

# SF Commentary 114

November 2023

84 pages

**DENNIS CALLEGARI AND JIM BURNS PLAY WITH A.I.  
CELEBRATING LIVES LOST IN 2023:  
VALMA BROWN, LEE HARDING, JENNIFER BRYCE.  
TRIBUTE TO HELENA BINNS 1941-2023.  
HORTON on CORDWAINER SMITH'S FIRST STORY.  
WOLF interviews CONEY.  
KIM HUETT: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.  
AUSTRALIAN SF PUBLISHING DURING WORLD WAR II.  
COLIN STEELE'S BOOKWORLD.  
ANNA CREER on CRIME FICTION.**



‘Chloe Surveys Her World I’ (Dennis Callegari).

# SF COMMENTARY 114

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**FRONT AND BACK COVERS:** Dennis Callegari: 'Chloe Surveys Her World'.

**PHOTOGRAPHS:** Bev Collins (p. 11); Leigh Edmonds (p. 12); Belinda Gordon (pp. 12, 13); Cat Sparks (p. 17); C. June Wolf (p. 34).

**ILLUSTRATIONS:** Dennis Callegari (pp. 4, 5, 6, 7, 83); Jim Burns (pp. 8, 9, 10); Jack Gaughan (pp. 25, 31); Cozetti and Walter (p. 26); Tom Barber (p. 27); Darrell Sweet (p. 30); Chris Moore (p. 31).

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# I must be talking to my friends

## Desperado waiting for a train

We're not particularly desperate out here in suburban Greensborough. One half of the population seems to be the same age as Elaine and me, or older, and the other half seem to be members of Young Families. We've all done a lot of waiting for train services recently. Every time somebody wants to repair something on the Hurstbridge line, or build a station and erase a level crossing, our trains disappear. Instead we are invited to take Replacement Buses to various stations to which trains are running. For two years, 2020 and 2021, Melburnians did not want to take a train, let alone a replacement bus, for fear of catching Covid. More recently, nobody wants to endure the peculiar, time-wasting schedule of the bus replacement service.

Even fandom has been affected by a train service disappearance. While in Melbourne, visiting GUFF winner and ANZAPA member Alison Scott and her husband Steve Cain had hoped to take a pleasant little 40-minute train trip out to Greensborough on 8 October to meet the folks (Elaine and me, and various ANZAPA members) for lunch). But of course Melbourne Metro decreed another train-free weekend for 6–8 October, so we were all hoping that some kind person would be able to ferry Alison and Scott out to lunch. That kind person proved to be Justin Ackroyd, who picked them up (and Leigh Edmonds) from Clifton Hill station. The Welcome GUFF Travellers/ANZAPA 55th Anniversary lunch was very successful. Seventeen people attended, and the 55th Anniversary Birthday Chocolate Cake was eaten very quickly.

I have little other news to relay from beautiful downtown Greensborough.

I have spent six weeks reading three mailings of ANZAPA (total, about 1800 pages) and writing mailing comments.

Various interruptions have been mainly of the fannish variety, not just the usual dentist, ultrasound scans, MRIs, X-rays, and GP appointments. I have been walking for at least one hour a day and often twice a day (often down to the Greensborough Plaza to see if any interesting new CDs or

Blu-rays have appeared at JB Hi Fi).

My legs have improved each week for the last two months. Because I still feel de-energised on some days, I underwent a bone scan. It showed that I have some osteoporosis in the lower back. I don't feel its effects, and most of my back pain during the last 66 years has been in my upper back. The other tests revealed a disappointing excess of healthiness. If I died tomorrow, Elaine could tell people I was perfectly healthy at the time.

The main fannish interruption is the one I describe in my introduction to Helena Binns's autobiography/self-obituary. I haven't started looking through the boxes that Geoff, Perry, Carey, Elaine, and I retrieved from Helena's South Oakleigh house a couple of weeks ago. Volunteers are always welcome to help with the archival task.

Perry Middlemiss and Irwin Hirsh visited a few weeks ago. Perry brought along his sooper-doooper document scanner. It spreads its arms like two wings. They illuminate both sides of a double page to do the scanning. This job, scanning *The Metaphysical Review* No. 15/16/17, all 148 pages, completes all issues of *TMR*. Perry's equipment converted the issue into digits to be sent to Edie Stern and Joe Siclari at fanac.org. Perry also scanned a very thin issue of *SF Commentary*, No.15 from 1970, all 24 pages of it.

Fannish business completed, we toddled off to lunch at one of Greensborough's delights, Lucky Little Dumplings in Grimshaw Street. It is one of the few Greensborough eateries open for lunch.

So much for the news. During the last few months I have read lots of enjoyable books and listened to lots of CDs of fine music, but haven't left myself room to discuss them. My favourite novel of the year so far is Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*. My favourite film so far is Steven Spielberg's *The Fablemans*. My favourite popular CD (a double CD) is Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' *Live at the Fillmore*. My favourite classical CD is the new Jordi Savall version of Mozart's *Requiem*. And late at night I've been watching on DVD every episode of *Midsomer Murders*, Seasons 1 to 23. I suppose that will have to be my favourite TV for the year.

— Bruce Gillespie, 18 October 2023



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## A little bit of AI in the night

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**In a recent mailing of ANZAPA David Grigg gave an explanation of how AI works for producing artwork, and what it means for him. I don't understand his explanation, but I'm looking forward to the AI art he might produce in future issues of his fanzines.**

**DENNIS CALLEGARI from East Kew has sent me quite a few examples of the images he's produced using an AI program. He's given me permission to publish them here.**

**JIM BURNS, a well-known artist and book cover illustrator who lives and works in**



**Dennis Callegari: 'Schrodinger's Cat Is Not Bothered.'**

England, has posted arresting examples on Facebook of his artwork generated using a program called Midjourney. I noticed he has not posted any for some months. He gave me permission to use his images in forthcoming issues of *SF Commentary*, but tells me he has moved on to other projects.

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## Thoughts on AI art from Dennis Callegari

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### Dennis writes:

Here's a quick series of images based on what you've suggested. As you can see, using Night Cafe I was able to generate 'something' quite quickly ... but it's literally a first thought for very little effort. (There is, however, no guarantee that a lot of work will produce anything better!)

It's a website (<https://nightcafe.studio/>) rather than downloadable software, and although you *can* pay for credits on the website, you can also build credits for free just by using the site. If you're judicious in using your credits, you can build up a substantial bank relatively quickly. Right now, I

have over 700 free credits on the site.

There are several problems with publishing AI art.

First, some people insist it's plagiarism — even though what the AI is doing is exactly what young art students do, except a million times faster. Sure, a young artist can slavishly copy an old artwork, but usually they get inspired by an artist's use of line and colour (or something) to try something new of their own.

Second is the sheer speed at which AI can render your ideas. This is a boon for me, because I get ideas for artworks that I would never be able to complete physically. (Recently, I made a series



'Steamboat Willie' (Dennis Callegari).



of semi-AI 'portraits' of characters from Zelazny's 'Amber' books that has been in the back of my mind for decades ... but weren't worth spending the months that would have been needed if I did them 'by hand'.)

Third: the skill that generates AI artworks is not the same as the skill that hands-on painters have. It's more like photography crossed with managing

an art gallery; you don't need an artist's eye to produce something you like. The AI is like some supremely talented artist who is at the same time an utter moron; you have to guide it with text prompts and examples to follow.

— **Dennis Callegari**, August 2023

**'The Ford Goliath Arrives in New Orleans, by Joan Bafoy Noodle' (Dennis Callegari).**







*Top: 'The New Ornithopter' (Dennis Callegari).*

*Below: 'Jack's London' (Dennis Callegari).*





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## Thoughts on AI by Jim Burns

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'I have seen a bit of your images from Midjourney. I think you should really be painting your own ideas. And I am being honest with you. I do think you could be exploring more things and it would be much more expansive to your soul.' (This in an email I received).

I'm 74 years old and I have 50 years of producing work for mostly the publishing world, some film work, and also a fair bit of my own stuff for showing and selling at conventions ... and a nice bunch of privately commissioned paintings over

the years. I call myself moderately successful, and three Hugos, 14 BSFAs, and a Chesley Lifetime Achievement Award would seem to suggest that's a fair enough claim to make without sounding too immodest. Hundreds and hundreds ... it may be thousands ... I never counted ... of drawings and paintings, plus heaps of digitals too.

Along comes AI and I think 'This looks like fun' and I start playing around with it. The argument develops out there as to whether or not it's a good thing and I do understand very well what the





*Previous page: 'Alien Arrival' (Jim Burns).*

*Above: 'Alien Tree' (Jim Burns).*

*Below: 'Alien Spaceship 4' (Jim Burns).*



damned thing might mean for careers ... but in the meantime as this unfolds and we move towards some kind of resolution, I continue — alongside paintings and drawings going on all the time in my studio — to play with this thing and actually acquire a few welcome little commissions utilising it, plus a nice painted interpretation of one of my prompted collaborations. It's income.

Yes ... the brickbats fly out there. For some mostly non-artists, I suspect, but also a few artists too, this is beyond the pale. The negativity and general criticism comes crashing in as people go apoplectic at the outrageousness of my experimenting with this new phenomenon (a thing that isn't going to go away).

I can deal with that. I can deal with civilised Facebook discussions and arguments about the pros and cons and the threats of being unfriended



**Jim Burns.**

(boo hoo) are water off this duck's back. It's for the most part me having a bit of late-in-life fun with a new digital creative tool. And I do actually put as much of 'me' into these things as is possible for the most part.

But I think getting personal emails from someone who is an artist saying to me 'I have seen a bit of your images from Midjourney. I think you should really be painting your own ideas. And I am being honest with you. I do think you could be exploring more things and it would be much more expansive to your soul' is a bit presumptuous! Such nerve! As if I haven't already paid my dues to the field with a gazillion pieces of work over half a century!!!

Who agrees with the sentiment expressed by the email? — which, I should add, was I think meant in a reasonably friendly, but really very presumptuous way?'

— **Jim Burns**, December 2022

**'Evil Elf' (Jim Burns).**





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## The wakes

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### Visiting Leigh for a celebration of Valma's life

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**SFC 112**, pages 20–21, featured some memories of the life of Valma Brown, who died very suddenly this year. Leigh Edmonds has written in ANZAPA about the deep shock of losing her. He invited old friends to Ballarat for the **celebration of Valma's life** on 7 May. He offered mementoes of Valma's various collections to each of us.

Thanks to **Carey and Jo Handfield** for driving me to Ballarat. Leigh's sister **Bev Collins** had organised an afternoon tea at Leigh and Valma's mansion. The afternoon tea was excellent, and I very much enjoyed nattering to Bev. It was a good chance to get together with various ANZAPAns and other fans — David and Sue Grigg, LynC, David



**Celebration of the life of Valma Brown, Ballarat, 7 May 2023. (Photos by Bev Collins.)**  
*Top (l. to r.):* Ann Poore, Justin Ackroyd, Robin Johnson, Lucy Sussex, Carey Handfield, Julian Warner.  
*Below: Standing (l. to r.):* Leigh Edmonds, Sue Grigg, Irwin Hirsh.  
*Sitting: (l. to r.):* David Grigg, Jo Handfield, Bruce Gillespie, LynC.



**Leigh Edmonds' model airplane files in his enormous garage. (Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)**

Russell, Robin Johnson, Justin Ackroyd, Irwin Hirsh, and Lucy Sussex and Julian Warner. Much catching up on the last four years, plus going 'ooh' and 'ah' around the house. We were shown how Leigh stores his model planes in his giant (carless) garage. The feature I like most is the self-contained home theatre. It would be very nice at our place to wall off a space as a dedicated home theatre, especially as Elaine usually doesn't like watching films. Shelves of books were spotted, but Leigh has not filled all the walls with bookshelves, as we did here when we moved in.

This was one of my first expeditions after my leg



began healing. Thanks for yet another kind favour from **Carey and Jo**.

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## The wake for Lee Harding, 27 May 2023: All photos supplied by Belinda Gordon

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**Perry Middlemiss** has written in *Perryscope* his account of the **Wake held for Lee Harding** at lunchtime on 27 May at Jimmy Watson's in Carlton. His account includes his photos. Provided with a lot of extra photos by **Belinda Gordon**, here's my account.

I met many people I hadn't seen for years, or at least not since the Covid lockdowns. We all look a

lot older, including me. It was good to catch up with people like **Race and Iola Mathews**, **Janeen Webb** and **Jack Dann**, and **Madeleine Harding**, who looks quite different from when I saw her last. I met for the first time **Belinda Gordon**, Lee's Perth daughter, who gave me much help in preparing my Tribute, which has appeared in both *SFC* and *Ethel the Aardvark*. (Thanks also to **LynC**, for publishing it much earlier than I was able to.) I hadn't set eyes on **Apollo Papps**, Lee's old friend from the Basin days, since the early seventies. We had just started talking when I was dragged away across the room. Apologies to Apollo and Richenda.

The speeches were excellent, except for mine. For the rest of the following week I kept thinking of stray memories of Lee I should have talked about. **Julia Hilton** provided an unexpected perspective on Lee's Perth experiences. Both daughters, **Belinda and Maddy**, told us that Lee could be 'difficult', hardly a surprise to any of us. But his last year posed a difficult situation for everybody. Because of constant falls, Lee could no longer live alone in his Moonee Ponds flat. He moved to Perth, then wanted to come 'home' again. He did phone **Dick Jenssen** a few times from Perth, welcome conversations because Dick has lost many good friends in recent years.

The photos here were provided by **Belinda Gordon**. Thanks again for all your help.



**Craig and Julia Hilton, with Madeleine Harding.**





**Top:**  
*l. to r.:* Lucy Sussex, Natalie MacLachlan, Robin Johnson, Bruce Barnes, Murray MacLachlan.

**Middle:**  
*l. to r.:* Maddie Harding and her partner, Iola Mathews, Bruce Gillespie, Jack Dann, Rob Gerrand, Natalie MacLachlan.

**Below:**  
 Belinda Gordon, Rob Gerrand, Maddie Harding.



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## The Celebration of the Life of Jennifer Bryce, 9 July 2023

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At first I thought I could not provide photos or a written account of the **Celebration for Jenny Bryce**. Nobody seemed to be taking photos, although somebody was monitoring the sound system. Each contributor to the speeches had written her or his own notes, but they did not send copies to **Tony Thomas**. Most of the contributors I had not heard of, or cannot remember in connection with what group. Fortunately, Tony kept a copy of his own speech (see next page).

I can report that about 100 people turned up at the **Linden Gallery**, an old mansion in Acland Street, St Kilda, that was converted into a writers' and artists' meeting place about 30 years ago. The Celebration of the Life of John Foyster was also held there, almost exactly 20 years before. I'm glad that Elaine and I had snaffled seats, because my leg was still not fully healed. Most people there were unfamiliar to us — but there suddenly in front of us was **Vida Weiss**, Yvonne Rousseau's daughter. We'd talked over the phone, but hadn't seen her since before Covid.

I wish I had a complete list of all the activities in which Jenny was involved. In his speech Tony gives a good account of the many aspects of her life.

Elaine and I had met **Laurance Splitter** at Jenny and Tony's place for Bagels for Breakfast during pre-Covid days, but I had no idea of his connection to them. I knew him only as a Professor of Philosophy who about thirty years ago had written a well-publicised course on Philosophy for Children. He now seems to be retired as an academic. It turns out that he met Jenny when they were both working at ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research), but I can't even guess which year that must have been. In his talk, Laurance said that during a period of personal crisis, Jenny had recruited him into the ACER Choir, which she had organised. I had never heard of the ACER Choir! Laurance discovered his own singing voice, and he has been singing in choirs ever since. When later he talked to the other members of the choir, he found that every one of them had had a similar experience of being

recruited for the choir at a time when they needed a change of focus in their lives.

Almost everybody who spoke had similar tales of Jenny's ability to help people when they most needed help, intervening only in a cheerful way, firmly but without any officiousness.

What else was Jenny involved in? She was an oboist, as part of **Trio Con Brio**, which kept performing, off and on, for many years.

She formed and hosted at her flat the **Every Second Tuesday** writers' group, pushing herself and the other members to develop their writing skills to the greatest extent possible. Jenny produced two novels, one of which, **Lily Campbell's Secret**, has been published, and several published short stories. The group produced its own anthology, which I enjoyed reading very much.

With Tony, Jenny was a member of the **Melbourne Shakespeare Society**. In 2019 Tony and Jenny persuaded me to join, but I must admit I don't know much Shakespeare, so have not yet attended a meeting. The Society's newsletter, edited by Barbara Sharpe, makes fine reading.

Jenny hosted the **Nova Mob**, with John Foyster, in the early 1980s, but that was not mentioned at the gathering. In the last eight years she and Tony have again been attending meetings of the Nova Mob.

I should have written down the name of all the contributors, but thought that proceedings might have been recorded. I would like to thank Heather Leviston, who ended proceedings by reading selections from Jenny's novel *Lily Campbell's Secret*. The connections between the lives of the characters and those of Jenny were obvious, but it was the subtlety and beauty of Jenny's writing that took me by surprise. Had I read the novel carefully enough in the first place? Of course not.

If only Jenny had been able to retire earlier. If only she had been given a life as long as her mother's (she lived to 97). Think how many more fine pieces of fiction she might have written.



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# Tony Thomas

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## Celebrating Jenny's life

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**[Speech delivered at the Linden Gallery, Acland Street, St Kilda, 9 July 2023, to introduce the speakers and performers at the celebration of Jenny Bryce's life.]**

Hello everybody.

I'd like to start by welcoming all of you to a time when we can remember Jenny, and celebrate a life very well lived. I know that almost nobody will know everybody here, because Jenny in her generous way spread herself far and wide, making good friends in many different areas.

So, welcome to all the Bryce and Watts families, including a very new addition, my grand-niece Violet Eloise, whom I've just met, partly named in tribute to Jennifer Louise.

And to my family, my brother, daughter, son, and other relations.

And welcome to all those school and uni friends through Fintona and University and Janet Clarke Hall.

And to all those music friends, dating from uni, from Trio Con Brio, and from Jenny's learning and teaching the oboe, and playing in orchestras, and from concert going, and from 3MBS.

And to all those friends from her two working stints at Australian Council for Educational Research.

And friends from her teaching years, and from music education, from the Victorian Music Teachers Association and the Australian Society of Music Education. And from academia, to which Dr Jennifer Bryce gave some of her time.

And to neighbours near our Dickens Street apartment, and from the St Kilda Historical Society.

And to friends from the Melbourne Shakespeare Society.

And to friends from the science fiction world, to which Jenny was introduced to in the 1970s, including our very good friend Bruce Gillespie, who published many of Jenny's travel writings and essays in his long-running magazine *SF Commem-*

*tary*. And to David Grigg, the publisher of her novel and stories.

And friends from writing, including all of the current members of Elwood Writers, which Jenny co-founded a couple of decades ago.

Welcome all, including any I haven't been able to mention.

And thanks very much for helping to arrange this celebration: Jamie Bryce, Laurance Splitter, Caroline and Rob Clemente, my daughter Lyndal and son Nick, Johnny Watts, Angela Munro, and Emilie, and the Staff of Linden.

I first knew Jenny as a sister-in-law for some 30 odd years and then as a much loved partner for the last seven years, and I miss her more than I can say. She took me travelling with her (something I'd hardly done before) and we went to many concerts together, played together, walked together, wrote together, ate out together, read some of the same books, and were rarely apart for long for the whole time we were together. Jenny had the remarkable trait, which came naturally to her, of always putting others first, thinking of ways she could help, whether it was family, close friends, or even more distant friends. And despite the many adversities which she had faced in her life, she always maintained a cheerful and happy disposition. She made me very happy in our years together, but I didn't realise how happy she was in this time until her friends started telling me so in recent weeks.

One of Jenny's great friends was Anne Hignett, who has lived in England and France now for many years. We stayed with Anne in London in 2017 and she recently stayed with us in Elwood. She can't be here today but has sent this tribute.

Anne says: 'I wish I could be with you all as you celebrate our beloved friend, Jenny. I know that she will be celebrated with grief but also recognising the joy and richness her life brought to us all. I first met Jenny when we were both in Janet Clarke Hall in 1963. Our lasting friendship was cemented when we both took Indian Studies, a very new department at the time. Full of

fascination for all things Indian, we shared a passion for India’s culture, music, history, and religions and became deeply involved in establishing the Indian Studies Society. Jenny named her first car (a Morris Minor) after the Vedic seer, Udalaka, and, amazingly, chauffeured the renowned Professor Basham to and from the airport in this already ancient car when he was visiting Melbourne. Something that would never be allowed to happen now! Neither of us spent as much time in India as we had assumed at the time, but did travel there together in 2013 — a journey full of interest and utterly enjoyable.

‘Because I have lived in the UK since 1971, I mostly spent time with Jenny when either of us visited our respective countries, though we did also travel to Egypt — another rich and exciting trip. Living at such a distance from her, it has always been a deep sadness and regret that I couldn’t be with her during times of the utter tragedies of her life, particularly the death of her beloved son, James. An unimaginable loss. One of Jenny’s most extraordinary qualities was the way in which she lived with these terrible events and losses. She didn’t deny her grief but seemed to allow it to deepen her compassion and positive resolve. We will all have our own memories of her

selfless generosity, warm support, and humour. Jenny had an inner steel, evident in all sorts of ways including her courage and her incisive wit — ironic but never unkind.

‘I know that Tony has been central to Jenny’s life and happiness in recent years. The first I knew about their relationship was when she wrote to me saying, I think to their mutual surprise, that they had fallen “ardently in love”. Such a wonderful expression. And what a joy it brought them.

‘Finally, I want to mention a friendship that Jenny and I shared with Angela Munro — a trio that became particularly important to each of us and has certainly enriched my life. Over the past twenty years or so, Jenny, Angela and I have holidayed together in Australia, the UK, and France whenever we could. We celebrated Jenny’s 70th birthday in Edinburgh during the Festival in 2014. Becoming a duo, with Jenny’s death, will be yet one more example of our grievous loss. Jenny will never be forgotten.’

These words from Anne Hignett.

Thank you.

**Tony.**

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## Appendix: Speakers, 9 July 2023

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- 1 **Tony Thomas:** welcome; **Ann Hignett** tribute read.
- 2 **Jamie Bryce:** Jenny’s younger brother. His wife is Janelle, and son Toby. Their younger sister is Barbara, was married to Mike (deceased); children Johnny and Lucy.
- 3 **Laurance Splitter:** see Bruce’s piece about the Celebration.
- 4 **Val Gerrand:** school friend. Married to Peter Gerrand, the brother of Rob Gerrand.
- 5 **Sue Tweg:** from the Shakespeare Society, read a poem. Married to Malcolm Holmes.
- 6 **Caroline Clemente:** lifelong friend, from high school and Janet Clarke Hall at Melbourne University. With her husband Rob Clemente she was responsible for food and drink for this event.
- 7 **Lyndal Thomas:** daughter of Myfanwy and Tony. Jenny was her aunt from the 1970s, as Jenny married to John, then Graeme. Read tribute from Carol Whiteside.
- 8 (Rev.) **Jim Minchin:** friend from

university; pianist and composer involved in Trinity Choir. Jenny played oboe with him in many performances. Recordings of some of Jim’s hymns/songs played behind the photo display at the Celebration; Jenny playing oboe.

- 9 **Helen McDonald:** fellow writer. Member of Elwood Writers for some 20 years. Published stories and poems in their joint anthology, *Every Second Tuesday*.
- 10 **Heather Leviston:** read from Jenny’s novel *Lily Campbell’s Secret*. Friend from Shakespeare Society during the last decade.

### **Musicians:**

**Ensemble Françaix**, named for composer Jean Françaix, who composed for this unusual combination. They are: **Emmanuel (Manny) Cassimatis** (oboe); **Matthew Kneale** (bassoon); **Nicholas Young** (piano).

— **Tony Thomas**, July 2023



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# Helena Binns 1941–2023

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## Bruce Gillespie's memories of Helena

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**Helena Binns, at Continuum 14. (Photo: Cat Sparks.)**

**HELENA BINNS** (formerly **MARGARET DUCE** and **HELENA ROBERTS**) left us on 18 September this year. 2023 has been a year of farewell to people important in my life and the lives of many others. As far as I can tell, none of her friends other than her two nieces and their families saw her after she stopped living in her rented house in South Oakleigh in early 2022 and moved to permanent care in Wantirna Views, Wantirna. I know a few people, such as David Russell, tried to make contact with

her at Wantirna Views, without success. Her nieces have been charged by Helena with the vast task of clearing the house while they could still afford to pay the rent.

None of Helena's wide circle of friends would have found out about her last two years or her death if it had not been for Geoff Allshorn. His friendship with Helena goes back to the early days of Austrek, Australia's Star Trek fan organisation. He discovered phone contact numbers with Helena's two nieces Ana and Stephanie. They invited Geoff and me to visit the South Oakleigh house in 2022. Much had been cleared, so it was hard to tell what had happened to Merv and Helena's vast collections. When a group of us, including Geoff and me, visited on 16 September, we were invited by Ana to fill as many boxes as possible with what was left. Thanks to

Perry Middlemiss, Carey Handfield, and Elaine Cochrane for providing transport and box-filling support. Also thanks to Perry for buying a lot of storage boxes for us. Ana told us that the rest of the collection is 'in storage'. Fifteen boxes have been dumped at our place. I can offer more information when we've been through them. Two days after our visit we received the news from the nieces via Geoff that Helena had left us. There has been no death notice in the newspapers, and no funeral.

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I'm not sure when I first became aware of Helena as a part of Melbourne fandom. As she tells us below, she joined the Melbourne Science Fiction Club in 1958, but then married Kelvin Roberts and changed her name from Margaret to Helena. I became involved with the Club in 1968, but can't recall her being part of Melbourne fandom at that time. Both Helena and Kelvin became very visible at the first Aussiecon in Melbourne in 1975, because they were appointed as official photographers. I bought copies of a few of their photos,

but should have bought more.

After Elaine and I got together in 1978, we saw little of Helena except as a member of the audience at a lecture series given by the Space Association of Australia in Melbourne. Helena did not recognise us.

I cannot remember when I heard of the death of Kelvin Roberts, and I cannot give a date for when Helena began attending conventions again. Meanwhile Merv Binns had had to close Space Age Books in 1985, with the further blow that his



**Melbourne Science Fiction Club 50th Anniversary 2002 cake cutting:  
(l. to r.) Dick Jenssen, Paul Ewins, Helena Binns, Merv Binns.**

father Ernie died, and he had to move house.

Somewhere in the early nineties Merv and Helena were observed to have 'grown closer', and gradually we became aware that they had moved in together. Meanwhile, Race Mathews had reached out to many of his old friends from the Melbourne SF Club of the 1950s, including some youngsters such as Elaine and me, and had begun to show films at his and Iola's home in South Yarra. Merv had very strong opinions about movies, often the opposite of those held by the rest of the group — but he and Helena kept attending the film nights. At the same time, Dick Jenssen rejoined fandom through the same group. We began to have dinners together, not only with Dick but also larger dinners (usually for Helena's birthday in December or Merv's and Dick's in July) that included Merv and Helena, Race and Iola, Peter and Tanya Kemp, Bill Wright, John and Truda Straede, Bruno and Keren Kautzner, Robin Johnson, David Russell, and Stephen Campbell.

As Helena recounts, she was finally able to buy a camera in the early 1990s. With Dick's help when buying a computer and learning how to store digital photos, she began to photograph every participant and every program item of every convention she attended. This drove Elaine crackers. She does not like to have her photo taken, but Helena had to be persuaded to point the camera the other way. Helena began to store her photos on CD-ROMs, one for each convention

or social event she attended. I've kept every disc she gave me. One of my many future tasks is to transfer all the photos on her discs to USB sticks, so that they become available for all future fan historians.

At the beginning of 2020, just after the onset of the Covid pandemic, Merv died in hospital from heart failure. He had suffered his first heart attack twenty years ago, and had recovered only slowly. He was awarded both the Big Heart Award from world fandom and the Eternity Award from Melbourne's annual Continuum convention. He seemed much happier in his last years than he had been for some time.

We had no idea how Helena was coping with this huge blow, because she became unable to use her computer to send emails or even use her phone. The only way she was communicating very occasionally was via her next-door neighbour. When her neighbour left her own home for interstate, we heard nothing from Helena. David Russell sent her an actual letter in January 2021. He invited her to a small gathering for my birthday (17 February). Much to our surprise, Helena turned up. She was as chirpy as ever. At that stage she was confident of being able to stay in the house in South Oakleigh. And that was the last time any of us saw her.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, September 2023



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## Helena on the fringe of fandom: Her authentic story

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**Among Helena's many achievements was her Life Membership of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. This is the autobiography she wrote when she was presented with this honour in 2009.**

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I was born Margaret Phyllis Duce, at Lilydale Hospital, two weeks after Pearl Harbor. My early years were spent with my family at my grandfather's house on the outskirts of Healesville. When I was eight, we moved to East Warburton, where my father, with a gang of immigrant workmen, was building a bridge for the Country Roads Board. Later, when I started High School, we lived near and then in Alexandra.

My introduction to science fiction came when I was very young, perhaps five or six, when my uncle Dave (my dad's brother) showed me an illustrated book of *Buck Rogers* stories. I was just at that age where the distinction between reality and fiction was still a little blurred. I knew that talking animals weren't possible, at least in this world. I wasn't sure about rocket ships and worlds other than our own, but it all looked so fascinating that I didn't care whether it was real or not, I just wanted more of it.

I read my first actual science fiction story when I was seven, in 1949. It was 'Mewhu's Jet' by Theodore Sturgeon, published in a British SF magazine that Dave had left lying about. It was about a little alien boy who gets stranded on Earth. (Does that plot sound familiar? I wonder if Spielberg read the same story.) The little ET gets about with a jet-propelled backpack, hence the title. I was very taken with that story, and have remembered it ever since. (Even though I suspected that you couldn't carry enough fuel in a little backpack to get very far.)

Of the actual SF magazines my uncle had, some were British editions of American originals like *Astounding* (the precursor of *Analog*) and some were original British publications such as *If*, *New Worlds* and *Authentic*. Throughout my childhood, Uncle Dave was my only source of SF. Needless to say, I still hadn't encountered any other person who shared my enthusiasm for science fiction. Then when I was 13 going on 14, I found in the readers' letters column of one of my uncle's maga-

zines a missive from a young man named Richard Paris, from Wellington. (The magazine was *Authentic Science Fiction Monthly* No. 57, dated 15 May 1955.) Richard declared, 'I am a young New Zealander who likes good science fiction. I like *Authentic*. I do not like American SF ... Every month the number of SF mags in the shops is tremendous ... But — as far as I know — there are no clubs, organisations, or gatherings of any sort. Is NZ dead, or just hollow? I am only fourteen, but if no one is willing to start one, then I will. I want a penfriend (or a dozen) about my age preferably, interested in SF, Astronomy and Space Travel.' I was, of course, inspired to reply to his plea for penfriends, and was accepted as one of the 'dozen or so'. I had never had a penfriend before, let alone one interested in science fiction.

A few months after we started communicating, Richard wrote to say that he had dropped all of his SF penfriends except me. He had decided that it was time to put away childish things and devote all of his time and attention to the quest for enlightenment. (We had found that we had each independently stumbled upon the ideas of the maverick Georgian guru Gurdjieff, who believed in unifying the core elements of all spiritual beliefs, and linking them to the search for knowledge of the physical universe.) We continued to exchange letters, mostly about spiritual matters, for the next year or so. Then unexpectedly I received a letter from someone else in Wellington — an adult named Mervyn Barrett, who introduced himself as a friend of Richard. At first I was put off by this. Who was this interloper? I was a bit miffed that he should take it upon himself to butt into my correspondence with Richard and write to me without being asked. I wondered briefly if he was a child molester, and decided probably not, since he declared himself to be a science fiction fan and the two compulsions somehow didn't seem to go together. He explained that he was one of a number of science fiction enthusiasts in Wellington. Richard and two other youngsters, Bruce



**Margaret Duce (as she was then) at her twenty-first birthday party, 1962. Standing: Merv Barrett, John Foyster, and Chris Bennie. Seated: Bob Smith, Margaret Duce (Helena Binns).**

Burn and John Morgan, who were at Wellington Tech with Richard, had got their photo in the paper along with the news that they were forming an SF club. It met as 'The Wellington Science Fiction Circle' in the basement of Richard's house. (Later when Richard gafiated, his father arranged for the meetings to continue.) Mervyn said that he knew of a similar group of fans in Melbourne that I might like to contact. They called themselves the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. He gave me the address.

I certainly would like to, and did contact them by mail. Since I was only 15 and still living in Alexandra (about 140 km from Melbourne), there was little hope of my paying a visit to the Club. But then it turned out that the Club came to me, in the form of Ian Crozier, editor of the Club's fanzine *Etherline*, who I think had relatives or friends in or near Alexandra, and took time out from visiting them to drop in and welcome me to the Melbourne Science Fiction Club.

