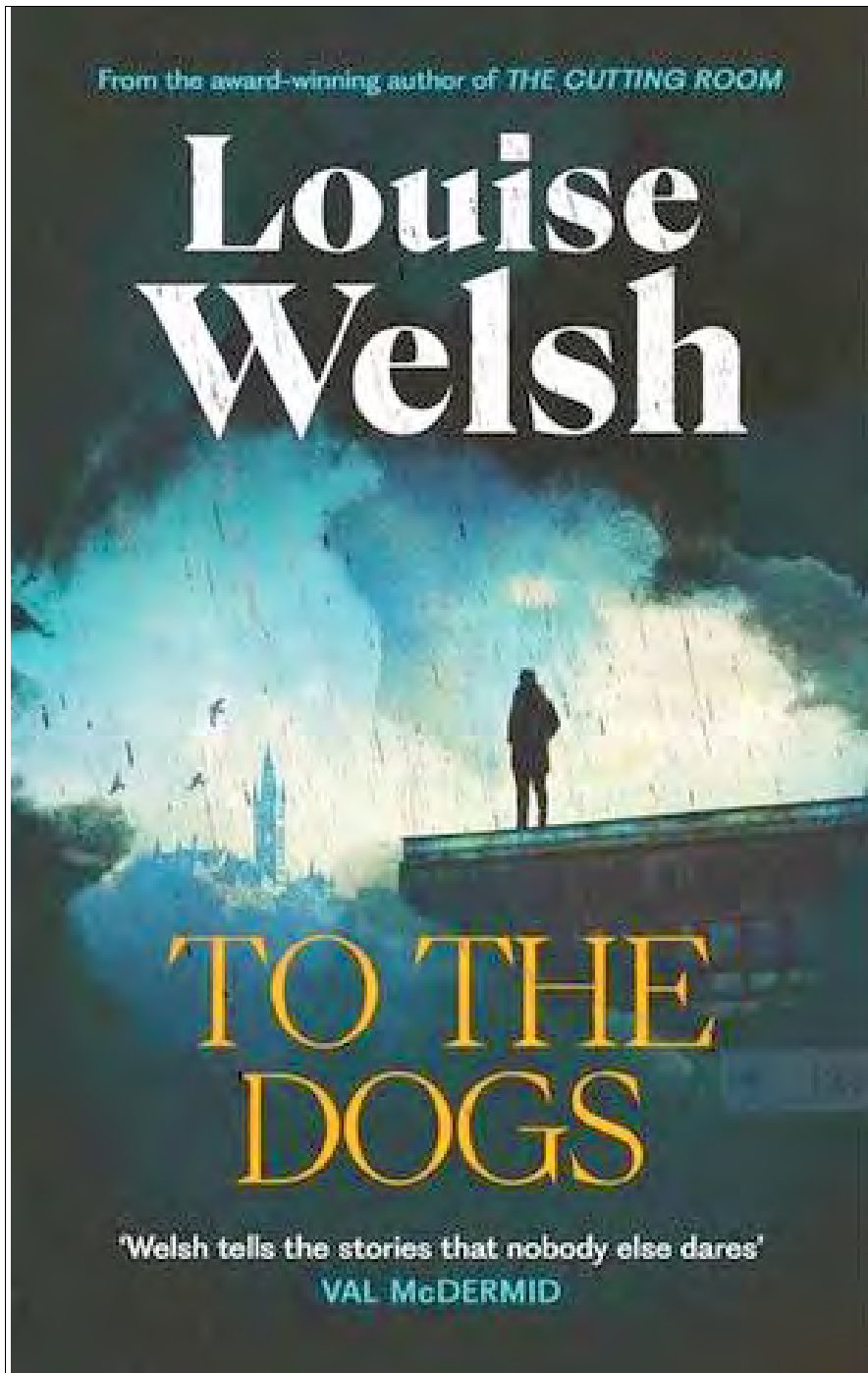
Brennan already chairs the powerful building procurement committee, where decisions have to be made about the design and financing of the new Learning and Teaching hub. But problems arise when a wealthy Saudi alumnus offers a generous donation to fund the building. For some staff and students this is blood

money from a repressive regime.

Brennan also has personal problems. His wayward son is arrested for drug dealing and when he breaks his bail conditions he is remanded in custody.

Eliot confesses to his father that he owes a lot of money to dangerous people and he fears for his life. After an attack in prison puts Eliot in intensive care, Brennan realises he is his father's son 'prepared to kill for his family. He would die for them too, if that was what it took to keep them safe'.

As a result, *To the Dogs* is a tense exploration of a decent man's battle to protect his family from organised crime and his reputation from opposing forces within academia.



THE WRONG HANDS

by Mark Billingham (Sphere; \$32.99)

Mark Billingham has been writing acclaimed, award-winning crime novels since 2001, when he first introduced his detective, Inspector Tom Thorne, in *Sleepyhead*. Eighteen more novels in the series have followed, while David Morrissey starred as Thorne in a TV series.

However, in 2023, in *The Last Dance*, Billingham introduced a new detective, DS Declan Miller, in the first of a series set in Blackpool. ***The Wrong Hands*** is the second.

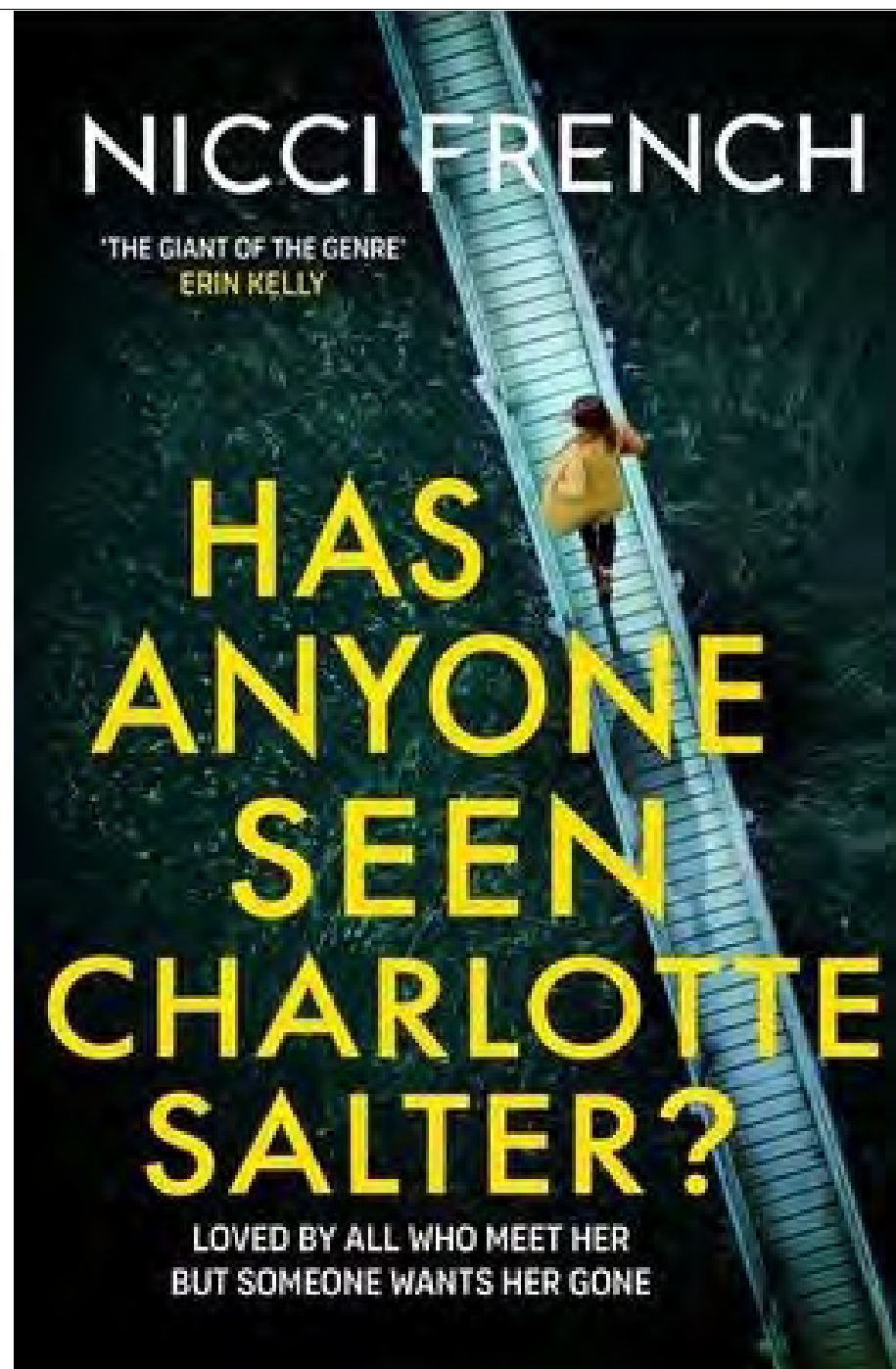
Billingham has said that he had 'become convinced ... that humour and seriousness are not mutually exclusive and was itching to write something more tragi-comic in tone than anything I had written before'. He also says DS Miller is 'enormous fun to write about' and that, although crime novels are about violent death and its aftermath, 'that's not all there is to life or even to death. That's never all there is, so there are also jokes'.

DS Miller is clever and unusual. He owns pet rats, his hobby is ballroom dancing and then there are the dad jokes. His colleagues tolerate him because he's a genius at solving crime.

However, there's been tragedy in Miller's life too, as his wife was killed during an undercover police operation and he's desperate to find her murderer. When a terrified young man brings him a briefcase containing a pair of severed hands, Miller knows that this is evidence of a contract killing by a local crime boss Wayne Cutler. Miller suspects Cutler ordered his wife's death.

As Miller pursues Cutler's hit-man, Desmond Draper, the hit-man is searching for his briefcase so he can be paid by Cutler.

Be warned, however, that beneath the humour *The Wrong Hands* is as violent and brutal as most noir crime novels. Billingham will



make you laugh as you shudder.

HAS ANYONE SEEN CHARLOTTE SALTER?

by Nicci French (Simon & Schuster; \$32.99)

The best of this selection is **Nicci French's** latest, *Has Anyone Seen Charlotte Salter?*, which begins at Christmas 1990 with the fiftieth-birthday party of Alec Salter.

It's quickly apparent that all is not well in the Salter family. The children, fifteen-year-old Etty and her three older brothers, are wary of their father but adore their mother, Charlotte.

Charlotte is universally admired. 'She loves life. She loves people. Above all she loves her four children.' But she fails to arrive for her husband's birthday party, and her children frantically search

for her for days. Charlotte Salter has vanished without a trace.

Thirty years later, Etty returns to her family home, because her father, now in his eighties, has dementia and is moving into residential care. Etty has changed. The 'eager creature' she had been is now a lawyer, 'brisk and cool and hard'. Etty has joined her brothers to clear and arrange for the sale of their father's house.

However, their childhood friends Greg and Morgan Ackerly decide to start a podcast about Charlotte's disappearance, with the aim of solving the mystery. Inevitably there's a murder and the arrival of the astute Detective Inspector Maud O'Connor from London.

This is clever crime fiction, beautifully written, about a family and a community torn apart by tragedy.

Jane Austen's world

JANE AUSTEN'S WARDROBE

by Hilary Davidson

(Yale University Press; \$51.95)

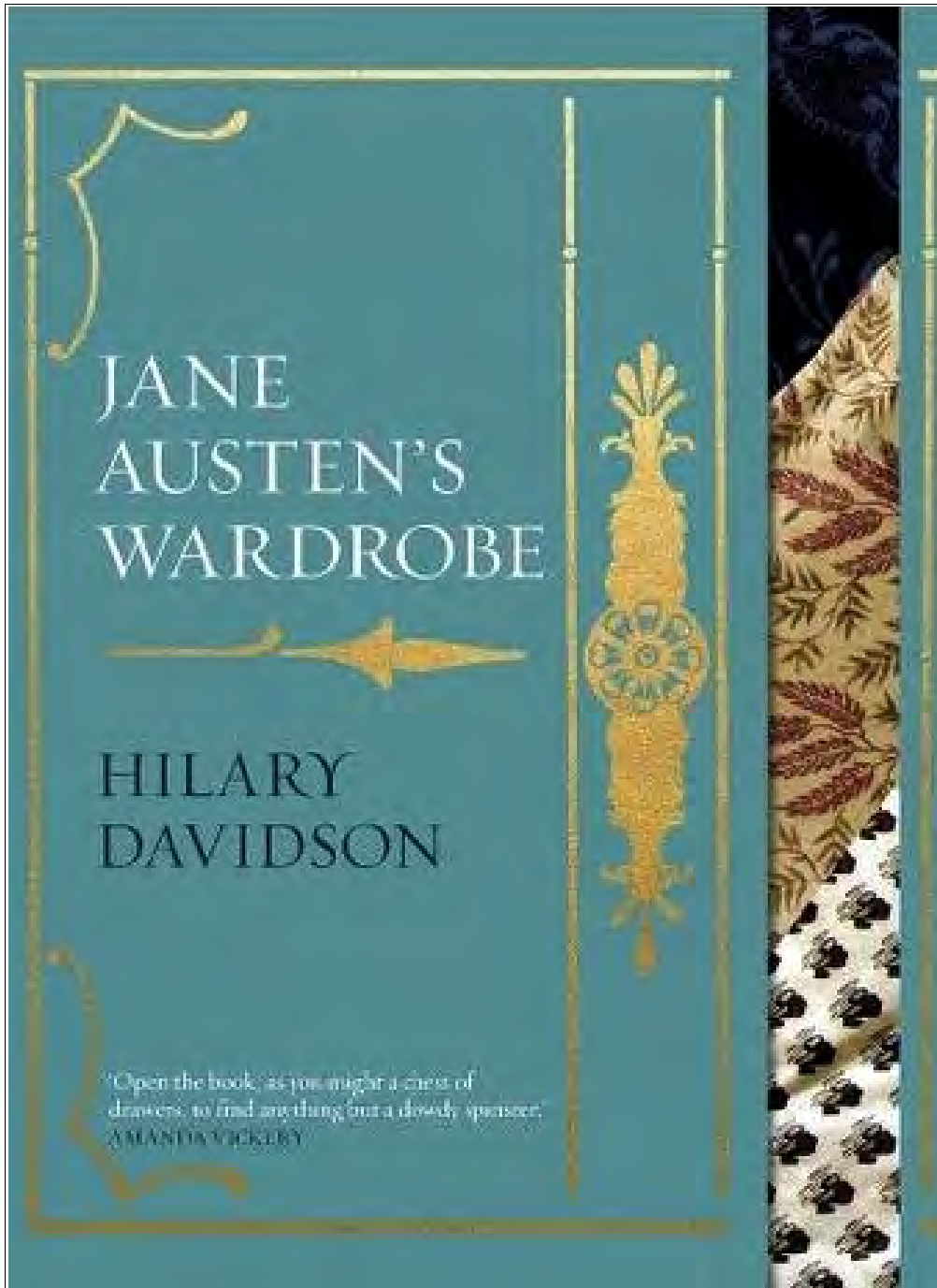
In the Biographical Notice published as a preface to Jane Austen's posthumous novels *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Austen created an idealised image of his sister Jane, claiming 'she never uttered either a hasty or a silly or a severe expression, nor comment with unkindness'.

The Austen family perpetuated the myth for most of the nineteenth century, but Austen's letters, first published in 1932, edited by R. W. Chapman, reveal a different Austen: ironic, witty,

judgmental, and critical, and at times outrageous in her observations of those around her.

Only 161 letters survive from an estimated 3000, and scholars and readers have searched them for clues about the real Jane Austen ever since.

In *Jane Austen's Wardrobe*, **Hilary Davidson** has researched what the letters reveal about what Jane Austen wore, discovering references to 32 gowns, 11 coats and wraps, 13 pieces of head wear, 15 accessories and trinkets, 4 pairs of shoes and many undergarments.



Davidson argues that Austen 'reveals herself to be alert to fashion, and how to purchase and incorporate its changes into her wardrobe ... and seems never to have actually fallen out of style'.

Davidson groups together items in the way Regency clothing would have been stored, creating a virtual wardrobe, showing how Austen's wardrobe grew and developed over time. Relevant colour illustrations bring the extracts from Austen's letters to life.

Only two items of clothing worn by Jane Austen survive. The silk pelisse coat dated 1812–14, in the collection of the Hampshire Cultural Trust, reveals that Austen was tall and slim, matching a contemporary description of her being 'a tall, thin spare person with very high cheekbones'.

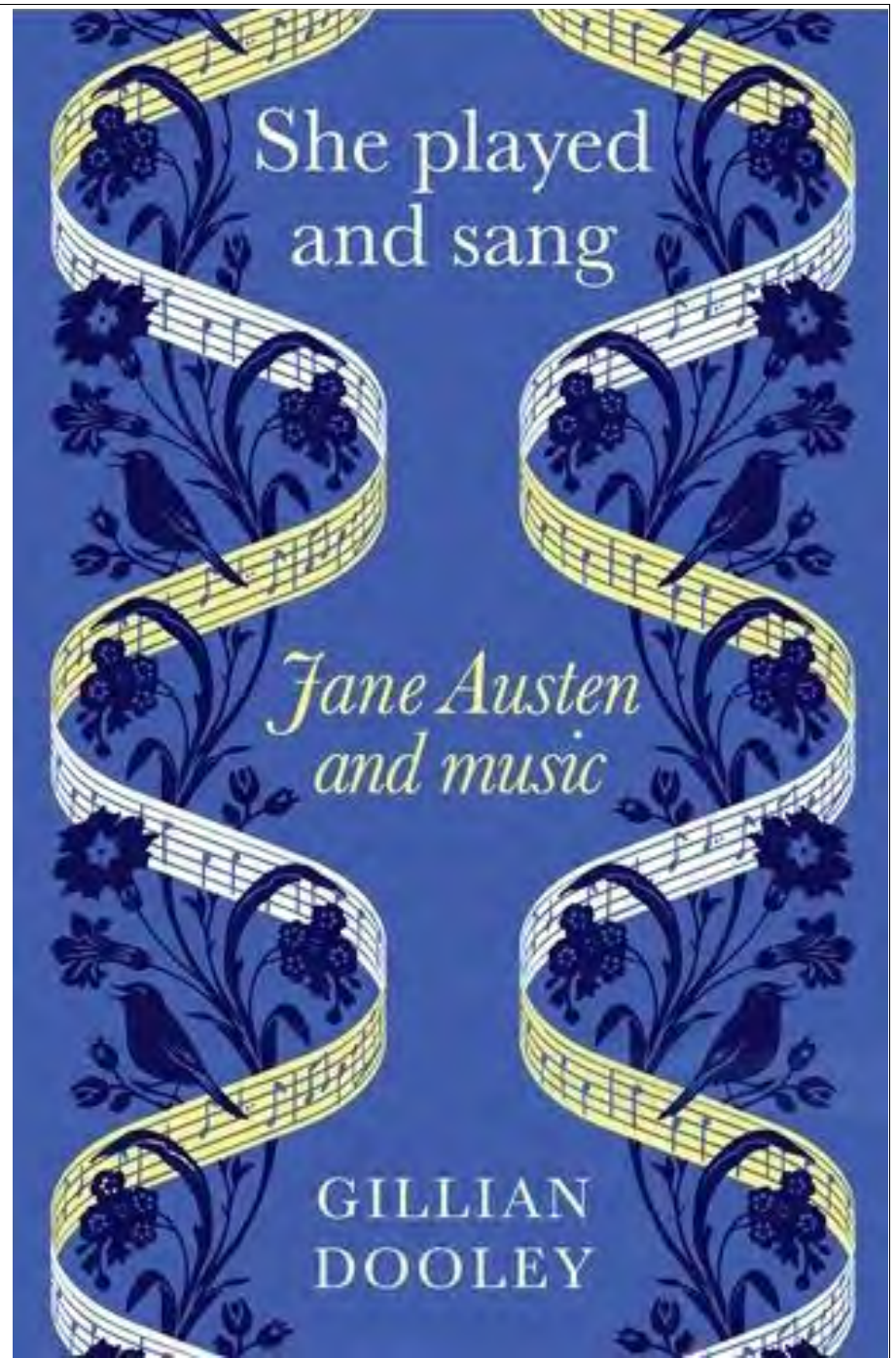
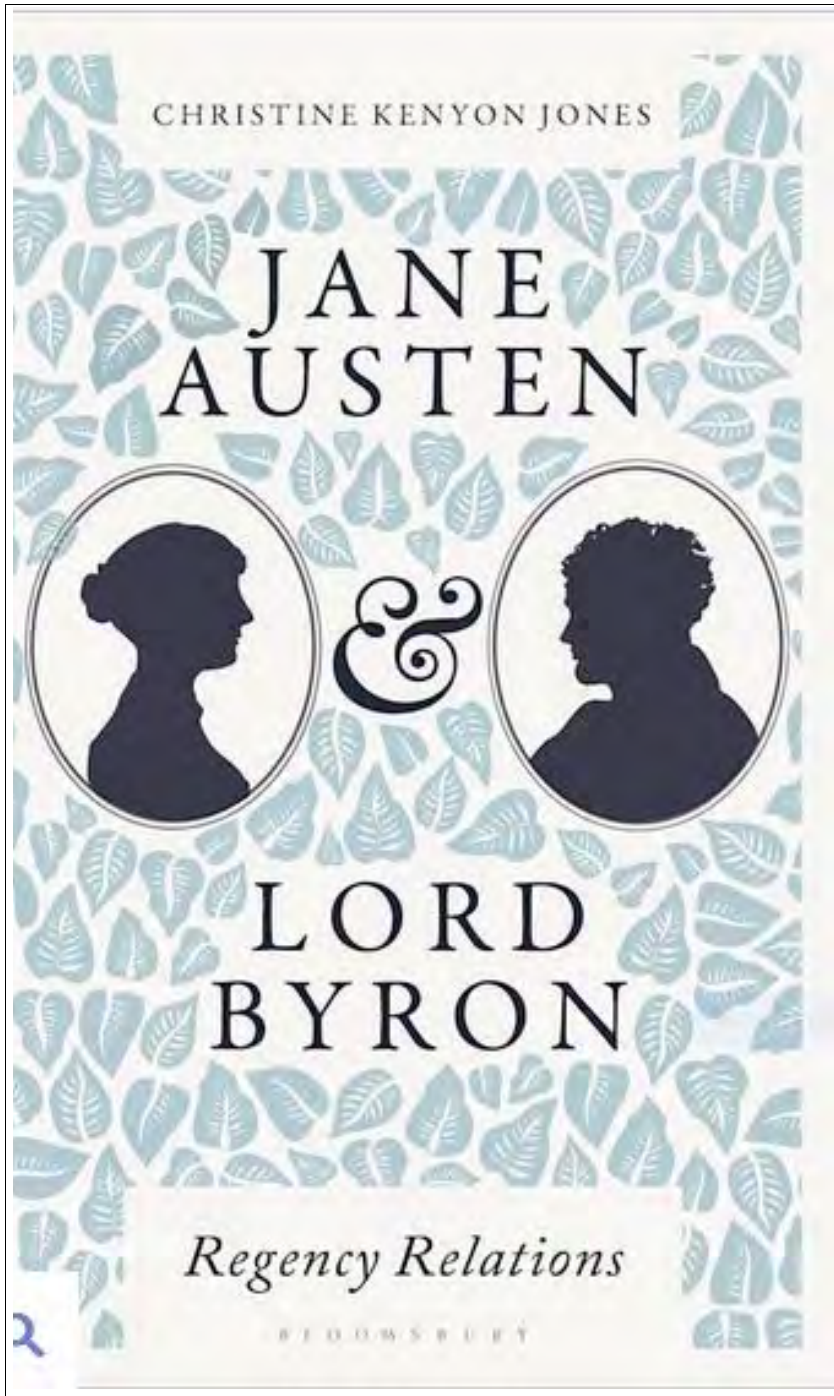
The other is a muslin shawl, held at Jane Austen House, which family history claims Austen embroidered herself.

This the first time that all the surviving dress and jewellery that Austen owned have been published together, and Davidson thanks both Jane Austen's House for supporting her research and Austen herself for her 'irony and amusement about clothes, shopping and taste [with] her tongue never far from her cheek'.

This insightful, beautifully presented book will engage both scholars and Austen fans alike.

JANE AUSTEN AND LORD BYRON: REGENCY RELATIONS **by Christine Kenyon Jones (Bloomsbury Academic; \$35.99)**

In 1832, Henry Austen revised his Biographical Notice and included a new anecdote about his sister being invited by a nobleman to join a literary circle at his house to meet the 'celebrated' author Madame de Staël. 'Miss Austen immediately declined the invitation. To her truly delicate mind such a display would have given pain rather than pleasure.'



Henry is emphasising his sister's reticence about appearing in public as an author. Lord Byron, the most celebrated author of his day, accepted the nobleman's invitation to meet de Staël.

For **Christine Kenyon Jones**, there's the tantalising prospect that Austen and Byron could have met.

In ***Jane Austen and Lord Byron: Regency Relations***, Jones explores how, despite being presented as opposites, their lives, interests, and work brought them within touching distance. Distantly related by marriage, Austen and Byron shared the same publisher, John Murray, and, although they didn't meet, for Jones 'the two writers were sometimes surprisingly close to each other in their lives and their works'.

We know Austen read Byron, because she tells Cassandra of reading 'The Corsair', the literary sensation of 1814. But did Byron read Austen? We know he owned first editions of ***Sense and Sensibility***, ***Pride and Prejudice***, and ***Emma***, and there are echoes of ***Persuasion*** (1817) in Byron's 'Don Juan' (1819).

It was W. H. Auden in 1937 who first commented that people were reading more Austen than Byron. Almost a century later, Jones suggests Byron would be shocked by the growth of Austen's fame that has overtaken his own.

Jones cannot prove Austen and Byron met, but she does weave together fascinating stories of the Regency world that they both inhabited.

**SHE PLAYED AND SANG:
JANE AUSTEN AND MUSIC**
by Gillian Dooley
(Manchester University Press; \$44.95)

Music was an important part of Jane Austen's life. She played the piano for her own entertainment and for country-dances for her nieces and nephews. It is also reflected in her novels, where the performing of music is subtly used to reveal character, to create atmosphere or, as in ***Persuasion***, to accelerate the ending.

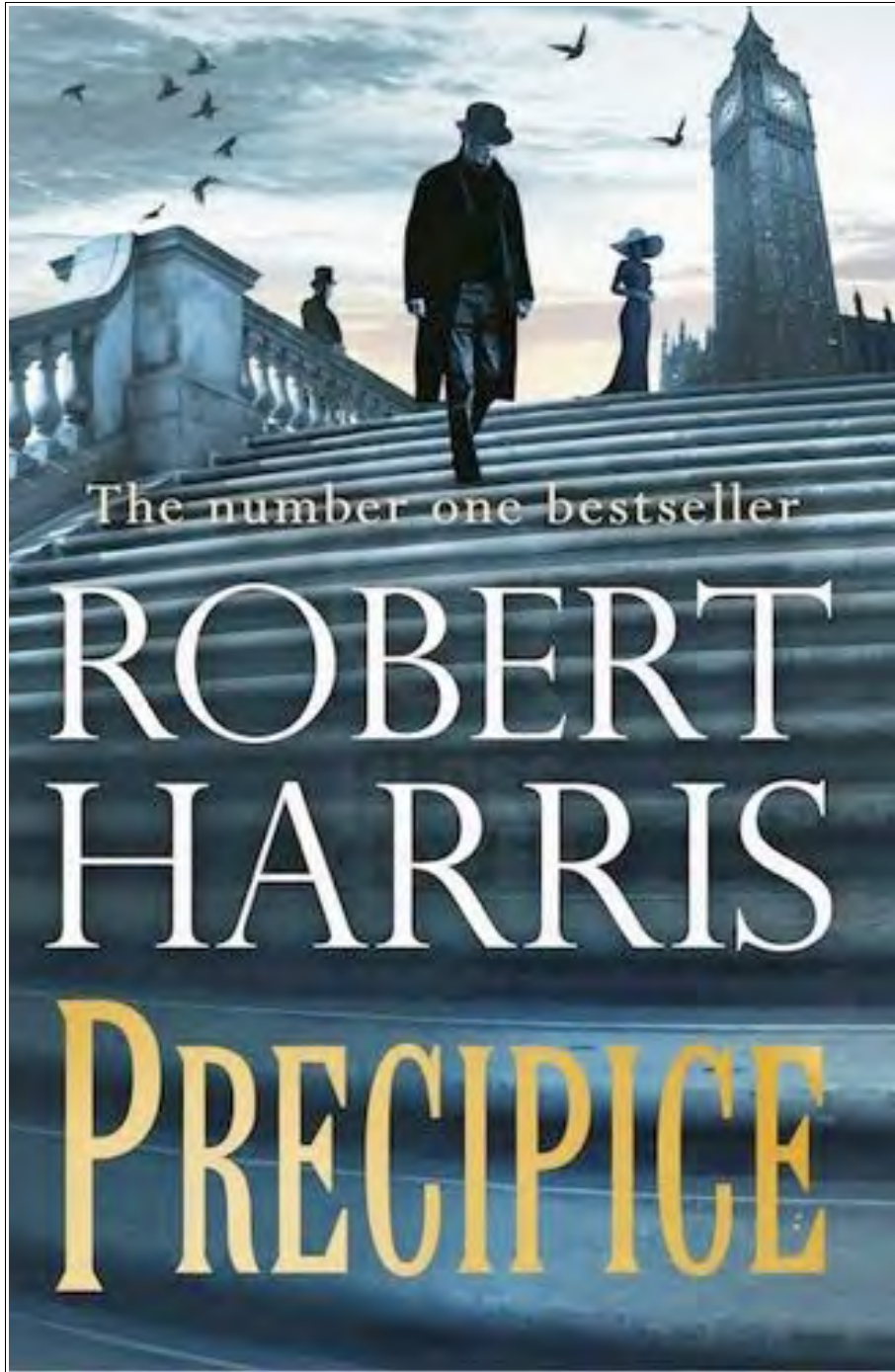
Gillian Dooley, in ***She Played and Sang: Jane Austen and Music***, concentrates on the music directly connected with Austen, especially the songs, devoting a chapter to the songs of the British Isles in the Austen music collection. Poignantly, in her conclusion, she reveals the last four songs Austen sang.

For Dooley, Austen's love of playing and singing inevitably contributed to the musicality of her prose.

Power and passion

PRECIPICE
by Robert Harris (Hutchinson; \$34.99)

Robert Harris's best-selling novels have notably explored the issues of power and those who wield it, from ancient Rome to the Vatican and World War 2.



In *Precipice*, his latest novel, Harris retells the story of the tense events that led to Britain going to war in 1914 and the disastrous decision to expand the war to the Dardanelles in 1915.

At the same time, he reveals details of the extraordinary love affair between Britain's Prime Minister, Asquith, aged 62, and the Hon. Venetia Stanley, daughter of Baron Sheffield, aged 27.

Venetia is a bored socialite. She belongs to a group called 'the Coterie' who gather at the Café Royal, music halls, or most often, the Cave of the Golden Café, a basement nightclub near Regent Street.

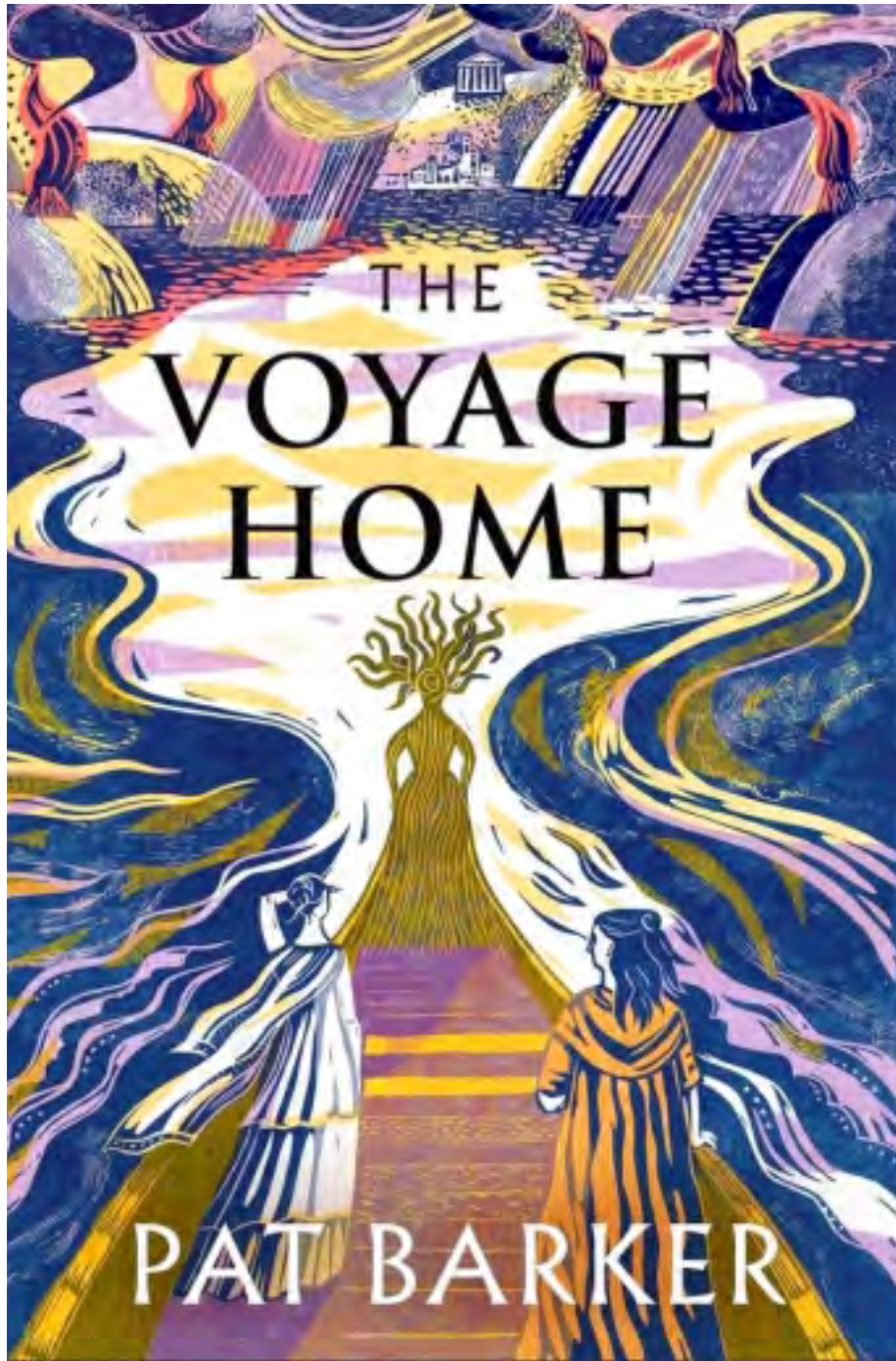
But every Friday, Venetia goes for a drive with Asquith, into the country for an hour and a half, in his chauffeur-driven limousine. The rear of the car is as big as an old-fashioned carriage, with a curtained thick glass screen separating the passengers from the driver.