In the course of our conversation he discovered that I was a budding artist, and asked if I would like to do some drawings for *Etherline*. My first was published on the cover of *Etherline* No. 85, sometime in 1957. (Many issues of *Etherline* were undated, which creates no end of fun for the would-be archivist who has to trawl through the contents in search of hints as to the nearest likely publication date.)

The next was in No. 87, which actually did have a date on the cover, 8 August 1957. That was my drawing of Einstein against an astronomical background, dubbed 'The Visionary', presumably by the Editor. I told Ian that I liked science fiction but not fantasy — a preference that still holds, with one notable exception. Ian then proceeded to tell me about that exception. He had read the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* and said that it was about a war between good and evil. I said that I didn't really like war stories (though I did understand the concept of the struggle between good



and evil, as taught in all major religions, and personified by Gurdjieff as ‘the struggle of the magicians’, by which he meant wizards, and there certainly were titanic battles of wizards good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings*.) When I later read (at the still impressionable age of 17) *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, I had that feeling I’d had when I first laid eyes on that old comic strip *Buck Rogers* book. ‘This is probably not real, but it should be.’

I had known since I was very young that that I would be useless in the material world and that the only thing I was fit for was to be an academic. I was intensely motivated to learn and teach, and besides I needed the security of a government job. I topped my class in every grade in primary and high school and had an obsession with maths and science, especially Astronomy. I had a small talent for art as well, and wanted to study that too, but I looked forward to it more as a hobby or diversion, certainly not a practical way to earn a living. At the end of Third Form (Year 9), before my 14th birthday, my scientific education came to a grinding halt. My country High School did not have a Science course in Fourth Form, only Agricultural Science. I begged to be allowed to study science by correspondence, but was refused. I was offered a teaching scholarship but my parents wouldn’t give permission for me to take it. (If I failed, they might have to pay back the money.)

I turned 16 at the end of Fifth Form in 1957 (my birthday is on the Summer Solstice, just before Christmas) and was sent to Melbourne to study Art at Melbourne Tech (a seedy old institute even in those days, it now goes under the grandiose title of The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology). I was sent to live with my aunt (my father’s sister) and her family at Oak Park (where I never spotted a single oak). On the plateau opposite was the end of one of Essendon Airport’s runways. That might have been a problem for some. But I was pleased to be within the sight and sound of aircraft. I had dreamed about them since I was a child addicted to ‘Biggles’ books, but had rarely seen or heard them in the countryside (except for crop-dusters, of course).

I couldn’t wait for my first opportunity to visit the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. According to *Etherline* No. 94, (dated 23 January 1958): ‘On January 14th, Margaret Duce of Alexandra visited the Club with a Friend.’ I think the friend was probably my aunt or my cousin (a girl a little older than me), as I would not have been allowed to go by myself on my first visit without having someone along to check out the Club to see if it was okay. I believe I went by myself on subsequent visits.

The Club members were all male, all older than I was, and some considerably older. They greeted us kindly, and made me feel welcome. Those that I remember from my early visits were Bob McCubbin, Tony Santos, Don Latimer, Keith McLelland, Dick Jenssen, and of course Merv Binns — although they could not have all been present that first evening, since the chronicler was disappointed with the sparse attendance on the night. The venue was an upstairs room, I think in the Saint James Building in Little Collins Street, Melbourne.

Following closely after my first visit to the Club was my first science fiction convention — Melcon, at the Richmond Town Hall, 5 April 1958 (probably the Easter weekend). The Con Report refers to it as ‘The Sixth Convention’ by which they must have meant the 6th Australian Natcon, since the first four were held in Sydney and the fifth was Melbourne’s first — Olympicon, in December 1956, the year of the Melbourne Olympic Games. I was very impressed, especially with the talk by Barry Clarke of the Astronomical Society of Victoria, on the canals of Mars. Since Astronomy was my major scientific interest, when I was 14 I had joined the Astronomical Society as a junior member (non-attending, of course, until I came to live in Melbourne). On the second day there was a barbecue organised by Jack Bristowe, then chairman of the Mountain Science Fiction Group, near the home of Les Ward at Upwey, but I wasn’t able to go. Melcon was also the first convention for John Foyster, who was only a few months older than I. Later John and his friend Chris Bennie befriended me (I suppose we were a sort of junior fans’ subgroup) and in subsequent years I was invited to small fannish gatherings at Chris Bennie’s home, not far from where I then lived in Ivanhoe with my mother and stepfather. John and Chris were guests at my 21st birthday party in 1962. As everyone knows, John was a prolific publisher of fanzines from a very early age. He used to send them to me and I learned a lot about the esoteric mysteries of fandom, including its jargon, from them. I was intrigued by the lively (and occasionally vitriolic) exchanges that could take place between the highly opinionated publishers of some of these journals. Sadly the Club zine *Etherline* ceased publication not long after its 100th issue. I felt privileged to have had my drawings on a few of its covers.

At the first Club meeting rooms I had visited, people sat at small tables, playing chess, which I thought was wonderful, as I had taught myself chess from a book but had never had the opportunity to play. They let me play, and it was a really great experience for me. After St James the MSFC

shifted venues, and for a while there was no regular meeting place. Then Merv obtained from his employers McGills Newsagency at a very reasonable rate, the use of a large upstairs area warehouse, located behind the shop in Somerset Place — a grandiose name for a back alley. It was a name that was to become familiar to fans for years to come. It was not a venue for the faint-hearted. Access was through a narrow doorway, up a steep narrow flight of disintegrating wooden steps, or by a creaking, halting ascent in Melbourne's oldest elevator — the notorious hydraulic lift, the last remnant of a system that had once served the entire city's freight elevators. It was an open-framed wooden structure that offered no reassurance whatsoever to the intimidated passenger. Having survived the lift or the stairs, and occasionally the apparition of a demented early arrival dropping from the ceiling of the lift to scare the wits out of the next passenger, the fan emerged into the clubrooms — more spacious than previous venues, with room for an actual library, and secure tenancy — for about a decade, as it turned out. A real estate agent would have called it a 'renovator's delight', and although there was not a lot of actual renovating done, Merv and a few others set about making it more habitable. Tony Santos donated some furniture, including a large dining-room table, which was promptly appropriated for table tennis. No more chess! I was really disappointed, though I suppose it was not altogether a bad thing that a bunch of geeks were getting some exercise.

I braved the perils of the lift (there was a sort of nostalgia at riding in a genuine antique) and enjoyed attending the meetings whenever I could (despite the table tennis). The library was my only source of SF reading material until Keith McLelland started lending me books and magazines from his extensive collection. It was my first acquaintance with the American SF and fantasy magazines. I was particularly fond of *Astounding* and its successor *Analog*, as I had a preference for science fiction that was (at least in part) actually science based. Keith earned his living as a technical artist for the Government Aircraft Factory, and in his spare time had produced highly detailed and decorative drawings for the Club's zine *Etherline* and for Race Mathews' *Bacchanalia* and others. He also painted, mostly watercolours, often of castles or other exotic locations, and created small sculptures. Our friendship ultimately almost led to marriage (even though he was an 'older man'; I must have been in search of a 'father figure') but it didn't work out. We remained friends, though, until he died in 1990. Keith was a conscientious chronicler of Club events and outings, and took

numerous photographs, mostly before my time. They were all dissipated when he died with no close relatives to care.

In 1960 when I was 18, I finally met my Kiwi penfriend Mervyn Barrett (sadly never did meet his young friend Richard Paris, my first NZ penfriend). He was in Melbourne for a few days en route to somewhere else. Later he came back to Melbourne and lived here for a number of years. He became very much a part of the local science fiction scene. His friend from New Zealand Bruce Burn produced a fanzine, for which I did a couple of cover illustrations, drawn straight onto stencil. That was a whole new challenge for me, and one I hadn't learned at art school, though at art school I did learn how to do linocuts and print from them. I took the opportunity to do my first Tolkien-inspired works, and made a linocut of Bilbo Baggins in Mirkwood surrounded by spiders, and one of the dragon Smaug on his mountain-top.

After Melcon in 1958, there wasn't another convention in Melbourne until 1966, and Club membership dropped off, but a lot of interest in fandom was kept alive by the fanzine publishers. The 'Three Johns' (John Foyster, John Bangsund and John Baxter) and Leigh Edmonds were the best known but there were others. Meanwhile the Club was kept going (at times almost single-handedly) by Merv Binns. Along with Mervyn Barrett and Cedric Rowley, Merv started showing movies at the McGills warehouse clubroom, which lured a number of people back to the Club and attracted a whole bunch of new ones.

I spent my years at Melbourne Tech pinning for Melbourne University, which was just up the road. I craved knowledge and intellectual challenge, and art school was not the place for either. Although I liked doing artwork, and would have appreciated some instruction in the technicalities of it, there was very little of that — no lessons on Anatomy or Perspective, just criticism of our stumbling attempts. I specialised in Illustration, hoping to be able to illustrate science fiction or fantasy books. My teacher was Harold Freedman, later appointed Victoria's State Artist. He designed the grand murals at Spencer Street Station (now sadly gone), Eastern Hill Fire Station and Flemington Race Course. (If you're going to have a mentor, it might as well be the best.)

From the moment I knew that I was going to have to study art instead of science, I dreaded the prospect of having to try to make a living from it. I was just not quite adept enough at it. I finished my Art diploma course at Melbourne Tech in 1961, and my worst fears were realised. I found it very difficult to get work. Although I got a few small



assignments from publishers, the only job I could get was as a designer for a plastic sign factory (typography turned out to be my best subject at art school, though also the most boring one.) I was never paid more than minimum wage. I had only two other jobs, and lost them both through ill health. When I looked for freelance work, the local publishers told me that all of their illustration work was done interstate. The only assignments I could get were doing finished diagrams (based on authors' scribbles) for maths books. The subject matter suited me, but it was a constant reminder that I had not been given the opportunity at school to continue my formal studies in maths and science. (And creating meticulous black on white diagrams for hours at a time exacerbated my migraines.)

In 1965 I married Kelvin Roberts (an even older man than Keith, and even more of a father figure), a commercial artist who specialised in photographic retouching. I did not go back to the Club for a while, then Kelvin accompanied me there when I told him they were showing movies. (Kelvin loved the movies almost as much as Merv does.) Some that we saw were quite memorable. For example, I had never seen *The 5000 Fingers of Dr T* before, though Dick Jenssen, Lee Harding and Mervyn Barrett were really besotted with it, so I finally saw what all the fuss was about. And we both loved *Forbidden Planet*. Kelvin had always been a big fan of adventure stories such as those of Hammond Innes and Alastair MacLean. He hadn't read a lot of science fiction, but he appreciated its imaginative and innovative qualities, especially in movie form, and read a lot of the books I had.

In 1966 there was a convention at the clubrooms, the first since 1958. I wished that I had a camera to record it, but sadly did not have one then or for many years after that. (Most of what was said about impoverished artists was true, especially in those days.) I had always wanted a camera, both as an artistic tool and as a documentary one. I bought one for Kelvin, but it was just a simple one and most of the time we couldn't afford film or processing anyhow. A couple of my paintings (one inspired by Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and a fantasy one with a medieval look about it) were sold at that convention and I have no pictures of those either. I wouldn't even have any photos of my 21st birthday party if Mervyn Barrett hadn't brought his camera. He has shared copies of those with me, along with his photos of my wedding to Kelvin, and numerous Melbourne MSFC and other fannish gatherings. Michael O'Brien from Tasmania also took photos of a number of Melbourne events, including the 1968

convention held at the MSFC and the 1970 one at the Capri Theatre in Murrumbidgee.

I continued to attend every Melbourne convention I could, and in 1973 at the age of 31 I got my first camera (with money earned for my cartoon-style illustrations for a book by Ian Sykes, an independent petroleum peddler, satirising the scheming of the multinational moguls). I had wanted a camera all my life, and knew exactly what I wanted — a single-lens reflex that was not too heavy for me to hold. I compared the specifications of each brand before buying one, and settled on the Olympus OM-1, which served me well for the next 30 years. At about the same time I bought mine, Kelvin got a very good secondhand single lens reflex camera with automatic exposure and that suited him fine. It turned out that he enjoyed taking photos as much as I did, and was very good at it. He converted one room of our rented house in Albert Park into a darkroom (fortuitously it had an exhaust fan), then decided that he didn't like developing and printing black and white photos all that much, though he liked seeing the results, so I finished up doing all of the developing and printing. Later I did colour as well, but we could never afford a machine to process the negatives or the prints, and doing it by hand is a very laborious process. (Each print has to be processed individually.) Breathing in the chemicals isn't all that good for you either, even with an exhaust fan. Thus equipped, along with Kelvin I became a visual chronicler of conventions, attending all the Melbourne ones we could afford. Kelvin enjoyed the conventions as well, and took quite a few photos. 1973 was also the year I changed my name, from Margaret to Helena. (It seemed like a good idea at the time.) Merv has since pointed out that if I hadn't, we would now both have the same initials. (I'm not sure if that would have been an advantage or not.)

The most interesting and exciting convention by far, of course, was Aussiecon 1975 — Melbourne's and Australia's first Worldcon. It opened with a dramatic audio-visual display — a photo montage with music, the kind of thing that present-day conventioners probably take for granted, but it was very innovative way back then. I was surprised and pleased to see some of my Tolkien paintings featured amongst the avalanche of images on screen. Because my habit of photographing everything that moved (or didn't) at conventions had been noticed, the Aussiecon Committee also asked me to be their official photographer. They even gave me a dozen or so rolls of film to do it with. Unfortunately they didn't also provide me with a front-row seat to do it from.

I was told to stand up at the back with the other photographers (of which there were quite a few, amateur and professional, most with longer lenses than mine). Consequently most of my Aussiecon One photos look as if they were taken through the wrong end of a telescope. These days I mostly manage to get in early and bag a front row seat, but back then I was not wise in the ways of the world and I (and my photos) suffered accordingly. Also the Aussiecon coffers didn't stretch to subsidising the cost of developing and printing the photos. I managed to develop the negatives myself, but was not able to do a lot of prints.

Aussiecon also brought the opportunity to meet people from overseas and make new friends — among them an American, Jan Howard Finder, an enthusiastic Aussieophile who introduced himself as 'The Wombat'. We also met Mr Sci-Fi himself, Forrest J. Ackerman, who liked my Tolkien paintings which were on display at the very comprehensive Art Show. He gave me a bat brooch from the Dracula Society. (Awesome.) The only three Science Fiction-inspired paintings that Kelvin ever did were on display also, and two of them won prizes. They were very professional, airbrushed and finely detailed. We asked Ben Bova if he would be interested in Kelvin's artwork, but he said that they only used artists not too far removed from *Analog's* headquarters in New York. Over the years since there have been more conventions, including two more Melbourne Worldcons and a memorable trip to my only overseas convention, the 1979 Worldcon in Brighton, England. That trip was thanks to Kelvin having one client who would telephone him at all hours of the day or night to produce artwork for catalogues. Kelvin finished up charging them double for the inconvenience, even though he did not mind the odd hours all that much. He worked on 'Ditmar time', his hours of sleeping and waking getting later and later as if he were born on Mars with a 25-hour day, and kept himself awake with coffee and cigarettes. He gave up smoking in 1981, but in 1988 it caught up with him anyhow. He died of cancer in 1991.

After Kelvin died, Merv started inviting me to attend conventions with him, which helped me to remain in touch with the science fiction community. We were not yet a couple, although we had been friends for over 40 years. Merv had invited Kelvin and me to his and his father Ern's birthday and New Year's Eve Parties over the years, so Kelvin was quite well acquainted with him. Kelvin was always very intuitive, and when he knew that he had only a little while to live, he was concerned

about me being left on my own and suggested that Merv might be a good companion for me. I said that was unlikely since we were just friends, but eventually his prediction came true. Merv and I married in 1998.

I have done my best to photograph every convention I've attended, but cost has always been a constraint — until the arrival of the digital age. It almost passed me by. I knew that a digital camera would solve the problem of having films developed and printed, but the initial cost was a major hurdle. Five years ago, Eric Lindsay gave us his old digital camera, and that opened up a whole new world of documentary excess. I could now take (almost) as many photos as I wanted, and proceeded to do so. For higher quality photos I continued to use my trusty old Olympus film camera, but couldn't always get them all developed and printed. Besides, after 30 years of use, the poor old camera was beginning to wear out. Then Dick Jenssen gave me his new digital camera (it's a long story) and bought an even newer one. Photographic nirvana had finally arrived. Thanks to Ditmar, I can now take quantities of photos of reasonable quality. Dick had also given us his old computer and monitor and taught me how to use the software to enhance and adapt photos. I can now edit photos and share them around without having to get them printed out first. This is really gratifying. I believe that if a convention is worth attending, it's worth photographing — and the same goes for any other special event. It's good to have something to remember it by, and it's even better to be able to share it with others.

Of course, the other advantage of having the computer and knowing (up to a certain point) how to use it, had been that for the past ten years or so, Merv and I have been able to produce personal fanzines or newsletters containing book and movie reviews and accounts of our own life's events in general, and Merv's memories of the early days in particular. That is still in progress, and of course photographs are a big part of it. There have been big gaps in the production of these publications over the past few years, due to technical as well as health and financial problems, but we are still doing our best to get it all done while we can.

I am 67 now. Merv is 75. And we consider it a blessing (and something of a minor miracle) that so many of our old friends are still around, and still in touch. And we are grateful for it.

— **Helena**, 2009



**RICH HORTON** is a software engineer in St Louis, Missouri, 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 has written nearly 200 articles for *Black Gate*.

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## Rich Horton

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### The timeless strangeness of Cordwainer Smith’s ‘Scanners Live in Vain’

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I recently had occasion to reread **Cordwainer Smith’s** *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* story ‘**Scanners Live in Vain**’. This was probably my

fifth rereading over the years (soon followed by a sixth!) — it’s a story I’ve always loved, but for some reason this time through it struck me even more strongly. It is a truly great SF story; and I want to take a close look at what makes it work.

In my articles I often discuss the background details of a story’s publication history, and of its author, first — and these are especially interesting in the case of this story; but I don’t want to bury the lede either. So I’ll discuss the story first, and then go over the history of its publication, and its author’s career. As ever in these essays, the discussion will be rife with spoilers.

‘Scanners Live in Vain’ opens with a famous pair of sentences:

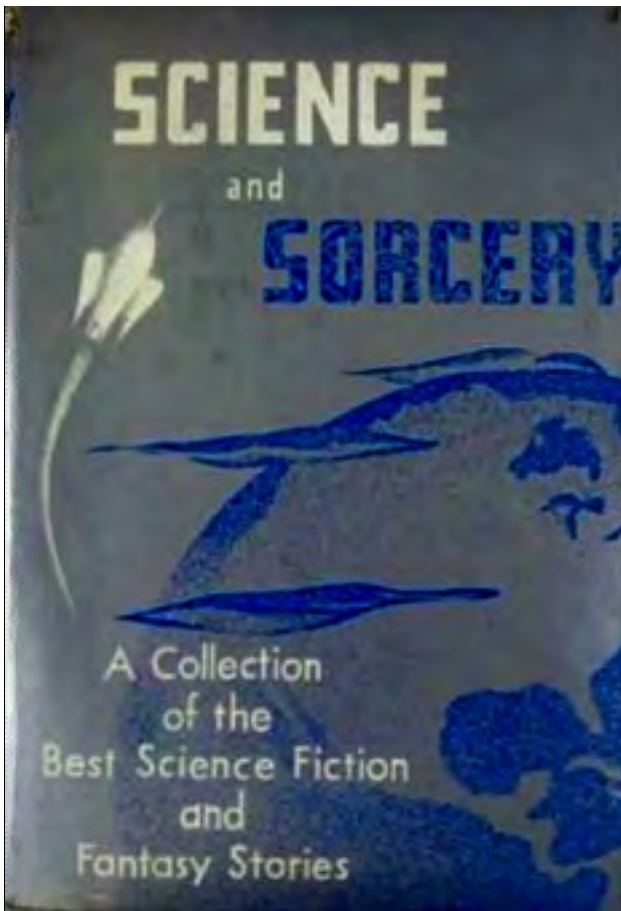
Martel was angry. He did not even adjust his blood away from anger.

That second sentence is beautiful SF ‘including’ (to use Jo Walton’s wonderful coinage): showing us within the text something strange about this future. The paragraph quickly makes it clear that Martel can see but not hear: ‘he could tell by the expression on Luci’s face that the table must have made a loud crash’ and that he cannot feel his own body, or feel pain: ‘he looked down to see if his leg was broken’. And we learn that Martel is a Scanner, and that a Scanner scans instruments in his ‘Chestbox’ to confirm his health. And that a Scanner can talk but can’t hear himself talk, and thus his voice is unpleasant to other people — in Martel’s case particularly his wife Luci.

The next line introduces the first actual new word: ‘I tell you, I must cranch.’ (The word has



**Fig. 1:** *Fantasy Book 6*, January 1950: first appearance of ‘Scanners Live in Vain’ by Cordwainer Smith. Cover by Jack Gaughan.



**Figs 2 and 3: *Science and Sorcery* (Fantasy Publishing, 1953), first reprint of ‘Scanners’. Cover art by Crozetti and Walter. However, its listing seems to be in the section torn from the top of the Contents.**

become a part of the vocabulary of some SF readers!) ‘Cranching’, we learn, is a process by which a Scanner temporarily regains access to his sensorium — as Martel puts it ‘to be a man again, hearing your voice, smelling smoke. To feel again’. Alas, it is dangerous to cranch too often, and Martel has recently crunched.

What follows is a sweet domestic scene, interlaid with more hints of future strangeness. Luci deploys the Cranching Wire after Martel asks her by writing with his ‘Talking Nail’. Now Martel can hear and feel and smell. Martel revels in his senses, especially smell (a Proustian touch?):

The crisp freshness of the germ-burner, the odor of the dinner they had just eaten, the smells of clothes, furniture, of people themselves.

(I loved the SFnal reference to a ‘germ-burner’.) He also loves the sounds — he sings a Scanner song, delights in the swishing of Luci’s dress. Soon Luci offers to play some new ‘smell recordings’, including one of a lamb chop, and asks Martel to identify it.

This is a delicious passage (pun intended) —

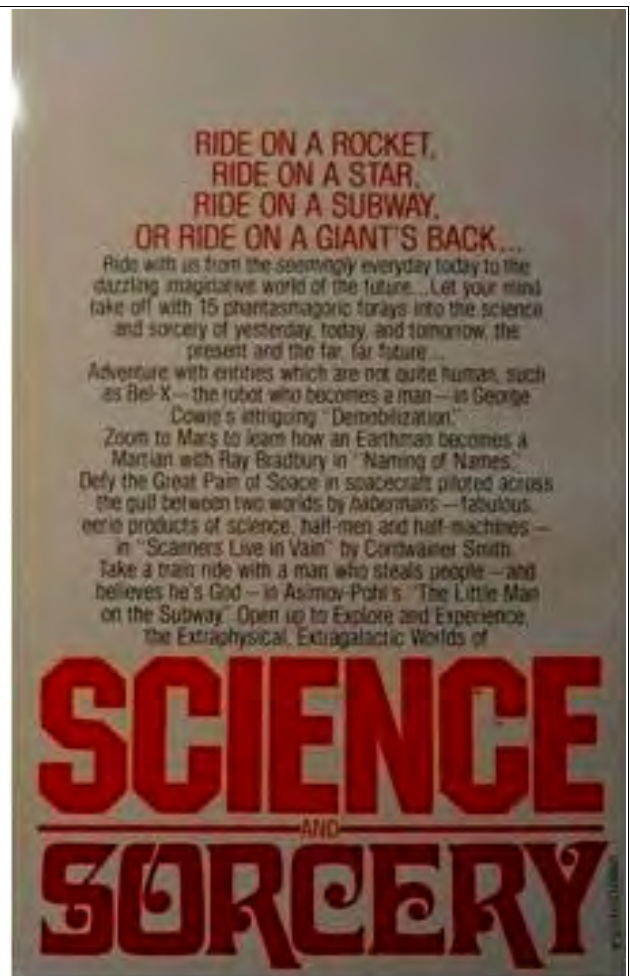
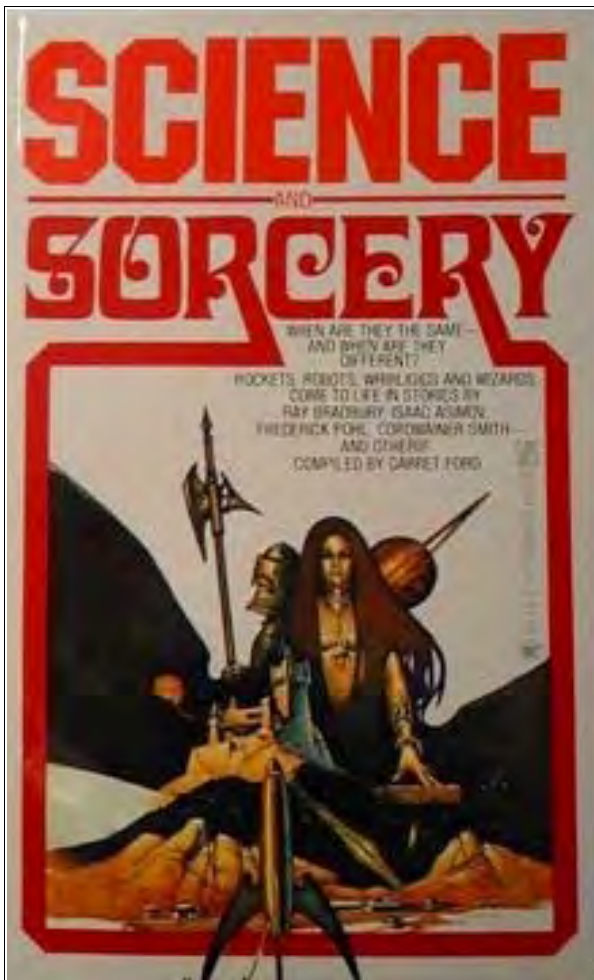
conveying at once Martel’s rare experience of smell, the apparent vegetarian diet of Earth at this time, the rarity of ‘Beasts’ on Earth, and, crucially, Martel’s association of the smell of burning meat with phantom recollections of injured men he had tended in the ‘Up-and-Out’ on a burning spaceship. And we learn more about the Scanners:

The bravest of the brave, the most skillful of the skilled protectors of the habermans. They make men live in the place where men desperately need to die.

We also learn of Martel’s agonised perception of his relationship with Luci — she, he feels, is chained to a man who is mostly not a man. ‘A man who has been killed and left alive for duty.’

This opening sequence, less than 20 per cent of the story, seemed to me on this reread incredibly dense, extremely powerful. We don’t know much of this until later (perhaps in some cases until we read later stories) but the information hidden here, about the nature of the Instrumentality, about the history of Earth from now until the Second Age of Space (that is, the time of the Scanners) is remarkable. And, again, the more we know about





**Figs 4 and 5: Science and Sorcery (Zebra Books paperback reprint, May 1978). Cover art by Tom Barber.**

habermans, about Scanners, about the 'Up-and-Out', about why Scanners live in vain, the more powerful this becomes.

And then comes the call that signals the change of everything for Scanners. An emergency call from the leader of the Scanners, Vomact. (A family that resonates throughout Smith's history of the Instrumentality.) A Scanner who has crunched is normally not allowed at a Scanner meeting, but this is an emergency. Everyone must come. So, still crunched, Martel comes to Central Tie-In for the meeting. We are introduced to two of his closer Scanner friends, Chang and Parizianski. This scene effectively portrays Scanners as a group, a Confraternity — the way they look and act, especially in contrast to Martel's crunched state, the way they communicate (lip reading and the Talking Wire), and their ritualistic reinforcement of their loyalty, their duty, and their separation from both the lowly habermans ('the scum of mankind ... the weak, the cruel, the credulous, and the unfit') and the 'normal' humans: the Others, in Scanner terminology.

To clarify a bit: Scanners are men who have volunteered to undergo the Haberman process —

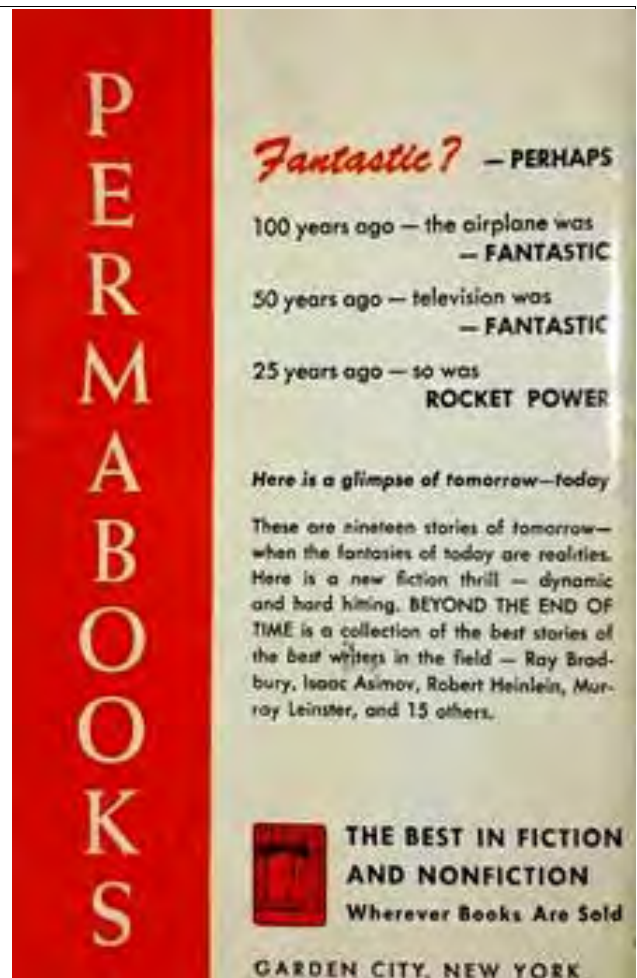
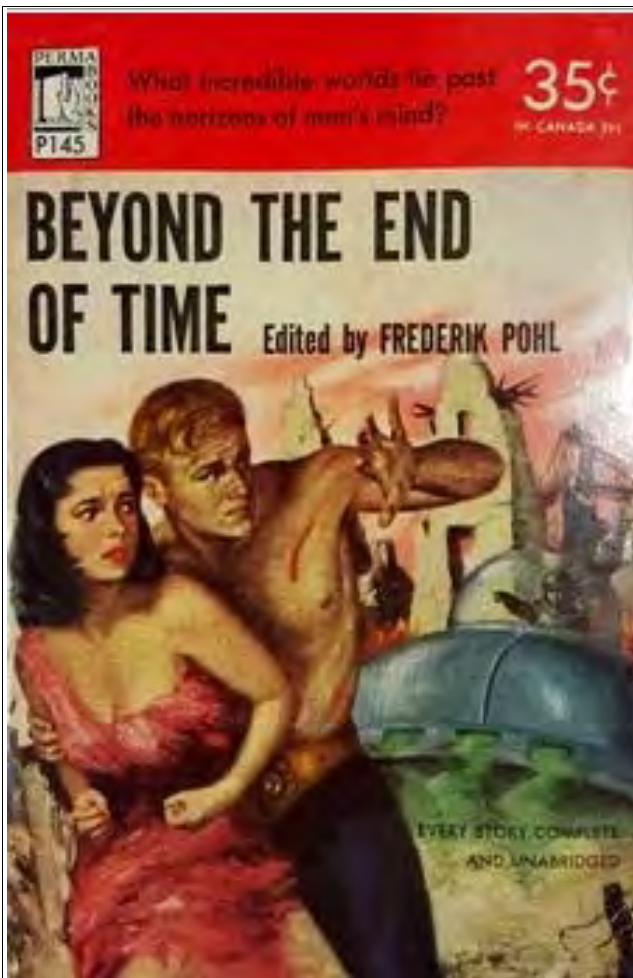
to have their sensorium (except for sight) detached from their consciousness. As such, they monitor the habermans — criminals who have been sentenced to the near death of the Haberman Process as an alternative to the death penalty. The Scanners scan the instruments of the habermans to make sure they are not overstressing their bodies — and they scan themselves too. Thus:

Habermans we are, and more, and more. We are the chosen who are habermans by our own free will ... All mankind owes most honor to the Scanner, who unites the Earths of mankind.

Why are habermans and Scanners needed? Because of the First Effect of Space travel: the Great Pain of Space. The only way to survive is to feel nothing. And so habermans are made to labour on spaceships while human passengers sleep through the journey. And since without feeling habermans would hurt themselves, and without supervision they would not work, Scanners must keep an eye on their instruments for bodily damage.

But now we learn the reason for the meeting: a





**Figs 6 and 7: *Beyond the End of Time*, edited by Fred Pohl (Permabooks, January 1952), first mass-market reprint of 'Scanners.' Cover art uncredited.**

man named Adam Stone has developed a process to insulate unmodified humans from the Pain of Space. Thus, Scanners live in vain. And Vomact, arguing that either Adam Stone is lying (his solution doesn't work) or that even if it does, the loss of status of the loyal and heroic Scanners will bring disorder, even war, to Space. And he invokes the Scanners' 'secret duty'. If the code of the Scanners is violated, no ships go out, and if no ships go out:

The Earths fall apart. The Wild comes back in. The Old Machines and the Beasts return.