They meet regularly at lunches, dinners, and country weekends, but the car is the only place they can be alone together. She calls him 'Prime', he calls her 'my darling'.

Venetia questions whether she loves Asquith, but she knows she likes him 'for his kindness, his cleverness, his fame and power' and she enjoys 'the thrill of it — the secrecy, the illicitness, the risk'.

Asquith is obsessed with Venetia, writing letters two or three times a day, insisting on replies. (There were twelve postal deliveries a day in London in 1914.)

Asquith wrote 560 letters to Venetia, often sharing sensitive information about government decisions. During their drives into the country he brings official papers to show her, carelessly throwing them out of the window. Inevitably, the secret service learn that information is being leaked and launch an investigation.



In *Precipice* Harris opens a window on a world rushing to war, while Britain's Prime Minister is constantly distracted by thoughts of his love for Venetia, writing letters to her even during important meetings of the War Cabinet.

Harris even suggests that Venetia's ending of their affair influenced Asquith's decision to agree to a coalition government on 17 May 1915. It's an astonishing story.

THE VOYAGE HOME

by Pat Barker (Hamish Hamilton; \$34.99)

The Voyage Home is the third novel in Booker Prize-winning Pat Barker's trilogy about the Trojan War, which began with *The Silence of the Girls* in 2018, followed by *The Trojan Women* in 2022.

Barker's aim in writing her trilogy is to give a powerful voice to the women who are silent in Homer's *The Iliad*, yet suffered rape and slavery, after their husbands and sons were murdered by the Greek army.

The Voyage Home reimagines the story of Agamemnon returning in triumph to Mycenae and Barker turns to Ritsa, an enslaved woman of Lyrnessus, who in the previous novels worked as a healer in the Greek hospital on the beach.

The Greeks are finally going home, and the women of Troy are loaded onto ships: 'women of childbearing age shared out among the conquerors, some already pregnant with their children. What we were witnessing on that beach was the deliberate destruction of a people'.

Ritsa travels as a maid to Cassandra, daughter of Priam and now Agamemnon's concubine. Cassandra had been the high priestess of Apollo in Troy, able to foresee the future but cursed never to be believed. She's considered 'mad as a box of snakes' and she

has already had a vision of Agamemnon's death, like 'a stuck pig on a slaughterhouse floor', because 'what he did in Troy was so horrific, so devoid of humanity, that even the gods were sickened'. She also knows she will die with him.

In Mycenae, Clytemnestra waits for her husband to return. She too hates Agamemnon because he sacrificed her beloved daughter Iphigenia to the gods at Aulis, in exchange for the wind to sail to Troy. She was there to witness her daughter pleading with her father to spare her.

Although Agamemnon is 'a great king — arguably at the moment, the most powerful man in the world', as he sets foot on Greek soil for the first time in ten years, the two women, his wife and his concubine, have decided his fate.

The Voyage Home is compelling but bleak reading. Barker succeeds in reimagining the torment of women whose lives have been changed forever by the Trojan War. It is impressive.

In the North

THE DARK WIVES

by Anne Cleeves (Pan Macmillan; \$32.99)

Ann Cleeves has been writing her critically acclaimed crime novels since 1986. She has created three memorable and distinctive detectives, Vera Stanhope, Jimmy Perez, and Matthew Venn, who can be found on TV in *Vera*, *Shetland*, and *The Long Call*.

Although *Vera* on TV is coming to an end, Vera will live on in fiction, and ***The Dark Wives*** has arrived to prove it.

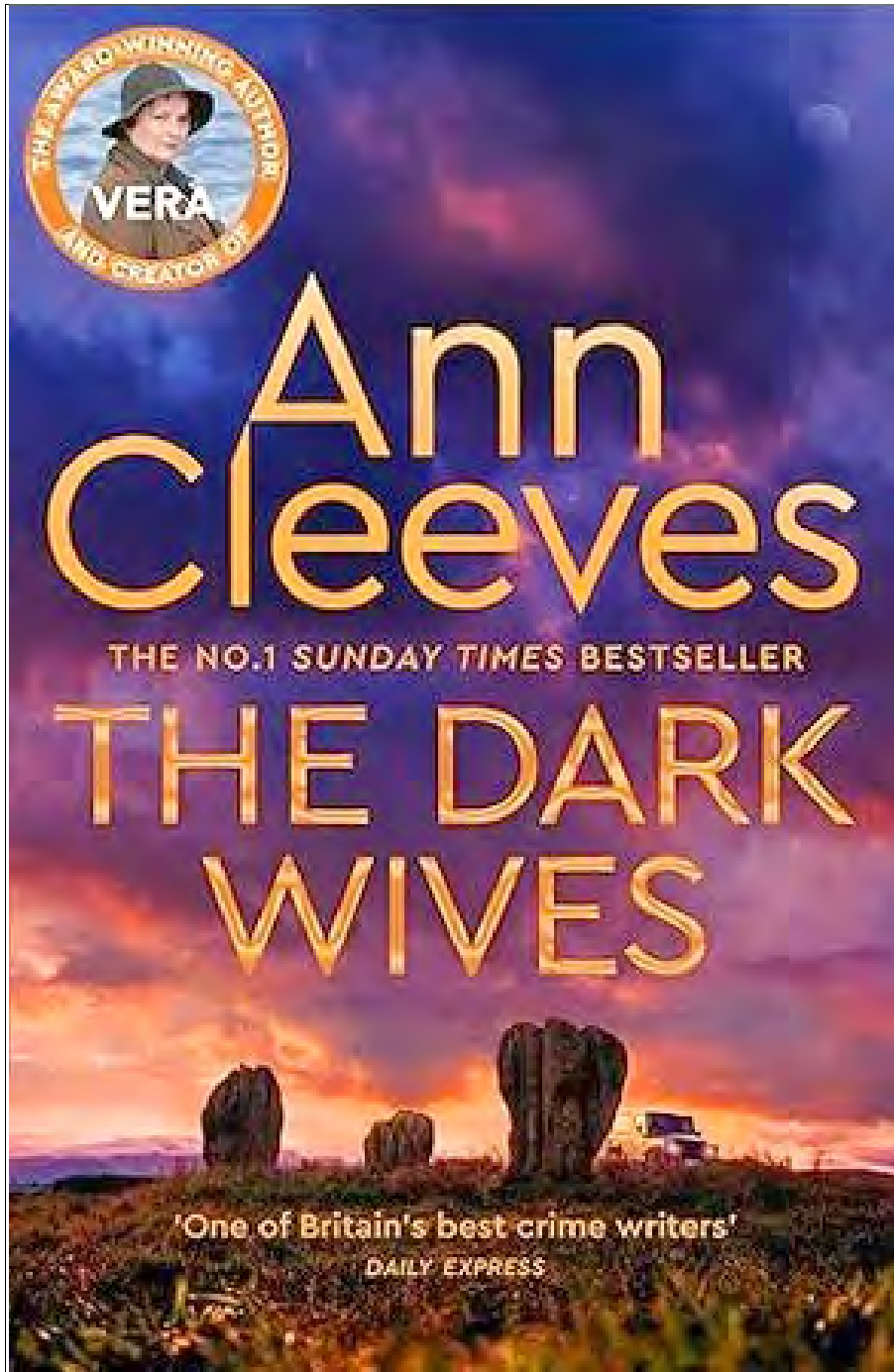
The Dark Wives is set shortly after *The Rising Tide* (2022), in which one of her team died and Vera is still guilt ridden. Joe Ashworth 'thought guilt was like a weight on Vera's shoulders. Physical. It made her seem stooped and old. Never before had he thought of Vera as old.'

A university student is discovered murdered outside Rosebank, a

care home for disturbed teenagers. Josh Woodburn worked at the home, but hadn't arrived for his evening shift. At the same time 14-year-old Chloe disappears from the home. Chloe has left a diary entry in which she reveals that she had been close to Josh, writing 'I think I could be in love with him.' Vera doesn't think Chloe could have killed him, but it's November, dark and cold, and she needs to be found.

The new case and the urgency of finding Chloe energises Vera, as she welcomes a new member to her team. DC Rosie Bell is from Newcastle, 'brash and loud' who enjoys 'a night out with the lasses on the Quayside, eyeing up the footballers, getting pissed and rowdy'. She admires Vera, considers her 'a bit of a legend', and aims to learn from her. However, she proves herself invaluable when interviewing those affected by Josh's death.

The search for Chloe eventually leads to Gillstead, a hamlet in a valley, with a few farms, a pub, one street of cottages, and on the



fell, three standing stones, The Dark Wives. The legend tells of three crones who had been turned to stone by a giant who thought they talked too much.

Chloe's grandfather still owns a 'bothy' there, somewhere to camp out, which Chloe had loved as a child. There, Vera makes a grim discovery and is convinced the murderer is searching for Chloe as avidly as the police.

Vera on the page is quite different from the screen version. She's physically bigger, with a more dominant personality, and she's secretive.

The Dark Wives is a classic Vera story set against the wild, ancient landscape of Northumbria. There's a very obvious plot flaw, but you can forgive it because you get to spend time with Vera and that's special.

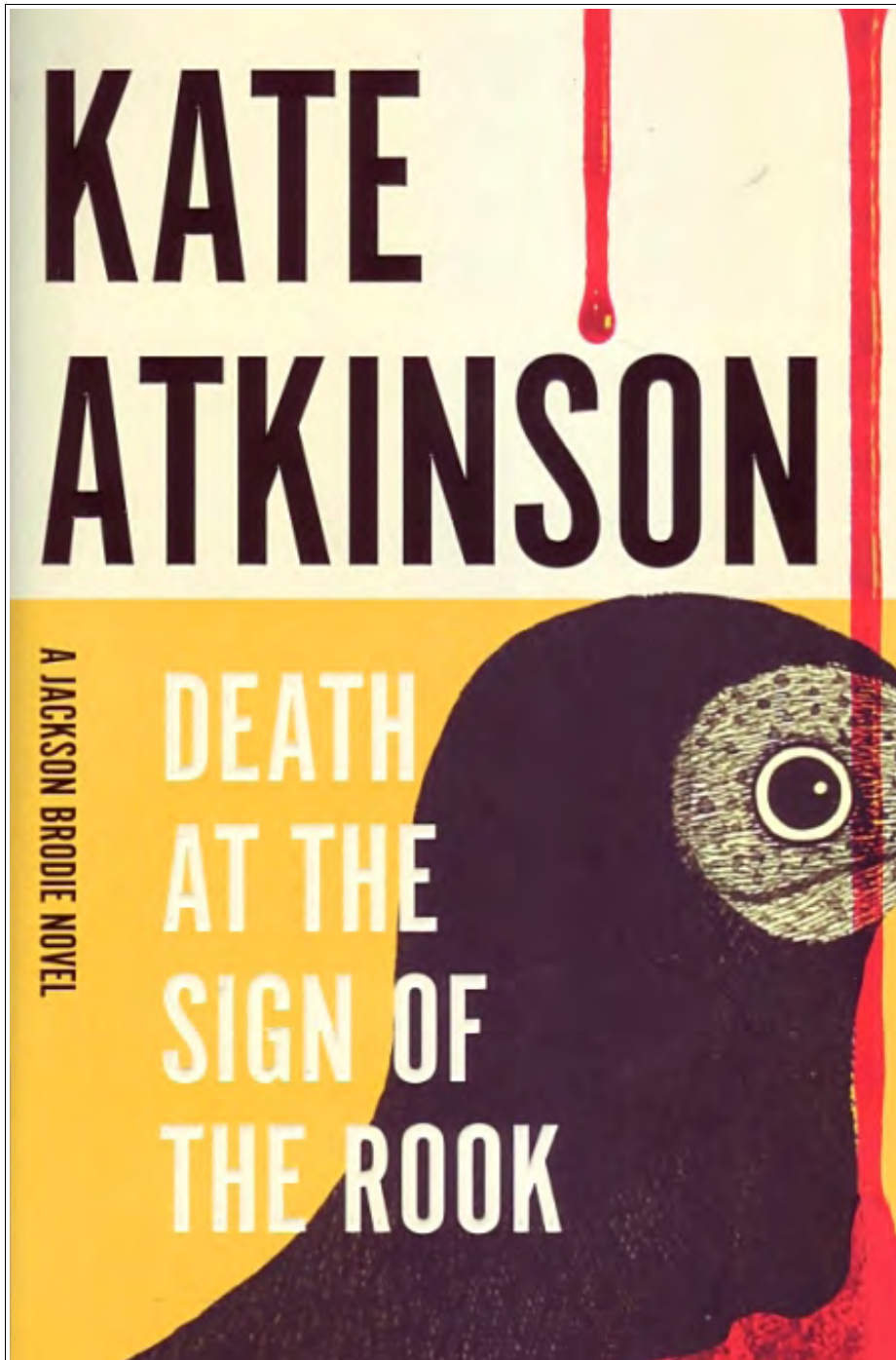
DEATH AT THE SIGN OF THE ROOK by Kate Atkinson (Doubleday; \$34.99)

Kate Atkinson is one of the world's foremost novelists, winning the Whitbread (now Costa) Book of the Year Award with her first novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995).

Two of her three critically acclaimed novels set around the Second World War, *Life after Life* (2013) and *A God in Ruins* (2015), were both winners of the Costa Novel Award.

Her best selling crime novels, featuring former police detective turned private investigator Jackson Brodie, became the BBCTV series *Case Histories*, starring Jason Isaacs.

In *Death at the Sign of the Rook*, Jackson Brodie returns. He's now over 60 and a grandfather, living in Yorkshire and driving a Land Rover Defender, a supercharged V8, 'the whole macho construct only slightly spoiled by his granddaughter's babyseat in



the back’.

Brodie is employed by the Padgetts to investigate the theft of a painting. Their mother has just died and they suspect her carer, Melanie Hope, of stealing the Renaissance portrait of *Woman with Ermine*, which their parents had bought in a stately home auction in 1945. But Brodie can find no evidence of Melanie Hope’s existence.

Meanwhile, in Burton Makepeace House, ‘one of the greatest houses in the north, second only to Chatsworth ... Vanburgh designed the house and Capability Brown landscaped the grounds’, Dowager Lady Milton is mourning the loss of her housekeeper, the ultra-efficient Sophie Greenway, two years ago. Sophie had taken with her the Miltons’ Turner, the last of their valuable paintings, the rest having been sold to pay taxes and roof repairs.

In a classic Christie climax, Atkinson gathers her eclectic cast of characters at Burton Makepeace House at a murder mystery evening, while a snow storm rages outside. As a further complication, an axe murderer has joined them, leading to a tense, action-packed finale. It’s exhausting and exhilarating at the same time.

— **Anna Creer**, September 2024

MARK FRASER is a self-described dilettante, retired from gainful employment. He has been occasionally been involved with fandom in various ways, and is still an intermittent gamer. Whilst decidedly sedentary, he has become very taken with travelling to Japan, where small children sometimes mistake him for Hagrid. He was born in Melbourne, but now lives in Canberra with his wife, Sandra; blue tongue lizard Rubeus; a variable number of micro and macro bats; and a greenhouse of peculiar looking plants.

Mark Fraser

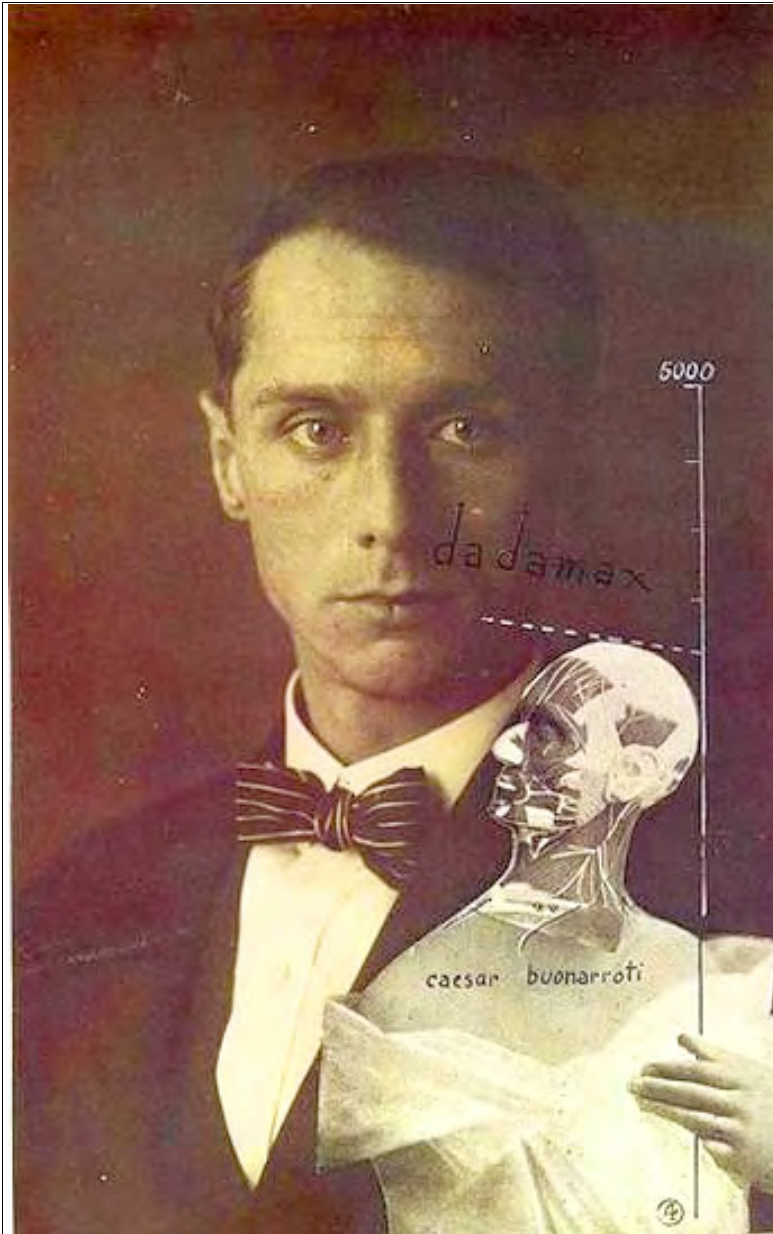
Dreams never end: Surrealism and *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*

We mean by [Surrealism] the definition of a psychic automatism which is closely allied to the dream state, a state whose limits are nowadays exceedingly difficult to fix (André Breton).¹

The images of surrealism are the iconography of inner space. Surrealism is the first movement, in the words of Odilon Redon, to place 'the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible' (J. G. Ballard).²

Perhaps no film, not even *Un Chien Andalou* (trans. *An Andalucian Dog*, dir. Luis Buñuel, France, 1929) or *L'Age d'Or* (trans. *Age of Gold* dir. Luis Buñuel, France, 1930), has captured the spirit and the aesthetic of the Surrealists in the way *L'Année Dernière à*

Marienbad (trans. *Last Year at Marienbad*, dir. Alain Resnais, France/Italy, 1961) has. Ado Kyrrou, in his monumental work *Le Surréalisme au Cinéma*, describes it as '*une réussite totale*' ('a complete triumph'):³ high praise for a film that still provokes a significant amount of critical debate regarding its merits. Unlike many films that explore art through either direct visual or biographical references, *Marienbad*⁴ makes references to art obliquely, as well as to the praxis of the artists. No individual artist or work of art is directly referenced, yet the audience is presented with images and ideas which are close to the heart of Surrealist art and theory. In particular references abound to the motifs and art of Paul Delvaux, Max Ernst, and Yves Tanguy. In this discussion we will consider how Surrealist art and ideology influenced Alain



Max Ernst: *Self Portrait* (1920)¹⁰

Resnais and *Marienbad*.

Before approaching *Marienbad* itself, it is important to consider the history of Surrealist cinema. The Surrealists were arguably the first major twentieth-century art movement to explore and examine film-making and criticism.⁵ The best known of the proliferation of Surrealist films of the 1920s and 1930s are undoubtedly *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, however it is Man Ray's *Les Mystères du Château du Dé* (dir. Man Ray, France, 1929), that is more relevant in a discussion of *Marienbad*. The vertiginous exploration of the architecture of the chateau anticipates the endless corridors and gardens of *Marienbad*. What limited the ambitions and activities of the original Surrealists regarding film was their own inability to adjust to the realities and discipline of film-making.⁶ Man Ray, already a photographer, had more awareness of the issues involved in composing and constructing a film, and was thus better placed to make some important contributions to Surrealist cinema.⁷

Max Ernst: *Self Portrait* (1920)

As a starting point, consider the setting and title of the film. The film is set in a luxurious baroque hotel, occupied by obviously wealthy patrons. The temporal setting is wilfully obscure, beyond the reference that in 1929 the fountain froze for a week in June. It has been suggested by Ginette Vincedeau that the fashions and appearances of the actors suggest a temporal setting of the mid 20s to mid 30s, but this is never stated definitively within the film.⁸ By way of comparison, consider the self-portrait of Max Ernst above. The self-portrait was composed during Ernst's Dadaist period.⁹

The young Ernst would not have appeared out of place in *Marienbad*. The appearance of the audience at the theatrical performance supports this notion.

Location

Similarly, the geographical location of the hotel is ambiguous: even the suggestion of Marienbad is open to doubt, if the dialogue is considered closely. The only clue to a locale is a brief discussion regarding the problems of a man travelling with a German passport. Significantly, the film was shot on location at a number of chateaux,¹² contributing to the overall sense of dislocation. The ambiguous locale, unspecified in time and space, can be regarded

as at least paralleling, if not synonymous with, the nebulous territories of dreams. The suggestion of the oneiric state is, as Breton declared, a defining aspect of Surrealist art.

Paul Delvaux: *Sleeping Venus* (1944)

It has been suggested that Alain Robbe-Grillet, who wrote the screenplay for *Marienbad*, was consciously influenced by the



*L'Année Dernière à Marienbad.*¹¹

enigmatic paintings of Paul Delvaux.¹³ Certainly, the rigid symmetry of the screenplay, analysed and outlined so effectively by Roy Armes,¹⁴ suggests the formal architecture found in Delvaux's paintings. Taking perhaps his best known work, *Sleeping Venus* (shown on page 56) a number of significant visual parallels are apparent.

The relative stiffness of the figures is reminiscent of the alternation



Paul Delvaux: *Sleeping Venus* (1944)¹⁵

between stasis and movement within *Marienbad*. The visual environment emphasises the artifice of the environment, paralleling the baroque nature of the hotel and the timeless formal gardens. The conjunctions of the assorted figures are reflected in the apparent alienation in time and space of the figures of X and A (using Robbe-Grillet's terminology)¹⁶ within *Marienbad*. If we return to the previous still of the audience, the same stiffness and suggestion of restricted interaction occur. The members of the audience are present singly, in couples or small groups, do not interact with other parties. This sense of alienation and separation contributes significantly to the sense of a dreamlike state that pervades both Delvaux's paintings and the film. Whilst Delvaux places an emphasis on the nude form throughout most of his work, *Marienbad* does not require such an obvious gesture to indicate a suggestion of erotic tension, a tension heightened by the elliptical nature of the narrative.

Fernand Khnopff: *Memories* (1889)

A noted precursor to Delvaux was the Symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff. The Symbolists were a recognised influence upon the Surrealist movement, chiefly because they also drew significant inspiration from dreams and dream-like images.¹⁷ *Memories* is particularly relevant here.

As with Delvaux, we have a number of figures presented who appear unaware of the artist, and intent upon something that is not part of the canvas. The evening lighting adds to the uncertainty of the setting. The light, together with the general absence of defined shadows is recollected in the images of the formal gardens of *Marienbad*. These figures are again echoed by the silent, spectral minor characters who flit through the vast hotel. There does appear to be a strong aesthetic commonality between the paintings of both Delvaux and Khnopff. The suggestions of timelessness, the oneiric state, and an unseen and dominant presence are also reflected in *Marienbad*: for the film, the mysterious



Fernand Khnopff: *Memories* (1889)¹⁸

presence is the undisclosed events of the previous year.

Yves Tanguy:
***The Rapidity of Sleep* (1945)**

The paintings of Yves Tanguy represent a different sort of influence. Whereas Delvaux and Khnopff have distinctive echoes in the visual structure of the film, the extraordinary paintings of Tanguy appear linked by atmosphere. Consider the painting *The Rapidity of Sleep*.

Tanguy's painting offers a different type of ambiguity. Here nothing is immediately recognisable, yet this appears to be a picture of a scene. The environment itself, together with the scale, is both ambiguous and alien. Any sense of time, or the possibility of the passage of time is lost. The elements of the painting are



Yves Tanguy: *The Rapidity of Sleep* (1945)¹⁹



***L'Année Dernière à Marienbad.*²⁰**

suspended in their uncertain, but seemingly infinite environment. This effect is in part created by the use of muted colours: the monochrome nature of *Marienbad* creates a similar distancing effect for viewers.

The graininess of the film, especially in the garden scenes such as the one above, creates a similar effect to the presumably distant misty horizons of Tanguy's paintings. Similarly the reduction of people to insignificant blots echoes the ambiguous objects that occupy the foreground of Tanguy's paintings. The images that

Tanguy presents are profoundly alien, and at the same time suggestive of things half-seen, half-remembered. As with Delvaux, there is a suggestion that the element of time is no longer relevant or even meaningful in the context of the paintings.

**Max Ernst:
*The Eye of Silence (1943–44)***

The relationship of the works of Max Ernst to *Marienbad* is altogether more problematical, for here we have works by an artist



Max Ernst: *The Eye of Silence* (1943–44)²²

which at once suggest a relationship with the film, whilst the practical creation of others of his works is suggested obliquely within the film. To simplify the issue, visual referents will be considered first.

The Eye of Silence is without doubt one of Ernst's finest works deriving from his experiments in decalcomania.

Here, the bejewelled odalisque, in her fantastically baroque setting, is an obvious echo of the Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, of works such as *Salome Dancing Before Herod (The Apparition)* (1876)²³ and *Sappho* (c. 1884).²⁴ In this case, the dwarfing of the figure in the context of this strange environment suggests an



Max Ernst: *The Robbing of the Bride* (1939).²⁸

intimation of insignificance.²⁵ The female figure remains a striking reminder of feminine allure and mystique, with a sense of permanence that we as viewers do not share. The figure also suggests a sense of resignation and indifference towards the environment, just as A (Delphine Seyrig) appears resigned to a life of luxurious hotels and resorts.

Max Ernst: *The Robing of the Bride (1939)*

A, when reclining in her suite, and multiplied by her endless mirrors, appears as self-contained and seductive as any nymph or siren of Ernst or Moreau. As the British critic and author J. G. Ballard noted, the women associated with the Surrealist movement were noted for both their brilliance and their beauty: 'One could write a book about these extraordinary creatures — nymphs of another planet'.²⁷

The replication of A through the use of mirrors can be seen as a parallel to the use of replicated images made by Ernst in *The Robing of the Bride*. The foreground figure in this painting is clearly replicated in the background image of a painting. This suggests that multiplication by mirrors, or paintings, establishes some form of existential priority: making the figure more real. The bland acceptance by A of her life in these transitional environments is surprising. Her acceptance of the asserted reality of the absence of her memory of 'last year' and the unaddressed crisis is more confusing. This acceptance can be interpreted as indicative of complicity in the unspecified events of last year.

An affront to expectations: Nim and the procedures of Surrealism

Having considered some of the visual points of reference for *Marienbad*, it is necessary to give consideration to the actual procedures of Surrealism. Max Ernst is a useful individual case

from which to start. In his experiments with *frottage* (rubblings), Ernst developed a talent for self-induction of an hallucinatory state.²⁹ This talent, combined with his extensive readings of Freud,³⁰ equipped him with the intellectual means for representing the dream or hallucination state. A parallel can be seen in Dali's paranoiac-critical approach, in which everyday items and images can be made to reveal secondary or hidden images.³¹ The slow-moving eye of the camera dwells on the baroque ornamentation of the hotel, hinting at hidden meanings and images. As such, the camera can be regarded as playing with aspects of the real praxis of the Surrealist movement, rather than simply illustrating techniques. The viewers themselves are drawn into practising techniques of the Surrealists.

Surrealist theory and practices may now appear eccentric, yet they represent an effective means of circumventing social conventions. The emphasis placed on play and games by the Surrealists was a means to freeing the mind.³² Within *Marienbad*, ritualised games and sports are referred to: the games of Nim (the card or match stick game that M demonstrates), the pistol shooting, and even the performance of a play can all be interpreted as forms of play.

True, Nim is more of a puzzle than a game, since an experienced practitioner or player can ensure victory.³⁴ However, for the Surrealists themselves it was more important to be involved in the process of play: the outcome might or might not be significant. In this respect the games and play within *Marienbad* can be considered a further representation of Surrealist praxis translated into wider society: a wish-fulfilment of the Surrealist cause.

One of the greatest single clues to the Surrealist status of *Marienbad* lies in the refusal of both Robbe-Grillet and Resnais to provide a single definitive and cohesive interpretation of the film. Because of this lack of explanation, the members of the audience are forced back on their own resources to interpret and understand the film. It is both a playful and serious challenge to the audience.



*L'Année Dernière à Marienbad.*²⁶

Marienbad is a deliberate affront to audience expectations, in an attempt to provoke consideration of the film and its contents. Instead of a linear narrative the audience is confronted with a narrative that appears to be missing its central element: exactly what happened last year. That Resnais elected to delete Robbe-Grillet's proposed rape scene has in all probability strengthened the film.³⁵ Without that paroxysm of violence, the film remains both calm and menacing, possessed of a sense of obscure meaning

that is never revealed to the viewer. The introduction of the rape scene would remove much of the ambiguity upon which the film and its atmosphere depends.

Ultimately, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* incorporates elements of Surrealist aesthetics and praxis into a seamless, if elliptical, narrative. The film does not observe Breton's demand for psychic automatism. It is carefully scripted and carefully constructed, just



*L'Année Dernière à Marienbad.*³³

as the paintings of Delvaux, Tanguy, and Ernst are. The finished film, like the works of those artists, represents the mysterious inner workings of the mind, following the shadowy logic of dreams. Whilst the film shows aspects of the operations of some of the Surrealists, and is unmistakably within the sphere of the Surrealist aesthetic, its production was necessarily contrary to the rules of Surrealism.

Filmography

- L'Age d'Or* (dir. Luis Buñuel, France, 1930)
Anémic Cinéma (dir. Marcel Duchamp, France, 1926)
L'Année Dernière à Marienbad (trans. *Last Year at Marienbad*, dir. Alain Resnais, France/ Italy, 1961)
Un Chien Andalou (dir. Luis Buñuel, France, 1929)
La Coquille et le Clergyman (dir. Germaine Bulac, France, 1926)
Dans le Labyrinthe de Marienbad (dir. Luc Lagier, France/USA, 2005)
Emak-Bakia (dir. Man Ray, France, 1926)
L'Étoile de Mer (dir. Man Ray, France, 1928)
Last Year at Marienbad: An Introduction by Ginette Vincendeau (dir. Not named, France/USA, 2005)
Les Mystères du Château du Dé (dir. Man Ray, France, 1929)
Le Retour à Raison (dir. Man Ray, France, 1923)
Toute la Mémoire du Monde (dir. Alain Resnais, France, 1956)
Le Vampire (dir. Jean Painlevé, France, 1939)

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Footnotes

1 Breton, André, cited in Schneede, Uwe M., *The Essential Max Ernst* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972) trans. R. W. Last, p. 52

2 Ballard, J. G. 'The Coming of the Unconscious' (1966) in Vale, V. and Juno, Andrea (eds), *RE/Search No. 8/9 J. G. Ballard* (San Francisco: RE/Search, 1984), p. 102

3 Kyrou, Ado, *Le Surréalisme au Cinéma* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1963), p. 206

4 Throughout this discussion the convention adopted by James Monaco will be applied, referring to the film simply as *Marienbad*. See Monaco, James, *Alain Resnais: The Role of Imagination* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978)

5 Short, Robert (ed.), *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema* (London: Creation, 2003), pp. 15–21, 171

6 Short, *The Age of Gold*, pp. 170–1

7 An outline of Man Ray's contributions to Surrealist cinema is given in Short, *The Age of Gold*, pp. 27–8

8 *Last Year at Marienbad: An Introduction*, by Ginette

Vincedeau (dir. Not named, France/USA, 2005)

9 See the entry 'Dada' in Macey, David, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London, Penguin, 2000), p. 80

10 Image reproduced from Schneede, *The Essential Max Ernst*, p. 41

11 Image reproduced from the website at <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film/last-year-at-marienbad.htm>

12 Monaco, *Alain Resnais*, p. 58

13 Scott, David, *Paul Delvaux: Surrealizing the Nude* (London: Reaktion, 1992), p. 132

14 Armes, Roy, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1981), p. 38

15 Image from website at <http://www.artinthepicture.com/paintings/view.php?nr=1779>

16 In Robbe-Grillet's screenplay the three central characters are identified as X (the narrator), A (the woman), and M (her husband). See Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*.

17 Ballard, 'The Coming of the Unconscious', p. 102.

18 Image reproduced from Christian, John, *Symbolists and Decadents* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), Plate 30

19 Image from website at http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/eurptg/highlight_item.php?acc=1946.46

20 Image reproduced from the website at <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film/last-year-at-marienbad.htm>

21 The technique was pioneered by Oscar Dominguez, and

- was later taken up by Ernst and Hans Bellmer. See Schneede, *The Essential Max Ernst*, pp. 168–71
- 22 Image from website at <http://www.abcgallery.com/E/ernst/ernst52.html>>. The original image appeared somewhat distorted, and an attempt has been made to correct some of the more glaring inadequacies of the reproduction process.
- 23 Christian, *Symbolists and Decadents*, Plate 1
- 24 Christian, *Symbolists and Decadents*, Plate 3
- 25 This is a theme common to much of Ernst's work of this period, especially the monumental *Europe After the Rain II* (1940–42). See Turpan, Ian, *Max Ernst* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), Plate 36
- 26 Image reproduced from the website at <http://artnet.com/magazine/news/ntm4-30-16s.jpg>
- 27 Ballard, 'The Coming of the Unconscious' (1966), p. 123
- 28 Image reproduced from Turpan, *Max Ernst*, Plate 34
- 29 Schneede, *The Essential Max Ernst*, pp. 72–9
- 30 Schneede, *The Essential Max Ernst*, pp. 50, 64
- 31 Brotchie, Alastair (comp. and ed.) *A Book of Surrealist Games: Including the Little Surrealist Dictionary* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), pp. 70–1
- 32 Brotchie, *Surrealist Games*
- 33 Image reproduced from the website at <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film/last-year-at-marienbad.htm>
- 34 A history and mathematical analysis of Nim, together with an on-line version can be found at the website http://www.cut-the-knot.org/nim_st.shtml
- 35 Armes, Roy, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, p. 37
- **Mark Fraser**, 2024

RICH HORTON is a software engineer in St. Louis, MO, working for the proverbial Major Aerospace Corporation. He was a short fiction columnist for *Locus* for 20 years, and has edited a series of *Best of the Year* anthologies for Prime Books since 2006; as well as several further anthologies, including an upcoming collection of 'the best philosophical science fiction of all time' for MIT Press (co-edited with Eric Schwitzgebel and Helen de Cruz). He writes extensively about science fiction (new and old) and about older popular fiction and Victoriana for places like *F&SF*, *Black Gate*, and his blog, *Strange at Ecbatan*.