And the secret duty says that those who violate it must die. So, 'Adam Stone must die.'

There is much to unpack here. Smith's prose in this story doesn't fully achieve the incantatory power of his later work, but it is tremendously forceful, intense. And it does reach incantatory heights in this sequence, with the repeated invocations of the Scanners' duty, and their law. The references to the past of this distant future — the Old Machines, the Beasts, the Unforgiven, the Manshonjaggers — are powerful, intriguing,

ambiguous. This sequence also shows — and we see this in many Instrumentality stories — the harsh nature of the Instrumentality. The punishment meted out to the habermans is horrifying — forced labour in the Up-and-Out, disconnected from one's sensorium, followed only by death. (And of what are the habermans guilty? They are '*criminal or heretics*' or just '*credulous*' or '*unfit*' (italics mine) — perhaps some are murderers, but some are only guilty of thought crimes. And they are not simply executed, but tortured via forced labour.)

The Scanners as a group are immediately ready to execute Vomact's command, but a few resist. One is Parizianski, who wonders 'What if Stone has succeeded?' — this means freedom for the Scanners: 'Men can be men' — and mercy for the habermans: 'The habermans can be killed decently and properly, the way men were killed in the old days.'

In his crunched state (and also perhaps because he is married — apparently (and not surprisingly) this is all but unheard of for Scanners) Martel feels the wonder and hope of this



**Fig. 8: Table of Contents for *Beyond the End of Time*.**

more vote against Vomact, and the order is issued — Adam Stone must be killed. Martel's protests are ignored, and even his friends who voted with him come to support Vomact, out of loyalty to the discipline of the Scanners.

This leads to the inevitable conclusion — Martel betraying the Scanners, rushing to Adam Stone's place and learning of his success and how he managed it, and then confronting the Scanner sent to kill Stone, who of course turns out to be his friend Parizianski. The conclusion — Martel waking, fully human, in Luci's company and

message deeply. The story lets Martel meditate, for a moving few pages, about his history as a Scanner, the horrors he's seen, the pain he's felt, his agony over what Luci has to put up with in their marriage. But in the end only he and a few

hearing from her the happy news about the Scanners, with only one exception, is powerful and moving again.

This is a long story (perhaps 13,000 words) but



**Figs 9 and 10: *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, edited by Robert Silverberg (Avon, July 1971).**





Figs 11 and 12: *The Best of Cordwainer Smith* (Ballantine, September 1976). Cover by Darrell Sweet.

it proceeds at a fierce rush. And for me, the first time through, it was easy to see the surface, and be excited and thrilled by the basic idea, but miss or forget the depths — the weird hints of the Instrumentality's past; the dark realisation that the quasi-Utopian Instrumentality is brutal at its core; the alternately lovely and severe evocations of the life and work of a Scanner and of Martel's feelings under the Cranching Wire; the almost scriptural declarations at the Scanners' meeting; the delicious revelation of what Adam Stone did to shield living humans from the pain of space (oysters in the ships' outer hulls!) and the crushing truth of what Martel had to do to save Adam Stone.

The prose, as I have said, is not as well developed as in the best of Smith's later stories, but it is vigorous and evocative — I have quoted some passages but not the best — I loved, for instance, Martel's comment upon briefly seeing the stars:

The stars are my enemies. I have mastered the stars but they hate me.

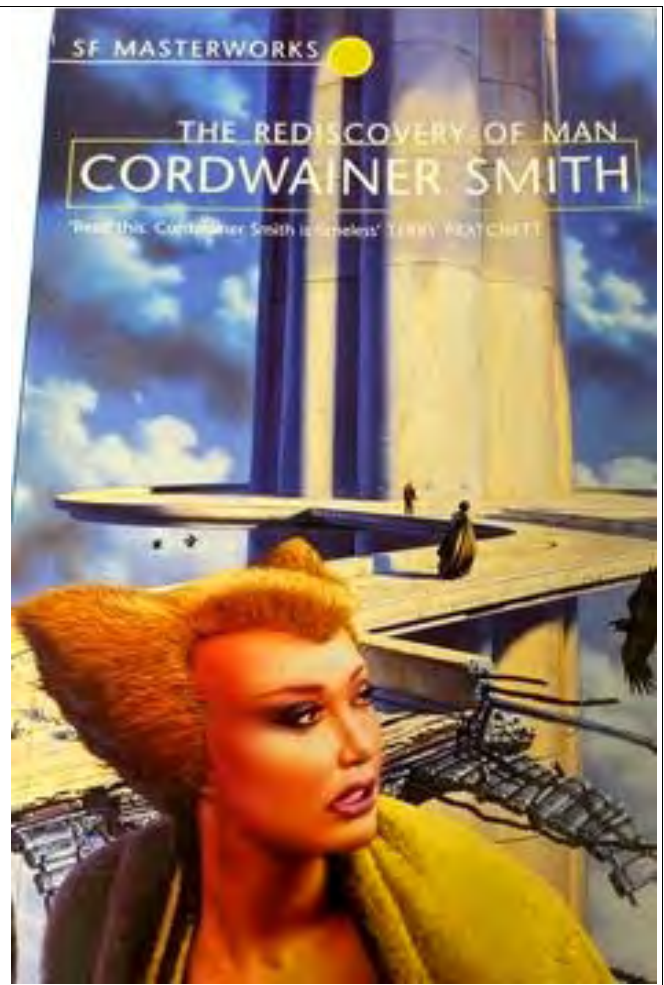
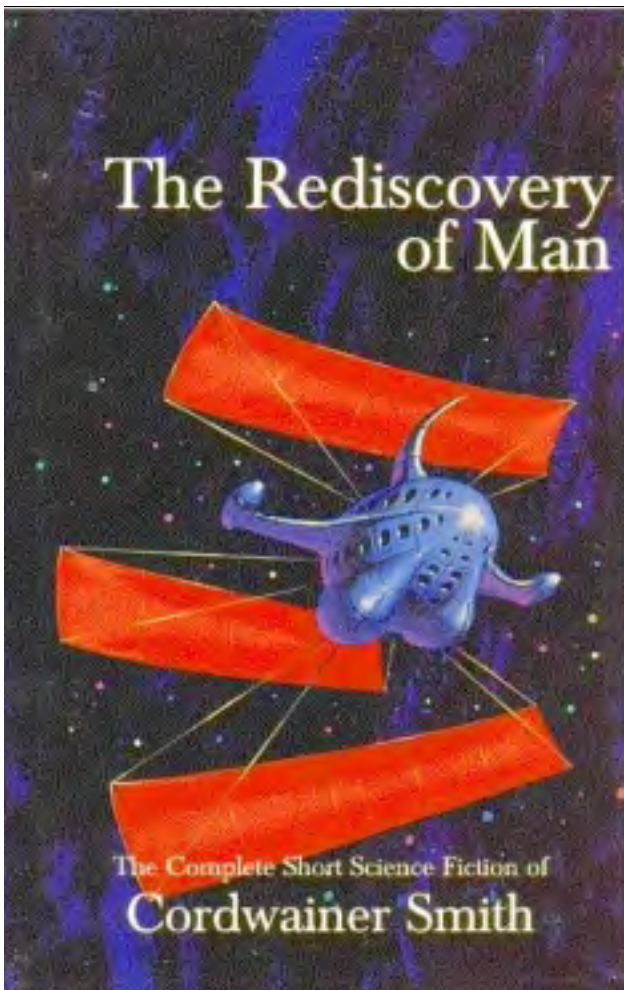
Another nice touch is the phrase 'the dark

inward eternities of habermanhood'. The sketch of Martel's relationship with Luci — and his memories of their courting — is sweet and affecting. The denseness of 'including' — even minor details of that future such as travelling from place to place by flying — is remarkable. This is a story that improves and deepens upon rereading, as with most great stories.

And where did it come from? 'Scanners Live in Vain' was 'Cordwainer Smith's' first published story. He wrote it in 1945, submitted it to all the extant SF magazines, and finally let it go to a very low-end semi-professional venue, *Fantasy Book*, edited by William Crawford (some sources say he wasn't even paid by Crawford). Crawford's efforts in the SF field were actually moderately significant — he published four magazines — *Marvel Tales*, *Unusual Tales*, *Fantasy Book*, and *Spaceways*.

It's worth noting that the issue of *Fantasy Book* featuring 'Scanners Live in Vain' also featured stories by Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl (in collaboration), Stanton Coblenz, and Alfred Coppel — all names of at least moderate weight in the field. And Frederik Pohl's involvement, in





**Figs 13 and 14: *The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith*, NESFA Press edition (June 1993) and SF Masterworks edition (May 1999). Covers by Jack Gaughan and Chris Moore.**

particular, seems to have proved important for Smith's career. (I should add that for most of his efforts, including *Fantasy Book*, Crawford was collaborating with his wife Margaret, and they often used the joint pseudonym Garret Ford.)

By the way, there's a reproduction of Paul Linebarger's cover letter to his submission to *Fantasy Book*. It's addressed to 'Mr. Ford' — obviously Linebarger didn't know about the Crawfords' editorial pseudonym. The letter suggests that 'Scanners Live in Vain' is more 'literary fiction' than 'pulp', and that perhaps as *Fantasy Book* is 'off-trail' that might appeal to them. He says they can find him in *Who's Who*, with reference to his already published books (at that time, mostly or entirely non-fiction.) And he includes \$3.00 for a subscription to the magazine (including back issues) — there's some advice for an aspiring writer!

It's not clear that 'Scanners Live in Vain' had any broad immediate impact. After all, *Fantasy Book* was a marginal magazine. But the story did get reprinted twice in the next three years after its

first appearance. One reprint was in *Science and Sorcery*, an anthology edited by 'Garret Ford', which is to say, William (and probably Margaret) Crawford, and published by the Crawfords' company. It consisted of stories from *Fantasy Book* and a few originals (one suspects, stories submitted to *Fantasy Book* but not published before the magazine folded). There were only 800 copies printed of this edition.

But the other early reprint was in an anthology edited by Frederik Pohl, *Beyond the End of Time*. This was a paperback from a then respected publisher Permabooks, with presumably a big print run. It featured writers such as Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke, and Bradbury; and such major stories as Clarke's 'Rescue Party', Bradbury's 'There Will Come Soft Rains', and C. M. Kornbluth's 'The Little Black Bag'. I suspect it was this anthology that first brought 'Scanners Live in Vain' to a wide audience. (And — good as the stories I've mentioned are — 'Scanners Live in Vain' is even better.)

The question is — how did Pohl know of this



**Fig. 15: *The Rediscovery of Man*, SF Masterworks edition (May 1999).**

**Fig. 16: The Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award awarded to Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore in 2004.**

obscure story, only published in a marginal magazine? And the answer, I imagine, may be that Pohl also had a story in that issue of *Fantasy Book!* (This was 'The Little Man on the Subway', co-written with Isaac Asimov, and published as by 'James MacCreigh'.) (Robert Silverberg, just 15 years old when the story came out, reports that he did find 'Scanners' in *Fantasy Book*, and was immediately taken by it — and in fact it was Silverberg who arranged for the first Cordwainer Smith collection, and selected its contents. This was *You Will Never Be the Same* from Regency Books in 1963.)

Of such happenstance as Pohl having a story in that issue of *Fantasy Book*, I think it is possible that a major career was born. For not only did Pohl reprint 'Scanners Live in Vain', a reprint that likely led to its selection for *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume I*, but Pohl didn't forget the mysterious 'Cordwainer Smith'. And in 1955, according to Mike Ashley's *Transformations*, Pohl 'encouraged' 'Smith' to submit a story ('The Game of Rat and Dragon') to *Galaxy*, then edited by H. L. Gold. Not long after, Pohl was working for Gold at *Galaxy*, and he wanted to get more stories from Smith. To that point, as far as I know, his only contact had been through Smith's agent, Forrest J.

Ackerman. (A less Linebarger-like figure than Ackerman I can hardly imagine!)

But, Pohl says, he got a call out of the blue, from a man calling himself Paul Linebarger. Pohl was a bit confused until Linebarger said, 'I write science fiction as Cordwainer Smith.' Pohl ended up buying a dozen of Linebarger's stories, mostly for *Galaxy* and *If*, after he took over the editing reins from Gold, but also for his original anthology *Star Science Fiction 6*. (I've written previously about Pohl's role in James Tiptree, Jr.'s, career; and also about his role publishing Samuel R. Delany's great novella 'The Star Pit'. Add his advocacy for Delany's *Dhalgren*, which he published at Bantam despite his bosses' scepticism about the commercial prospects of a very long, rather experimental novel; and you can see continued evidence for the importance of Pohl's editing to the history of SF.)

I spent some time comparing the two versions of the story I have to hand, one from *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume I*; and one from *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*. The first was published in 1970 but seems to be directly based on the *Fantasy Book* printing. The second, from 1975, has some editorial changes, minor but interesting. Either the editor of *The Best of Cordwainer Smith* (J. J. Pierce) or perhaps a copy editor at Ballantine

chose to eliminate the numbered section divisions in the original; and also chose to eliminate the eccentric capitalisation Smith used for some of the unique aspects of the story — he capitalised such terms as Cranching Wire, Up-and-Out, the Great Pain of Space, the Talking Nail, the Tablet, and so on. In both these cases I think the text of the original version is actually to be preferred.

The later version also makes a couple of very slight word changes (substituting 'kin' for 'kith' twice — in one case correctly, in the other case I think mistakenly; and also cleaning up and clarifying one phrase: 'Most meetings that he attended seemed formal heartening ceremonial' becomes 'Most meetings that he attended seemed formal, hearteningly ceremonial', which I think is an improvement; and also changing the spelling of 'Manshonjagger' to 'manshonyagger', which I think was done for consistency with later Instrumentality stories).

I note as well that the version in *The Rediscovery of Man*, the exceptional NESFA Press edition collecting all of Cordwainer Smith's short SF, adopts the original version with only the 'formal, hearteningly ceremonial' change. I think that edition should be considered definitive.

**'Cordwainer Smith'**, as noted above, was a pseudonym, for **Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger**. And Linebarger is a remarkably interesting man aside from his 'Cordwainer Smith' side. He was born in 1913, his father a lawyer who was advising Sun Yat-Sen, the first President of the Republic of China after the overthrow of the Emperor. (Sun Yat-Sen, in fact, was Paul Linebarger's godfather.) Linebarger's family moved often, and he lived in several countries, and by adulthood was fluent in Chinese, English, and German. He held a Ph.D. in Political Science from Johns Hopkins, and taught at Duke. He was an expert in Far Eastern affairs, and during the Second World War served for the Army in China, and became close to Chiang K'ai-Shek. He was a leading expert in psychological warfare, and called himself a 'visitor to little wars', advising our allies about propaganda.

Linebarger first married in 1936, and had two daughters. After a divorce, he remarried. His second wife, Genevieve, collaborated on several of his stories, and apparently one of the post-humously published 'Cordwainer Smith' stories, 'Down to a Sunless Sea', is by her alone. Linebarger also published three novels before any of his 'Cordwainer Smith' stories appeared: *Ria*

(1947) and *Carola* (1948), both as by 'Felix C. Forrest'; and *Atomsk* (1949), a spy thriller published as by 'Carmichael Smith'.

He published poetry as by 'Anthony Bearden'. He finished three other novels in the late 1940s, *General Death*, *Journey in Search of a Destination*, and *The Dead Can Bite*. They have not been published, and I know nothing about them. The other three 1940s novels seem reasonably well regarded by 'Cordwainer Smith' fans, though I have not yet read them myself.

Smith became something of a sensation in the SF field after Pohl's rediscovery. The wide revelation of his identity, after his death at only 53 in 1966, added to his mystique, and a few additional stories plus various collections dribbled out, culminating in 1993 with the massive NESFA Press collection of his complete short fiction, *The Rediscovery of Man*. He was never really forgotten (and Baen published new editions of his fiction in the 2000s) but in a way he seemed to fall into a slight eclipse for a while, not exactly dismissed but regarded by some as an outlier, sort of a curiosity.

In this context, the Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award, founded by his daughter Rosana Hart in 2001 (and sponsored by the Cordwainer Smith Foundation), is interesting, for it aims to bring worthy SF writers who have fallen into some degree of obscurity into greater notice. (Full disclosure: as of 2021, I am part of the jury for that award, along with Steven H. Silver, Grant Thiessen, and Ann VanderMeer.)

At any rate, it seems to me now that Smith — though never forgotten — is recently being to some extent rediscovered again, and his importance only seems to be growing. It is astonishing, truly, that his stories, written between 1945 and 1965, still seem fresh, still seem, as Robert Silverberg once suggested, to be the work of a time traveller from the distant future, telling of events from his past. Or perhaps it is only I who have rediscovered him — everyone else never forgot — but my recent rereading, not just of 'Scanners Live in Vain' but of stories like 'Alpha Ralpha Boulevard', 'Drunkboat', 'No, No, Not Rogov!', and others, has been remarkably rewarding.

It is clearer to me now than ever before how original Cordwainer Smith's work was, and remains, how emotionally powerful he could be, and how sneakily influential he was.

— **Rich Horton**, *Black Gate: Adventures in Fantasy Literature*, 11 June 2022



**About C. JUNE WOLF (original introduction, 2006): Casey is grateful for the time to write a little fiction and to enjoy the stories of others. It was a privilege to read a few of Mike's offerings and to interview this delightful man in the last weeks of his life. Thanks, Mike. Rest peacefully. Casey's fiction can be found in *Tesseract Nine*, and you may find other works in her Archive.**

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## C. June Wolf and Michael J. Coney

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### Michael's spyglass: An interview with Mike Coney

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**[First published: *Strange Horizons*, 6 February 2006.]**

I stepped onto the crystal lake. Underfoot it was rock hard; I bent down and touched the surface nervously; it was cold, but not too frightening. It was not slippery, either, not like real ice. I nodded to Browneyes and she stepped down from her tussock, holding onto my hand. I remember thinking, with the ridiculous sentimentality of my age; if we go, we'll go together ...

We began to walk, treading lightly in order not to disturb the monster underneath, talking in whispers. After awhile we reached the far shore and followed a winding, glittering path among the spinethickets and reed. Wolff yelled again and suddenly I caught sight of him and Ribbon beyond a bush, about thirty paces away.

Ribbon's face was white with pain and Wolff was bending over her ankle. He looked up as we approached. 'The ice-devil's got her foot,' he said (*Pallahaxi Tide*, p. 99).

The name Mike Coney is no longer frequently heard in the science fiction world, but at one time his short fiction appeared steadily, most frequently in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and his novels were anticipated with enthusiasm by his fans. As with many excellent writers of his generation, his books are now mostly available through sources like Abebooks.com, BookFinder, and Amazon. They are worth searching out. Were another generation of readers to be treated to the workings of Mike's delightful mind, it would be a good thing. They would find well-drawn characters, quirky and thoroughly imag-

ined science, vivid references to everything from Arthurian legend to alien cosmology to steam mechanics — sometimes all in the same book. And to paraphrase a fan, his tales have heart.

Mike published 18 novels and over 60 short stories in his lifetime. His works have been translated into Dutch, French, Russian, Japanese, and more. His novel *Brontomek!* won the British Science Fiction Association Award in 1976, and his novelette 'Tea and Hamsters' [1] was nominated for a Nebula in 1995. Various of his works have been nominated for a total of five Aurora Awards.

Born in Birmingham England in 1932, Mike and his wife Daphne have been publicans in England and hoteliers in Antigua. In 1972 — the year that saw the publication of his first novel, *Mirror Image*



Michael and Daphne Coney. (Photo: C. June Wolf.)

— they moved to Canada, where he worked for many years with the British Columbia Ministry of Forests and ran Porthole Press. He died on 4 November 2005.

When Mike was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he dispensed with the usual hoop-jumping and placed three previously unpublished novels and five short stories on his website for free download. One of these, *I Remember Pallahaxi*, is the long-awaited and greatly satisfying sequel to his most popular novel, *Hello Summer, Goodbye* [2], named by the British Science Fiction Association as the best British SF novel of the 1970s.

Completing this interview was a difficult task for Mike. In and out of hospice care, on morphine and oxygen, Mike had his daughter Sally Green transcribe his replies. Each session required a great effort and took an equal toll, and there was no possibility for adding questions or refining answers after the initial effort was made. He continued the work only because it was important to him to have one last conversation with the world of science fiction before he died.

**C. June Wolf:** Hi, Mike. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview. How are you doing right now?

**Michael G. Coney:** I've just been in palliative care for two days to try to get the medication sorted out and get rid of the nausea. It went well and I'm feeling quite a lot better now. My appetite has improved, although I've had to get my daughter to type this from my dictation because there is no way I can hit the right keys on the computer anymore.

**CJW:** What led you to become a writer, and to become the writer you are?

**MGC:** When I was a kid I used to read a particular type of writing by H. Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle, Sapper, and H. G. Wells, and I did not realise at the time why I liked this style of writing. At that time the words SF were not in common use. I wasn't at that time inspired to write but I was certainly inspired to read that kind of stuff. The writing came about much later when I was about 40 years old.

**CJW:** What influences have encouraged and inspired you along the way?

**MGC:** Along the way my reading became more general but I still enjoyed most what I was beginning to realise was Science Fiction. The big change came when I read John Wyndham's *The Day of the*

*Triffids* and *The Chrysalids* and Cordwainer Smith's short stories. I was encouraged and inspired by these writers, in particular because their writing style was good enough to speak straight into my mind instead of my having to translate each sentence as I went along. I found that their literary style would, to me, stand up against any of the modern books then being touted as good literature.

**CJW:** What made you choose this genre to devote your career to?

**MGC:** I chose SF as a vehicle for writing partly because I have always enjoyed invention. At school I had a basic grounding in science, so I had no difficulty in bending the science that I remembered to fit the circumstances of the story I was writing by the time my writing career started at the age of forty.

**CJW:** What would you say are your greatest strengths as an author? Where have you struggled?

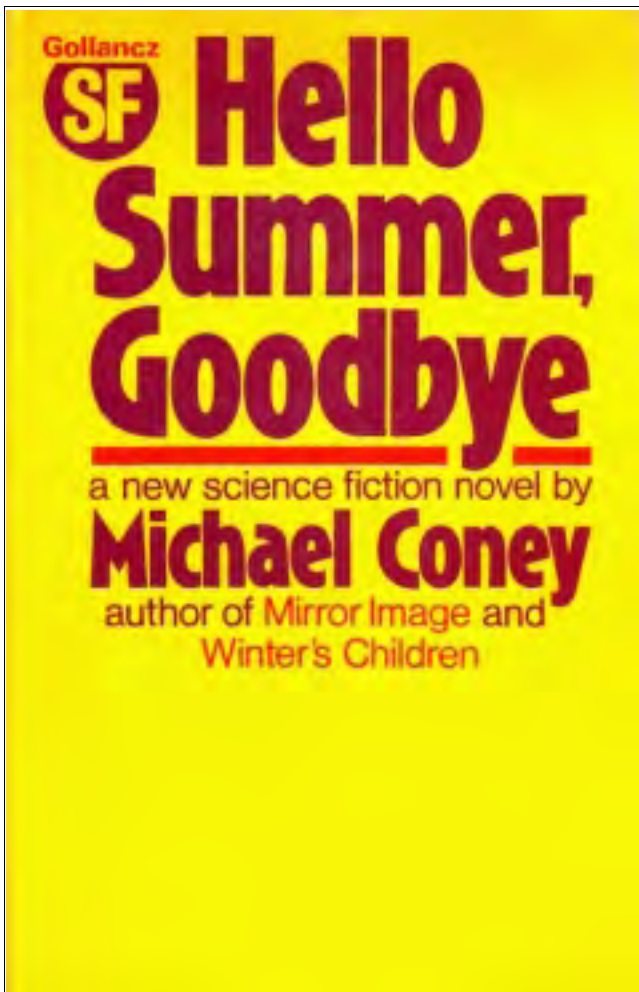
**MGC:** My strength as a writer lies in plotting. I find it interesting to take the disparate elements of a story and fit them together in such a way that I'm left with a story that makes sense and has a proper ending, often an unexpected ending. In order to achieve my effect, I usually fully work out the end of the story first and then work back from it with a middle and a beginning. I have struggled when I have abandoned this method because of the temptation of a good opening idea which I have then written forwards from without knowing where it's all going to come out. The biggest enjoyment comes when I reread the finished story and realise that I could not possibly have written it any better.

**CJW:** Have you ever surprised yourself?

**MGC:** I surprised myself when I wrote *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* because that was an exception to the above method, when I based the action on puns and a linear progression of action and abandoned my normal method of writing the ending first. I was not satisfied with the result, although I have had compliments on the book.

**CJW:** What are your favourite works — short and long?

**MGC:** My favourite serious novel is *Rax* (a.k.a. *Pallahaxi Tide* and *Hello Summer, Goodbye*), partly because the book was largely autobiographical and partly because everyone else seems to like it



best. Who am I to say they are wrong? Since I write in different styles, I would have to say my favourite humorous novels are *A Tomcat Named Sabrina* and *Fang, the Gnome*. As regards short stories, of the serious ones I've always preferred 'Sparklebugs and Holly' [3] because it was a nice, simple love story, and of the humorous short stories I like 'Tea and Hamsters'.

**CJW:** Clearly both long and short forms attract you. What do you like most about each?

**MGC:** Yes, I enjoy writing both long and short fiction. Long fiction has the attraction of really getting into the story, getting to know the characters and having fun with the plotting. Short stories attract me because there's always the hope of producing a miniature masterpiece with not a word out of place. Examples of the short story I would like to have written are mentioned on my website: 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry and Cordwainer Smith's story 'The Ballad of Lost C'Mell'.

**CJW:** Do you have any favourite or most hated cover art?

**MGC:** I've nearly always been disgusted by my cover art. I did like the naked lady on *Syzygy* because of the pleasant pastel shades; that was my first cover, but matters went downhill from there on. The worst was the DAW cover to *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that Catch*.

**CJW:** What effect did growing up in England at the time of the Second World War have on your writing — and indeed on how you see the world? Would you attribute your humorous response to dark situations in any way to this experience?

**MGC:** I was at school during WWII and my only writing was confined to English classes. My reading was supposedly confined to curriculum books. I was taught by a man who had no regard for my use of the language whatsoever and the book chosen as an example of what good writing should be was *Silas Marner*, more recently voted one of the ten most boring books ever written. That was a dark enough situation to bring out a humorous response in anyone.

**CJW:** I would say you are guilty of intelligent and compassionate lampoonery. For instance in 'A Chimp of Few Words', a story that views more than one character with a certain bite, in the end there is no clear antagonist — each of the humans is treated both pointedly and mercifully. What is behind this?

**MGC:** 'A Chimp of Few Words' is intended merely to make the reader chuckle. I have, however, written a number of stories (some of which star the same little old lady) where I have deliberately attempted to show the results of opposing characters' views and tried to point out that each point of view can be correct. My favourite short story of this type is 'Sophie's Spyglass', [4] in which the old lady does not in fact appear. 'Sophie's Spyglass' was inspired by my feeling that it is unfair that wives have an insane prejudice against husbands' old girlfriends even though the couple may have been 15 years old at the time. 'Sophie's Spyglass' attempts to work out this dilemma, showing the best side of each character in later life.

**CJW:** What do you see as the role of humour in your writing?

**MGC:** When I'm working out the basics of a story (and as I've said the end comes first), that ending may have a particular resonance. It may be simply a joke, as in 'Chimp', or it may be a trick ending. It may be an ending that is so unspeakably horrible that I have to make a joke of it. So when I start the story from the beginning I'm careful to



give the reader clues that this is in no way meant to be taken seriously. Sometimes, on the other hand, I will write a funny story simply because I'm tired of writing serious stories. That is what happened with *A Tomcat Called Sabrina* and *No Place for a Sealion*, because no reader could seriously swallow a talking cat or a talking sea lion as a valid character in a serious story. Sometimes it's simpler than that; sometimes I just like to write a funny story for its own sake.

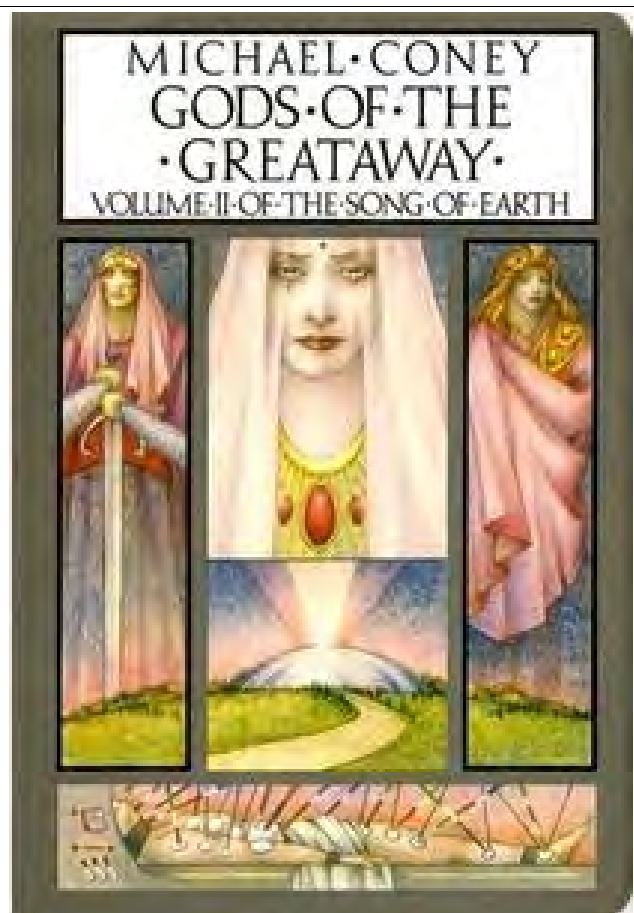
**CJW:** You once said, in reference to *Fang, the Gnome* and *King of the Scepter'd Isle*, 'I believe in doing as little research as possible.' Is this a general approach or was it specific to the Arthurian tradition — which is overwhelming in its abundance? The remark sounds potentially lazy or irreverent, but that's not reflected in your writing. Can you say more about this idea?

**MGC:** I may have implied earlier that I do very little scientific research and rely on extrapolations of remembered school lessons. To some extent this also applied to Arthurian stories *Fang* and *King*. The Arthurian tradition had been so heavily instilled in my consciousness as a child in England that I was already very familiar with many of the differing versions, and since it is all in any case a myth, I had no compunction in introducing *Fang* to the legends of King Arthur. I see it as just another legend like all the others, but hopefully funnier.

**CJW:** The dust jacket of your early Gollancz editions features a charming bio I gather was written by you. In it you say, 'He writes purely as an escape, and believes it provides an infinite field for intelligent entertainment whether it concerns itself with inner space or outer, and for this reason does not favour artificial boundaries within the genre.' Would you change this remark in any way, 30 years after it was written, or does it still sum things up well for you?

**MGC:** I think this still applies to me. I still write for escape inasmuch as I enjoy placing myself as protagonist in exciting situations. As to artificial boundaries within the genre, I am now not so troubled about the boundaries as with the genres themselves. I very much dislike, for example, the grievance genre where the writer is using SF as a vehicle to get across their own agendas. From that point of view I'm obviously speaking about inner space, which is not what I would normally write about.

**CJW:** Although you say that you don't write fantasy, you have an affection for fantasy-like



worlds and themes that are then rendered into perfectly logical (and consequently richly inventive) science fiction. What is the attraction for you here? Have you found yourself to be misperceived as a writer at all because of your willingness to explore this region of literature?

**MGC:** This is where the fun of invention comes in. I certainly have found some of my books being described as fantasy, but this is never the case unless I set out with that intention, such as *Tomcat*, *Sealion*, and one or two of my short stories.

**CJW:** What is the connection between the Pallahaxi books and *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and other books of the 'Song of Earth' series?

**MGC:** The 'Song of Earth' series consisted of *CSL*, *Gods [of the Greataway]*, *Fang*, *King*, and somewhere in there, *Cat Karina*. There was no connection with the Pallahaxi books until I wrote the sequel to *Rax/Pallahaxi Tide/Hello Summer, Goodbye*, and I found that the Kikihuahua were the ideal way of explaining the never-fully-explained survival of the Pallahaxi people.

**CJW:** Can you describe the Kikihuahua?

**MGC:** The physical appearance of the

Kikihuahuas is not significant, since they are able to change their shape according to circumstance. The main thing about them is that they are totally good creatures able to survive any environment and are telepathic amongst themselves and, to a greater or lesser extent, with humans. They are my version of a perfect creature. In *Rax* I visualise them as something like giant pandas.