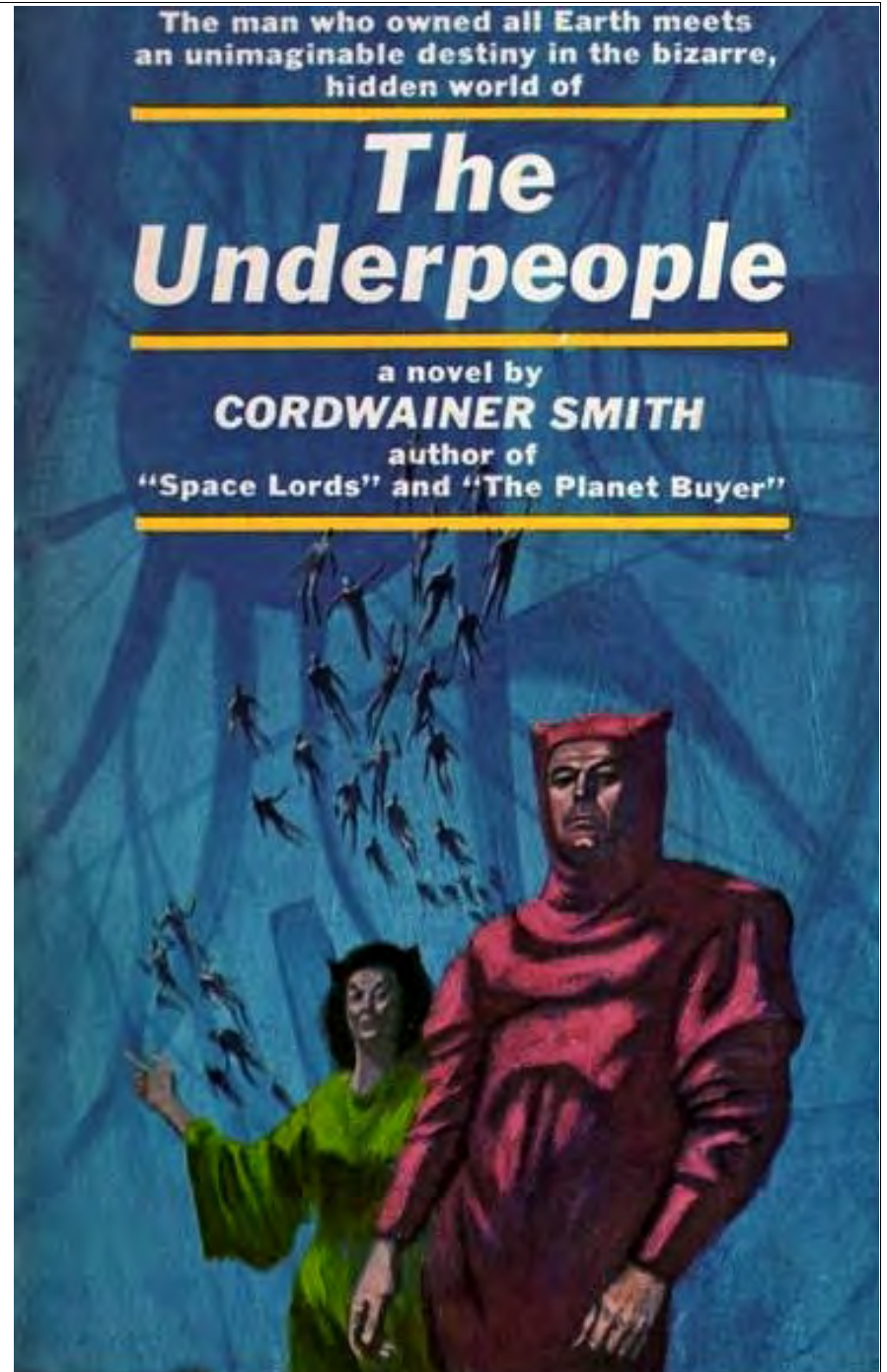
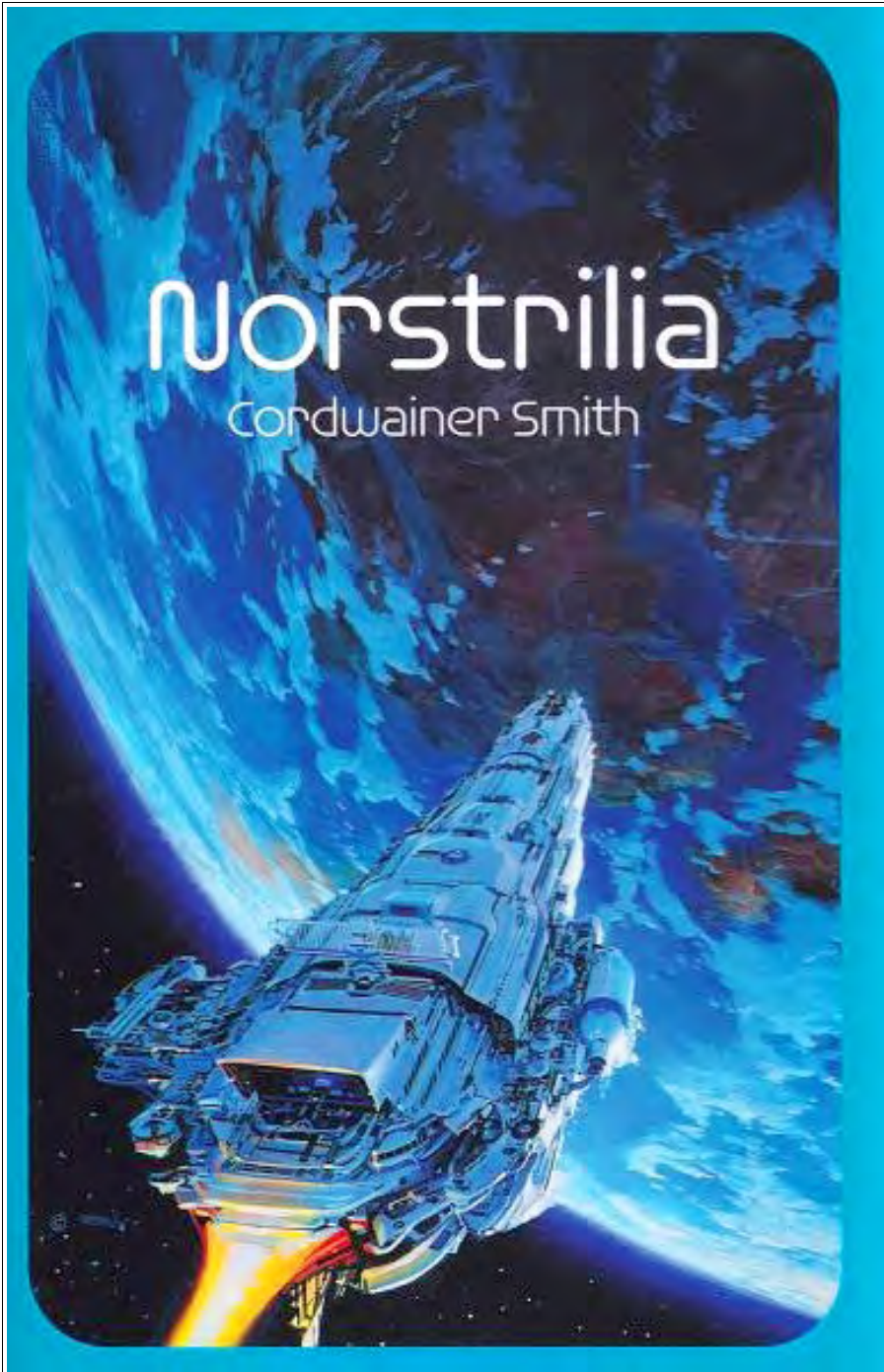
Rich Horton

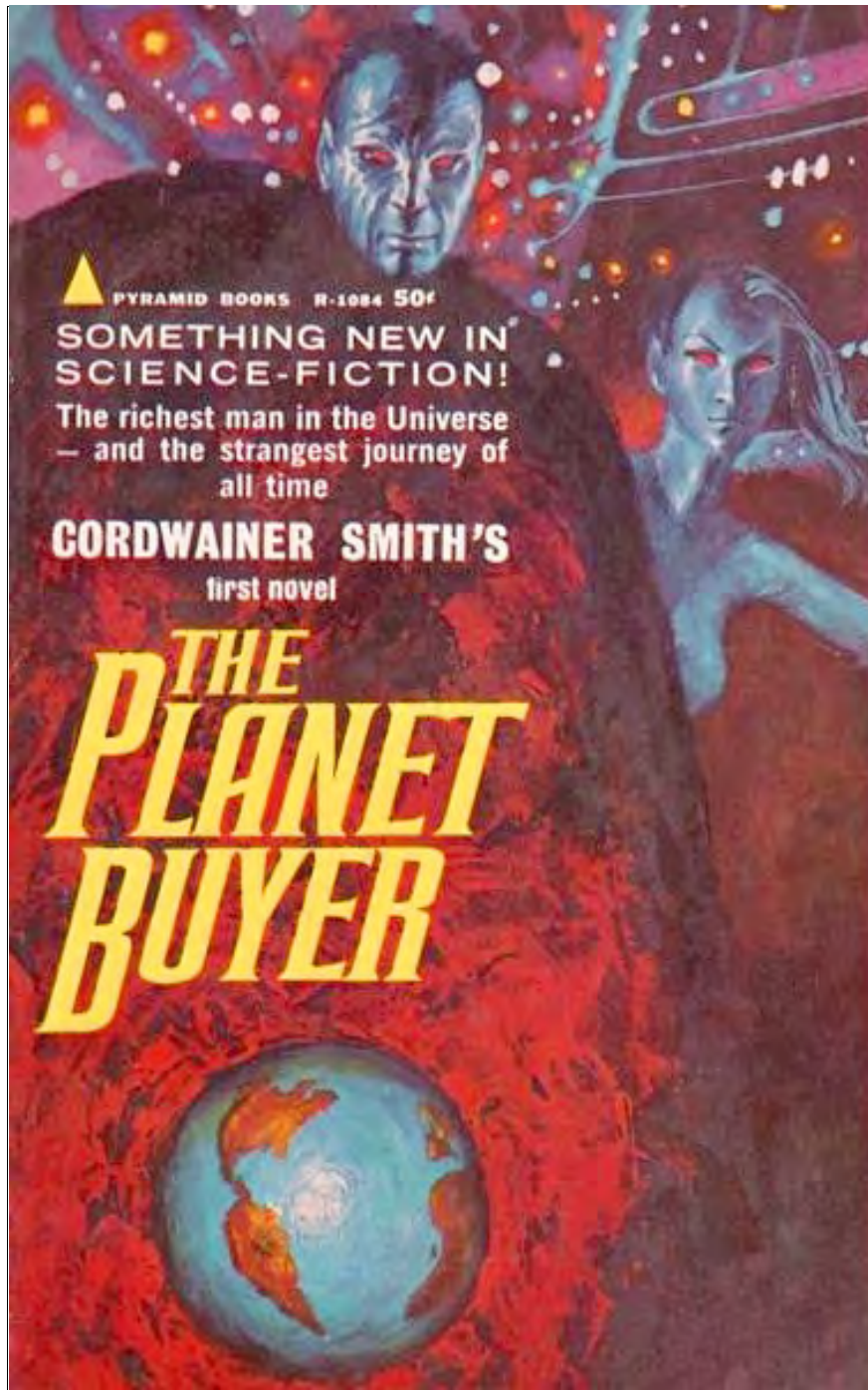
Seventh heaven, or High sky falling: A look at *Norstrilia* by Cordwainer Smith

I last read **Cordwainer Smith's** only novel *Norstrilia* when it was first released in its 'full' form, back in 1975, so almost 50 years ago. And I must confess, I remembered almost nothing — Rod McBan from Old North Australia (Norstrilia), C'Mell, stroon ... that's about it. I had intended to reread it for a long time, and, happily, my book club chose it as one of our readings this year. Which finally got me off the schneid.

I went ahead and bought the NESFA Press edition, which is by a wide margin the best one to get. This version takes the 1975 Ballantine text, and adds some material from both the novella-length magazine publications ('The Boy Who Bought Old Earth'

and 'The Store of Heart's Desire') and the two short novels expanded from those (*The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*), in the process smoothing over some discontinuities introduced during the complicated road to publication. This edition also includes an introduction by Alan Elms, and an appendix giving the alternate texts from the other versions, and detailing the way in which the various texts were stitched together. There is also a 2006 Baen collection called *We the Underpeople*, which comprised the three key stories related to Norstrilia ('Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons', 'Alpha Ralpa Boulevard', and 'The Ballad of Lost C'Mell'), the novella 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town', and *Norstrilia* itself. I do not know what text the Baen edition uses.





I'll discuss the textual variations between the various versions in more detail later, but first let's get to the novel itself. John J. Pierce put together a speculative timeline for Smith's 'Instrumentality of Mankind' future history. Pierce places *Norstrilia* at right about the most critical period of Instrumentality history: 'The Rediscovery of Man'. It's part of a cluster of five stories set in about 16,000 AD. (I use the abbreviation AD advisedly — Smith was a committed (if somewhat heterodox) Christian, and the Instrumentality stories ultimately had quite overt Christian themes — noticeable in *Norstrilia* if muted, but more explicit later.) These five stories are '**Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons**', '**Alpha Ralpa Boulevard**', '**The Ballad of Lost C'Mell**', *Norstrilia*, and '**A Planet Named Shayol**'. Two of these ('Alpha Ralpa Boulevard' and 'The Ballad of Lost C'Mell'), along with Smith's first story, 'Scanners Live in Vain', are my three favourite Cordwainer Smith stories.

Roderick Frederick Ronald Arthur William McArthur McBan the 151st, hereafter called Rod, is the heir to a wealthy estate on the planet of Old North Australia, or Norstrilia. Norstrilia's wealth is derived from stroon — the immortality drug that can only be produced there. As the novel opens, Rod is 16, or perhaps 64, as he has lived the first 16 years of his life four times, in the hopes that his congenital defect will be cured. This defect means he cannot 'spiek' or 'hier', which is to say telepathically communicate. Otherwise he's pretty intelligent young man. And this is his fourth chance at the test which will determine if he lives or dies — for on this somewhat inhospitable planet the population is rigorously controlled. It is thought that his handicap will doom him — but his examination goes in an unexpected direction. However, there are still people who think he ought to be killed. The only solution seems to be to leave Norstrilia — but those who leave cannot return. But with the help of an ancient computer, Rod finds a sort of loophole — he plays games with his enormous wealth to buy the entire planet known as Manhome, or Old Earth.