**CJW:** For the Kikihuahua to stay with you over so many books and years, they must have had a powerful hold on you — what was the significance of that group of aliens for you? How did they evolve in your mind, and in what way do they reflect your overall view of the universe?

**MGC:** I would not say that the Kikihuahuas have a powerful hold over me. In many ways I have used them as a convenient *deus ex machina*. They probably reflect my overall view of who is in charge of everything. Since I am not a religious person I cannot conceive of one little old man sitting on a cloud running everything, but I can more easily believe in an alien race with an infinite capacity for goodness.

**CJW:** What would you say are the themes you have most carefully explored in your writing?

**MGC:** I have carefully explored other people's themes and translated them into my own themes when I disagree with the original statement. For instance, my Arthurian myth is quite different from the various other myths that one encounters. I see the Arthurian myths as having a preposterous background, which I highlighted by turning it into SF and introducing the gnomes.

**CJW:** You have written a lot of connected stories: *Syzygy*, *Mirror Image*, and *Brontomek!*, 'The Song of Earth' quartet, the Pallahaxi novels — even your short stories often refer back to each other as well. Why is that?

**MGC:** I like to regard my work as a whole thing and if I find that there are elements of a story in *Syzygy* that I have not perhaps explored in *Mirror Image*. I like to go back and correct this omission. The best examples were perhaps the 'Song of Earth' books, which were never intended to be separate novels. It was only when I got the contracts from the publisher that I found that he was expecting two books for the price of one in the case of *CSL* and *Fang*. I felt that I had far from exhausted the possibilities of the characters and events so I had no problem in writing additional material and a completely new line of plotting.

**CJW:** Do you always like where your mind has taken you in your writing?

**MGC:** Only once was I disappointed in where my mind had taken me in my plotting. This was in *Mirror Image*, an early book, which I commenced full of confidence without working out what the ending would be. The result was my spending a needless amount of time and effort in trying to come up with a feeble, Son of God type of ending.

**CJW:** How has writing changed you? Or, what has writing taught you about yourself?

**MGC:** I think that it has taught me always to be completely honest with the reader and never allow myself to take the easy way out for the sake of glib plot device. It's also taught me to avoid clichés in plotting and characterisation.

**CJW:** If we were to look for Mike Coney in your books, which character would most clearly resemble you? (What about your wife? Children? Secret girlfriends?)

**MGC:** Mike Coney is the Nowhere Man in *Fang* and *King*. He is a youthful version of myself in the Pallahaxi books. He is very obviously the young boy in 'Sophie's Spyglass', and other aspects of his character appear throughout the books. His wife is in the Pallahaxi books as Browneyes — Drove's girlfriend. She is also a nurse in *Charisma*. Most frequently, she is the girl who comes to the rescue of the hero when he has screwed things up.

**CJW:** Talk about the work you have online. Any chance of putting *HSG* up there to keep *I Remember Pallahaxi* company?

**MGC:** The work online was put there for various reasons mostly described on the website. Due to my sickness they were not books or stories that I had the time or energy to argue with publishers about, or to rewrite. And yet, since I had had interest expressed by numbers of readers about these stories, I could not let them die without giving them an outing. I don't think it would be possible to put *HSG* on the site, because I think this might represent an infringement of copyright, since the book has already been published in hardcover.

**CJW:** You were quite active writing and publishing during the '70s and '80s, then slowed down during the '90s. What were the reasons for that?

**MGC:** I slowed down in the '70s and '80s because other aspects of my life were taking over my



MICHAEL G.  
CONEY

## THE CELESTIAL STEAM LOCOMOTIVE

THE BSFA AWARD-WINNING  
AUTHOR OF BRONTOMEK!

interests, in particular, sailing and family history. To some extent, I'd got bored of writing and needed a break in order to get started again. This break would have come about with *Tomcat* and *Sealion*, but the two books were so completely different from my other style that I suspected I would have difficulty in getting them published locally. As it happened, I had a small publishing company going at the time (Porthole Press Ltd), and so I published them under that heading on a small scale limited to British Columbia.

**CJW:** What replaced writing in your life?

**MGC:** My sickness has basically replaced writing. I am suffering from mesothelioma, which is very debilitating and makes concentration quite difficult. I find that my memory will disappear from one sentence to the next, which may not seem too bad a problem bearing in mind that this is a frequent enough occurrence with me anyway.

**CJW:** You mention in the foreword to 'A Chimp of Few Words' that after hearing that the new editor there was not a fan of your writing, you decided not to send that story to *Fantasy & Science Fiction* even though they had published the previous stories in the series. Are you content with the

decision you made not to send that story to *F&SF* — or anywhere else? What was behind the decision to hold it back entirely?

**MGC:** I cannot honestly say that I am completely content with the decision not to send 'A Chimp of Few Words' to *F&SF*. I can't help but feel that there was an element of 'sod you' and also an element of sour grapes. Maybe the story was not good enough and maybe I was acting on this presupposition. It was not the only short story that I held back entirely but it may have been one of the best.

**CJW:** Bruce Gillespie, a well-known Australian fan reviewer, critic, and editor, says: '*Hello Summer, Goodbye* was one of the very best novels of the era (1970s), and some others were very fine as well. He was the kind of author whose books you always looked forward to.' [5] *HSG* was named by the British Science Fiction Association as the most important British SF novel of that period. Readers at Amazon.com say things like this:

5 stars. To say that this is a great novel is an understatement. It is, however, easy to say that *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* is highly original, thought provoking, and very entertaining. It does exactly what a good science fiction novel should do. It's [sic] sequel, *Gods of the Greataway*, is equally entertaining (John P. Barker).

You seem to touch readers on many different levels. What is the special quality in your work that has this effect?

**MGC:** The whole matter of *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* arose out of boredom with standard SF, which up to that point I had written. It was an attempt to write a story in which absolutely anything could and did happen, driven only by the mentalities of the people involved. I felt it succeeded in these terms but I don't consider it an easy book to read and I have had a few adverse comments on it from people who simply don't know what I was getting at. This was why I went on to write *Fang*, which I knew would be much easier for the reader to follow. I think it's very easy for a writer to get too clever for his own damn good and to forget that his business is to entertain his readers. I've seen it happen to many other writers, and now I could see it happening to myself. It was not what I wanted. The subsequent story on the website, *The Flower of Goronwy*, is an attempt to return to the style and characters of my earlier books and stories, including 'Susanna', [6] and add a touch of spice by the use of a truly horrifying heroine, Mistrale.



**CJW:** If you were to write a novel now, what would it look like? What theme, what setting, what mood would it strike?

**MGC:** If I wrote a novel now I think it would turn out to be like *Flower of Goronwy*. In fact, I think it has done.

**CJW:** I want to thank you for this interview, Mike, and for giving us the opportunities you have to savour the workings of your delightful mind. It's been our pleasure.

**MGC:** Thanks for the opportunity for burdening you with all this stuff.

Mike Coney's latest offerings can be found at his website. A bibliography of his work is hosted at <http://westshore.bc.ca/booksmusic/coney.cfm> and also at 'Michael G. Coney' on Wikipedia.

## Footnotes

- [1] 'Tea and Hamsters', *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, January 1995.
- [2] *Hello Summer, Goodbye* was also published as *Rax* and *Pallahaxi Tide* in the US and Canada.
- [3] 'Sparklebugs, Holly and Love', *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, December 1977; *Other Canadas*, ed. J. R. Colombo, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1979.
- [4] 'Sophie's Spyglass', *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, February 1993.
- [5] Bruce Gillespie, private communications, September 2005.
- [6] 'Susanna, Susanna!', *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, November 1971.

## In Memoriam

- 'In Memoriam: Michael Coney — A Tribute,' Mary E. Choo, *Lonely Cry* Online.
- 'Michael Coney: Science-fiction writer,' John Clute, *The Independent* Online Edition, 14 November 2005. [Viewing this article in full requires a subscription to *The Independent*.]
- 'Michael Coney: An Appreciation,' Eileen Kernaghan, *Locus*, December 2005.
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Readability Hid Inner Depths', Christopher Priest, *Guardian Unlimited*, 1 December 2005.

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- *Syzygy* (1973)
- *Friends Come in Boxes* (1973)
- *The Hero of Downways* (1973)
- *Winter's Children* (1974)
- *Monitor Found in Orbit* (1974) (Short story collection)
- *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that Catch* (1974; UK title *The Girl with a Symphony in her Fingers*)
- *Hello Summer, Goodbye* (UK title, also known as *Rax* in USA, and *Pallahaxi Tide* in Canada; 1975)
- *Charisma* (1975)
- *Brontomek!* (1976)
- *The Ultimate Jungle* (1979)
- *Neptune's Cauldron* (1981)
- *Cat Karina* (1982)
- *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* (1983)
- *Gods of the Greataway* (1984)
- *Fang, the Gnome* (1988)
- *King of the Scepter'd Isle* (1989)
- *A Tomcat Called Sabrina* (1992)
- *No Place for a Sealion* (1992)
- *I Remember Pallahaxi* (2007; sequel to *Hello Summer, Goodbye* — published posthumously)
- *Flower of Goronwy* (2014; published posthumously)

*The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Gods of the Greataway* are two parts of a single tale, *Cat Karina*, *Fang, the Gnome* and *King of the Scepter'd Isle* are independent stories set in the same universe. *Brontomek!* is set on the same world as *Syzygy* (and has many of the same characters) and is also associated somewhat with *Mirror Image* and *Charisma*.

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# Introducing Kim Huett

to those few fanzine fans who don't know him already

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**KIM HUETT lives in Canberra with 6000 fanzines and a library of early Australian science fiction. With these he brings to light long-forgotten history.**

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## Kim Huett: My fannish origins

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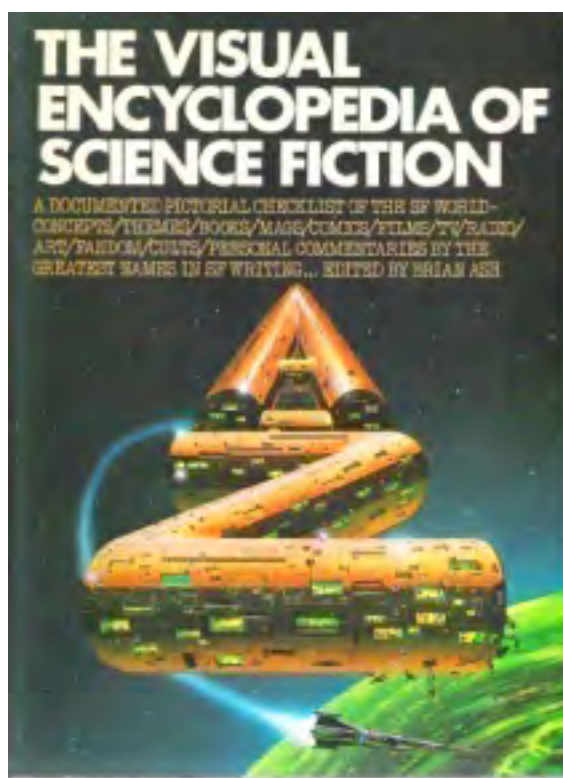
My descent towards fandom began in the latter half of 1978 when it was announced that I had come top of my science class. Not that this was a particularly significant effort, as we were given three options when starting Year 11; we could choose to study physics, biology, or what was essentially a none-of-the-above science course that covered a bit of this, and a bit of that. This last class was for anybody who didn't want to specialise and thus was also the right choice for anybody who didn't want to study too hard. Now, given I was definitely in the not wanting to study too hard category, I've no idea how to explain my coming top of my class except to blame it on being quite bright.

Regardless of why it happened, the important point is that it did happen. Why was it important? Because both the school principal and the Chatham Parent & Teacher Association were of the opinion that Year 11 students should be given a little encouragement to study hard now they were nearly at the end of high school. This encouragement came in the form of an end-of-year prize-giving ceremony. The top student in each subject was given a gift certificate with which they were allowed to purchase a book which would be awarded to them at a prize-giving ceremony. Me, being me, I hadn't even noticed this particular bait being dangled.

Neither did it occur to me that, given I had come top of my science class, it might be appropriate to choose a book that was in some way science related. Instead I blew my gift certificate on a book that I actually wanted, a book I had lusted after for months. That book was *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, which was edited by **Brian Ash** and published by Pan Books. I have no idea what my local bookshop was doing stocking

a copy of such an exotic, and relatively expensive, book given the rural nature of the Manning Valley region,<sup>1</sup> that part of Australia where I grew up, but I'm glad it did. My mother was less than impressed by my choice, even though she didn't disallow it, as she thought she thought it inappropriate for a science award. The joke is on her though as to this day I regularly consult *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 43 years after first receiving it. I doubt I could make that claim if I had chosen a book about science, as she thought proper.

For those of you who have never seen a copy, *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is a rather differently constructed reference book. It's



broadly laid out in four parts, the first being a multi-page flow chart on to which the chronological appearance of significant SF stories, magazines, and films are laid out. The second section is a series of articles exploring specific science-fictional ideas, with a well-known SF author of the day providing a short introductory essay. For example, James White is paired up with 'Biologies & Environments', Harry Harrison with 'Warfare & Weaponry', Lester Del Rey with 'Galactic Empires', Isaac Asimov with 'Robots & Androids', and so forth. The third section consists of a collection of in-depth essays discussing matters such as whether SF could be literature and what the value of SF might be.

As you can imagine, all the above was fascinating to the teenage me, but it is the fourth and last section of *The Visual Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that is most relevant to this story. That section covered a whole series of topics connected to written SF. There are chapters about science fiction in the cinema, television, comics, a chapter on cults such as Shaverism and Dianetics, but most importantly, there is a chapter on fandom. The articles in this chapter were perhaps not the most accurate summary of what fandom was all about, but they still managed to explain a lot of the basic concepts and terms, and ensured that once I did eventually contact fandom I was mostly forewarned and forearmed.

Not that I did start looking for this fandom thing immediately, because it's one thing to know that something like fandom exists; it's another to know how to contact it. Besides, I had to survive 1979 and my final year of school before I could worry about the possibilities of a new hobby. Consequently it wasn't until sometime in 1980 that I took the next step. By then I had finished school and begun to look for a job, something that wasn't going so well because at that time the Manning Valley wasn't exactly overflowing with job vacancies. Indeed it was pretty clear that my best bet for regular employment was to get out of town. To this end I took the train to Sydney and stayed with relatives a number of times in order to sit for various public service exams. Since as an unemployed person there was no rush for me to return home, I always tried to combine business with pleasure by spending a day or two hitting the second-hand bookshops and making a pilgrimage to Galaxy Bookshop.

How I found out about the existence of Galaxy Bookshop back when it was on Bathurst Street is a mystery to me. I definitely found out about it before I finished school, because on a school trip in 1979 I know I managed a visit. What I am sure was that it was there I saw my first fanzines in the



**Kim Huett.**

flesh, in for the form of Brian Thurogood's *Noumenon* and Neville Angove's *The Epsilon Eridani Express*. In these I discovered reviews of other Australian fanzines. I began to send away for every Australian fanzine listed. Not being entirely sure how the system worked, I confined myself initially to local publications so I could enclose a dollar bill. I figured sending money would maximise the chances of being sent at least one issue, after which I could play it by ear.

So initially I became one of those people whose sole contact with fandom was via the mails. I can't say I was the most reliable letter writer back then, but then again I never have been. I've never been a steady producer of words, being more the type who writes in short sharp bursts of enthusiasm. Back then I also had the bad habit of forgetting to sign my letters, an oversight which several different people told me annoyed them no end when they eventually met me.

After about a year of applying I finally secured a job in Sydney, and having moved there I finally met fandom face-to-face in the form of the Sydney Science Fiction Foundation. It was there that I was told about the regular Thursday night gatherings at Galaxy Bookshop and began to attend those as well. Twelve months after moving to Sydney I attended my very first convention, the 1982 Australian natcon, Tschaicon.

Even so, fanzines remained my one true love and I've remained deeply involved with them ever since. Robin Johnson helped to cement this relationship by way of a family crisis that required him to fly to England at short notice. Not having the funds for both the trip and storage of his possessions. Robin began asking around Sydney fandom in search of people who would look after



one collection or another. When he asked if I could look after his fanzine collection I readily agreed. What neither of us knew was that by the time Robin returned to Australia I would have left Sydney for Canberra and he would be ready to move to Melbourne. As we have never lived in the same city since, there has never been an opportunity for me to return Robin's fanzines, except at great expense. In the end Robin decided to make me permanent guardian of his collection and I've been steadily adding to it ever since. The collection

is currently three times larger than it was when I acquired it from Robin.

Both the collection and I continue to live in domestic harmony in Canberra and will probably continue to do so for many years yet, as moving a collection like this interstate is something I prefer to not think about.

— **Kim Huett**, August 2023

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Kim Huett

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## Cambrian level publishing: Australian SF publishing during World War II

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Having declared war in 1939, Australia's federal parliament set about putting the country onto a war footing. Soon enough it was uniforms for all and fun was being strictly rationed. However, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and in this case it was upon Australian publishers that a fresh breeze of opportunity now blew.

Since World War I imports from British publishers had dominated the Australian market, so much so that books by local companies represented less than 10 per cent of sales in Australia. But once Great Britain was at war the flood of reading material from the mother country naturally dried up. The cherry on the top of this reduction in competition came about when it was decided by the federal parliament to introduce legislation to restrict payment in non-sterling currencies for items deemed 'luxury and near-luxury commodities'. The concern was that with local industry focused on producing material for the war effort, Australian retailers would make increasing large orders of non-essential goods from a USA currently not at war. As this would seriously affect Australia's balance of payments just when the country had committed itself to fighting an expensive war, ruthless measures were clearly called for.

In publishing terms this ensured that many US magazines, in particular the fiction magazines, could no longer be imported into Australia. According to a report in Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* of 7 April 1940, the savings in dollar exchange was expected to be about £100,000 annually. Given that the average imported maga-

zine retailed for mere pennies, it's clear the absence of US magazines would leave the average newsstand looking more than a little bare. Retailers and the general public were less than thrilled by this development, but many Australian publishers and printers saw this as an unparalleled opportunity; that is, if only they could access a sufficient paper supply. As C. H. Peters, the managing director of publishing firm Robertson & Mullins, later stated, 'Australian publishers could not take advantage of the situation because of the paper shortage.'

The problem was the federal parliament had with one hand opened the way to the domination of the book and magazine trade by locals, but then with the other largely closed it again by introducing restrictions on the purchase of paper. The publication of books and magazines to be sold to the civilian population was still possible, but in order for that to happen a publisher first needed access to a supply of paper. And doing so was far from easy under the new regime. According to Martyn Lyons in *A History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945*, the paper mills of Burnie, Tasmania were producing about 20,000 tons of paper annually, of which the federal government was appropriating about 14,000 tons for its own departments and directing that schoolbooks and items of national importance be given priority out of the remainder.

Consequently, for the local publishing industry paper was now like gold. Access to sufficient supplies of it was all an individual needed to build a publishing empire. And thus in 1942 the

mysterious Currawong Publishing Company did appear. Mysterious, in that neither the AusLit database nor any other reputable source knows much more about this publisher other than that it was active from 1942 (actually 1941) to 1951, used the slogan 'You can't go wrong with a Currawong', and published a wide variety of cheaply produced volumes of fiction and non-fiction by mostly local authors. The Currawong Publishing offices were originally located at 32 Jamieson Street and later at 3 Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

Who owned Currawong Publishing, how they managed to obtain their paper, and what they paid for manuscripts remain a mystery. That said, according to the *Guide to Australian Business Records* website (gabr.net.au) there are nine cartons of business records, including manuscripts, belonging to Currawong Publishing Company Pty Ltd held by the Mitchell and Dickson Libraries Manuscript Collection, State Library of New South Wales. I suspect a search of these papers would answer some of the above questions for anybody able to gain access to them.

What is of interest to me is that among Currawong's earliest publishing efforts was a series of pamphlets containing primitive science fiction written by three different authors. I call these pamphlets because, while I've seen none of Currawong's earliest efforts in the flesh (they rarely appear for sale and when they do the prices listed are far too rich for my purse), I do own some of Currawong's slightly later efforts and thus am familiar with the publishing standards of this era. These pamphlets are usually saddle-stapled, range from 18 to 20 cm in height, 12 to 13 cm in width, and are rarely more than 100 pages in length. As such I don't think it would be reasonable to describe such publications as either paperbacks or novels.

It's because of this science fiction that I know a little more about Currawong Publishing than most. While both the production without and fiction within was of a primitive nature, the mere fact that something that could be described as science fiction was on the newsstands excited Sydney's active science fiction fans no end. As a result of this excitement, **Colin Roden**, editor of the weekly fanzine *Science & Fantasy Fan Reporter*, made no less than five attempts to visit Currawong's editorial offices before finally finding an editor, Mr Gardner, at work<sup>2</sup>. According to Colin Roden in *Science & Fantasy Fan Reporter* 34, Mr Gardner was surprised by how rapidly J. W. Heming's first two science fiction pamphlets, *The Living Dead* and *Subterranean City*, sold, and had already made plans to publish further SF in the form of Paul de Wreder's (a pseudonym of J. W.

Heming) *Time Marches Off*. Roden suggested that the words 'Science Fiction' might be put on the front cover, but Mr Gardner did not care for this idea. In his opinion labelling *Time Marches Off* as science fiction might turn off as many existing readers as attract new ones. He also thought 'a straight stf yarn would be a failure, hence the emphasis on adventure in their stories'. But while he would not go from science-adventure to straight science fiction in one hop, Mr Gardner was open to 'gradually increasing the science content, until a limit was found. We will have to educate the public to science fiction.'

Educate the public to science fiction? Now why does that sound familiar? Oh yes, it's almost word for word the philosophy of Walter Gillings, who had been editor of the British SF magazine *Tales of Wonder*. Why the likes of Gillings and Gardner were obsessed with educating a reading public who were already ready, willing, and able to purchase the US science fiction magazines is beyond me.

Anyway, regardless of any need to educate the general public, Currawong managed to publish no fewer than a dozen pamphlets with stories that contained some degree of science fiction:

- *The Living Dead* — J.W. Heming — 1941
- *Subterranean City* — J.W. Heming — 1942
- *Time Marches Off* — Paul de Wreder — 1942
- *King of the Underseas* — J.W. Heming — 1942
- *Other Worlds* — J.W. Heming — 1942
- *From Earth To Mars* — J.W. Heming — 1942
- *In Aztec Hands* — J.W. Heming — 1942
- *The Ape of God* — Vol Molesworth — 1943
- *Monster at Large* — Vol Molesworth — 1943
- *Lords of Serpent Land* — Alan Connell — 1945
- *Prisoners of Serpent Land* — Alan Connell — 1945
- *Warriors of Serpent Land* — Alan Connell — 1945

Of the three authors who sold science fiction to Currawong, **John Winton (Jack) Heming** was probably the best known. He actually began his career as a proofreader for various Sydney newspapers until work dried up during the Great Depression. Like more than a few other refugees from the newspaper trade he then began working as a freelance writer, producing fiction and non-fiction for a wide range of publications. According to Heming he sold 177 westerns, 32 mysteries, 4 children's books, 90 love novelettes, numerous science-fiction novelettes, a handful of pirate books, 17 adventure novelettes, 1500 short stories, songs, poems, and plays.



However, despite the dubious quality of his science fiction Jack Heming was a fan of the genre. Not only did he attend a number of the Sydney Futurians' regular meetings, but he also accepted the role of president of the Southern Cross Futurian Society when it was formed in 1942.

Next up was **Vol Molesworth Jnr**, the son of Voltaire Molesworth, a journalist and member of the NSW Parliament. In 1939, Molesworth, along with a number of fellow students who were also science fiction fans, founded the Sydney Futurians. After gaining his Intermediate Certificate (which would make him about 15), Molesworth left school to become a cadet journalist. While in his late teens he began to sell novella-length stories to Currawong and other micro-publishers. Most of what was bought by Currawong Publishing were detective/mystery stories, but he did manage two SF sales to them.<sup>3</sup> By the 1950s, however, Molesworth had lost all interest in pulp-style writing and his only (unsuccessful) attempts at fiction were of a more introspective and serious nature.

Despite no longer writing SF, Vol Molesworth remained a fan of the genre and was an active participant in Sydney science fiction fandom all through the 1950s.

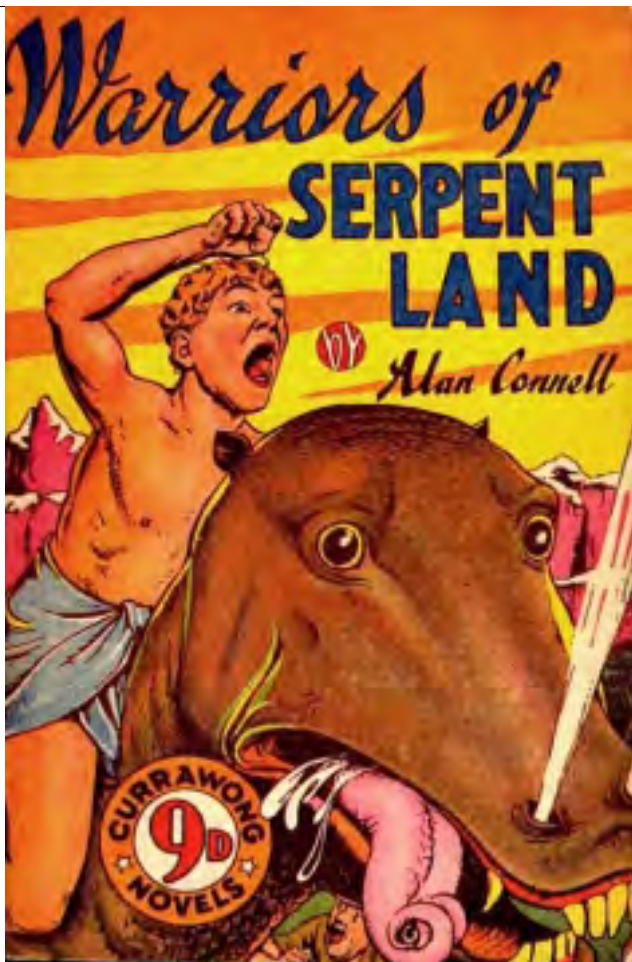


Last was **Alan Connell**, about whom I know little. Luckily *Flame: A Magazine of Fiction* published a short autobiographical sketch by Connell: 'Raised and educated in Mosman, NSW. Left school when I was 14, spent some time in country districts, and eventually was faced with the problem of whether I should become a farm hand or return to the city. I still wonder if I shouldn't have stayed with the cows. Back in Sydney, I purchased a typewriter on monthly instalments. My first appearance in print was in an American magazine of furious fiction. Followed stories in various Australian monthlies and weeklies.'

Alan Connell was probably the most successful local author in regards to SF of this period, as he had a number of stories published in *Wonder Stories* during 1935-36. He does seem to have stopped writing after the war. I've not been able to locate any evidence of his stories being published after 1945.

So here we have another mystery. If Currawong was able to publish so much SF during the war, then why the abrupt end to what had been, at least at first, a successful venture? Even if Vol Molesworth was no longer interested in writing pulp fiction and Alan Connell had, to the best of my knowledge, given up writing altogether, there was still always J. W. Heming to fill the gap. Unless





**Vol Molesworth.**

those boxes held by the State Library of New South Wales hold untold secrets, I suppose we will never know.

All I can tell you for now is that it wouldn't be for another three years before Transport Publications would once more take up the cause of locally published SF with their Scientific Thriller series.

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So what were these attempts at science fiction like? Were they truly as crude and primitive as I've made out? In *Science & Fantasy Fan Reporter* 25 Colin Roden summarises the plot of **J. W. Heming's *The Living Dead*** thus:

Story is that of a mad (of course) scientist, Dr von Steiff, who dreams of producing a perfect race by replacing diseased organs with healthy ones.

Hero Fred West dies on page 1 of consumption, is rejuvenated by the doctor, and returns to life. He becomes chief assistant, but is prisoner on the doctor's island.

Next corpse arrives for rejuvenating, and is found to be a woman (you guessed it). West and Demon (a sub-human servant) kidnap a girl so

as to get healthy organs for the operation.

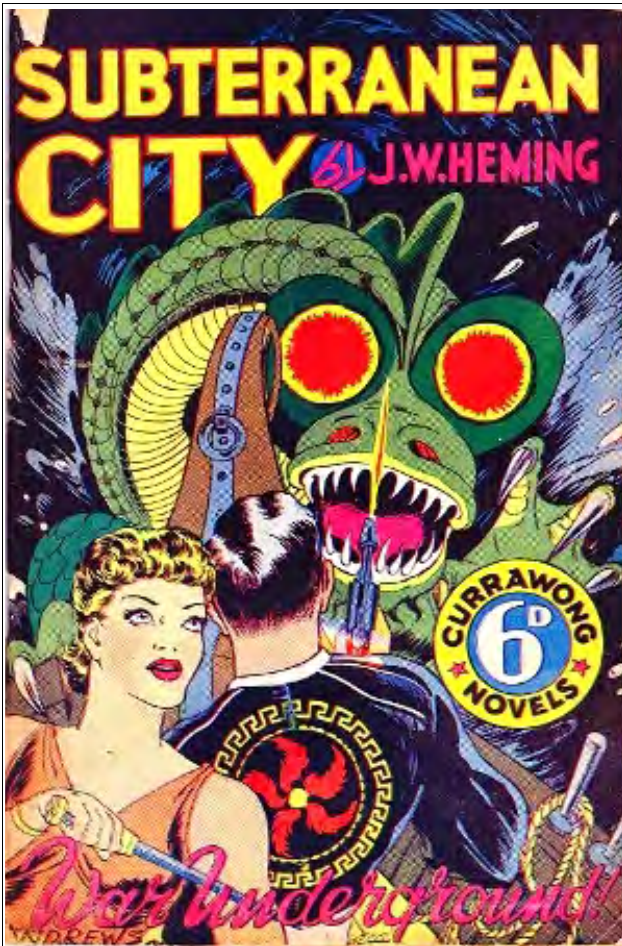
Description of the operation lasts until the middle of the book is reached. From there on science is replaced by adventure, and the story ends with Demon and the doctor killing each other.

Although the story is crude and the science is neglected towards the end, it is science-fiction, and thus raises hope, though not very great, of other and better publications to follow.

As you can see, Roden was being as positive as he could, but to me the above reads like the plot of a Victorian Era melodrama, more *Varney the Vampire* than *The War of the Worlds* if you get my drift.

Anyway, editor Roden continues to put on a brave face in *Science & Fantasy Fan Reporter* 27 when he summarises **J. W. Heming's** second effort, ***Subterranean City***:

Story is of the type that does not need very much science. Explorers journey into the Earth



in a vessel called the Mole, and crash in the midst of some ancient Romans, twelve miles beneath the surface. After fighting and beating some more ancient Romans, who live in a neighbouring cave, the whole race is wiped out by floods. Hero and side-kick escape with respective girl friends, whom they found down there.

That summary is not meant to ridicule the book, but is shortened to save space. It seems that in Heming we have a good hope for the future. His style is still crude, but his ideas are good, and he may rise high in Australian science-fiction.

Again, this summary reads more like the plot of a nineteenth-century lost worlds novel than anything resembling the science fiction of US magazines like *Amazing Stories* or *Astounding Science Fiction*. Still, given everything that had happened since war had been declared, it's hard to fault a science fiction fan like Roden for clutching at straws.

- 1 New South Wales.
- 2 Just as an aside, Colin Roden in *Science &*

*Fantasy Fan Reporter* 28 mentioned that another Sydney fan, David R. Evans, had told him that the editor of Currawong stf — presumably this means Mr Gardner — used to publish *Flame: A Magazine of Fiction*. The four issues of that magazine were published by Australian Industry Ltd of 160 Castlereagh Street and were edited by L. L. Woolacott in 1936 before ceasing publication. So if David Evans' claim is to be relied upon, Mr Gardner definitely had some prior experience in regards to publishing. What his role at Currawong was, whether as the owner of the company, or merely an employee, remains unclear.

- 3 Molesworth had four other known SF sales during this period: *Stratosphere Patrol* — Transport Publications, 1943; *Spaceward Ho!* — Transport Publications, 1944; *Three Rocketeers* — Transport Publications, 1944; *Wolfblood* — J. Dennett, 1944

— **Kim Huett**, August 2023



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## Colin Steele's Bookworld

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**COLIN STEELE**, Emeritus Fellow, ANU, writes:

I have been, or rather had been, a reviewer for the *Canberra Times* since 1979, initially for science fiction and fantasy, but in recent decades over a wider range of books. Over that period, the newspaper has gone through several ownerships, including a period when it was owned by Fairfax Media and was running reviews from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. Local book reviewers came back into their own again in 2019 when the *Canberra Times* was included in the purchase of the Australian Community Media network (ACM).

In July 2023, however, ACM management decided to no longer use outside reviewers in the *Canberra Times* to cover cultural activities, especially art, music and books. This was cited as a budget measure, but given the average payment of \$100 per review — the same as two decades previously — and the fact that reviews were syndicated across roughly 100 ACM newspapers and websites across Australia, the cost per reviewer was roughly 1 dollar per outlet, so this did not seem economically significant in the totality of the newspaper. Nor was any discussion entered into as to alternatives, including sponsorship.

Despite a significant number of readers wanting access to informed music, art, and book reviews, the cuts have led to a reduction of the book pages to two pages on a Saturday and their total elimination on a Sunday. On Saturdays, one page is given over to a book review and forthcoming events, and the other consists of eight reviews based largely on the blurbs of the books. It was argued that there were few advertisements on the book pages, yet the same scrutiny was not applied to the lack of advertisements on the 6 to 8 pages of sport each day at the weekend. More people go to cultural events in Australia than sporting events.

Colin Steele now reviews regularly for the *Canberra City News*, which also has a vibrant arts page online run by former *Canberra Times* arts editor Helen Musa. Colin is forever grateful to Bruce Gillespie for his ongoing support for the books column in *SF Commentary*. Colin is also a regular reviewer for the quarterly journal of the Australian Book Collectors Society of Australia, which recently awarded him life membership for his reviews over a 20-year period.

Apart from book reviews, Colin's main ANU activity is convening and organising the free ANU/Canberra Times Meet the Author events, which he has been running since 1987.



Colin Steele, 2023.



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## Mikey Robins salutes history's forgotten knuckleheads

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Mikey Robins.

**Mikey Robins: 'I have found writing ... Maybe that's why I have mellowed. I have found my thing.' In his first review for *City News*, COLIN STEELE journeys through a new book about stupidity by comedian Mikey Robins:**

Mikey Robins is one of Australia's best-known comedians and broadcasters, following his years hosting Triple J's *National Breakfast Show* and TV's *Good News Week*.

In recent years, in addition to his media and comedy appearances, he has published three books exploring the idiosyncrasies of humanity.

His first book, *Seven Deadly Sins and One Very Naughty Fruit*, publicised as 'an irreverent romp through the history of food', was followed by *Reprehensible: Polite Histories of Bad Behaviour*, a guide to 'some of the most shameful behaviour indulged in by humanity's most celebrated figures'.

Now comes his third book, *Idiots, Follies and Misadventures*, an eclectic 370 pages of the 'great stuff-ups in history', in which Mikey reveals that

human stupidity has been our constant companion.

Mikey's books combine his comedic roots with his love of history. Mikey calls himself 'a history nerd'. At high school, he topped his year in History before gaining an Arts degree at Newcastle University. He currently co-hosts a successful podcast series, *Heroes and Howlers*, with his friend, Oxford history graduate Paul Wilson.

Mikey reflects: 'The overriding narrative of our species would be thousands of years of achievements ... Yet there are times I'm sure we've all looked at our fellow humans and pondered, sure, harnessing fire was an earth-shaking achievement, but how did we ever make it out of the cave without spearing each other in the damn foot?'

The phrase 'history is written by the victors' was popularised by Winston Churchill. However, Mikey bemoans the fact that history is rarely written about the stupid. He argues history books often omit tales of human fallibility: 'We overlook the dubious and ridiculous contributions made by history's tawdry parade of knuckleheads.'

Mikey doesn't quantify stupidity. Instead, he cites Italian-born economist Carlo M Cipolla, whose 1976 article 'The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity' offered defining laws of observable stupidity, which Mikey strongly affirms are still relevant some 50 years later.

His take on history is that 'while the technology and the costumes have changed, the human impulses are the same'. He wrote his book during the Covid lockdown, a time when 'we had people who ended up in hospital because they took fish-tank bleach to ward off the virus ... Right now, the net is responsible for the surge of a lot of stupid conspiracy theories.'

Mikey's historical examples of stupidity include pastoralist Thomas Austin who in 1859 released European 'sports rabbits' on his Victorian rural property — and we all know the consequences of that action.

In the chapter 'Pull my Finger' he recounts how German romantic composer Robert Schumann's use of a homemade finger-stretching device allegedly ruined his ability to play a piano.

His chapter 'Please Rewind, No Seriously Can We Please Rewind' documents how in September 2000 the directors of the huge American

Blockbuster video chain turned down the approaches of a young company called Netflix. Blockbuster went bankrupt in 2010 with nearly \$1 billion of debt.

King O'Malley told the Australian Parliament in October 1903 that 'the history of the world shows that cold climates have produced the greatest geniuses', which he used in his push for Canberra as the national capital. Mikey criticises 'a really European and imperialistic way of looking at the world'.

Mikey is someone who has struggled to control his weight since childhood: 'I have to confess that I have occasionally grasped at weight-loss straws that I knew in my heart of hearts were nothing more than well-marketed folly.' He says that turning 60 felt like winning a bet.

In the chapter 'Rub a Dub Dumb', he reflects that even at his most desperate he would not have fallen for something as 'fundamentally insane' as a soap that 'promised to wash away fat and years of age ... and reduce any part of the body desired without affecting other parts'. Yet this was a claim made by a company that traded in Britain in the early 1920s under the name La-Mer Laboratories.

Mikey says he has now 'reached a very lucky phase in his life. It's that rare thing, in the third act, I have found writing. Maybe that's why I have mellowed. I have found my thing.'

He hopes his new book with its 'rather ridiculous cautionary tales' will 'hopefully amuse and add some perspective to our current rash of stupidity'.

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## Science fiction and fantasy books

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### **A STROKE OF THE PEN: THE LOST STORIES** by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday; \$32.99)

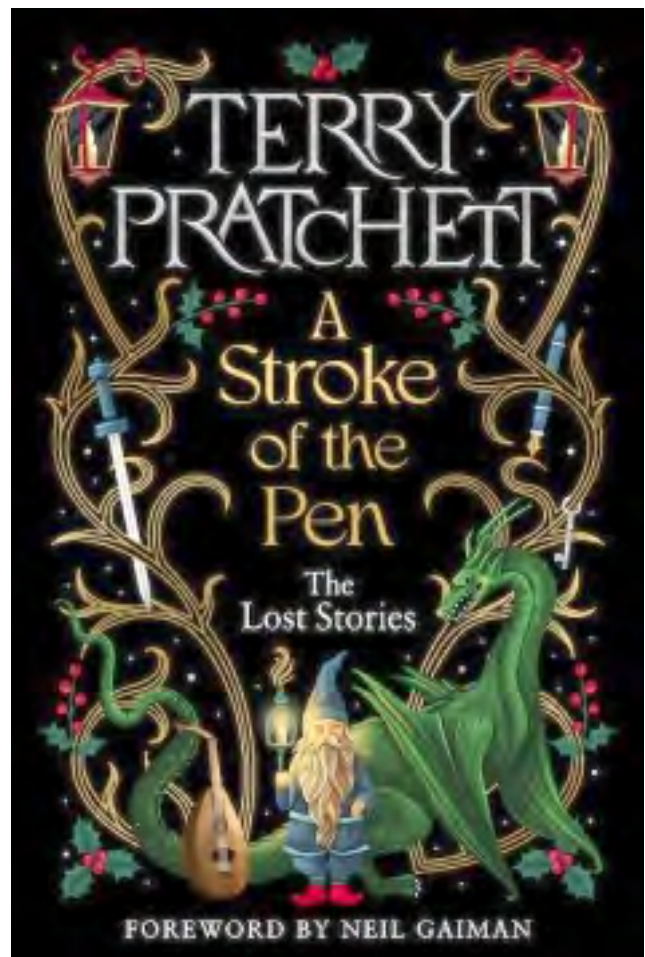
**Terry Pratchett** (1948–2015) left instructions that after his death his remaining, largely unpublished writings should be destroyed, and indeed they were. The hard drive with the manuscripts was crushed by a steamroller authorised by Rob Wilkins, Pratchett's former assistant, biographer, and now head of the Pratchett literary estate.

Wilkins was, however, unaware of the 20 early Pratchett stories unearthed in the newspaper collection of the British Library, and now published in *A Stroke of the Pen*. The discovery of the stories is down to a small group of Pratchett's fans.

The last and longest story in the collection, 'The Quest for the Keys', was published in 36 short instalments in the *Western Daily Press* in 1984. Pratchett fan Chris Lawrence brought them to the attention of Colin Smythe, Pratchett's agent, in 2022. Lawrence as a teenager had cut away all the dates and citations to the newspaper and wanted to know more.

Enter Pat and Jan Harkin, who began searching decades of the newspaper files of the British Library at Boston Spa, being unaware of its publication date. Pratchett's stories in the *Western Daily Press* were published pseudonymously, as he was working for another newspaper at the time.

The Harkins were aware of other Pratchett stories from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which led to their cross-textual referencing that



Pratchett was writing stories under the name Patrick Kearns. Kearns was his mother's maiden name.

Rob Wilkins has said: 'Rediscovery of these stories is nothing short of a miracle. While Terry was always very focused on the next novel and maintained that his unpublished works should never be released, he always held a grudging admiration for his younger self's work, and he would be tickled to see these stories celebrated in one wonderful volume.' As Neil Gaiman writes in his excellent introduction, 'Through all of these stories we watch young Terry Pratchett becoming Terry Pratchett.'

None of the stories is set in Pratchett's Discworld, the first book of which, *The Colour of Magic*, was published in 1983, but 'The House of Keys' definitely foreshadows 'the world Sir Terry would go on to create'.

It opens with the words: 'Far away and long ago, when dragons still existed and the only arcade game was ping-pong in black and white, a wizard cautiously entered a smoky tavern in the evil, ancient, foggy city of Morpork and sidled up to the bar.'

Ankh has yet to be added, but we do have a devious wizard, foreshadowing the Unseen University wizards, and the hero Kron the Barbarian, who is physically more muscular than Cohen the Barbarian. There are some wonderful set pieces, including the seven-foot Kron, wearing leathers and furs and 'dribbling a bit', defusing a robbery in a fish-and-chip shop and being rewarded with piles of cod, mushy peas, and chips.

Elsewhere in the stories, meet Og the inventor, the first caveman to cultivate fire, and more stories set in Blackbury, the small market town, such as the 'The Great Blackbury Pie', which add to those previously published in Pratchett's collection *The Time Travelling Caveman* (2020).

While most are very short stories, they do offer early indications of the humour and invention of Pratchett's Discworld, for example, in the delightful 'How Good King Wencelas went Pop for the Feast of Stephen'.

Rob Wilkins concludes, 'They are all gems. Each and every one of them is fantastic because you know you get to the end of these and there are no more. We are not going to find any more, so every word you read you're closer to getting to the end.'

## SIR HERWARD AND MISTER FITZ: STORIES OF THE WITCH KNIGHT AND THE PUPPET SORCERER

by Garth Nix (Allen & Unwin; \$32.99)

**Garth Nix** is one of Australia's most successful writers, with than six million copies of his books sold around the world and with his books translated into 42 languages. He has won multiple Aurealis and Ditmar Awards, and the Mythopoeic Award.

His new collection of short stories, *Sir Herward and Mister Fitz: Stories of the Witch Knight and the Puppet Sorcerer*, which brings together eight previously published stories and one new story, is marketed as adult fantasy but, like many of his books, it transcends age frameworks.

Garth Nix has said in a recent interview: 'There is no great difference between writing for young adults and adults, most of the time, and in fact most of my YA books have been published for adults in other countries. It is often only a marketing decision about whether something is initially published as YA or adult, particularly in fantasy and SF. This is always a source of confusion and/or discussion. I personally think YA





should always be considered a subset of adult, the clue is in the name itself.'

Garth Nix says in his introduction that the first story in the series, 'Sir Hereward and Mister Fitz Go to War Again', was developed in late 2005/early 2006. He now describes his famous fantasy couple as follows: 'Sir Hereward is a knight-artillerist, the only male child of a society of witches who are part of an ancient organisation dedicated to keeping the world safe from inimical otherworldly entities often considered to be gods; Mister Fitz is a sorcerous puppet who is also a sorcerer himself, and was also once Hereward's nanny, so they have an interesting relationship. The two of them travel a baroque world of sorcery, gunpowder weapons and monsters, ridding it of hostile gods. It is sword and sorcery with muskets and cannon, in the tradition of Fritz Leiber, Michael Moorcock, and L. Sprague De Camp, among others.'

Sir Hereward and Mister Fitz are agents of 'The Council of the Treaty for the Safety of the World', charged with confronting malevolent gods/godlets from other dimensions and either destroying them or sending them back to their original dimension.

Hereward and Fitz cloak their overall mission by operating as hired mercenaries offering Hereward's military skills and Fitz's sorcery powers. Hereward usually sets up the conflict with the godlet, albeit with occasional female diversions, with Fitz usually concluding the encounter at the supernatural level with the god in question.

In the first adventure, 'Sir Hereward and Mister Fitz Go to War Again', they arrive in Shūme, a prosperous town controlled by a god, Tanesh, whose parasitical powers have reduced the power and wealth of the neighboring towns. Victory comes, but at a cost to a female member of the city guard to whom Hereward is attracted before Fitz delivers the supernatural *coup de grâce*.

'Beyond the Sea Gate of the Scholar-Pirates of Sarskøe' is a story with mild echoes of Lovecraftian horror, in which Fitz and Hereward take to the seas to battle a starfish godlet, aided initially by a shape-shifting female pirate captain.

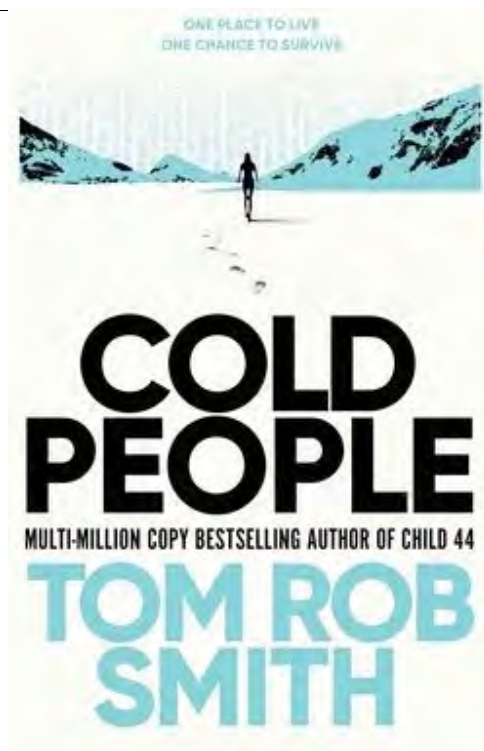
The new story, 'The Field of Fallen Foe', has Fitz and Hereward reluctantly seeking an ancestor in a field where monster skeletons emit a deadly miasma, a task that raises several moral issues and a possible defiance of The Council's mandate.

## COLD PEOPLE

by Tom Rob Smith

(Simon and Schuster; \$32.99)

British author **Tom Rob Smith** achieved best-



selling status with his novel *Child 44* (2008), which resulted in two sequels, *The Secret Speech* and *Agent Six*. A great deal of his recent creative effort, however, has gone into screenwriting. His screenplay *American Crime Story: The Assassination of Gianni Versace* gained him an Emmy and a 2018 Golden Globe for the best miniseries.

In *Cold People*, his latest novel, Smith adopts a wide cinematic SF canvas, although the issues are firmly based on contemporary events. Aliens arrive on Earth in 2023 and give the earth's population 30 days to relocate to Antarctica otherwise they will be killed. The result is 'the largest genocide ever committed'. Smith uses the aliens, whose arrival and actions are never explained, only as a means to explore issues of migration and survival.

Smith asks, 'What if an imposed mass migration of the entire human race meant that all the things we believe in — status, inherited property, the dividing lines of nation states — were suddenly wiped away? What if some superior intelligence ordered us to evacuate to the worst piece of land on the planet?', which, for the remnants of the human race, is Antarctica.

Smith writes: 'In Antarctica, there's this enormous sense of space but because the conditions are so hostile, people are huddled together, which results in a strange mix of both claustrophobia and physical emptiness, which is rare.'

Smith follows two main settlements in Antarctica over two decades from 2023, Hope Town, with its 'bohemian culture' where the arts are 'as important to survival as housing and food' and McMurdo City, where former prime ministers and

presidents, billionaires and scientific leaders settled.

Genetic engineering, through the 'Cold People Project', is seen as the key to survival for humanity. Developments are reflected in the story of the two main characters, Hope Town couple Liza and Atto, who have an 'ice-adapted' teenage daughter, Echo, with dragon-fly eyes, lizard-like scales, and modified blood cells.

An even more dramatic genetic mutation is the product of Israeli geneticist's Yotam's creation of Eitan, with intentional echoes to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster. Do the scientific experiments on humanity entail, however, creating 'aliens of our own', whose coldness to humanity could echo those of the extra-terrestrial aliens two decades before?

Smith tackles big issues, but the end result is a somewhat clunky narrative with relatively little character development. Those looking for a deeper fictional exploration of the issues of sustainability in a hostile environment could turn to Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* (1998).

## PINK SLIME

by **Fernanda Trías** (Scribe; \$29.99)

Pink Slime (*Mugra Rosa*) by Uruguayan award-winning author **Fernanda Trías**, admirably translated by Heather Cleary, reflects contemporary fears in regard to pandemics and climate change. *Mugra Rosa* was first published in Uruguay at the height of Covid in 2020. The book won the National Uruguayan Literature Prize and the prestigious Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Literature Prize in 2021, an annual award from the Guadalajara International Book Fair, which recognises the best literary work by a woman across the Spanish-speaking world. It was also selected by *The New York Times en Español* as one of the 10 Best Books of 2020.

Trías, who now lives in Colombia, in her acceptance speech, outlined the themes her book deals with and the threat humanity faces through climate change. 'People have already told me I predicted the pandemic. If each generation imagines an apocalypse, I belong to the generation that is living through climate terror. The story has something of the fantastical to it, but in the double meaning of the word, and if it felt fantastical it was precisely because it was real,' she said. 'The question therefore should not be, "Why write a climate dystopia", but why not write one?'

She continued, 'I wanted to work on reality gone awry, and that awryness I think is enhanced when the dystopia resembles the real world more closely,

when difference is just by degrees ... When I write I don't care about genre; those have more to do with the critics, who put texts in certain categories. I have always worked a lot on the construction of characters, and I wanted to do what I have always been doing, which is to write a novel of characters, very psychological, but in a very dystopian context, and with that mixture of focusing on the conflicts of people within an environment in which a dystopian conflict has occurred.'

Her novel, with sparse clear prose, is set in a South American port city, resembling Montevideo, whose waters have been filled with contaminated air from toxic algae, 'pink slime'. The rich have fled inland, leaving the majority of the population confronting blackouts and food shortages. Trias' unnamed narrator is disentangling herself from relationships with her husband, and her mother, and is looking after an infected boy, Mauro. The city's physical collapse is contrasted with the emotional collapse of relationships with its beauty and pain and the emergence of individual strength to overcome the collective and individual fear.

As in her previous novel *The Rooftop*, the main character turns her apartment into a fortress from the world, which becomes even more of a fortress in the forced evacuations that come to the city.

Trías probes the darkness underpinning our individual protective instincts. She has said, 'We're all frightened of things we don't understand, of things that seem different, which is why we live in a world divided by hatred, xenophobia, transphobia, etc. These prejudices are all really just extreme forms of fear, which is why literature can be an important weapon in the fight against hate: because it brings us closer together; because it builds bridges of empathy.'

Trías has also commented that her being born in Uruguay during the period of the dictatorship (1973–1985) has perhaps led to an underlying sense of uncertainty and fear in her writings. The penultimate paragraph of the novel is worded, 'I cannot stop future that has already arrived.'

Trías has said she plans to write more eco-based fiction. 'There are some themes in *Pink Slime* that I want to explore further.' Trias has decidedly arrived as a major literary talent.

## SEASON OF SKULLS

by **Charles Stross** (Orbit; \$49.99)

*Season of Skulls* continues **Charles Stross'** 'Tales of the New Management' series, following *Dead Lies Dreaming* and *Quantum of Nightmares*, all contained within his Lovecraftian 'Laundry Files' series. *Season of Skulls* is essentially a book

for the many Stross fans. New readers will need to start at the beginning to pick up all the myriad fascinating plot lines.

The Stross website notes the three novels to date are

a series of Urban Fantasy novels with a streak of Cosmic Horror. They're set in the same world as his Laundry Files series, but mostly at a later point in time ... the first New Management novel takes place about a year after the as-yet-unpublished final Laundry Files story. This is a Britain after the apocalypse under the demonic New Management government with a Prime Minister who is an eldritch god of unimaginable power. Magic is real, the government employs elves and riot police ride unicorns. Oh, and a growing number of civilians are manifesting superpowers ... Whereas the Laundry books are focused on the government secret service dealing with all of this weirdness, the protagonists of the New Management stories are civilians without that sort of backing. Although they're not without their own resources. And they're not exactly normal,

either.

The first two books focused on the machinations of billionaire Rupert de Montfort Bigge and his corporate vehicle, the Bigge Organisation. In *Season of Skulls*, Eve Sharkey is now in charge of the Bigge Corporation after Rupert, Eve's boss, had been banished by her from the real world in a supernatural duel.

But:

Rupert had imposed a *geas* on her — an obedience compulsion — as one of the initial conditions of her employment. She'd thought it contemptibly weak at the time, and he'd never tried to use it, so she'd never tried to break it. He ensured her compliance through traditional means — gaslighting and blackmail — and she was completely taken in by his pantomime of sorcerous incompetence. When she finally discovered the proxy marriage certificate after his disappearance, it became clear that he'd known exactly what he was doing with the *geas*: the bumbling was a malevolent act ... Since discovering the document, Eve had awakened in a bath of cold sweat at least three times a week, stricken by the conviction that her scheme to rid the world of Rupert had failed.

In addition, if Eve needed motivation, the government demands that she finds out if Rupert is actually dead. To do that, Eve must travel the 'Ghost Roads' back in time to an alternate early nineteenth century.

Stross is adept at mixing genres, and in this one he excels in a magical Regency Gothic setting circa 1816, which bizarrely also features links to The Village, that is, Portmerion from Patrick McGoochan's 1960s classic TV series *The Prisoner*.

Stross nicely frameworks Eve as a single woman in a Regency male environment where she will have to confront Rupert. Eve knew that 'living in a Jane Austen setting [would] be more problematic than any number of starry-eyed fans assumed, and [she] was never starry-eyed at the best of times', but that doesn't prepare Eve for the contemporary domestic, social, and cultural settings. Eve follows a dangerous and unromantic path in a magic metaverse to ensure that the future remains Rupert-free.

As Stross states in his final acknowledgments 'there's room for Eve's story to continue'.





## QUANTUM RADIO

by A. G. Riddle (Head of Zeus; \$32.99)

American author **A. G. Riddle** had critical success with his last Crichtonesque novel, *Lost in Time*, but he may be less successful with his latest novel ***Quantum Radio***.

The novel starts off well, when his main character, Dr Tyson Klein, a young quantum physicist working at CERN, the Large Hadron Collider, discovers a structured data stream, which he calls quantum radio, most probably emanating from an alternate universe.

Klein soon finds that such knowledge is dangerous. After delivering his findings at a scientific conference, a bomb that explodes in his flat emanates from a mysterious group called the Covenant. Ty goes on the run, before being drawn into a secret US military unit working on the data.

There is much initial quantum science 101, but the science focus never really plays out in depth. The novel changes plot lines in the second half of the book to follow an alternate World War II history but not in the same class as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, before concluding with the realisation of the competing forces for control of the multiverse.

Riddle says in his authorial conclusion that his novel is about 'escape' and 'about worlds where anything is possible'. It is also 'a novel about families and friends who have been separated and are finding their way back to each other'.

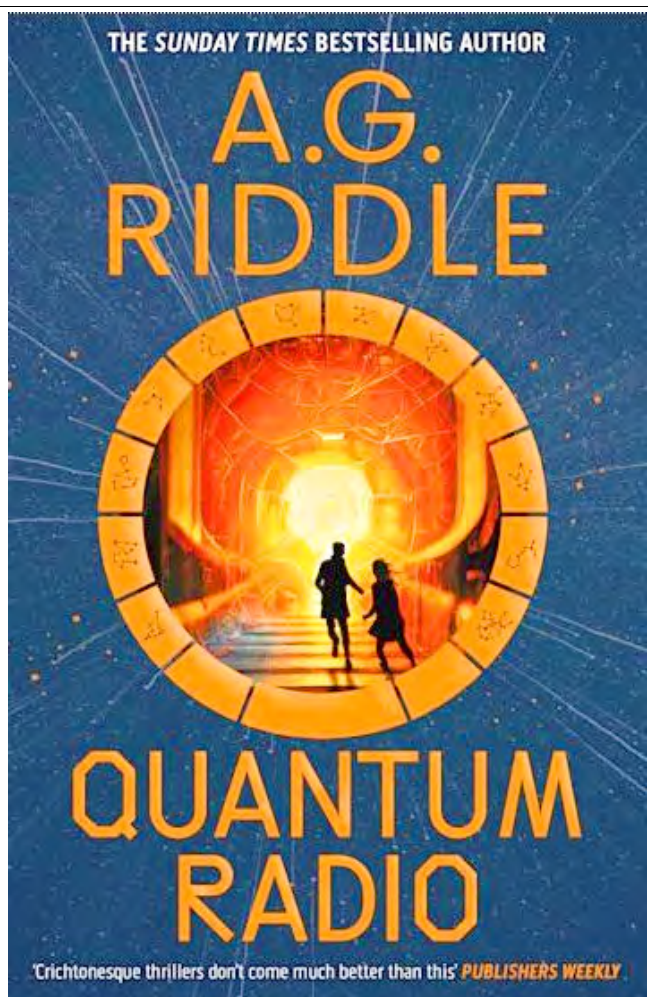
Unfortunately, the combination of intended themes and diverse genres, coupled with one-dimensional characterisations, blunt the impact of the opening chapters. Riddle may bring these together more successfully in his projected future volumes of the series.

## MEMORY'S LEGION: THE COMPLETE EXPANSE STORY COLLECTION

by James S. A. Corey (Orbit; \$22.99)

**James S. A. Corey** is the pen name of American writers **Daniel Abraham** and **Ty Franck**, renowned for writing the Hugo Award-winning, best-selling SF series ***The Expanse***, which has also been made into a successful TV series.

In the series, humanity progresses from colonising the solar system to travelling beyond it through ring gates, a.k.a. alien wormholes. ***Memory's Legion*** brings together all the previously published short Expanse fiction, arranged chronologically, plus a new novella, 'The Sins of Our Fathers', set after the events of *Leviathan*

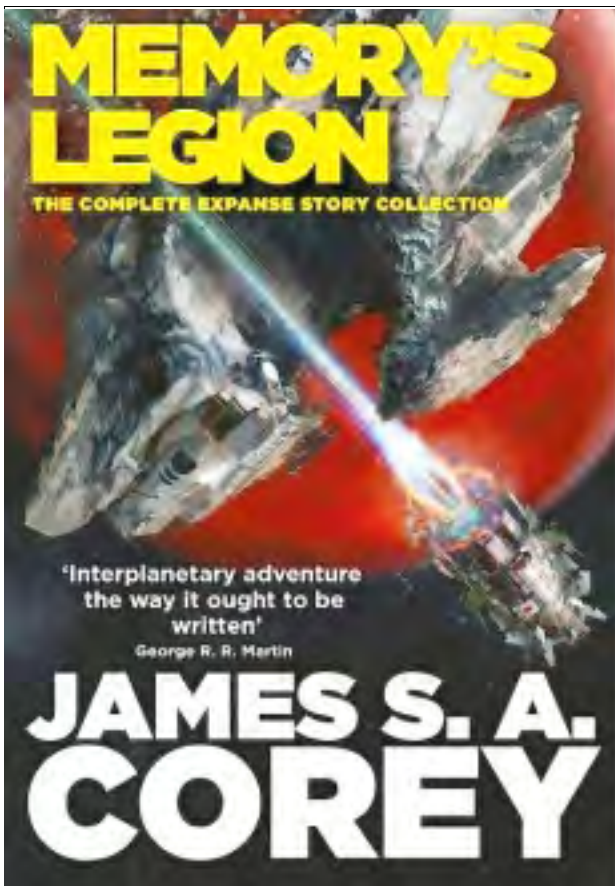


*Falls*, the last novel of the series. Each short story is buttressed by author notes, commenting on the stories' origins and their place in the series.

The first story, the 'Drive', predates the Expanse evolution and follows the invention of 'The Epstein Drive' by Solomon Epstein, which opens the solar system to human settlement and the asteroid belt to development. Solomon, however, is a technological prophet pointing the way to the promised land but who will never make it himself.

Underpinning the stories, some of which are set within a crime fiction framework, are reflections on the role of the individual — free will or predestination — and the power of big companies having an impact on the moral choices of the individual, as in the dark, almost Nietzschean story 'The Vital Abyss'.

The new novella, 'The Sins of Our Fathers', the last in the book, follows the inhabitants of a planet who are cut off and have to rely on their own limited, local resources, which leads to the paragraph that is echoed throughout the rest of the collection, 'When you look at history, you see the same kind of people doing the same stupid, selfish, delusional, gorgeous, kind, astonishing things that we do today. And we'll keep doing the same,



as long as the species survives. Technical knowledge advances. The organism stays the same.'

Given that the short stories interface to the main 'Expanses' series and link characters, such as the back story of Fred Johnson in the 'The Butcher of Anderson Station', *Memory's Legion* will largely appeal to the vast number of Expanses fans, who will be already aware of the series framework and the main characters within it.

### THE GHOST THEATRE

by Mat Osman (Bloomsbury; \$32.99)

**Mat Osman** is best known as a founding member and the bassist in the rock band Suede. In 2020 he published his first novel, *The Ruins*, which included elements of the fantastic. His second novel, *The Ghost Theatre*, combines the fantastic within the historic setting of Elizabethan England.

Osman has said that his original intention was to tell the story of a band, based on the Sex Pistols, to be set in Elizabethan London, but a BBC documentary about children kidnapped from the streets of London in order to perform at the Blackfriars theatre provides the framework for *The Ghost Theatre*.

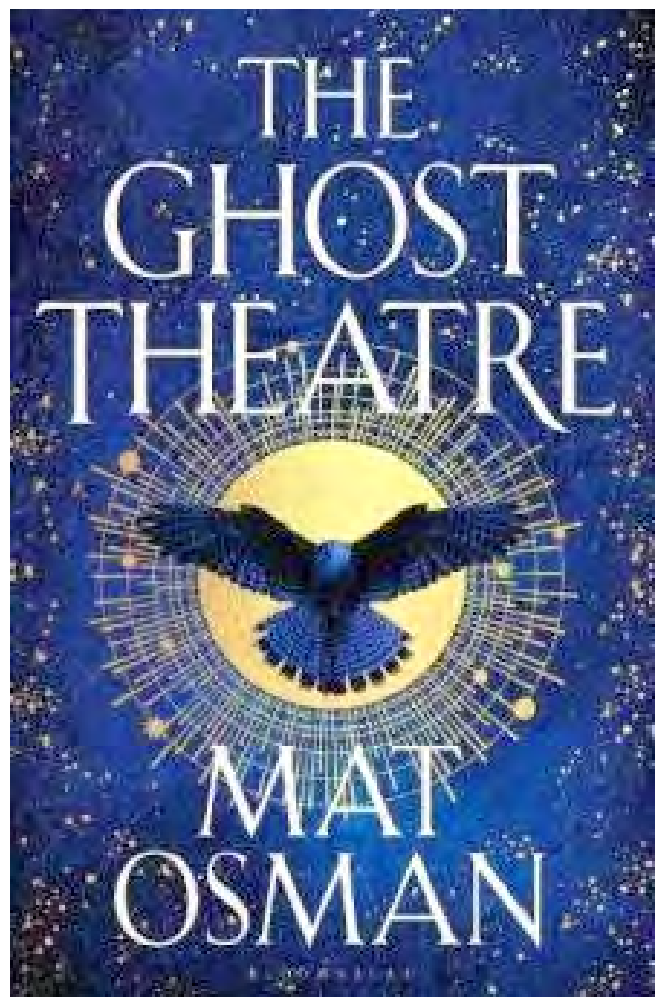
Blackfriars Theatre was originally a venue for the Children of the Chapel Royal, child actors associated with the Queen's chapel choirs. Osman

says 'almost every Londoner went to the theatre, so these children were as famous as you could be without being high-born, while at the same time being the lowest of the low, utterly despised. Actors and whores. The two terms were synonymous.' Osman's male characters, the majority of whom have been 'press ganged, bribed or plain kidnapped', are based in part on real-life Blackfriars' boys.

Osman's main character is Shay, a girl who delivers messages via rooftops — it's quicker that way than on the streets! Shay is part of the 'Aviscultan' sect, which believes that bird murmurations can provide indicators to future events.

Shay's life is overturned in 1601, when she meets and falls under the influence of Nonesuch, the charismatic young star actor and trickster. Aware of their theatrical exploitation, Nonesuch and Shay, disguised as a boy, set up a travelling 'ghost theatre' in the gritty streets of London, but fame brings trouble, as does Shay's constant releasing of birds from captivity.