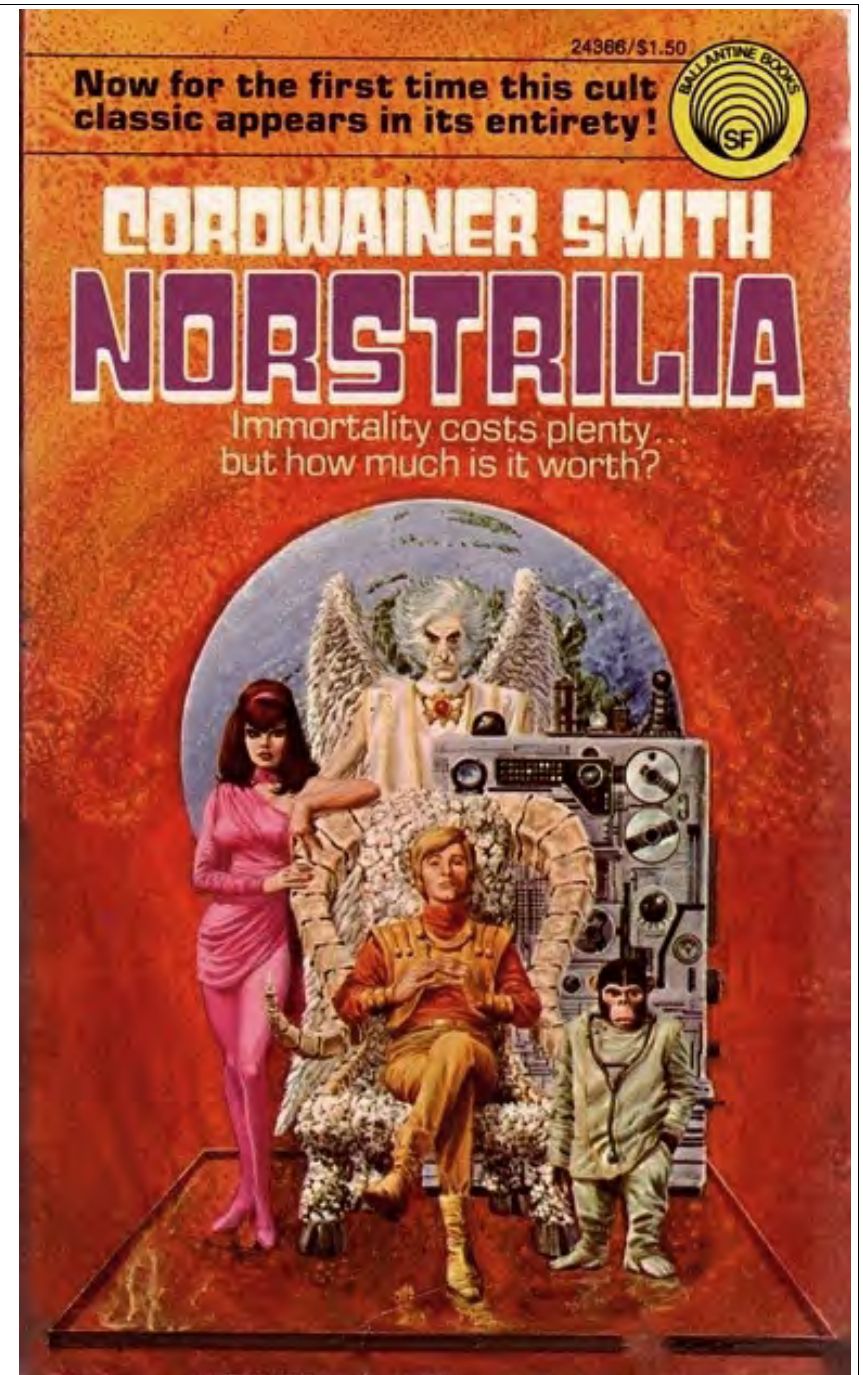
His troubles are hardly over. Such wealth makes him even more of a target, on Norstrilia, on Old Earth, and in between. He does

have allies, and they find a way to sneak him to Mars, and then, in the disguise of a C'Man, married to the beautiful girlygirl C'Mell, he gets to Earth, along with a number of robots disguised as him. And here on Old Earth, he will find his heart's desire, meet E'Telekeli, the most powerful of all the animal-derived 'under-people', escape multiple attempts on his life, get psychiatric treatment, live a long life with C'Mell, and finally realise his real destiny.

I don't really want to say more about the plot. There is at the same time a lot going on, but in an odd way not. Some of it seems a bit arbitrary, some doesn't quite convince, and some is fascinating. But still it all pretty much works. The novel isn't at a level with Smith's greatest works, but parts of it are. At time it reaches the incantatory heights Smith could achieve, and it hints throughout at a really important story — the story of the Underpeople (which is also central to 'The Ballad of Lost C'Mell', and which perhaps is ultimately key to the entire Instrumentality future history). But Rod isn't an Underperson (though of course C'Mell and E'Telekeli are), so that story is kind of told in the margins. We like Rod, but he doesn't shake the universe, in a way.

There is magic here, though — never doubt it. There is action and humour and deep history. Sly references, like the terrible planet the Norstrilians came from: Paradise VII (Seventh Heaven?). And there is darkness — right from the beginning we confront Norstrilia's harsh rite of passage, in which a large subset of children are killed (kindly) as they turn 16 — and we are reminded of this in the plangent conclusion. There is poetry: I particularly like C'Mell's little song:

And oh! my love, for you,
High bird crying, and a
High sky flying, and a
High wind driving, and a
High heart striving, and a
High brave place for you.



This is a good novel, and it's an important part of the future history created by one of the oddest and most powerful SF writers of all time. But to fully grok Cordwainer Smith, you need to read his short fiction — and for doing so you will be richly rewarded.

I promised a bit more about the textual history of *Norstrilia*. It was written as a single novel, but Smith couldn't sell it in whole. He divided it roughly in half, and cut versions of each half were published in **Frederik Pohl's** magazines *Galaxy* and *If*. (Pohl was Smith's primary editor.) The two novellas were published in the April 1964 issue of *Galaxy* ('The Boy Who Bought Old Earth', about 38,300 words) and the May 1964 issue of *If* ('The Store of Heart's Desire', about 23,300 words.) Paperback editions of both novellas, expanded to short-novel length, appeared from Pyramid: ***The Planet Buyer*** (1964, about 53,000 words) and ***The Underpeople*** (1968, about 42,000 words). These books presumably restored cuts to Smith's original manuscript that had been made to fit the magazines' space restrictions, but also included additional material to make each book stand alone to some extent. Alan Elms' introduction implies that Smith's manuscript was about 75,000 words. The combined length of the novellas is almost 62,000 words. The Pyramid paperbacks come to about 95,000 words. The NESFA edition is about 89,000 words, based on an electronic count kindly supplied me by Jim Mann of NESFA, not

counting the introduction or the appendices, and the Del Rey edition is about the same. I suspect my estimate for the Pyramid books is off just a bit, and the two books probably are similar to the complete *Norstrilia*, after accounting for the additional text added to each to smooth out the transition between the two volumes, set against a somewhat restored text from Smith's manuscripts (or so I assume) that is found only in the 'complete' version.

My suspicion is that Smith's original manuscript was about 90,000 words, and was cut significantly for the magazine publication, and mostly restored (plus some bridging material) for the first books. Alternately, Smith wrote a 75,000-word version first (as Elms suggests) but expanded it later to the final 90,000 words, hoping to sell it as two novels. (At Pyramid in particular, novels of 45,000 words or so were not uncommon.) It would be interesting to know for sure which of these two possibilities is true, and if so which parts were added later. It is worth noting that *The Underpeople* didn't appear from Pyramid until 1968, while *The Planet Buyer* came out in 1964, just a few months after the novellas. Smith died in 1966, so it is at least possible that he made some revisions after the first publication of *The Planet Buyer*.

— **Rich Horton**, 2024

JOHN HERTZ, Los Angeles fan, produces his two-page fanzine *Vanamonde* every week for APA-L. He sends bunches of copies to friends from time to time. He and I would like to share with you from *Vanamonde's* pages the following essays and mini-essays.

The John Hertz Corner

Vale, Taral Wayne

(*Vanamonde* 1606, 5 Aug 24)

Taral Wayne (1951–2024), the name under which we knew him, left for After-Fandom on July 31st. He had been one of our best fanartists; he was given the Rotsler Award (annual since 1998; for long-time wonder-working with graphic art in amateur publications of the science fiction community) in 2008; he was an eleven-time Hugo finalist. He drew the logograph for Iguanacon II (36th Worldcon), used in its Hugo trophy bases. He was Guest of Honor at Ditto VIII (fanziners' convention; named for a brand of spirit-duplicator machine; 3–5 Nov 95, Seattle, Washington) — he had co-founded Ditto with Catherine Crockett — and Fan Guest of Honor at Anticipation the 67th Worldcon (6–10 Aug 09, Montréal, Quebec), which built a life-size 'virtual' TW apartment with careful reproductions of the original; the electronic may see his con report at (<https://efanzines.com/Taral/ToWalkThe%20Moon.pdf>).

Murray Moore published *Old Toys: A Tarable Collection* for Ditto XV (18–20 Oct 02, Toronto, Ontario), with introductions by Moshe Feder and Mike Glicksohn (<https://efanzines.com/Taral/OldToys.pdf>); the title alludes to TW's fanzines *New Toy*, *Broken*

Toys, *Dark Toys*, *Lost Toys*, *Stolen Toys*, *Forgotten Toys* (<https://efanzines.com/Taral/>). For *The Slan of Baker Street*, TW's zine in honor of Stu Shiffman, named for Van Vogt's 1941 novel and SS' activity next door in Sherlock Holmes fandom, see (<https://efanzines.com/Taral/The%20Slan%20of%20Baker%20Street.pdf>). For some of TW's favourite covers as of 2009, *Banana Wings*, *Challenger*, *Checkpoint*, *Derogatory Reference*, *File 770* — he was the lead *File 770* cover artist for decades, then drew the (File770.com) headers culminating in the current one based on the Prague astronomical clock — *It Goes on the Shelf*, *Mainstream*, *Outworlds*, *Prehensile*, *Rune*, *Weberwoman's Wrevenge*, *Yandro*, *YHOS*, see (<https://efanzines.com/Taral/Incomplete-Taral-Wayne-Cover-Gallery.pdf>). He restored artwork for *Rare and Well Done Bodé* (Vaughn Bodé).* He drew the 'Magician for Bruce Pelz' Tarot deck with cards envisioned individually by fan and pro artists, (https://fan-cyclopedia.org/Fantasy_Showcase_Tarot_Deck).

brg John points out that the name 'Bodé' should carry a macron (flat-line accent) instead of an acute accent (hence pronounced 'Bo-day'), but I don't have macrons in the Character Set for this program.*



'The Digital Imp' (Tara Wayne, 2007).



Cover, *File 770* (Tara Wayne, 1985).

Taral came from a fictional language TW created. Many of his drawings featured Saara Mar, a white-furred Kiola ('k'YO-la') 1.8 m tall with chrome-silver skin and eye-pupils, resembling a slim human girl but in fact a quantum-powered synthetic solid-state being, sometimes clothed in a chrome-silver force field continuous (through sub-space or a higher dimension) with the hull of her starship, the first visitor from the 4000-year-old culture Dalmirin; we also saw the Teh Langgi girl Tangelwedsibel, resembling a black and white furry dinosaur and hating to be called a skunk.

Patrick Nielsen Hayden said TW was grumpy and an oddball and brilliant. All true. Steven Baldassarra said he was gentle, impish, thoughtful. All true. *Ave atque vale*.

Hundreds of little cakes

(*Vanamonde* 1456, 19 Jul 21)

The Japanese sweet-shop **Fugetsu-do**, 315 E. 1st St., Los Angeles 90012, run by the third generation of the Kito family, with fourth-generation **Korey Kito** apprenticing under his father Brian, has been in business 103 years. Korey says he's doing his part toward the next hundred. The sidewalk, in brass letters set in the concrete, reminds us, from Brian, 'As children we played in this street, and all the shopkeepers knew us.' Little Tōkyō, heart of the largest Japanese–American population on the continent, was designated a National Historic Landmark District in 1995. Why 'Little Tōkyō', when LA has a Chinatown and a Koreatown, I have yet to learn. And are people from Kyōto and Ōsaka content? Anyway, Fugetsu-do is a favourite of mine.

I often recount my first adventure at a Japanese bakery, I think in New York [*Vanamonde* 229]. On display were hundreds of little cakes in many shapes and colours. I bought one, and took a bite. It was filled with bean paste. How interesting, I thought, never having tasted it before. I picked out a different one, and took a bite. This one was filled with bean paste. How interesting. I tried

another and another and yet another, each of wholly distinct appearance. Each and every one proved to be filled with — yes. Remarkable. I remember describing this adventure to a girl I knew. She thought I was putting her on. Maybe a year later, she happened into a Japanese neighbourhood, and found a bakery. Look, hundreds of little cakes! She bought one. Well, well.

Vale, Stephen Hickman

Stephen Hickman (1949–2021) won a Hugo, six Chesleys, and two Spectrum Gold awards; two artbooks, *The Fantasy Art of SH* (1989) and *Empyrean* (2015). I particularly like his cover for *Fallen Angels* (Niven, Pournelle and Flynn, 1991). In 1986 he had been given NESFA's (New England SF Association's) first Jack Gaughan Award for Best Emerging Artist. I hear he contributed some artwork to fanzines, but so far I haven't traced it. His five images issued by the United States Postal Service in 1993 as 29¢ Space Fantasy stamps (1-oz. postage for first-class mail then) are, as was wanted, a fine balance of originality and reminiscence — that extraordinary quality we have in science fiction of looking back at ideas of the future; the electronic may see them at (<https://www.amazon.com/SPACE-FANTASY-Booklet-Postage-Stamps/dp/B001GGB6U0>). He was Artist Guest of Honor at *inter alia* Balticon 23, Baycon '89, Con*Stellation XI, Lunacon 38–39, Bosk-one 39, Libertycon 17, Archon 29, Ravencon 2008, Conestoga 12, MileHiCon 44, and Jordancon IX. At one of those Lunacons he came to me after the Art Show tour I'd led, and applauded my discerning articulate remarks and how I'd drawn participation from the folks on the tour, gosh; I hadn't seen him; he'd been on the other side of the peg-board-hooks-and-clips panels, and had listened — the reverse, if you will, of 'Dance as though no one was watching'. *RIP*.

Even from a duck

(*Vanamonde* 1490, 14 Mar 22)

When Reuben suggests to Shimon 'You might amend X with Y', of course Shimon might reply, without looking, 'X will stay just as it is. How bad and wrong you are.' S may shut up. S may be left resentful against R, which may make things harder another time. R in self-justification may become less willing to entertain comments from S — or from anyone else — which may make things harder another time. A teacher of mine was so much better that I used to say 'If D was out walking in the park, and a duck made some suggestion, D would stop and listen to the duck, and if the duck was right, D would take the suggestion and afterwards remark *Here's an improvement I got once from a duck.*'

Collective nouns

(*Vanamonde* 1546, 22 May 23)

The 'nomenclature of collective nouns for animals includes a murder of crows and an unkindness or a conspiracy of ravens' isn't a fun fact, it's a feckless fraud.

Lawyers

(*Vanamonde* 1551, 3 Jul 23)

My father and I had a treaty we both strictly observed: he promised that, although he was a lawyer (and was later made a judge), he'd not try to influence me toward going into the law profession; I promised that, although he was a lawyer (and was later made a judge), I'd not turn away from going into the law profession. When, after getting my bachelor's degree, I, consulting many people personally and through writings, decided I should go to law school, he and I rejoiced at a decision we were each content had been independently made. I asked, 'How long will it take me to learn being a lawyer?' He answered, 'If you're lucky,

only thirty or forty years.' Among the things I've learned is that people often come to lawyers late. They say 'Get me out of this!' when they'd have done better to ask earlier 'How should I get into this?' Among the folks who don't understand our legal system must be included too many lawyers. Lawyers are philosophers (not in the current sense of useless). Lawyers are engineers. Lawyers are not primarily pugilists.

Desks

I fear that I may never see a desk I find convenient for me
The folks who make them have strange thoughts
that force me, or try to, into their oughts.
A desk should have wide room for stacks
of things I pile up studying facts.
A desk should have a set of drawers
to hold things in, not left on floors.
I'd rather have it built of wood
than glass and metal, which aren't as good.
I'm for design and cleverness,
but at my cost? Oh, what a mess!

Them

We sometimes say *Can't see the forest for the trees*; conversely we sometimes *Can't see the trees for the forest*. Members of an organisation sometimes, instead of seeing their fellows, see THEM; or instead of individuals they should serve, see THEM; or such individuals, instead of an organisation comprising individuals, see THEM.

Beverley Driver Eddy

(*Vanamonde* 1556, 5 Aug 23)

Beverley Driver Eddy, Professor Emerita of German Studies at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, says of herself, 'Since I

have retired [in 2003], I have turned to writing literary biography ... World War II history.... *Ritchie Boy Secrets* [2021] ... of the Military Intelligence Training Center in Camp Ritchie, Maryland. In my works I explore how the lives of individuals intersect with historical events.'