Shay's trances during performances seem to predict the future, which brings her, through the alchemist John Dee, to the attention of the Queen herself. Shay's apparent occult powers lead to her





captivity and imprisonment in a London struck by plague, fire and political power struggles.

*The Ghost Theatre* is a picaresque novel, set in the underbelly of Elizabethan London, tempered by a realistic ending in which love and betrayal play out. *The Ghost Theatre* is an impressive addition to the historical fantasy genre.

**WHITE CAT, BLACK DOG**  
by Kelly Link (Head of Zeus; \$32.99)

*White Cat, Black Dog* is the impressive new collection from **Kelly Link**, a MacArthur Fellow, featuring illustrations by Australia's award-winning artist Shaun Tan. The prestigious and financially rewarding MacArthur citation noted in 2018 that Link was 'pushing the boundaries of literary fiction in works that combine the surreal and fantastical with the concerns and emotional realism of contemporary life'.

Since her first collection, *Stranger Things Happen* (2001), Link has been effectively straddling the so-called boundaries between literary and genre fiction. *White Cat, Black Dog* brings together seven modern fairy stories, jumping off fictional bases that include the Brothers Grimm, Madame d'Aulnoy, and Scottish ballads.

Link has said in relation to the book, 'I decided that I would set myself a rule — that any new story must engage in some way with a fairy tale. I find it helpful to make writing into a kind of game in one way or another, and then to take the game as seriously as possible ... I wanted the overall feeling of the book to be unpredictable in pleasurable ways, which ruled out making it only retellings. I wanted variation, and freedom to approach narrative in the way that best suited the people and the situations that I aimed to write about. I also wanted readers to approach the stories in their own way and engage with the original fairytales as much as they chose to. I like that putting the titles of fairy tales in parentheses renders them invisible to some readers. They are the bones. They help the stories move, but they're not necessarily the thing I want the reader to think of first.'

All the fairy-tale settings are updated or transformed from the originals. Dark woods become crowded airports, and princes and princesses are no longer straight sexual stereotypes. Thus, a king becomes a tech billionaire in 'The White Cat's Divorce', Link's rewriting of Madame d'Aulnoy's 'The White Cat'. The ageing billionaire, who seeks immortality, along with younger and younger wives, sends his three sons off on a quest to find the smallest and most beautiful dog they can find, informing them that the winner will become his



heir. Link has said, 'It is very difficult to remain young when one's children selfishly insist upon growing older.'

The youngest son wins the quest after meeting a white cat on a cannabis farm, subsequently transformed into a beautiful woman, who accompanies him home with a nutshell which, on being cracked open, reveals a beautiful minuscule dog. When the billionaire falls in love with the young woman the scene is set for a dramatic and ironic ending, framed by the words: 'If we let our fear of death stop us from what we wish most to do, then what is the point of living?'

Another strong story is the reworking of 'Snow-White and Rose-Red' into 'Skinder's Veil'. Andy, a postgraduate student, is invited to look after an isolated house in the Vermont hinterland in order to finish his dissertation, although with strict instructions on who is not to enter the house. Soon he has some unusual portal visitors, including Rose White and Rose Red and various animals.

Link has said, 'Because I often have a hard time sitting down to write, I wanted to write a kind of story where that was the main problem, and where the protagonist got some very unexpected and slightly disturbing aid with the work he needed to



do. I suppose there's a bit of "Rapunzel" in there as well'. Andy's stay will be rewarded in later life in mysterious ways after his unexpected encounter with Death.

In 'The Girl Who Did Not Know Fear', a reworking of the German legend published by the Brothers Grimm, 'The Boy Who Did Not Know Fear', a married lesbian professor is desperate to get home to her much younger wife. She is stranded, however, for days in the airport and the adjoining hotel reflecting on life. When she eventually gets a crowded plane home, she is forced to confront her fears and the dark secrets of her wife.

Link, who laces her stories with dark humour, and often outright horror, to probe contemporary society, has said: 'Humor and horror are both doors into story for me — and inside a story, they're paths to understanding or rearranging situations in which otherwise I (and perhaps the reader) might be overwhelmed in the most uninteresting ways.' Readers will never lose interest in Link's imaginative reworking of classic fairy tales.

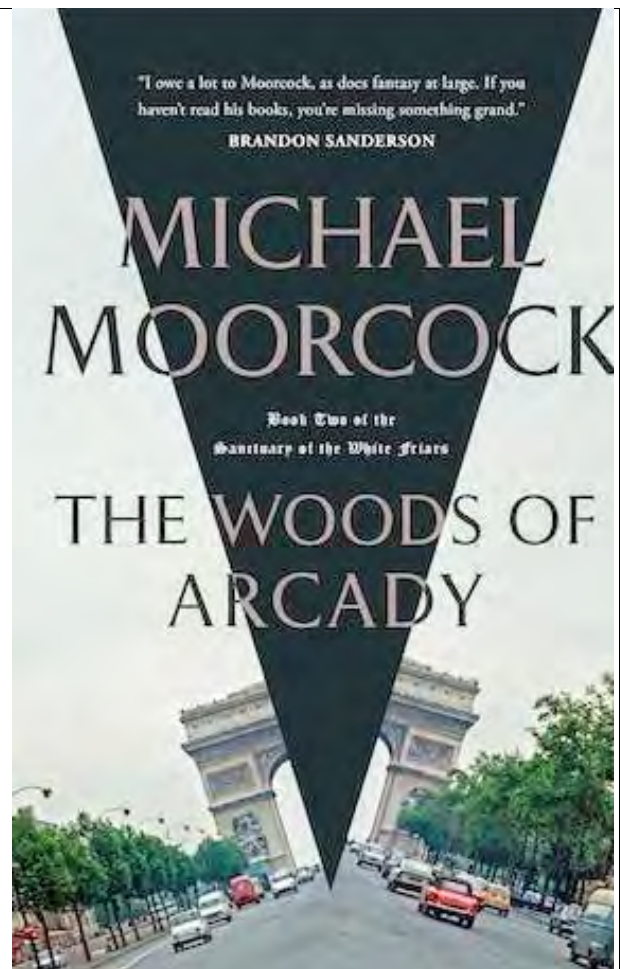
**THE WOODS OF ARCADY: BOOK TWO OF THE SANCTUARY OF THE WHITE FRIARS**  
by Michael Moorcock (Gollancz; \$32.99)

**Michael Moorcock**, a giant of SF and fantasy, is now 83. He is the author of 100 books and more than 150 short stories, the recipient of several lifetime achievement awards, including the Prix Utopiales, the SFWA, the Stoker, and the World Fantasy, and has been inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

This reviewer still remembers travelling from the Bodleian Library in Oxford in the early 1970s to London to collect archival material from Moorcock for lodging in the Bodleian. A galaxy now far far away.

It's eight years since he published in 2015 *The Whispering Swarm*, the first volume of a trilogy 'The Sanctuary of the White Friars', a mixture of Moorcock autobiography and fantasy. It's a strange eclectic mixture, and this reviewer would have preferred their separation. The autobiographical elements of *The Woods of Arcady* certainly need to be added to the previously published elements of Moorcock's life story.

*The Woods of Arcady* contains fascinating autobiographical reflections on the 1960s and 70s, when Moorcock was a prolific author and editor of the groundbreaking *New Worlds* magazine. However, these become increasingly mixed up with the Moorcock personal fantasy sections, the



fictional Lord Blackstone and his family and the 'Second Ether' book series.

The Moorcock the reader meets in this fantasy world deviates from the one in *The Whispering Swarm*, when Moorcock's fictional adventures take place in a section of London dubbed Alsacia. But, in the second book it's a younger Moorcock, not in Alsacia but one who takes a trip from London to Paris with his wife and family, where, one night, he meets Alexandre Dumas' four musketeers and takes part in an eventual extraordinary adventure in Africa.

In the autobiographical memoir sections, we have his comments on authors such as Angus Wilson, J. G. Ballard, Judith Merril, John Brunner, and Brian Aldiss. On the latter, he comments inter alia, 'Brian was nicer to you than you could be to him but expected complete reciprocation. Give him a negative review and he stopped being your friend for a year or two. Tom Disch was the same.' On Ballard, he comments that he was 'a loyal and honest friend' but 'remembering incidents in which we both figured, he almost always made himself the most dynamic protagonist of the story he was telling when often I remembered him as a retiring bystander'.

Moorcock's first wife Hilary Bailey (1938–2017)

is referred to throughout as 'Helena', and the sections cover their up-and-down marriage and relationships. They met at a party, Helena 'wearing a horrible tweed suit' but possessing 'an astonishing beauty, what I called post preRaphaelite ... Love at first sight'. They married in 1962, had three children, but Moorcock's attempts to become 'a better husband and father'

eventually foundered and they separated in the early 1970s.

The final volume, titled *The Wounds of Albion*, presumably will be the same multiverse mixture but, for many, separate books of fact and fiction would have been preferable in order to follow the always intriguing factual and fictional Moorcock.

## SF criticism

### **THE NEAR FUTURE IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FICTION: CLIMATE, RETREAT AND REVOLUTION** by David C. Sergeant (Cambridge University Press; \$141.95)

**Dr David Sergeant** is Associate Professor of Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature in the School of Society and Culture at Plymouth University.

His recent research, which crosses creative and critical fields, has focused on issues of the future, the Anthropocene, systemic change, planetary scale, and utopian thought. Sergeant believes the global climate crisis demands the 'radical transformation of every aspect of society, and the close cooperation of large bodies of people'.

To this end, he is also Principal Investigator of Net-Zero Visions, about which he has said, 'The imagination goes ahead of action. Picturing in detail how the world around you might be better can be the first step to making it so. However, while climate change affects everyone, different communities and individuals face different challenges in relation to it. Net-Zero Visions aims to support and encourage as many people as possible in exploring how the places where they live might change for the better, as a step towards making real the ambitious but urgently necessary goals of the Devon (UK) Carbon Plan and its goal to transition the county to net-zero emissions by 2050'.

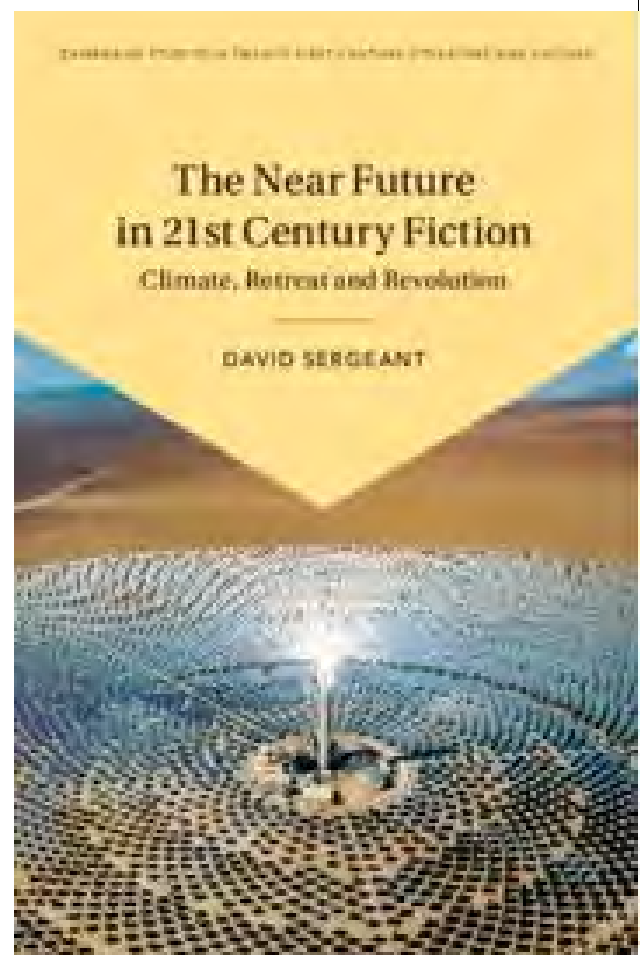
***The Near Future in 21st Century Fiction: Climate, Retreat and Revolution***, part of the Cambridge University Press 'Studies in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture', examines the title's theme in eight chapters covering 17 novels and one film — *Blade Runner 2049*.

Sergeant's focus is essentially within a UK and US spectrum, although Australian author James Bradley's novel *Clade* features significantly in the text. Sadly not covered is George Turner's prescient *The Sea and the Summer*, of which Lucy

Sussex has noted 'it would be celebrated internationally, variously termed the first and greatest novel of what has become a literary subgenre'.

Sergeant, who is not a fan of the terms 'climate fiction' or 'cli-fi', argues that 'this category is something between a distraction and a red herring, subsuming too many differences in genre, theme, approach and period to be useful'.

Sergeant's analysis sees near-future fiction split between two divergent paths. 'One seeks to retreat from climate change and the disruption it threatens to affluent lifestyles; the other tries to imagine new forms of community, and radical change, but struggles to locate a genre adequate



to the task. It in this struggle, however, that we begin to glimpse the outlines of an emergent near future form: a revolution fit for the Anthropocene’.

The examination and analysis of those two paths is detailed and informative, including a long introduction, but it comes with a caveat. This is a book largely intended for an academic audience and, as such, the text is often dense and written within the discipline tropes. The price will also deter a wider general readership but academic monograph pricing is not simply restricted to Cambridge University Press.

The first two chapters explore how ‘the domestic near future often draws on the adventure novel and its roots in the nineteenth-century romance, as a way of enacting a sort of ritual exposure to climate change which allows for a therapeutic return to a re-consolidated domestic sphere’.

Sergeant provides a detailed analysis of Megan Hunter’s *The End We Start From*, Australian author James Bradley’s *Clade*, and Natasha Carthews’ *All Rivers Run Free*, which ‘recoil from the prospect of such cooperation, withdrawing instead into the private dramas of couples and families’. In subsequent chapters, in the first thematic half of the book, Sergeant covers novels such as *The Circle* by Dave Eggers and *Odds Against Tomorrow* by Nathaniel Rich.

In the second half of the book Sergeant’s focus is on works that tackle ‘imagining new kinds of collectivity, and radical change, though they frequently struggle to find a generic form adequate to the task’.

Chapter 6 examines near-future novels, such as Emily St John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, that ‘try to imagine a collective more expansive than the domestic unit, and how such imagining is undermined in part by issues of identity, in part by the ideological freight of the genres brought to this task, and in part by their inability to pull free from the malign gravitational force field of US history and its treatment of race and gender’.

Chapter 7 examines ‘a set of near future fictions which centre on a revolutionary break’, including *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead and *WalkAway* by Corey Doctorow, while Chapters 5 and 8 are devoted to Kim Robinson’s *Red Moon* and *New York 2140*.

Sergeant, who terms Robinson the ‘most acclaimed living novelist of utopia and Left politics’, argues that Robinson’s *New York 2140* is a novel that harnesses ‘various dialectical move-

ments — between past and future, genre and instance, fiction and nonfiction — the most tensioned of all those movements, between collective and individual identity, remains an unsolved problem, even as it is the possible catalyst of utopian impulse.’

Sergeant suggests ‘that in its imbrication of the present with the future *New York 2140* resembles not so much science fiction, the genre commonly associated with depictions of the future, as the historical novel, inheriting from its nineteenth-century exemplars and moving beyond its post-modern incarnations in such a way that Robinson’s novel comes to seem the genre’s logical successor. And just as *New York 2140* marks a temporal innovation in the historical novel, so it also innovates in its treatment of the problematic relationship between individual and general, particular and universal, which has always lain at the heart of both critical and creative treatments of the genre’.

Sergeant references these near-future novels to the writings of American literary critic Fredric Jameson, who ‘famously posited this convergence of history and fiction on a point in the future as a necessary next step for the historical novel — ‘our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures as well — and it was always at least implicit in his interest in science fiction and utopia’.

Sergeant comments in the context of Robinson: ‘Perhaps Jameson’s critical innovation in this context is almost so obvious or so foundational as to be easily missed. The conception of history itself is perpetually elusive and under (re)construction such that it is not some objective truth to be projected more or less schematically but an emergent property of each text not necessarily synchronizing with that text’s conscious representational intentions’.

In conclusion, Sergeant’s analysis of texts comprehensively ‘traces the path from the domestic near future and its conservative retreat in the challenges of the Anthropocene, to the near future genre revolution in which the historical collective and historical change are driving elements’.

It’s just a pity that academics in the contemporary competitive university environment have to aim for specific disciplinary markets and research metrics rather than propagating an accessible text for the wider spectrum of fiction and speculative fiction readers.



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## Fascinating and eclectic

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### **THE MADMAN'S GALLERY: THE STRANGEST PAINTINGS, SCULPTURES AND OTHER CURIOSITIES FROM THE HISTORY OF ART** by Edward Brooke Hitching (Simon & Schuster; \$49.99)

**Edward Brooke-Hitching** has a taste for the unusual and the bizarre in his books. *Fox Tossing, Octopus Wrestling and Other Forgotten Sports* (2015) revisited some of the strangest competitive games ever invented; *The Phantom Atlas* (2016) explored the greatest myths, lies, and blunders on maps, while the bestselling *The Madman's Library* (2020), a *Sunday Times* Literature Book of the Year 2020, documented the strangest examples of books and manuscripts.

Brooke-Hitching begins *The Madman's Gallery* with a quotation from René Magritte: 'Art evokes a mystery without which the world would not exist.' He certainly evokes the mysterious in his latest, profusely illustrated book, which is frameworked by his comment that 'while the bulk of our art history books focus on the revolutionary and traditionally reviewed works, *The Madman's*

*Gallery* is intended to offer an alternative guided tour of art history'.

Brooke-Hitchings, in choosing the artworks, which cover topics such as religion, politics, satire, sex, love, food, domesticity, and death, aims to 'make a global sweep for curiosities to show the delightful drunken variety of creative imaginations across vastly different traditions, geographies and eras'. His more than 100 selections, documented in short chapters, range from prehistoric fertility art of 38,000–33,000 BCE to recent pieces created by artificial intelligence.

Readers will find chapters on subjects as diverse as Salvador Dali and his 1931 surrealist painting *The Persistence of Memory*; nude versions of the *Mona Lisa* from da Vinci's apprentices; Arcimboldo and his vegetable portraits; 90 cans of excrement, *Merda d'Artista*, sealed up by Piero Manzoni in 1961 and now selling individually for up to 275,000 Euros; John Singer Sargent's 1884 *Portrait of Madame X*; Franz Marc's 1913 *Fate of the Animals*, foreshadowing the horror of World War I; and Piranesi's 1750 series of nightmare prison pictures *Carceri d'Invenzione*.

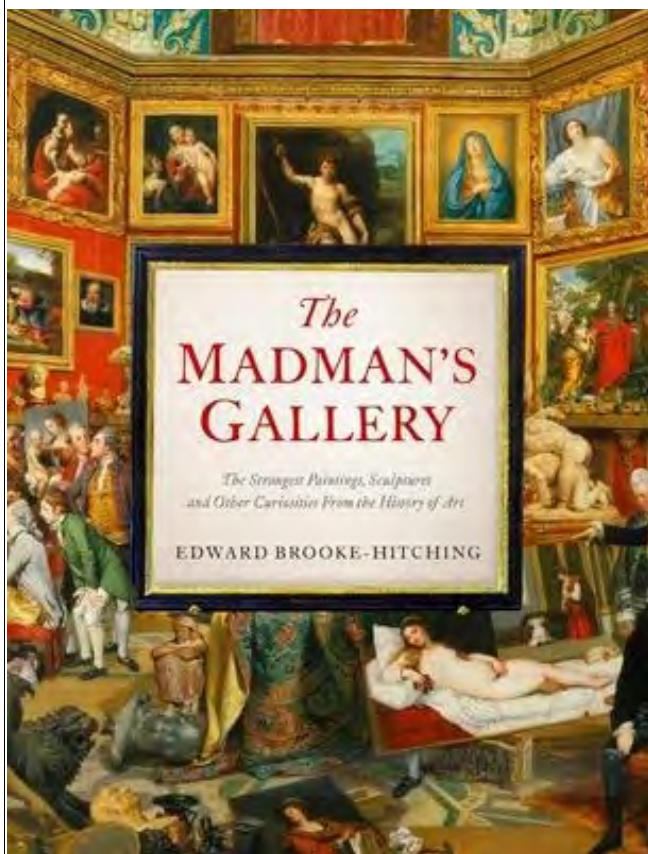
Odd facts abound, such as the Italian monk who levitated so often he's recognised as the patron saint of aeroplane passengers, that the *Mona Lisa* is the only Louvre painting with its own post box, and that Turner used an early canvas of the Thames foreshore as a cat flap for his housekeeper's numerous Manx cats.

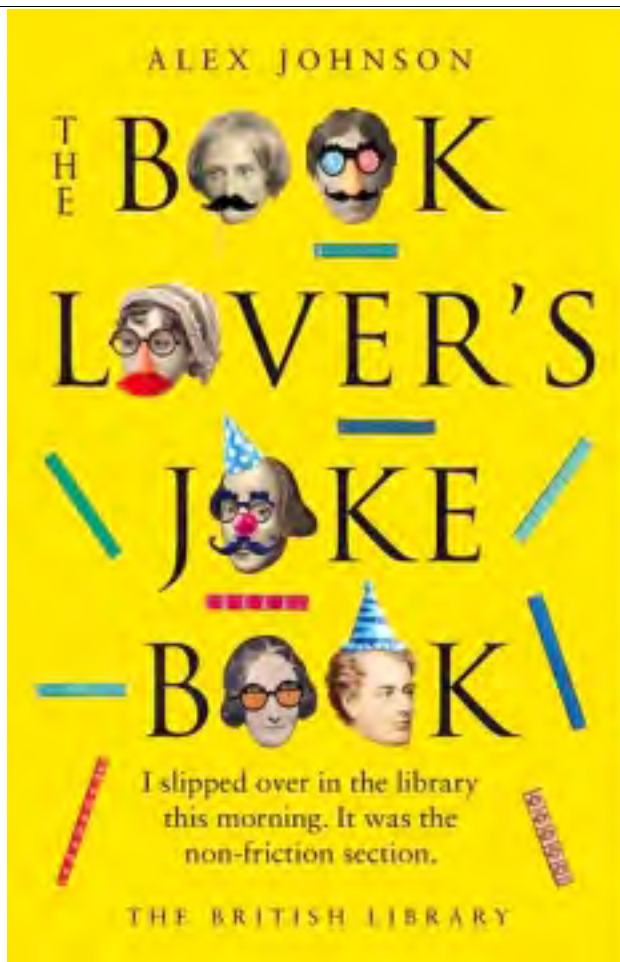
Ralph Waldo Emerson once reflected that 'we have to see and hear ourselves as strange before we can properly come to be at home with ourselves, and art presents us with that strangeness — with what we are without knowing it. It captures both our squalor and our radiance'.

Brooke-Hitching's fascinating and eclectic selections provide yet another example of how he successfully mines the unusual in human creativity.

### **THE BOOK LOVER'S JOKE BOOK** by Alex Johnson (The British Library; \$28.95)

**Alex Johnson's** delightful *The Book Lover's Joke Book* has the following joke on its front cover: 'I slipped over in the library this morning. It was the non-friction section.' Johnson assembles a vast

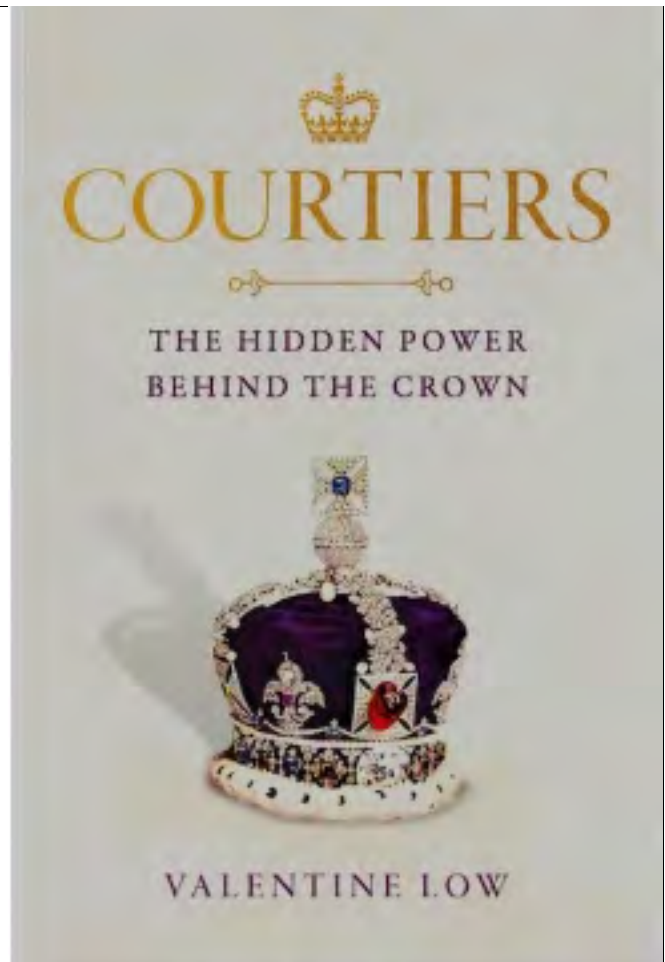




array of jokes and puns about authors, agents, publishers, librarians, bookshops, reviewers, and even light bulbs. For example, 'How many book editors does it take to change a lightbulb? One, but they need to keep changing it.'

Library jokes include not being able to find books about women and religion because the library had put them in the nun-fiction section; a customer seeking a book on abdominal pain, found it was missing a whole section because someone had had ripped out the appendix, and a request, 'Do you have any books on radiators?' receiving a reply, 'No they're just on the normal shelves'.

Further samples: 'Which monarch wrote the most books — King Author'; 'I'm reading *Dracula* in Braille and I'm sure something awful is just about to happen, I can feel it'; 'For my nephew's christening present I bought a huge compendium of every story Dahl wrote. They are all Roald into one'; Shakespeare walks into a bar, 'Not again' says the landlady, 'you're bard'; 'I have an agent joke but only 15% of you will get it'; and 'What do you call a Belgian detective with an air conditioning unit on his head — Air cool'.



**COURTIERS:**  
**THE HIDDEN POWER BEHIND THE CROWN**  
 by Valentine Low (Headline; \$32.99)

The influence of royal courtiers is nothing new, as Shakespeare's depiction of Polonius in *Hamlet* revealed. **Valentine Low** in *Courtiers* delivers a timely, incisive account of the advisers, who 'exert power, but do not rule' in the British royal households.

Low's revealing account was written just before the death of Queen Elizabeth II, so she is cited in the present tense and King Charles is 'Prince Charles'. Low interviewed nearly 100 key individuals who have worked in the royal households from the 1960s to the present day, with a focus primarily on the powerful private secretaries and press officers.

Apart from several key Australian figures, most advisers have come from a background of top British public schools, Oxbridge, and the aristocracy. Low writes, 'There is a reason why those closest to the Queen are drawn from such a narrow social circle: it is because the Queen is a woman of a certain generation and class, and they are the people she feels comfortable with.'

Michael Adeane, educated at Eton and Cam-

bridge, the 'tweedy, cautious' Queen's Private Secretary between 1952 and 1972, observes, 'It is no use thinking you are a mandarin. You must also be a nanny.'

Nonetheless, as Low comprehensively demonstrates, those around the Queen have exercised, and presumably still exercise, considerable power behind the throne. The Queen's Private Secretary from 1973 to 1977, Old Etonian, snuff-loving Martin Charteris, certainly exhibited power in the Palace letters to Sir John Kerr before and after the 1975 Gough Whitlam dismissal.

Alan 'Tommy' Lascelles, 'the epitome of the old school Palace insider', was a key influence in the ending of Princess Margaret's relationship with Group Captain Peter Townsend in the 1950s. Princess Margaret and Townsend were not the only ones to run foul of royal advisers. Princess Diana called them 'the men in grey suits', Sarah Ferguson termed them 'constipated, self-appointed keepers of the gate', while Prince Harry and Meghan Markel's antipathy to them is decidedly ongoing.

Low's first chapter begins with a story of a senior Australian member of the royal household, almost certainly William Heseltine, being informed at Australian immigration as he handed in his passport, 'Mate, there's no T in courier.'

Australian-born Heseltine was the Queen's Private Secretary from 1986 to 1990, but had been involved in the royal household since 1960, when he was seconded from Sir Robert Menzies' office to become assistant press secretary at Buckingham Palace. Heseltine is credited with influencing the 1969 TV documentary on the royal family, as well as encouraging their walkabouts.

Another Australian, Samantha Cohen, a former assistant private secretary, was about to retire in 2018 after 17 years at the Palace. She was, however, persuaded in 2018 'to stay on and help' Prince Harry and Meghan Markel, becoming their interim private secretary. Low traces their declining relationship, including the troubled Australia-Fiji tour in 2018, with Cohen eventually falling out of favour and becoming one of the increasing number of the 'Sussex Survivors' Club'.

Low documents the many ups and downs of the royal family with the press over 60 years, including the rivalries of the various households and their respective press offices. Prince Harry's 2023 reflections on leaks from Camilla's press office go back to the Charles and Diana divorce.

Low analyses Mark Bolland's press PR, which helped transform Camilla 'from the most hated woman in Britain to the country's future Queen'. Low quotes a Palace insider that Bolland, known as Lord Blackadder by William and Harry, was 'a master of the dark arts, a courtier you could recognise from other eras: manipulative, clever and devious'.

What of the future? Low notes that Christopher Geidt, the Queen's private secretary from 2007 to 2017, was a supporter of 'modernisation' in household operations, although his downfall came partly through trying to reform the archaic and different management structures, as well as attempting to combine the press offices of the royal households, 'to create a unified royal communication operation'.

Low details the background of Charles's Clarence House private office over the decades to predict the future. Charles is a hard taskmaster, primarily 'because he is very demanding of himself'. This is reflected in his office turnover. Charles, for example, had five private secretaries in seven years from 1985 to 1992, while his controversial ex-valet Michael Fawcett, who ultimately wielded significant political and financial power, culminating in becoming CEO in 2018 of the Prince's Foundation, had to resign in 2020 because of alleged financial 'skulduggery'.

Low describes the King's last private secretary as Prince of Wales, Sir Clive Alderton, as 'a schemer, a chess player ... a figure from Wolf Hall or House of Cards'. Nonetheless he sees the household of Charles III as likely to be more open and mission oriented.

Now, at a pivotal moment in its history, the question of who advises the royal family and helps 'decipher the (royal) code', especially in the light of Prince Harry and Meghan Markel's public revelations, will be more important than ever.

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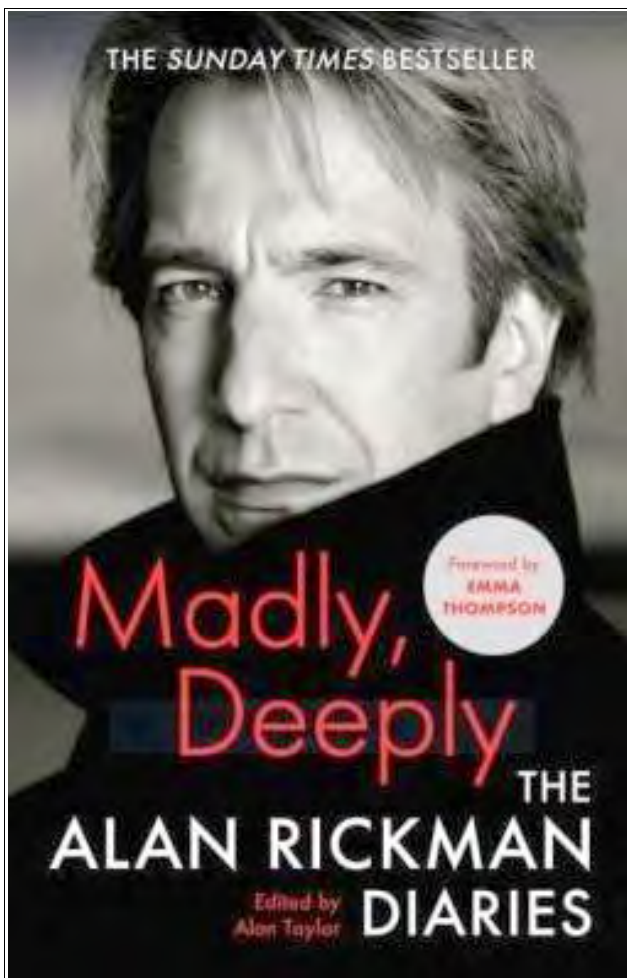
## Biography

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**MADLY, DEEPLY: THE ALAN RICKMAN DIARIES**  
edited by Alan Taylor  
(Allen & Unwin; \$34.95)

Simone de Beauvoir once wrote: 'What an odd thing a diary is: the things you omitted are more important than those you put in.' This occasionally appears to be the case in *Madly, Deeply. The*





### **Alan Rickman Diaries.**

Editor Alan Taylor, in his introduction, writes: 'Why Rickman kept a diary is unclear.' Many readers, however, will be grateful that we have them, covering the years from 1993 until just before Rickman's death in January 2016.

**Alan Rickman** is best remembered for his roles as Hans Gruber in *Die Hard*; the Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*; Harry in *Love Actually*, and Severus Snape in the Harry Potter series. He clearly developed a disdain for interviewers who constantly asked about these films, comparing them to 'tired dogs with a very old slipper'.

Rickman's diary entries are often short, at times being almost bullet points. He lists having a May 2002 meeting with Daniel Day-Lewis but does not recount any detail from it. There are many lunches and dinners, which has led one reviewer to suggest that the book should be retitled *Dine Hard*.

Nonetheless, there are many interesting and humorous entries, particularly those revealing the foibles and inner workings of the movie industry. Rickman wrote in 1994: 'To work or to hang around for five hours is the question.'

Rickman was a lifelong member of the Labour

Party. He undoubtedly took pleasure in July 2001 at Wimbledon when he met former British Prime Minister John Major. Major said: 'You have given us so much enjoyment', to which Rickman replied: 'I wish I could say the same of you'.

Rickman had a 46-year relationship with academic and Labour politician Rima Horton, whom he married in 2012 — although he does confess to Emma Thompson, 'there but for the grace ...' when he learns of Hugh Grant's arrest with a sex worker in Hollywood. Rima was with him at the end when he was dying with pancreatic cancer, and the diary becomes full of hospital appointments and re-watching his favourite TV programs.

Rickman as an actor has been termed 'sardonic, aloof, witty and withering, yet with undercurrents of warmth that could surface when needed'. *The Rickman Diaries* definitely reaffirms that image.

### **MASQUERADE: THE LIVES OF NOËL COWARD** by Oliver Soden (Hachette; \$34.99)

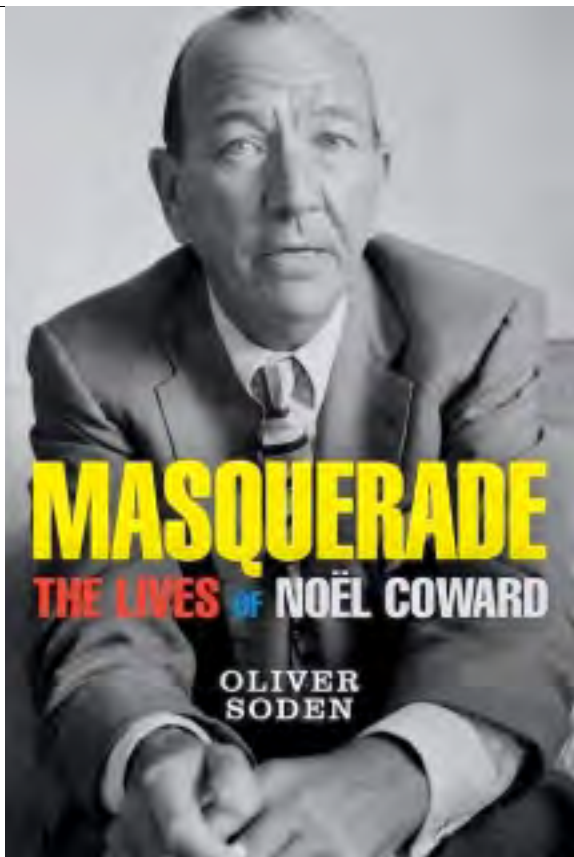
*The New York Times* wrote in 2002 of Rickman, when he appeared in a revival of Coward's *Private Lives*, 'No man, at least not since Noël Coward, wore a dressing gown with more slippery ease or dangerous intent'.

The indisputable image of **Noël Coward** (1899–1973), writer, actor, singer, songwriter, and occasional World War II spy, is of a figure in an elegant dressing down, with a cigarette holder, effortlessly delivering a stream of witticisms.

*Noel Coward's Diaries*, reissued in 2022 with a new introduction by Stephen Fry, never fully revealed the inner Noël Coward. The latest, and undoubtedly best biographer of Coward, **Oliver Soden**, deliberately titles his book ***Masquerade: The Lives of Noël Coward***, and comes closest to removing Coward's public masks.

There are constant revivals of Coward's most famous plays *Private Lives*, *Hay Fever*, and *Blithe Spirit*, while songs such as 'Mad about the Boy', 'Some Day I'll Find You', and 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' are instantly recognisable. Frank Sinatra once said: 'If you want to hear how songs should be sung, listen to Mr Coward'.

Overall, Noël Coward wrote some 50 plays, nine musicals, and 675 songs, as well as novels, short stories, and screenplays. His last film performance was in the 1969 film *The Italian Job*, in which he played the gangster Mr Bridger. Coward's 1940s films *In Which We Serve* and *Brief Encounter* are classics to this day.



Soden, with extensive use of new archival material, including unexpurgated diary material, breaks up his biographical analysis of Coward into nine segments of Coward's life, each of which begins with a vignette in imitation of Coward's style.

Coward was eminently suited to the 1920s, a decade which Soden describes as a 'cat's cradles of laissez-faire sexuality and carefree infidelity'. His 1924 play *The Vortex* rocked London society with its study of a decadent hostess with a young lover and a drug-addicted son. The rampant drug use, which nearly had the play banned, now feels the most dated element of its still vibrant structure. By 1925 Coward had become the highest-paid writer in the world.

Soden superbly documents Coward's personal 'zig-zag' throughout the 'alternately permissive and intolerant' decades of the twentieth century, when homosexuality was a criminal offence, in a sympathetic and revealing biography

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British critic John Gray once wrote that M. John Harrison's fictional people are those 'with an overriding impulse to shape their lives even though they lack any clear idea of how they would like their lives to be'. This is certainly the theme running through Harrison's own life, as cryptically described in *Wish I Was Here*.

Philip Larkin, who features prominently in Andrew Motion's memoir *Sleeping on Islands*, once famously wrote: 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do.'

Robyn Davidson writes, 'we never escape our mothers', and certainly Davidson's, Motion's, and Frayn's lives were affected by losing their mothers when they were children.

Memoirs have now supplanted autobiographies as best-selling books, particularly when they focus on a particular aspect of the author's life, so that readers can experience the author's loves and losses rather than a chronological, often self-congratulatory, narrative..

### **WISH I WAS HERE: AN ANTI-MEMOIR** by M. John Harrison (Serpent's Tail; \$34.99)

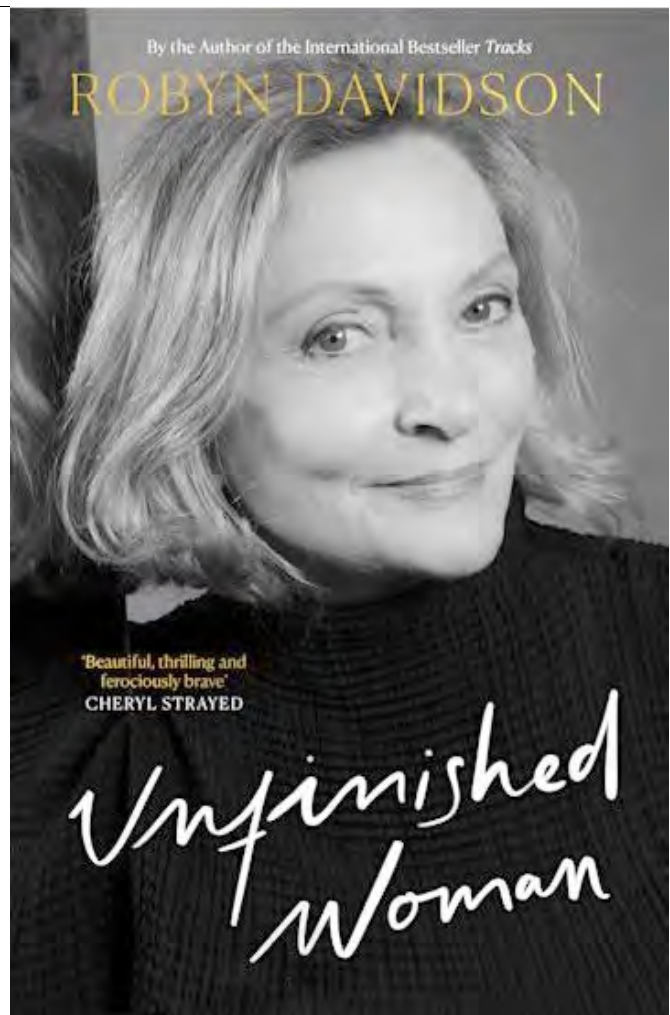
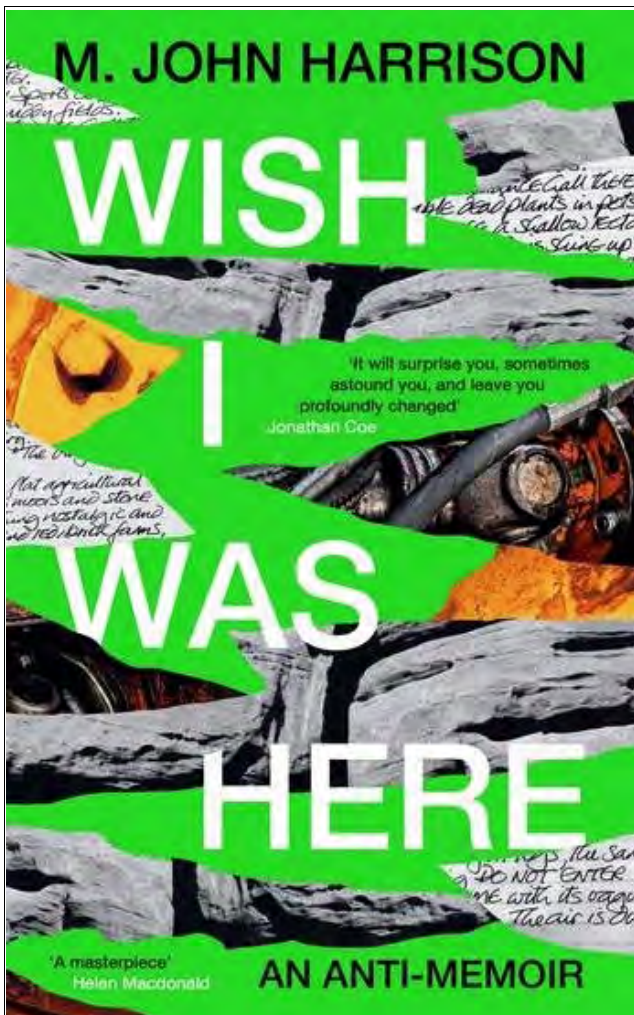
M. John Harrison's creative output, which has included works encompassing SF, fantasy, climbing culture, and literary realism, defies genre labelling even though he often takes the frameworks of genres and both accepts and rejects them.

Harrison may well turn out to be one of those authors more recognised after his writing life than during it, even though he has had received much literary praise and an honorary doctorate from the University of Warwick.

Now in his late 70s, Harrison calls *Wish I Was Here* an 'anti-memoir' of being a writer for over 50 years, 'staring grimly at things and writing them down'. He opens the book with the words, 'When I was younger I thought writing should be the struggle to find out what you are. Now I think it's a struggle to find out who you were.'

Like many others who lost a parent, in this case his father, at an early age, Harrison escaped into writing. The half memories of his father's death, 'everything to do with his death was distant and blurred' resonates throughout the memoir, as Harrison tries to fit his 'nowtbook' (notebook)





recollections into a search for identity.

At the age of 17 working in a fox-hunting stable, he adopts a secondary alternative self known as Map Boy. After two years as a student teacher in the mid 1960s, Harrison began writing science fiction stories, then became books editor of Michael Moorcock's influential magazine *New Worlds*, although he was not really a New Wave writer himself.

In his 'Viriconium' trilogy (1971–1984) Harrison both adopted and severely criticised the fantasy genre and questioned the fragility of personal identity. *The Centauri Device* (1974) is regarded by many as an SF classic.

Harrison writes in the epilogue, 'I wandered off somewhere about age 30 and didn't come back.' Harrison then become a near-decade-long mountain climber in England's Lake District and especially the Peak District, celebrated in his 1989 novel *Climbers*, which he says reflects an 'obsession and alienation'. Here re-emerges his self-adopted Map Boy character, with climbing and falling become metaphors for Harrison's life.

When Harrison returns to genre fiction in *The Course of the Heart* (1992), the setting is in the

tradition of writers such as Arthur Machen and Robert Aickman. His innovative 'Kefachuchi Tract' trilogy *Light* (2002), *Nova Swing* (2007), and *Empty Space* (2012) played with the tropes of space opera.

His 2020 novel *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*, which won the 2020 Goldsmiths Prize, reflected Harrison's political feelings. Nina Allan in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* has commented, 'nor should we forget that Harrison's fiction has always been political ... His protagonists are alienated not only as a result of personal existential misalignment, but equally through the desire for self-actualization within a society where an individual's worth is calculated according to their economic value ... Harrison excels as no other in showing how Britain as a nation has never fully recovered from Margaret Thatcher ... *The Sunken Land* presents a grimy, debased portrait of post-Thatcherite Britain.' Not that Harrison is as explicit as that in his anti-memoir; it's all partly submerged in the short enigmatic chapters.

Harrison writes, 'Perhaps the worst discovery of all is that you don't even have to be very good at something to ache from missing it.' He evokes shards of memory to try to reclaim his identity



although he realises it will never be a complete recollection. 'If we can't remember events have we lost them forever?'

### UNFINISHED WOMAN

by Robyn Davidson (Bloomsbury; \$34.95)

**Robyn Davidson** certainly covers the bases of love and loss in her revealing memoir *Unfinished Woman*. Davidson, best known for her international best-selling book *Tracks*, describing her 1977 Australian desert trek, had a relatively idyllic childhood in 1950s country Queensland. This was dramatically overturned when, at the age of 11, Davidson's mother hung herself in the garage and her father sent her to live with his no-nonsense spinster sister.

Davidson escapes Queensland when of age, working as a hostess in a Sydney gambling den in the late 1960s, then onto the London literary scene, staying with Doris Lessing and a tempestuous three-year on-and-off affair with (unnamed in the book) Salman Rushdie while he was writing *The Satanic Verses*. Later came the pursuit of freedom through nomadic travelling in Tibet and a long-term relationship with a Rajput aristocrat and politician.

In a reflective and absorbing memoir, Davidson initially attempts to bury her memories of her mother's death, but this leads on to a later midlife 'breakdown', which forces her to reflect on who she is and ultimately conclude 'my mother is as close to me, and as hidden from me, as my own face'.

### SLEEPING ON ISLANDS

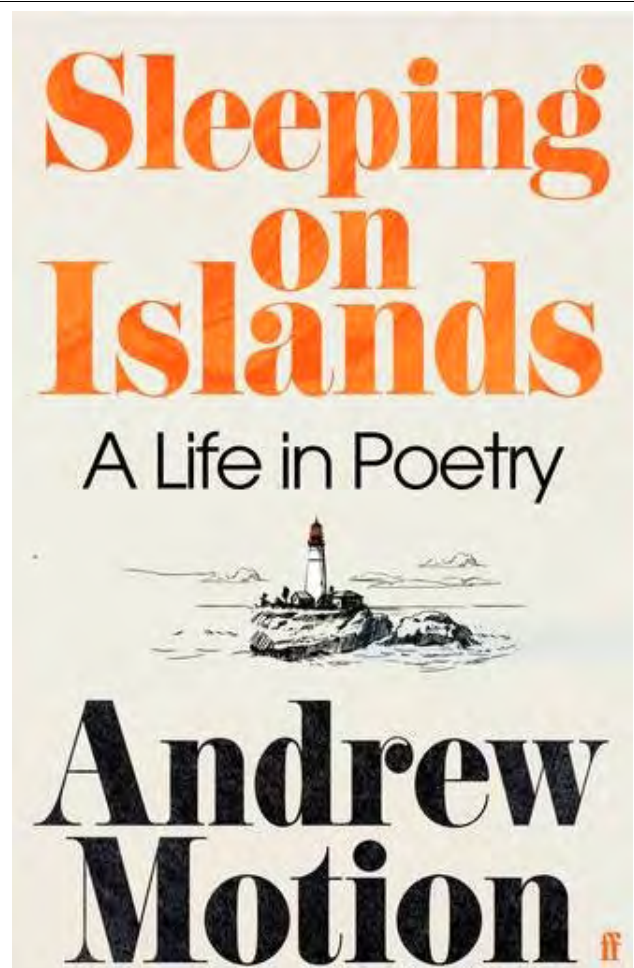
by Andrew Motion (Faber; \$49.95)

**Andrew Motion**, former British Poet Laureate, 'lost' his mother when he was 12 when she fell off her horse and was in a coma for years and severely disabled in a nursing home. Motion, who, like Davidson, had a reserved, uncommunicative father, said that he wrote to keep the memory of his mother alive.

Motion, is less self-reflective than Davidson, instead documenting his increasing material and social success as a writer and poet. We don't, therefore, get deep personal insights into his three marriages and his relocation later in life to America.

His social pathway, however, is decidedly entertaining and illuminating, including a weekend stay at Sandringham with the then Prince Charles, Camilla and a group of 'luvvies and their partners', such as Richard E. Grant and Stephen Fry.

After the guests being offered pints of gin,



Charles tells them all of his unhappy childhood and takes them on a tour on which Motion's wife, seeing numerous frogs, asks the prince what would happen if she kissed one. 'A surfeit of princes' he responds.

An hilarious section documents the meeting of Motion and Les Murray, who is to receive the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry at Buckingham Palace. The Queen, who had previously told Motion that she didn't read poetry, presents Murray with his medal, who then promptly drops it on the floor.

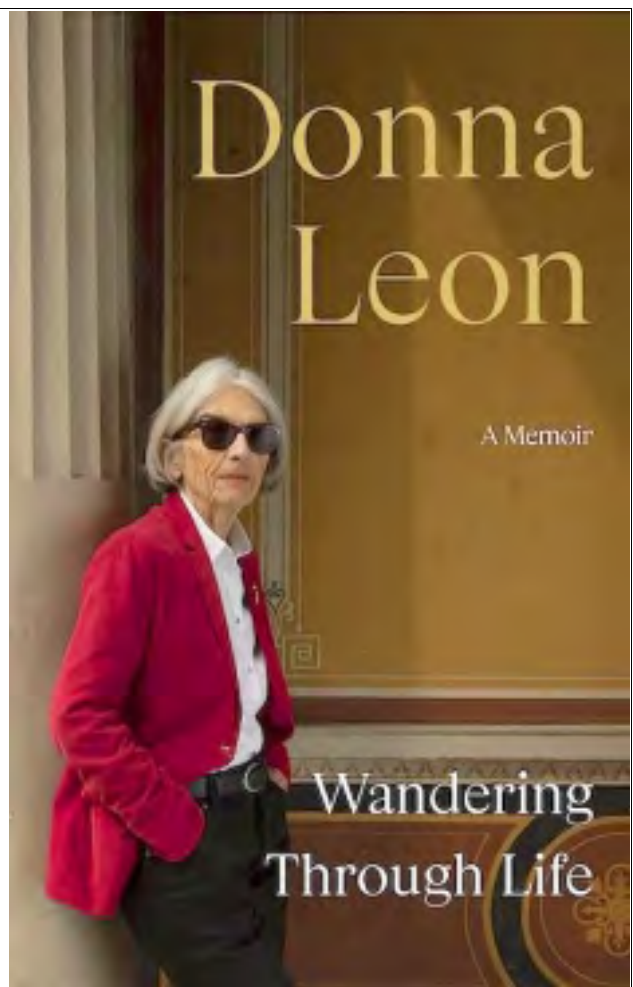
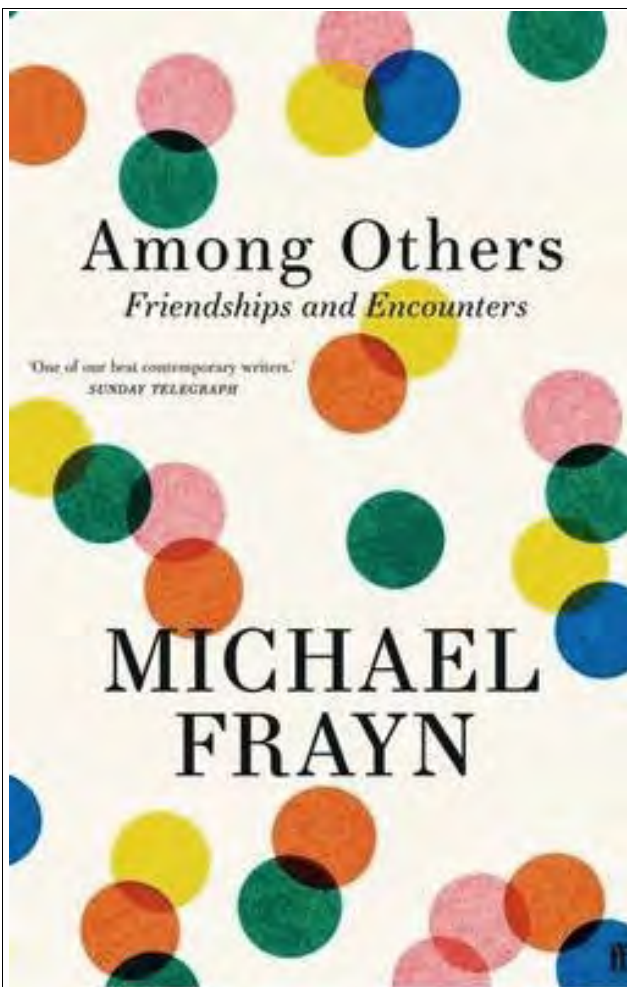
The nervous Murray then embarks on a long monologue on the virtues of 'Orstralia', as the Queen puts it, ranging from kangaroos and wombats to the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which leaves the Queen quickly groping for the buzzer to summon the footmen.

### AMONG OTHERS:

#### FRIENDSHIPS AND ENCOUNTERS

by Michael Frayn (Faber; \$55)

**Michael Frayn**, distinguished British playwright, recounts in *Among Others: Friendships and Encounters* how he was traumatised when his mother died of a heart attack when he was 12. He



and his sister apparently never spoke of her again in the house until Frayn wrote about her death in his 2010 book *My Father's Fortune*.

His warm memoir is guided by the phrase 'Tell me who you go with, and I'll tell you who you are', in which he documents his friends, such as Bamber Gascoigne and Neal Acherson, who helped to shape his life and character. Now 90, Frayn begins his the last chapter, 'like the story of man in the Bible, with a fall'. He takes readers on a fascinating physical and philosophical tour of his body, reflecting during a colonoscopy that he had eaten and excreted the weight of seven elephants over his lifetime. He concludes optimistically, 'so while it lasts', he sees his body as 'a moment of celebration'.

#### **WANDERING THROUGH LIFE: A MEMOIR** by Donna Leon (Hutchinson; \$35)

**Donna Leon** has written 33 novels, 32 of which, set in Venice, feature her 'philosopher-policeman' Commissario Guido Brunetti. They have been translated into 35 languages and dramatised on German TV, which resulted in an unusual blend of cultures.

*Wandering Through Life* is a patchwork

memoir from Leon, now 81. Its four sections, comprising 30 brief chapters, are organised roughly in chronological order, but it is far from a conventional autobiography. In many ways, the book replicates, and occasionally duplicates, the content and structure of her longer 2013 book of memories, *My Venice and Other Essays*.

Leon's comments in her latest collection of memories: 'I am feckless and unthinking by nature and have never planned more than the first step in anything I've done.' In the first section, 'America', she recalls her childhood in rural New Jersey in 1942. She recalls with affection her chain-smoking mother, an avid reader, who lived until the age of 84, and an enjoyable childhood. 'I was never driven or taught ambition as a kid. My parents just said "go get a good education, have a decent life and have fun", which was miraculously visionary for people in 1950s America.'

In the second section, 'On the Road', Leon takes us to her teaching in China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Leon happily teaches English to Iranian Air Force pilots just before the 1978-79 revolution ends her stay. Cultural issues and the place of women had an impact when she went to work in Saudi Arabia. She developed \$audiopoly, a 'Bored Game', with two friends to break the enforced

monotony in Saudi Arabia. In her previous book *My Venice*, she writes: 'My rancor has to do only with Saudi Arabia and only with its male citizens'.

Section Three sees Leon to Italy in 1981 and her growing love of Venice. Strangely, we read little on the influences behind the novels and her writing process. Brunetti only features in Leon's brief letter about the regular flow of tourists hoping to meet Brunetti at the Questura police station at Campo San Lorenzo.

Leon hates the impact of the massive cruise liners on Venice. For the last decade she has lived in Switzerland with monthly visits to Italy. The fourth and last section, titled 'In the Mountains', also reflects on the ageing process.

Throughout the sections, we learn of Leon's love of music, particularly opera and Handel. Leon is a patron of the orchestra Il Pomo d'Oro, having previously said: 'I think if one has been lucky fiscally, one should give a lot of it back, because we all of us have too much.'

Leon gives away very little personal information in the chapters. Although she has said in an interview about never marrying, 'I think most people profit immeasurably from marriage in every sense, but I'm too restless.' She modestly comments on 'never having a real job, never having a pension plan, never settling down in one place'.

Readers will be grateful of her restlessness, which has allowed her to live in Venice and produce novels that have given so much pleasure around the world, although curiously she has never allowed her novels to be translated into Italian — because she didn't want to be a local celebrity.

In her introduction, she writes that she looks forward to spending 'more time with Guido Brunetti, his family and his friends and colleagues, and to give him the chance to reveal more about himself, his past, and what he thinks and feels'.

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## Book collectors and bookshops

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### **BIBLIO MANIAC: AN OBSESSIVE'S TOUR OF THE BOOKSHOPS OF BRITAIN** by Robin Ince (Atlantic Books; \$42.95)

**Robin Ince**, BBC radio presenter, co-host of the popular *Book Shambles* podcast, and science populariser, was due to undertake a national tour in late 2021 with astrophysicist Brian Cox, when Covid hit. So instead Ince embarked, when lockdown restrictions lifted, on a tour involving 111 events, promoting his book, *The Importance of Being Interested*.

Ince changed from 'playing for 12,000 people in Manchester Arena for playing to 12 people in the Margate bookshop'. He travelled 8000 miles, visiting 104 independent bookshops, whose role he celebrates in the cultural life of local communities. Ince could be termed the Bill Bryson of bookshops, with his accounts of fascinating characters, including booksellers, and social observations, ranging from the changing weather to the vicissitudes of British Rail.

The only town that overwhelms him is the booktown of Hay-on-Wye, because 'It's hard to experience that victorious gazelle-hunt sensation when you are surrounded by so many (books); it dampens the sense of victory'. In Corbridge he



finds the bookshop housed in a former church whose preservation order means that the pulpit is the location where authors sign copies of their books.

Ince describes his book collecting as 'drawn to the highbrow and the lowbrow, but less interested in what lies between' and does not 'buy books for their rarity or potential profit'. Nonetheless, he is elated when he finds treasures, such as a sixth impression of Albert Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* (1921) for just 30p, which he estimates could be worth £300, although he gets more pleasure from the fact it contained an old publisher bookmark of *The Warlord of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. He revels in the fact that he finds in Wigtown's famous secondhand bookshop a large collection of photographs of Australian actor, dancer, and choreographer Robert Helpmann.

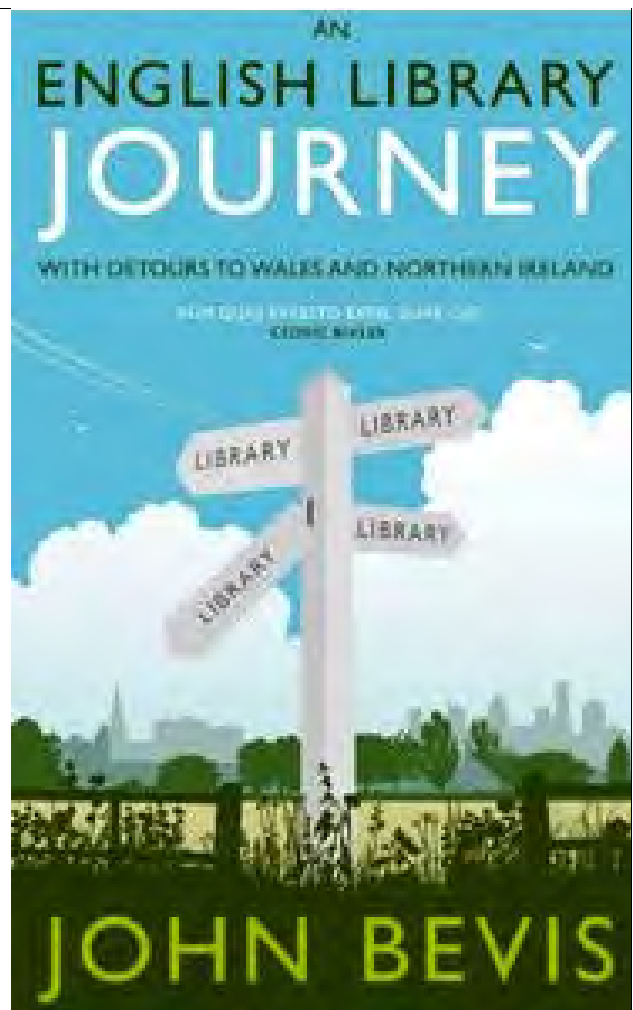
Ince reflects on the ability of a book to influence well after its author has died: 'Someone who is no more than ash or bone can still change me. Their company means there is always the possibility of something to be discovered.' Ince says his life is best explained by the Japanese word *tsundoku*, the passion to collect books but without necessarily reading them: 'I think I love books even more than I love reading.' But, he reflects, filling his house full of books puts him on the 'cusp of justifiable grounds for a divorce'.

### **AN ENGLISH LIBRARY JOURNEY** by John Bevis (Eye Books; \$38.95)

**John Bevis** in *An English Library Journey* probably avoided a divorce by accompanying his wife on her work travels around England from 2010 to 2021. With time on his hands, Bevis visited numerous public libraries, especially as these provided access to computer terminals.

Bevis spends more space on the issues in obtaining library cards and library buildings, which range from Victorian and Edwardian grandeur to a converted corset factory, than the actual book stock of the libraries and their clientele. Libraries, which used to be known as 'street-corner universities' for earlier generations, still provide a sanctuary for many disadvantaged members of the public in England.

Bevis does highlight, however, with numerous examples, the English library 'catastrophe', the dramatic decline of the public library system since the Conservative local council cuts from 2010. 773 libraries closed during Bevis's travels, with 10,000 jobs lost. Libraries were closed down, while many only survived with volunteer workforces. Bevis



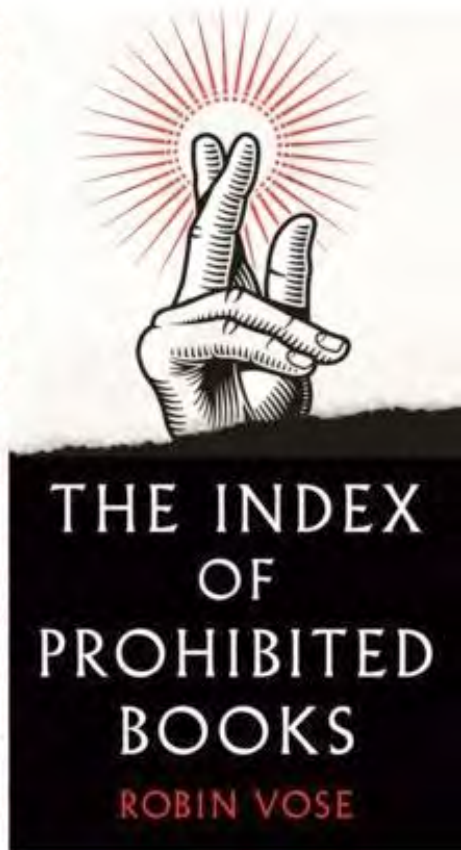
recounts his visit to Birmingham's £189 million library, which, two years after its official opening in 2013, reduced its opening hours by nearly 50 per cent and made half of the library staff redundant.

### **THE INDEX OF PROHIBITED BOOKS: FOUR CENTURIES OF STRUGGLE OVER WORD AND IMAGE FOR THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD** by Robin Vose (Reaktion Books; \$57.99)

**Robin Vose**, Professor of History at St Thomas University, Canada, has provided the first comprehensive study of the Catholic Church's infamous *Index of Prohibited Books*, a list that has remained in force for over four centuries.

Vose has commented: 'I was well placed to do this sort of research when the Vatican finally decided to open up its previously secret inquisition archives in 1999. It's a fascinating new field, full of exciting discoveries that are now allowing us to rewrite what we thought we knew about the history of the Church's long history of book-banning'.

FOUR CENTURIES OF STRUGGLE OVER WORD



AND IMAGE FOR THE GREATER GLORY OF GOD

Vose notes the Church's objective was 'absolute control over the spiritual and ideological content of written and other forms of communication that audiences of the faithful might be exposed to throughout their lives.' He documents the Church's attempts over four centuries to censor religious, scientific, and artistic books, its impact, its ultimate failure, and the lessons that can be learned for contemporary debates over freedom of expression and cancel culture.