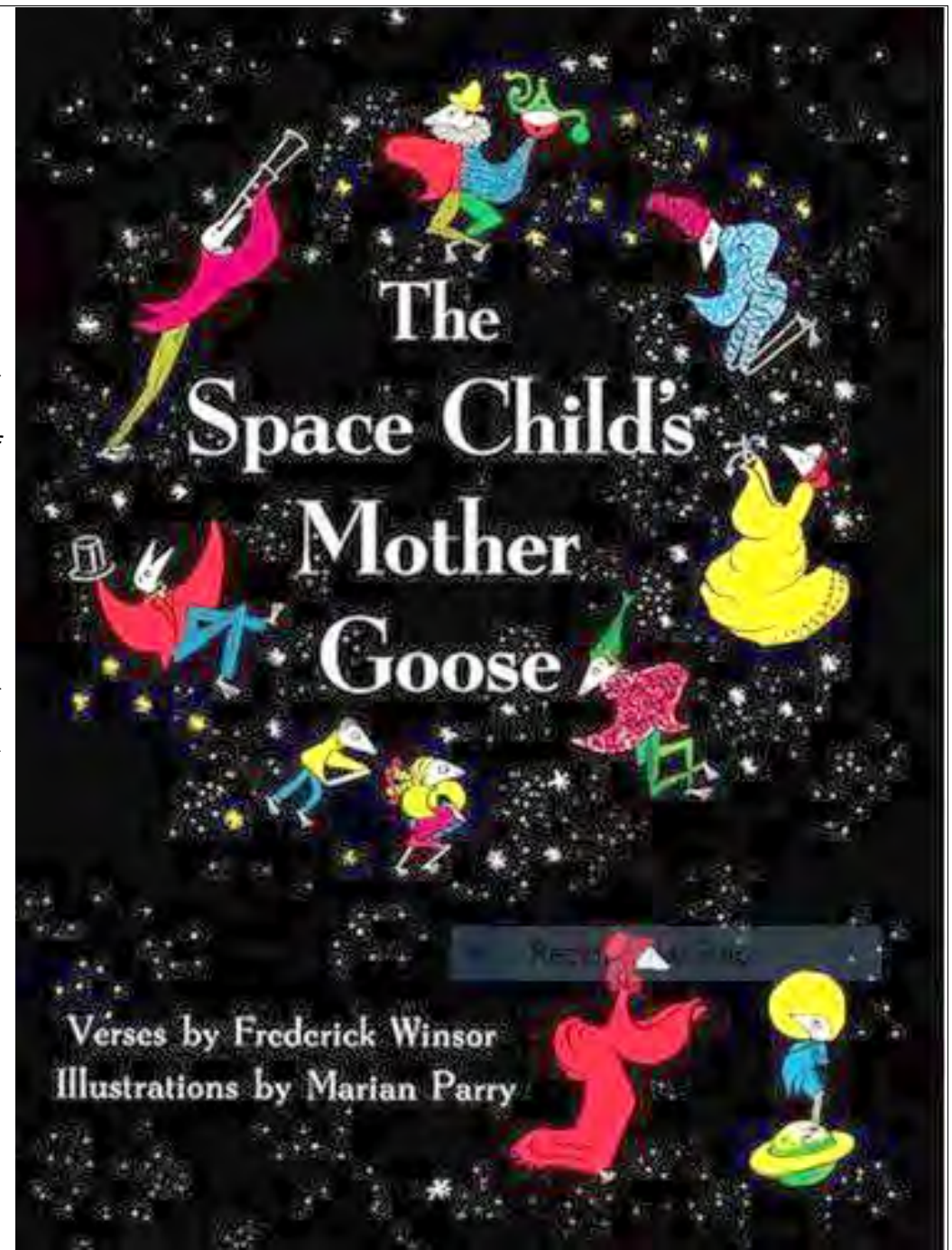
There were 15–20,000 Ritchie Boys (including girls), multilinguals recruited to serve in that capacity during the war, like Barbara Harmon's friend Herb Murez (1924–2023), who found a document of Hitler's, and Kazuo Yamane (personal name first, United States style, as he used; 1916–2010), who found, among 15 crates of documents captured at Saipan and thought to have no intelligence value, a Japanese *Proceedings of 1944 Liaison Conference of Chiefs of Ordnance Departments*, with inventories and statistical tables. Eddy interviewed 10 Ritchie Boys; she notes more. One earned a Medal of Honor, a Private in the Philippines; another, a Distinguished Service Cross, a Captain in China; 56 earned Silver Stars, from Private to Major, in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Tunisia.

She goes next door to the Counterintelligence Corps, the Office of Strategic Services, and Camp Sharpe; to Europe and the Pacific after the war. She gives a 213-item bibliography, 38 pages of photographs; 8 one-page studies 'He [or She] Passed Through Camp Ritchie', including a lawyer, a general, the only US soldier invited by Sultan Mohammad V (1909–1961) of Morocco to read from the Koran at his private mosque, the first Asian American to get her doctorate in anthropology, and Man Mountain Dean (1891–1953). The David Hertz whom Eddy mentions is I think the Hollywood writer (1906–1948); I know of no relation, although in his photo (p. 217) he looks a little like me.

The Space Child's Mother Goose

(Vanamonde 1578, 22 Jan 24)

Sometimes I think my favorite moment in ***The Space Child's***



Mother Goose (verses by F. Winsor and illustrations by M. Parry, 1958) is the last five words of a footnote.

No. 16 is:

Said the Cortex
To the Vortex
'Won't you have a Chlorophyll?'
Said the Vortex
To the Cortex
'Thank you, sir, perhaps I will.'

Before going on, I mustn't assume you know this wonderful book or why it's particularly, not just generally, comical. In 1958 possibly anyone who knew English was on familiar terms with Mother Goose. Maybe she came into literature with **Contes de ma mère l'Oye** (French, *Tales of My Mother Goose*), published 1696 by Charles Perrault (1628–1703), a pioneer in what we still call fairy tales; his book included 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Cinderella', 'Puss in Boots', and 'Sleeping Beauty'; its title page was illustrated with a picture of a woman drop-spinning and telling stories to children. Why 'Goose' I can't tell you.

Space Child has 45 Space Age versions (one more example: No. 17 is 'Little Jack Horner/Sits in a corner/Extracting cube roots to infinity,/An assignment for boys/That will minimise noise/ and produce a more peaceful vicinity'), with Marian Parry's pictures as fine as Frederick Winsor's words. Her people are somewhat avian, recalling — that's backwards for me; I read *Space Child* first — the bird-men of Margaret Newcastle's fantasy *The Blazing World* (1666, revised 1668; she also has fish-men, worm-men, and like that; we who don't understand titles of nobility have reprinted *Blazing* as by **Margaret Cavendish**; Cavendish was her husband's family name; she was the Duchess of Newcastle; her husband's introductory sonnet is signed William Newcastle, and she signs her preface M. Newcastle; *Blazing* is fantasy, not 'proto-science-fiction'). Much of *Space Child* first appeared in *The Atlantic* (July 1957), a fact also wonderful.

The footnote:

The Cortex wraps around a core.
Alas! There isn't any more.

Vale, Martin Morse Wooster

(*Vanamonde* 1583, 29 Feb 24)

to teach ... how to acquire & how to communicate knowledge
... that they will go forward henceforth & educate themselves &
in due time educate others

Catharine Beecher (elder sister), 27 Sep 1851
quoted in J. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, p. 221 (1994)

Martin Morse Wooster (1957–2022) and I had so much in common that it was a healthful surprise to see he'd carefully kept aside how much we didn't, about which he was elsewhere eloquent and respected.

He attended my Classics of Science Fiction book discussions at SF conventions. He wrote letters of comment to many fanzines, including *Banana Wings* and *PLOKTA (Press Lots Of Keys To Abort, 'the magazine of superfluous technology')*, to name two overseas from him, also *Algol*, *File 770* in its paper days and *File770.com* thereafter, *Interzone*, *Mimosa*, *SF Commentary* (also overseas), startling many in these later times by sending his LoCs on paper. He reviewed *The Best of Wilson Tucker* and *Fancylopedia II* for *Science Fiction & Fantasy Book Review*, *The Courts of Chaos* (R. Zelazny, 1978) for *Thrust*, *The Paradox Men* (C. Harness, 1949) for *Fantasy Review*, Rob Hansen's *Then* (SF fandom in the UK 1930–1980) for the *New York Review of SF*. I knew him to be thoughtful, articulate, engaging.

I never knew, which showed how remiss I'd been at studying things I didn't agree with, that he'd been senior fellow at the Capital Research Center; an editor at *American Enterprise* and

Reason, a columnist for the *Washington Times*; that he'd written about Heinlein for *National Review*; that he wrote for *Air and Space*, *Commentary*, *Esquire*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*; that he'd published *Angry Classrooms*, *Vacant Minds* (1994) and *Great Philanthropic Mistakes* (rev. 2010). Evidently he knew we in the SF community aren't tolerant; we only march behind a banner that says 'Tolerance'; he knew better than to bring up his conservative views among the likes of us; he showed far better manners than we who rant about our progressive views. In my defence, I did not hesitate to explore such things with Jerry Pournelle, of whom my appreciation was entitled 'We



Martin Morse Wooster (*National Review*).

Met for Lunch and Disagreed' (<https://file770.com/we-met-for-lunch-and-disagreed/>) (27 Sep 17); but I missed many chances to nourish my honesty and possibly expand my mind with Brother Wooster. Too late now for this life. *Requiescat in pace*.

Is Arrowsmith science fiction?

(*Vanamonde* 1585, 17 Mar 24)

I've just re-read **Arrowsmith** (Sinclair Lewis, 1925; awarded the Pulitzer Prize, which SL declined, saying that since the Prize was 'for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood' [this] would appear to mean that the appraisal of the novels shall be made not according to their actual literary merit but in obedience to whatever code of Good Form may chance to be popular at the moment').

As I understand, a real Félix d'Hérelle (ch. 29; 1873–1949) did find bacteriophages and coin that term, but Martin Arrowsmith's broader discovery is science fiction.

People have cited *Arrowsmith* as an example of what isn't science fiction.

Arrowsmith's discovery is the climax of the book.

Mark Schorer (1908–1977), in a 1961 Afterword to the Signet Classics edition I have, says (p. 436) 'One wonders if Paul de Kruif [1890–1971; rhymes with 'life'; microbiologist; helped with the book, was given 25% of the royalties] approved of the ending in this ending we have moved from science into what we can only call 'science fiction'.' Of course his sneer does not make it so — or not so.

More substantively, I think of Theodore Sturgeon's great pun,

'Science fiction is knowledge fiction' (in ch. 27 pt. 5 Terry Wickett incomprehensibly says *science* is from the Greek [p. 286 in my copy] — not an expectable blunder from TW, could it be the author's?).

Vale, Ray Nelson

(*Vanamonde* 1593, 30 Apr 24)

Ray Faraday Nelson (1931–2022) I knew as a fanartist. I was glad to be on the three-judge panel that gave him the 2003 Rotsler Award. He contributed faithfully to *Vanamonde*; his cover for my second collection *Dancing and Joking* may be seen by the electronic at https://www.fanac.org/fanzines/Fanthologies/dancing_and_joking_hertz_2005-11_westercon_57.pdf#view=Fit). The Rotsler Award exhibit we manage for many World Science Fiction Conventions has a panel of his work, e.g. (<https://file770.com/rotsler-award-display-at-chicon-8/>). Harlan Ellison called him a true craftsman of the field.

He invented the propeller beanie, all over our drawings and thus our fanzines for decades. Halfway through the twentieth century, if you were a fanboy or fangirl living at home and, not wanting your Mom to know, you hid your copies of *Astounding* under clothes in the dresser ('I am a spy for the FDI.' 'What's the FDI, Lamb Chop?' 'The Federal Dresser of Investigation.' 'Lamb Chop, that's the Federal Bureau of Investigation.' 'You call it a bureau, I call it a dresser.' — Shari Lewis [1933–1998]; SL's hand-puppet Lamb Chop once testified before the United States House of Representatives, *Deseret News* 11 Mar 93; SL *inter alia* co-wrote 'The Lights of Zetar' [1969] for *Star Trek*); you meanwhile put in your fanzine, where your Mom would never look, a cartoon of the dresser with a propeller beanie a-top.

He around 1947, during a gathering of fans in his home at Cadillac, Michigan, while he was a high-school sophomore, made the first propeller beanie for a set of joke-photographs taking off science-

fiction magazine covers. Propeller beanies became associated with George Young and then appeared generally in cartoons. For a while they were a sign of naïve enthusiasm and energy, such as might greet the latest issue of *Planet Stories* with a cry of 'Goshwowboyoboy!' This naturally roused the ready scorn of Dick Eney in *Fancylopedia II* (1959); perhaps the propeller beanie's wide adoption was defiant, as with *Whig*, which once meant *cattle thief*, and *Tory*, which once meant *outlaw*. In *Fancy III*



This is not Ray Nelson, but your scribe John Hertz, wearing his Ray Nelson-style beanie cap.

(https://fancylopedia.org/Ray_Nelson).

From a fork in evolution sprouted the hand-puppets Beany Boy, who looked like George Young, and Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent, in *Sedley's Medley* (Bruce Sedley 1925–2012), eventually the *Beany and Cecil* animated cartoons of Bob Clampett (1913–1984), on television.

Ray published half a dozen SF novels and a score of shorter stories; the Internet SF Data Base lists 30 essays and letters of comment from *Planet Stories* (1949) to *Portable Storage* (2020), 60 drawings, of course neither complete nor conclusive. His *Eight O'Clock in the Morning* (1963) has been translated into French, German, and Swedish, and was made into the movie *They Live* (J. Carpenter dir. 1988); he co-wrote *The Ganymede Takeover* (1967) with Philip K. Dick. *Blake's Progress* (1975) has Wm. Blake (1757–1827) and wife travelling in space and time. In France, Ray took long walks with Simone de Beauvoir (1905–1986). When *Ionisphere* asked (new series no. 11, June 2018) 'What are some of your current professional activities?' he answered 'I try to avoid professional activities.' *Ave atque vale*.

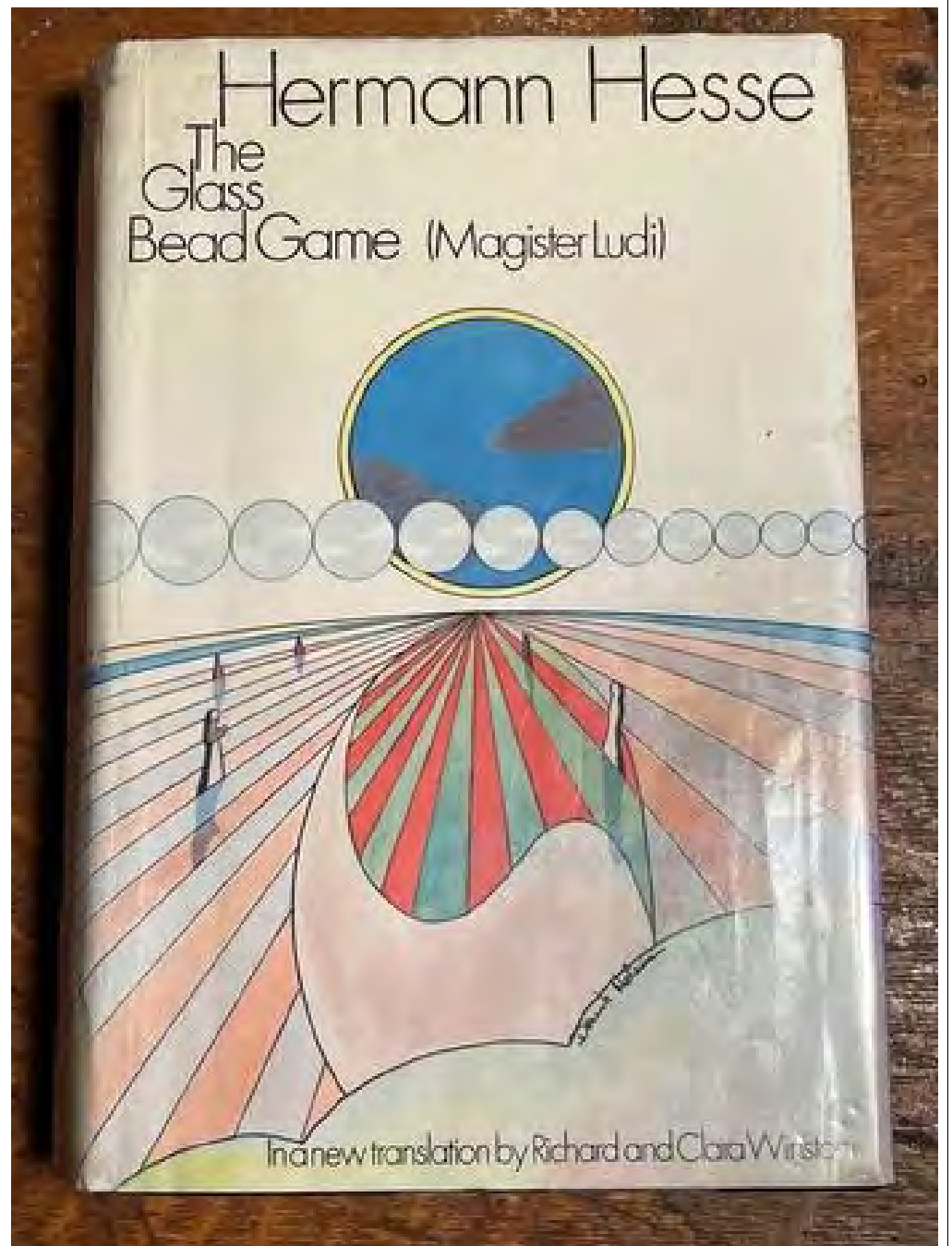
John reviews *The Glass Bead Game*

THE GLASS BEAD GAME (1943) by Hermann Hesse

(From *YHOS* #59 (2002))

For Westercon LV ('Conagerie', 55th annual West Coast Science Fantasy Conference, July 2–5, 2002, Los Angeles) I suggested discussions of sf classics. Mike Glycer, head of programming, took my suggestion and my list of books, which were printed in *Progress Report 3* so people could read up and make ready.

The books were Bester, *The Stars My Destination* (1956), Cameron, *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet* (1954),



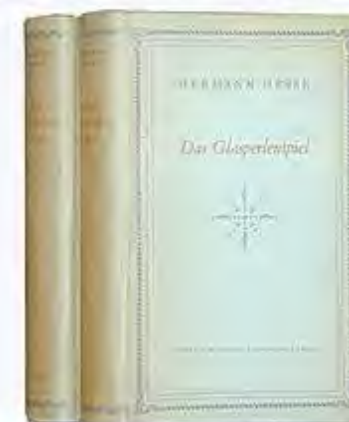
Clarke, *The City and the Stars* (1956), Heinlein, *Farmer in the Sky* (1950), Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), Schmitz, *The Witches of Karres* (1966), Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831), Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). As the PR noted, two were written by women, two were not written in English, two were written in the same year, two were written before 1900, two were written for children, two had been done in films: a pretty accident.

Of these, **Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*** (also published in English as ***Magister Ludi***) is surely the most neglected among us. Yet it won Hesse the Nobel Prize; it is one of very few good sf novels by an outside writer; indeed it is a masterpiece.

You are welcome to ponder whether this is a good list, whether any of these books is a classic, or whether in sf we can have any. Charlie Brown said mainstream writing is about the past, sf is about the present; no one can write about the future. Perhaps that is so. I believe we can have classics if we make a book, or a painting, or whatever may be sf, which outlives its own time; which we find merit in even after times have changed. With decades passed since the most recent of these books, that may be more interesting than whether the future actually turned out, or will, as written.

In Hesse's book the glass bead game is what differs from our world. Some hundreds of years from now — he does not say, though to a friend he wrote of imagining the year 2400 (T. Ziolkowski, *The Novels of Hermann Hesse* (1965), p. 308) — the world has reorganised. People grew tired of what they came to call the age of wars. Intellectual ability found a new place. The change began, or was concentrated, by a toy, a wire frame on which glass beads could be strung in various colours and shapes. The beads were used to symbolise ideas — all kinds of ideas — an architectural design, a theme in a Gabrieli sonata, a line of verse. Over time there grew up a notation; the physical beads fell out of

The Glass Bead Game



First German edition

Author	Hermann Hesse
Original title	<i>Das Glasperlenspiel</i>
Translator	Mervyn Savill (1949), Richard and Clara Winston (1969)
Language	German
Genre	Fiction
Publisher	Holt, Rinehart and Winston
Publication date	1943
Publication place	Switzerland
Published in English	1949
Media type	print (hardback & paperback)
Pages	558

use; the game took on international proportions. The best players were celebrities; the least were precious schoolmasters. The book does not mention, but from hints Hesse surely knew, that similarly knowledge of the Confucian classics, and skill at a kind of essay-writing, were the backbone of China for 2000 years.

By the time of the story a kind of order had formed, like our religious orders, its members renouncing material wealth, family, politics, to serve society by virtue of their training. A Master of Music, and a President of the Order, are important characters in the novel. The alternative booktitle *Magister Ludi*, i.e. 'master of the game' in Latin, is the name of the office held by the protagonist, in which capacity he among other things led public games with great ceremony. This particular Master of the Game, a man named Joseph Knecht, became a subject of legend. His work excelled, but his career ended strangely. Well after his death a biography was thought possible. It is compiled by another member of the order, writing for the general public. He summarises the history of the game, tells what is known of Knecht's life, adds with reluctant scholarship the legendary matter, and closes with some of Knecht's student exercises and poetry.

The Glass Bead Game is a model of sf writing. Hesse's subtlety never fails. All the big questions about elitism, practicality, creation, skepticism, the risk of panacea, the place of religion, and the nature of allegiance, are handled by implication. Nor does he digress to explain technology. Why should he? The characters take it for granted. The book is first about them, how they strive and succeed and fail; second about their world, what shape it has as a result of its choices.

In a virtuoso display Hesse disdains the technique of throwing us into the middle of things; he puts the explanatory matter in front, and fascinates us by using it to characterise the narrator. By the

time the narrator is ready to start on Knecht's childhood our suspicions are roused and the game is afoot. The narrator is sure, but not so smug or stupid as to make the book cheap. Women are largely off stage, while Hesse with little touches shows the consequences of that. The detail is telling throughout, and the language even in translation has admirable grace.

The structure of the book is masterly. The student episode of Plinio Designori foreshadows the meeting of Designori and Knecht as adults, and then, the alarm having sounded, Knecht's letter to the Board of Educators, where Knecht in all the power of his mind displays what he reproved Designori for. When we come to the closing matter we burn to know what signs Knecht gave in his youth. They are all there. We need not wonder what difference Knecht made; the presence and tone of the narrator at the beginning tell us. The end of Knecht's life is as right as any tragedy. In sorrow and horror we were expecting it.

By the miracle of genius this book is not mired in its time. Written in Switzerland, in the middle of Europe, in the middle of World War II, it is not about National Socialism — the one cut at Hitler is made so much in passing that we are jolted into recalling the year 1943 — or Communism, or the West and the East shaking each other awake. Its reception cannot be called silly to an audience who knows the history of *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Even today there are people who say they are founding the Province of Castalia or playing the glass bead game. In this his final work Hermann Hesse, if we may say so, surpasses Jane Austen and reaches the level of Jack Benny. Who can regret the cost?

— **John Hertz**, from *Vanamonde*, dates quoted in the text; compilation October 2024

JOHN NEWMAN has been an SF fan for nearly 50 years, discovering conventions in Sydney, chairing one in Melbourne, being Fan GOH at another in Canberra, and mostly gaffing when life got too busy but still reading SF. He's grateful there have been fanzines and APAs to keep in touch with the people he considers his tribe. Born in Melbourne, he resides in Central Victoria for the moment after retiring from a career as a software developer.

John Newman

Re-reading Robinson's 'Mars' trilogy

I decided to re-read **Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Mars' trilogy**. I have to admit that I love these books, and this was probably the third time I had read them all. You probably need to be someone who is OK with Kim Stanley Robinson to do that, as he writes a lot of detail in which you need to immerse yourself. Reading Robinson can be a bit slow, but that also means you can read and re-read his works and find new details!

Red Mars

The first novel is ***Red Mars***, which is about the initial colonisation of Mars. This is effected initially by sending a carefully selected team of 100 people.

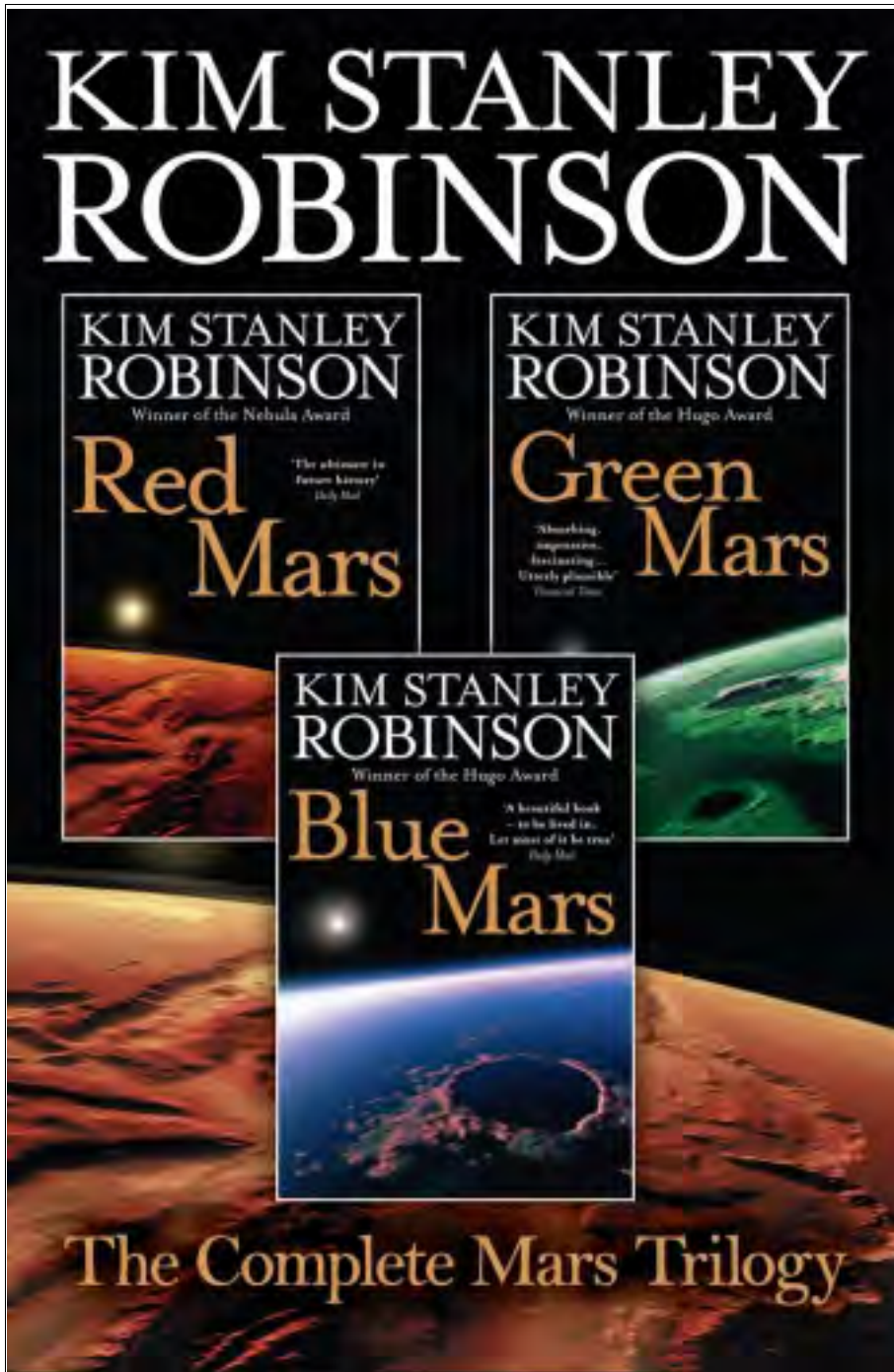
There are too many characters to discuss in detail, but many of them are greatly developed as events unfold. The story grows

from and around these people and their challenges, passions, and actions.

First published in 1992, *Red Mars* begins in 2026, in a world much like ours. The technologies in use and the nature of life on Earth are broadly familiar.

The conflicts of this story come from two directions. First, how should Mars be treated? Two main factions emerge, as well as, of course, many splinter groups.

The 'Reds' want to change Mars as little as possible, and study, learn about, and respect its particular nature, while the 'Greens' want to change the planet, in varying degrees, to be more accommodating to human life.



This is not a surprise, given Robinson's long-held focus on the environment. He is able to illuminate the issues in a time (the 1990s) when global warming was not yet the subject of a major policy discussion, and many people on Earth were having trouble accepting the notion of a threat against an entire planet. So Earth's global climate problems affect the Mars story as well.

The second source of conflict is the question of who runs Mars. Although it is loosely under UN oversight initially, real power moves steadily to the transnational industries who are funding, specifying, and doing much of the development.

Again, Robinson is always political. It would be most unlike him to allow Mars to meekly remain a colony.

By the end of *Red Mars*, year 2061, there is a revolution that fails. The infrastructure that had been bringing thousands of workers and troops to Mars is destroyed, and only 39 of the first 100 remain alive.

Green Mars

The second novel in the series is **Green Mars**. Under the UN Transitional Authority, considerable terraforming has been done. Plants are growing at many altitudes and water has been released from deep underground aquifers. A whole new movement is building and planning to make Mars independent. When a major ecological catastrophe occurs on Earth it creates a distraction, providing an opportunity for Mars to fight for independence and win.

It's a gruesome, violent process, as revolutions are. We see how people change, and how built up resentments sabotage agreements over obviously desirable things.

Those of the first 100 who survive are joined by generations of the Martian born, and new settlers still keep coming from Earth.

Blue Mars

The final novel, **Blue Mars**, is the biggest challenge to read, partly because it's the longest. Some of its action takes place on Earth, and it describes the beginning of humanity moving out into the solar system.

The world has become a body politic. Now they have to make it work. Yet through it all, some of the first 100 still find love, and later generations learn how to be Martians. All the old problems and disagreements remain. But on Mars a government and a constitution are formed. People keep working, creating, and inventing.

At the end of the trilogy, now in the 2120s, the need to expand from an Earth still overpopulated and damaged, joined with new technologies, sees the colonisation of more of the solar system. It's rather thrilling. Some of it is totally bonkers!

I should mention that in order to tie all this extended story, plus the stories of all the characters, there is a major fiddle, which is the life extension technology developed in *Red Mars* by some of

the first 100. This lets us follow some of the 100 right to the end. As a result the reader feels very connected to the families that they've come to know.

Unlike many space stories, this trilogy does not feel like pure fantasy. It's tied to a world and technologies not so different to ours, and we get to see how things build up step by step. It's not real, but it deals, in every step and every page, with real things that real people might do.

There are bad people. Selfishness, greed, and political enmity lead to terrible suffering and death. But human communities learn how to deal with them. Not perfectly, of course. That too would be fantasy. But given half a chance, and the good will to work on what matters for most people, humans muddle through.

It feels like a future history. It's not about how great humanity is, or how evil. It's about life and being human, and a thrilling view of how the denizens of Earth might well expand into the solar system.

— **John Newman**, 2024

The Dennis Callegari Column

What I did on my holidays: (Hint: it was reading books)

These days, the books I read are almost entirely ones I've borrowed from the Boroondara Library in Melbourne, so the library database contains an accurate record of every book I've read for quite a few years. When I look at that list, I can tell you that I can barely remember some of the books on that list — and there are some that I have forgotten entirely! Clearly, none of those books appears here.

So the books below have achieved some kind of unofficial pass mark, at the very least.

To start, there's **John Clute's *The Book Blinders***, a recollection of old book dust jackets just barely rescued from oblivion at the hands of the British Library. You've already covered this in some detail in *SFC* 117 [and in much more detail, by Colin Steele in this issue], so I'll add only this observation: I have a pretty good vocabulary, but Clute in *The Book Blinders* uses a lot of words I've never heard of (coulisse! hypnopomp! diremption! proleptic! apodictic! decalcomania! and many others). If you're reading *The Book Blinders* in bed, have a dictionary handy.

I read the first of **Mick Herron's 'Slough House' spy novels (*Slow Horses*)** about seven years ago, really enjoyed it, and made a note to keep an eye out for any sequels. It took me about six and a half years to follow up, and I've now read most of those too (***Dead Lions, Real Tigers, Spook Street, London Rules, Joe Country, and Slough House***). Many reviewers try to compare these books to John Le Carré's spy novels, but they really shouldn't, because Herron isn't trying to emulate Le Carré. There's more humour and less kitchen-sink realism — and Jackson Lamb is nothing like George Smiley!

I still read a fair few SF and fantasy novels, but a quick look at recent award winners reveals that, alas, I'm no longer on the cutting edge. The list of this year's Hugo winners contains only one book I've read, and that one's the winner in the non-fiction category: ***A City on Mars*, by Kelly and Zach Weinersmith**. I'd already read one of their previous books, ***Soonish***, which is subtitled 'Ten emerging technologies that will improve and/or ruin everything'. *Soonish* was good, so I had high hopes for *A City on Mars*. Unfortunately, it didn't quite hit the mark for me. It wasn't

a bad book (and started out quite well) but I thought it ran out of steam very quickly.

Also a bit disappointing to me was **White Holes** by **Carlo Rovelli**, one of the cosmologists who developed the concept of white holes in the first place. Naturally the concept of white holes is a difficult one (think of a black hole running backwards in time — kind of, sort of), but Rovelli makes the mistake of trying to simplify his ideas to the point where they no longer say much at all. And his frequent references to Dante's *Divina Commedia* don't really help.

A View from the Stars, by **Liu Cixin** — translated from the Chinese by various people — is a collection of early short stories and non-fiction recollections by the author of *The Three Body Problem*. I don't know whether to blame the original texts or the quality of the translations for the dullness of this book, but it sounds like the history of SF in China so far has been particularly pedestrian.

A novel whose genesis, at least, is far from prosaic is **The Book of Elsewhere** by **Keanu Reeves** and **China Miéville**. Miéville's earlier *The City & the City* is still a favourite of mine so (alarm bells notwithstanding) I was always going to read his collaboration with Reeves, the iconically popular movie star of *The Matrix* and *John Wick* movie series (not to mention *Bill and Ted*). Reeves is not a stranger to such collaborations; the thematically-related 'BRZRKR' graphic novels have already had considerable success.

The reviewer Joshua Rivera has described *The Book of Elsewhere* as 'Let Keanu Reeves punch and shoot his way onto your summer reading list'. It's a fair description. I suspect the writing is largely Miéville's but the story line is very much *The Matrix* by way of *John Wick*. I'm certain there is a market for this book ... but I'm not it.

I've never been moved to write song lyrics (and I haven't yet

learned to play a musical instrument) but I have become a devotee of books by musicians who want to tell me how they write their songs. **Energy Follows Thought** by **Willie Nelson** combines the lyrics of many of Nelson's songs with his own recollections of the times and circumstances in which they were written. It doesn't tell you too much about how Willie wrote the songs, but I enjoyed hearing his literary voice.

By contrast, **Jeff Tweedy's** books **How To Write One Song** and **World Within a Song** are pretty much Jeff Tweedy (the lead guitarist, singer, and songwriter of the band Wilco) trying to tell you exactly how he writes songs and persuading you to give it a whirl yourself. (I must confess that I don't know much about Tweedy's music itself, but his friends, the writer George Saunders and the actor Nick Offerman, speak highly of him, and Tweedy has written a couple of engaging books.)

The whodunnit **Everyone on this Train Is a Suspect** by **Benjamin Stevenson** is a sequel to *Everyone in my Family Has Killed Someone*, and as with his first novel, it not only demolishes the fourth wall between author and reader, it shows you the blueprint of how the book was put together. I honestly don't know whether to recommend it or not, but it's a unique take on how to write a crime novel.

Finally, my list of books ends with what I'll call my 'expected reads' — recent books where I know pretty much what I'm going to get when I start them. Among them are history books on ancient Rome by **Mary Beard** and **Nick Holmes**, **Lindsey Davis'** crime novels set in ancient Rome, **Donna Leon's** crime novels set in modern-day Venice, **Ben Aaronovitch's** urban fantasies, and **Andrew Cartmel's 'Vinyl Detective'** series. It's like putting on a pair of comfortable slippers.

— **Dennis Callegari**, August 2024

'Clockwork Seadragon'
(Dennis Callegari + NightCafé)