The Catholic Church had arguably greater individual success in monitoring and banning of heretical items before the advent of print in the middle of the fifteenth century and a surge in the production of books and pamphlets. The rise of Protestantism was initially the catalyst for the increased listing of banned heretical books in the sixteenth century. Rome first attempted a central *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559 in the run-up to the Council of Trent, and local indices also proliferated. Vose notes the Index was 'the longest lived and least understood mechanism' of censorship in history.

Soon the spectrum of banning books widened to subjects like new science. Giordano Bruno's publications led to his burning at the stake in Rome in 1600, and Galileo was under threat later in the century. Works that questioned the Catholic norm were banned, even including Thomas More's

*Utopia*. Books dealing with 'lascivious or obscene things' were also banned. Yet novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* were overlooked.

Translations of the Bible were also often under scrutiny. Vose comments in relation to practices in South America and Mexico: 'Despite its lack of formal appearance in the Indexes, censorship of both Indigenous spiritual texts and translations into Indigenous languages would be one of the most long-lasting harms ever inflicted by the Catholic Church upon the New World.' The destruction of Aztec and Mayan codices and art also proceeded apace, which was not often the case for Western art.

Vose reveals the often incoherent and inconsistent implementation of items being placed on the index. Censors were often overwhelmed by the increased output of material to be vetted. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Spanish *Index* alone had reached nearly 2000 pages. Nonetheless, it is difficult to estimate what intended books were lost through self-censorship.

Vose's final chapter covers censorship in the nineteenth century after the impact of the French Revolution. He notes that Pius IX, after the revolutions of 1848, reaffirmed the importance of the *Index*, but its impact was diminishing in the face of change that accelerated in the twentieth century. The last Index was issued in 1948.

The *Index* often led to a state within the Catholic Church of what has been called intellectual calcification, yet Vose attempts to understand the motivations of the censors within the ethos of the Catholic Church, reflecting that all civilisations have engaged in some form of censorship, while at the same time noting what was lost in freedom of expression.

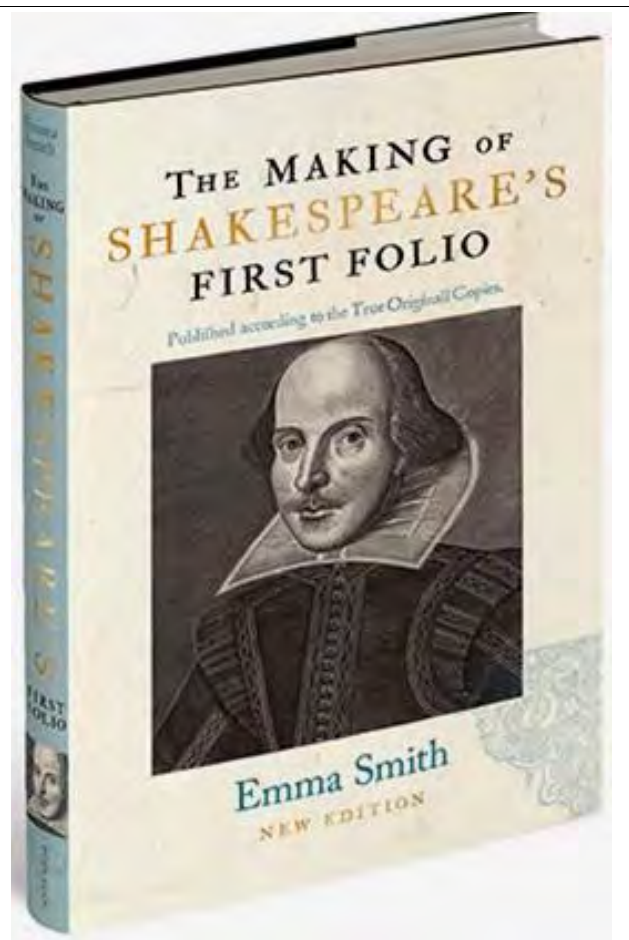
The *Index* played a key part in the shaping of the modern world, which Vose carefully and meticulously documents. Vose tells his students: 'Ideas matter, but they can also be dangerous — and that tension is precisely what a liberal arts education best equips us to study.' These comments resonate in today's world, when censorship and surveillance are ever-greater threats to democracy and where school and public libraries face increasing attempts by extremist groups to ban books.

### THE MAKING OF SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST FOLIO by Emma Smith (Bodleian Library; \$59.99)

**Emma Smith** is Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Hertford College, Oxford and the author of the bestselling *This is Shakespeare* (2019).



Emma Smith.



*The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio* was first published in 2015 and is now published in a second edition to mark the 700-year anniversary, in November 2023, of the publication of Shakespeare's *First Folio*, originally published as *Master William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*.

Smith's profusely illustrated book includes a new chapter in which Smith visits the Mount Stuart library on the Isle of Bute to authenticate an hitherto unknown edition of the *First Folio*. Around 235 copies survive of the original printing of 750 copies. A phenomenal 82 are located in the Folger Library in Washington, acquired by Henry and Emily Folger between 1893 and 1928, while the next largest group of 12 are held at Meisei University in Tokyo.

The *First Folio* was planned in the years after Shakespeare's death in 1616 by Shakespeare's former colleagues, notably John Heminge and Henry Condell, 'to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive as was our SHAKESPEARE'. Heminge and Condell feature in a list of the 'Principall Actors' who performed in Shakespeare's plays, alongside Richard Burbage, Will Kemp, and Shakespeare himself.

The 1623 publication contains 36 plays, including 17 that were printed during his lifetime as

quartos, one that was printed after his death, and 18 that might otherwise have been lost, such as *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Julius Caesar*, which existed only as annotated handwritten copies or prompt books. The volume lacks only *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. It did not include, however, Shakespeare's poems, which were the most popular of Shakespeare's output; for example, *Venus and Adonis* had been printed more than a dozen times by 1623.

Smith reflects: 'Without the *First Folio*, we would have some of Shakespeare's plays, scattered in individual editions. But we wouldn't have the sense of significance, weight (literally), and permanence that this large volume gives to the author.' The British Library has commented that 'As none of Shakespeare's original manuscripts survive (except, possibly, *Sir Thomas More*, which Shakespeare is believed to have revised a part of) we only know his work from printed editions.'

Smith writes in her introduction that the *First Folio* was 'the product of a number of very specific social, cultural and commercial contexts, and of numerous individuals with different skills in different agendas'. Smith's aim, in which she succeeds admirably, is 'to fill out the details of how and why the book was produced', where the pub-



lishers obtained copy to print from, and how and to whom it was marketed.

Publication was organised through a syndicate led by publisher/bookseller Edward Blount utilising the printing house of the ailing William Jaggard and his son Isaac. The 18 unpublished plays had to be signed off by the 'Master of Revels' at Stationers' Hall near St Paul's Cathedral.

The printing process was 'very labour intensive', so that 'each copy is a unique collation'. This was certainly demonstrated in the textual variations identified by Charlton Hinman in the 1940s with his renowned optical collating machine, resulting in his book, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* (1963).

Emma Smith frameworks the *First Folio's* origins, locating it within the social and political context of Jacobean London and the seventeenth-century book trade. It was advertised in advance of publication at the 1622 Frankfurt Book Fair, *Plays, written by M. William Shakespeare, all in one volume, printed by Isaack Jaggard, in folio*.

After publication in November 1623, it was promoted at the 1624 Frankfurt Book Fair as *Master Shakespeare's Works*. It sold on publication at a not insignificant price of 15 shillings unbound. It certainly reached its intended audience of affluent buyers, 'noblemen and commoners of standing', who saw its purchase as a token of 'exclusivity, good taste and grandeur'.

As a 'profitable undertaking', the Folio did lead to a revised version, the *Second Folio*, in 1632. The *Third Folio* was issued in 1663, with the publisher

Philip Chetwinde adding some non-Shakespearean material to the second impression in 1664, which was repeated the *Fourth Folio* in 1685. The third edition is rarer than the others because the unsold sheets were destroyed in the great fire of London.

The Bodleian Library in Oxford had its copy of the *First Folio* bound in Oxford, but then sold it later in the seventeenth century after the third edition was published. Library policies of discarding books when new editions come out is not simply a contemporary phenomenon.

The Bodleian was able to make up the discarding error at some cost in the early twentieth century. In 1905 an undergraduate brought a copy of the *First Folio*, owned by his family, into the Bodleian. The original binding demonstrated that this was indeed the Bodleian's original copy, and a major fundraising appeal enabled its purchase in 1906 and its restitution to the library.

The *First Folio* is now one of the most expensive books. In 2020 Mills College in California sold a high-quality *First Folio* at Christie's in New York to a rare-book dealer for US \$9.98 million. In 2021 the University of British Columbia paid US \$5.9 m for a *Folio*. In 2023 the London antiquarian bookseller Peter Harrington, has for sale a *First Folio* for US \$7.5 m.

Ben Jonson commented on Shakespeare, 'He was not of an age, but for all time.' Emma Smith's book effectively demonstrates the origins and the 'extraordinary afterlife' of Shakespeare's *First Folio*.

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## Meet the Authors dates

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**Apart from book reviews, Colin's main ANU activity is convening and organising the free ANU/Canberra Times Meet the Author events, which he has been running since 1987. Last year there were 47 events and a similar number is likely for 2023. Details of the events, prospectively and retrospectively, can be found at <https://www.anu.edu.au/events/anu-the-canberra-times-meet-the-author-series>. The events, with major national and international authors, are recorded with links to the podcast audios, and are available globally. They are amongst the most downloaded series audios on the ANU website.**

**Here are the Meet the Author events for the rest of 2023.**

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### November 2: Richard Flanagan

Richard Flanagan in conversation on his new book *Question 7*, a blend of fiction and nonfiction. Kambri Cinema.

### November 7: Bryan Brown

Bryan Brown in conversation with Alex Sloan on his new novel *The Drowning*. Vote of thanks by Brett Yeats. Kambri Cinema.



The recent Meet the Author gathering in Canberra to hear Trent Dalton, whose new novel *Lola in the Mirror* has just been launched.

**November 8: Christos Tsiolkas**

Christos Tsiolkas in conversation with Nigel Featherstone on his new novel *In-between*. Vote of thanks by Sally Pryor. Kambri Cinema.

**November 22: Clementine Ford**

Clementine Ford in conversation on her new book *I Don't*. Kambri Cinema.

**November 14: Wendy Harmer**

Wendy Harmer in conversation with Alex Sloan on her memoir *Lies My Mirror Told Me*. Kambri Cinema.

**December 9: Annabel Crabb and Leigh Sales**

*Chat 10 Looks 3*. Anabel Crabb and Leigh Sales. Llewellyn Hall.

**ANNA STEELE** was head of English at Canberra Grammar School, before retiring in 2005. Since then, using her birth name **ANNA CREER**, she has been a regular reviewer of crime fiction, historical fiction, as well as non-fiction about Jane Austen and Shakespeare, for *The Canberra Times*.

*The Canberra Times* discontinued reviews from external reviewers in July 2023, and since then Anna's reviews have been appearing in *The Canberra City News* once a month.

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## Creer on crime

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### The loss of a child

Two crime novels, two Australian women writers, one an established best-selling author, the other with her debut novel, but both, although in completely different ways, explore the devastating impact of the loss of a child.

#### **FIRE WITH FIRE**

by **Candice Fox** (Bantam; 480 pp.; \$29.95)

In Los Angeles, in **Candice Fox's** *Fire with Fire*, Ryan and Elsie Delaney refuse to accept that their five-year-old daughter Tilly died two years earlier. They believe she was abducted. They invade the

Hertzberg-Davis Forensic Science Lab, taking three hostages. They demand the police find their child within 24 hours or they will destroy vital DNA evidence that could convict violent, dangerous criminals.

Detective Charlie Hoskins (Hoss) has spent five years undercover in a bikie gang, The Death Machines, and the hard-won evidence he has collected is in the lab. He tells Saskia Ferboden, the Chief of Police, that he will investigate the truth of the Delaney's claims and, if necessary, find Tilly. He's told 'the Tilly Delaney case is irrelevant right now ... we're treating this as a hostage crisis'.

Despite the fact he's just released himself from hospital, with a plate in his head and other injuries, Hoss decides that, if the police won't look for Tilly, he will. Even more unlikely, he teams up with the disgraced young policewoman Lynette Lamb, whose carelessness revealed his identity to the Death Machines, putting his life in danger.

Hoss and Lamb race against time, and the pursuing Death Machines, as the Delaneys start to destroy evidence. The end result is a mission impossible mixed with shades of *Lethal Weapon*.

Fox, however, is an established award-winning author, having won the Ned Kelly Award for Best Crime Novel twice, and perhaps her best novel, *Crimson Lake* (2017), was adapted into the disappointing TV series *Troppo* (2022). All her thrillers have been bestsellers and no doubt this one will be too.

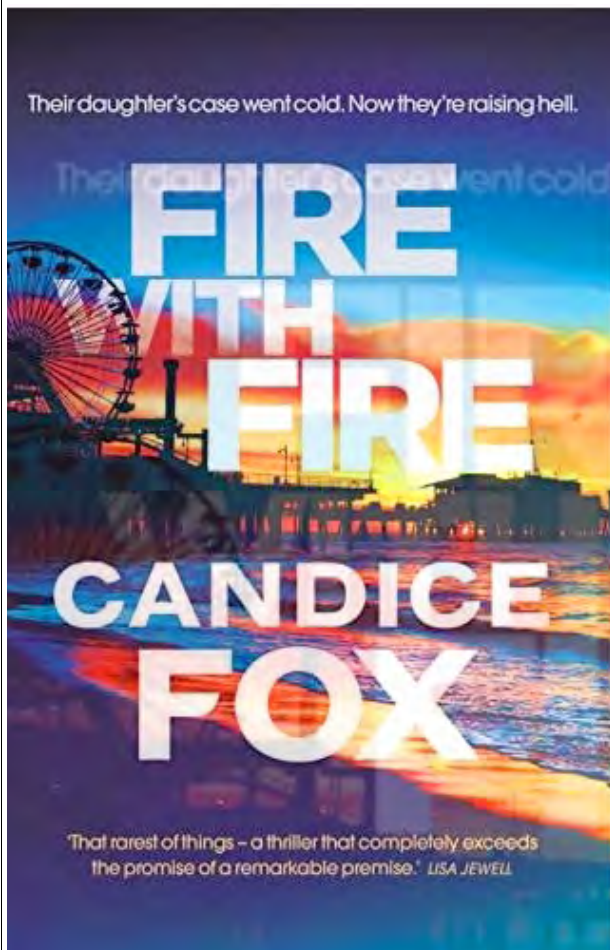
#### **LOWBRIDGE**

by **Lucy Campbell**

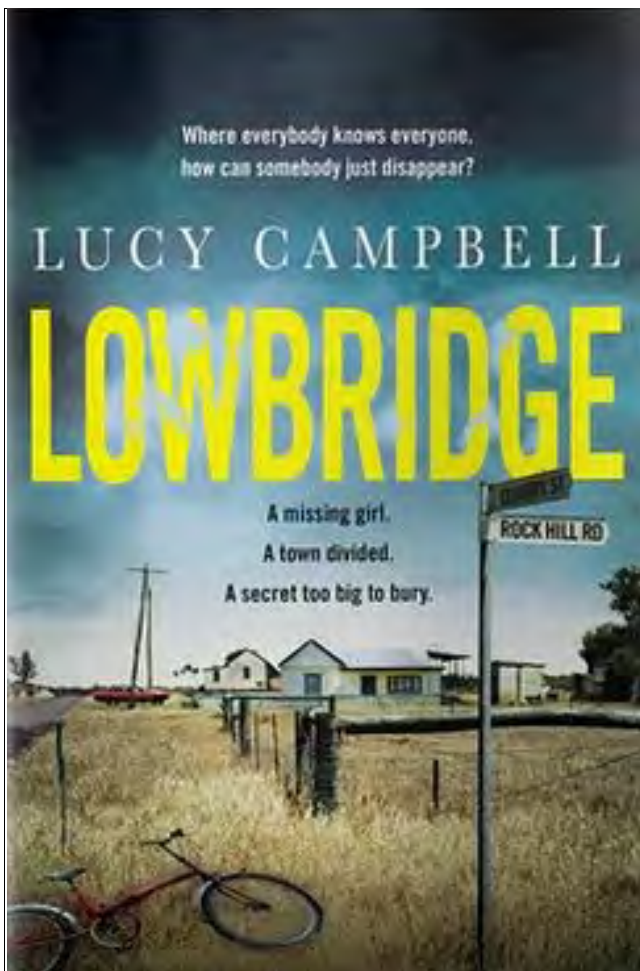
(Ultimo Press; 384 pp.; \$34.99)

*Lowbridge*, however, is **Lucy Campbell's** debut novel. Campbell, who lives in Canberra, is a journalist who has worked as a sub-editor across magazines, newspapers, and non-fiction books.

Campbell sets her novel in the fictional town of Lowbridge, which she says is 'very loosely based on a town in the Southern Highlands of New South







Wales where I lived for 10 years'. She wanted 'to be able to look at the difference between people from varying backgrounds: city and country, progressive and conservative, the wealthy and the struggling.

Katherine Ashworth, distraught with grief after the death of her daughter in a hit-and-run accident, has moved with her husband from Sydney to Lowbridge, his hometown, hoping the move will help her heal. However, 'sometimes the darkness in her head was so dense that not even the tiniest pinprick of light could enter. At those times she was conscious of nothing but the desire for death to take her too.'

When Katherine's addiction to pills and alcohol eventually forces her husband to threaten her with an asylum, she ventures into town, discovering the Lowbridge and District Historical Society run by three elderly women, proud of their town's heritage as one of the oldest settlements in New South Wales.

Katherine is particularly drawn to Margaret Graham, an impeccably dressed, no-nonsense country woman in her seventies, and she decides to help, offering her expertise in marketing, as the women work to mount their first exhibition.

During her research she discovers a photo of Tess Dawes, a schoolgirl, who went missing in 1987. She 'walked out of Lowbridge shopping centre and was never seen again'. Katherine becomes obsessed with the mystery of Tess's disappearance. 'For the first time in a year, [her] own grief was swamped by something larger'.

Campbell interweaves the story of Tess and her friends with that of Katherine, bringing to life vividly the friendship of three Year 11 girls at Lowbridge High in the summer of 1987, as well as the controversy over a proposed women's health centre which divided the town. The authentic teenage voices breathe life into a novel that otherwise could have been a totally dark exploration of grief and loss.

Lowbridge promises much but, as Katherine's investigation falters, so does the novel. Campbell has admitted in interview that she 'always knew who did it, but I had no idea how. There were many endings, some more plausible than others'. It's unfortunate that, after an impressive start, the ending she chose is both unpredictable and overly sentimental.

## The enjoyments of cosy crime

### THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE ALPERTON

#### ANGELS

by Janice Hallett (Viper: 528 pp.; \$45)

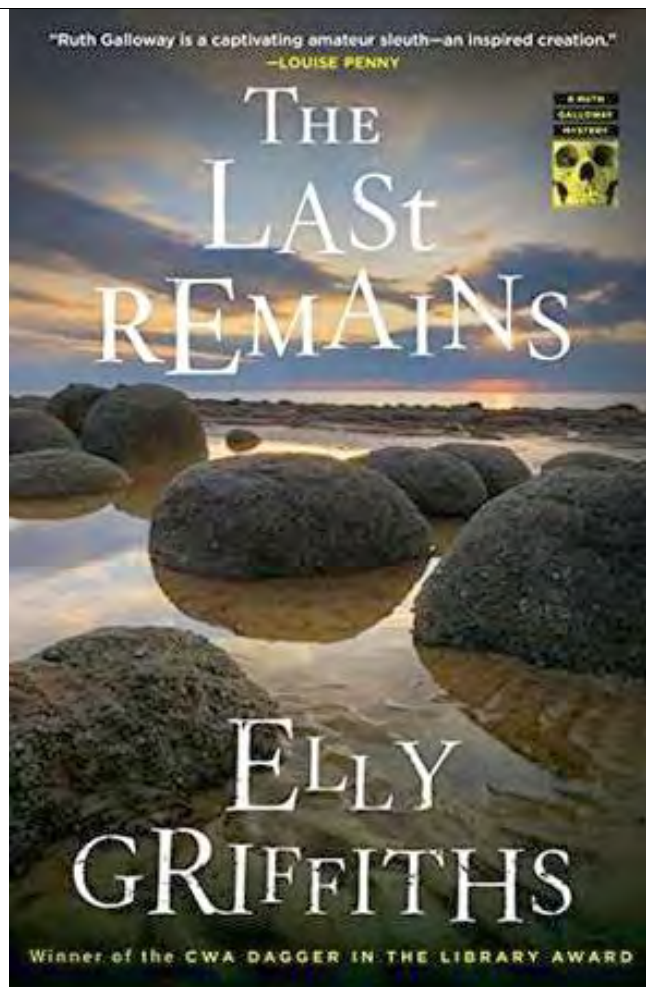
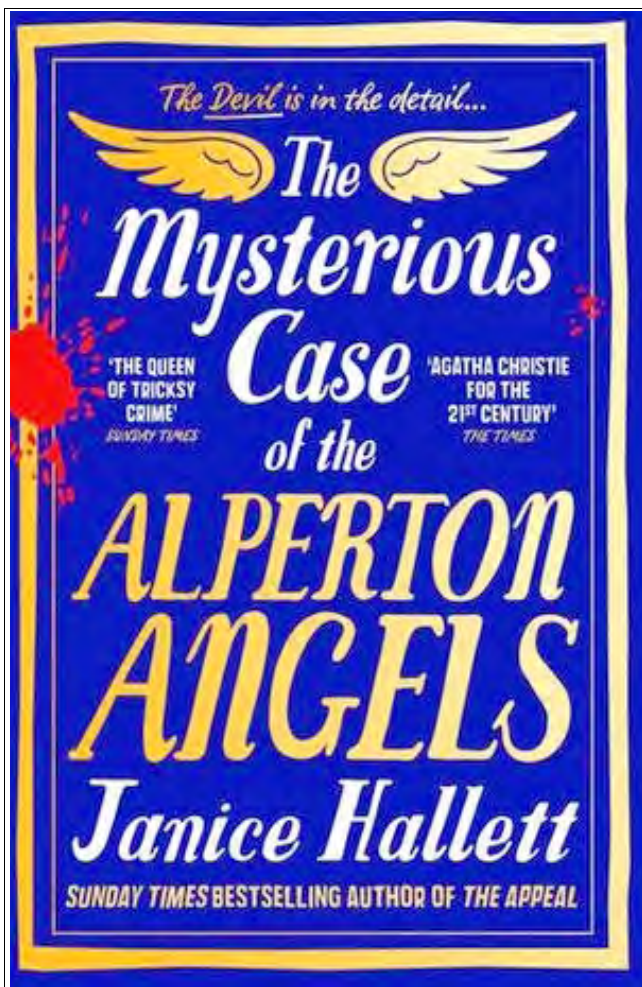
At the Adelaide Writer's Festival in March 2023, a panel of crime writers was asked to identify current trends in the genre. The British crime-writing duo Nicci French immediately nominated cosy crime and Richard Osman's *Thursday Murder Club* series in particular. The reason — the 'difficult times' the British people have experienced in recent years.

Cosy crime is not a recent phenomenon. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple mysteries are classics of the sub-genre. But cosy crime is indeed having a resurgence in popularity, both in print and on TV.

In the world of British cosy crime, **Janice Hallett's** novels are reportedly now second in popularity to those of Osman.

The Mysterious Case of the Alperton Angels is Hallett's third novel, and once again she has reinvented the epistolary novel for the modern reader, using emails, texts, WhatsApp messages, transcriptions of interviews, and screenplays to tell her story, rather than a traditional narrative. It's a style that initially demands some persistence.

Hallett addresses her readers with a challenge,



as the novel begins: 'You have a key that opens a safe deposit box. Inside is a bundle of documents ... You must read it and make a decision.'

The documents are the collected research of true crime writer Amanda Bailey into the case of the Alpertons Angels for a new series of crime books, which will 'put a fresh, dark spin on a well-known crime'.

In 2003, a cult led by Gabriel Angelis, aka Peter Duffy, believed they were angels with a divine mission to kill the newborn anti-Christ during a particular alignment of the stars. They persuade the teenage parents of the baby that they too are angels and that their baby must die.

However, the mother escapes with the baby and they disappear into the care system. The angels commit suicide in a bizarre ritual and, although Gabriel escaped, he is in prison for murder.

Amanda and her publishers know that the anti-Christ, the baby, will be eighteen soon and if Amanda can find him/her it will be the true-crime 'scoop' of the year. But the pressure is on, as another journalist, Oliver Menzies, Amanda's rival, is also on the hunt.

Amanda is a ruthless and manipulative

investigator, calling in favours and persuading the hapless Menzies to share information. Their joint investigation, however, reveals a much darker story than the one reported in the press at the time, and their sources begin to die in mysterious circumstances.

Original and intriguing, *The Mysterious Case of the Alpertons Angels* will keep you guessing right up until the last twist in the tale.

**THE LAST REMAINS**  
by Elly Griffiths  
(Mariner Books; \$352 pp.; \$30)

**Elly Griffiths** is a veteran of the sub-genre, and first introduced her archaeologist detective Ruth Galloway in 2009. She has since written a further 13 mysteries combining crime, archaeology, and romance.

Professor Ruth Galloway is head of the Department of Archaeology at the University of North Norfolk (UNN). With her lover, Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson, she has been instrumental in solving a multitude of murders, often finding her own life in danger in the process. **The Last Remains** is to be the last in the series.



Griffiths sets her novel in 2021, firmly in the time of Covid. Nelson's wife has left him and moved north. As a result he has spent most of the lockdowns with Ruth and their daughter Kate. Nelson hopes they can finally live together as a family. But Ruth is hesitant.

Ruth's carefully controlled world is further threatened when UNN announces it's considering closing the Department of Archaeology because it's unprofitable.

Ruth is therefore happy to be distracted when builders renovating a café in King's Lynn find a human skeleton behind a wall in the basement. Ruth immediately identifies the bones as modern, as a metal plate suggests recent surgery on the ankle.

The bones are identified as the remains of a young archaeology student Emily Pickering, who went missing in 2002 after a field trip to the Neolithic flint mines, Grimes Graves, near Thetford. Griffiths in her acknowledgments calls them 'one of the archaeological wonders of the age'.

Griffiths is an accomplished storyteller, and in *The Last Remains* she skilfully combines a police procedural with local legends. The end result is tension and life-threatening danger.

However, in the true tradition of the genre, she farewells all of her characters in an ending that exudes the essence of cosy crime, to ensure that they all live happily ever after, except for the murderer.

## Literary crime

### THE LOCK-UP

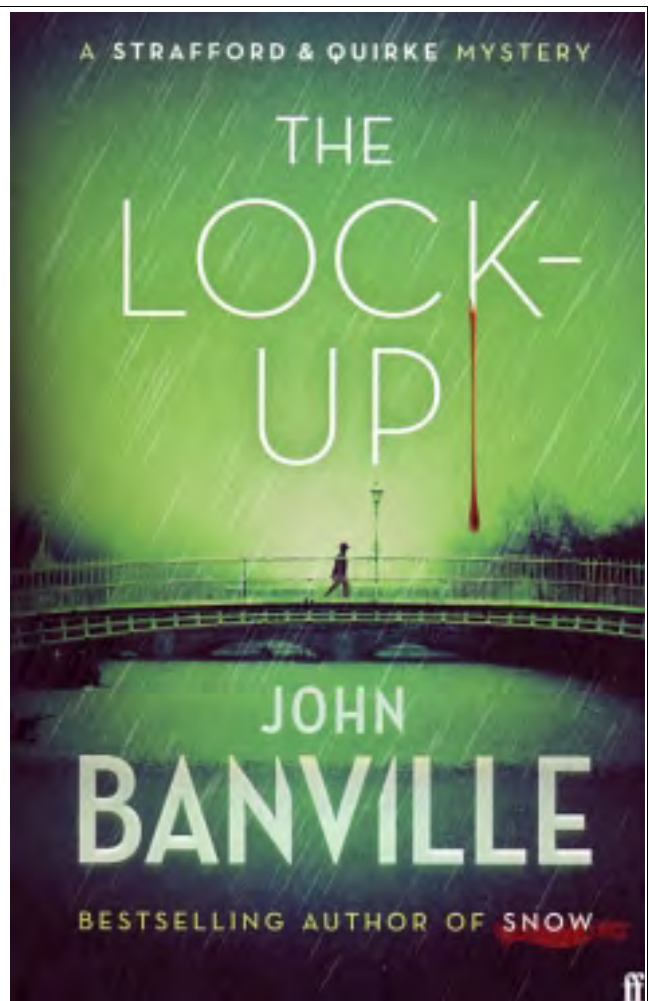
by John Banville (Faber; 358 pp.; \$32.99)

For many critics, the concept of literary crime is an oxymoron. However, P. D. James' Adam Dalgliesh stories and the late, lamented Peter Temple's *The Truth* are decidedly novels in which style and language dominate the plot.

John Banville, who as a novelist has been described as the heir to Proust and Nabokov, would be disconcerted to discover his crime fiction wasn't considered literary.

Irish writer and Booker Prize winner, Banville published his first crime novel, *Christine Falls*, in 2007, using the pseudonym Benjamin Black. Banville has said that 'the invention of Benjamin Black was John Banville's way out of what was suspiciously like a rut'.

Banville had found literary freedom in his



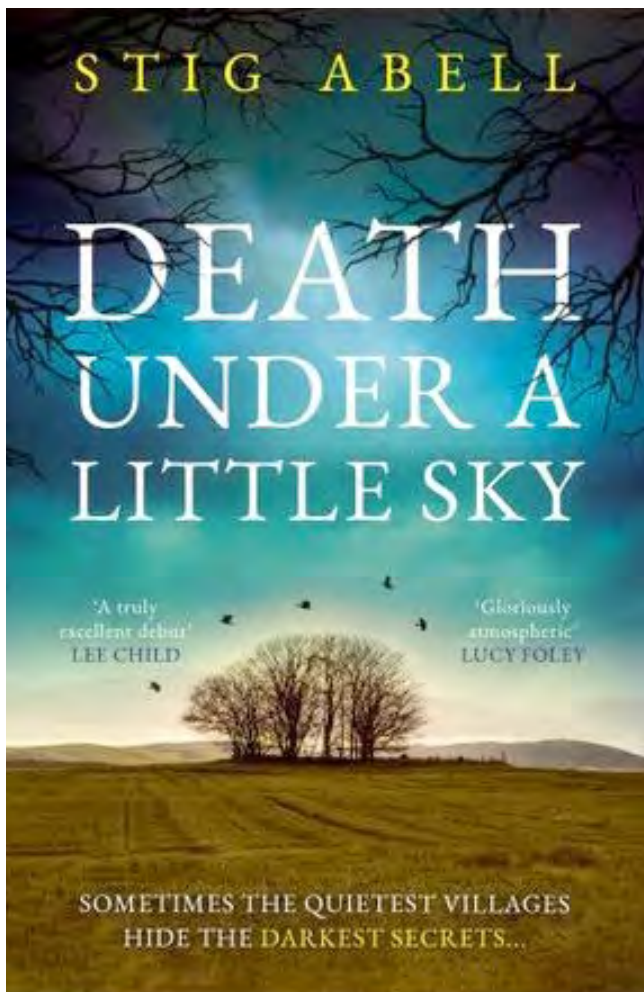
novels about Quirke, an alcohol-dependent pathologist in Dublin in the 1950s. Six more Quirke novels followed until 2020, when Banville decided to publish *Snow* under his own name, stating that Black had 'very graciously allowed himself to be killed off'.

In *Snow*, Banville introduced a new Detective Inspector, St John Strafford from the Protestant land-owning class. In *April in Spain* (2021), he brought Strafford and Quirke together in San Sebastian, where Quirke was on his honeymoon. The location created a lighter, humorous tone, until the inevitable tragedy at the end.

*The Lock-up* sees both detectives back in Dublin. (Spoiler alert. It's impossible to write about this novel without reference to *April in Spain*. It is a true sequel.)

Quirke is living with his daughter Phoebe, refusing to step foot in the house he had shared with his wife Evelyn. He hadn't spoken of his wife's death to Phoebe or to anyone. It was ... a forbidden topic'. He's 'faded ... Reduced in substance. He seemed not entirely there'. When he's not working, Quirke walks the streets of Dublin, 'it settled his mind, it blurred his thoughts, it kept the monsters of remembrance at bay'.





## DEATH UNDER A LITTLE SKY

by Stig Abell

(HarperCollins; 352 pp.; \$32.99)

If Banville is a master of his craft, **Stig Abell** is definitely an apprentice.

Abell is a media personality in the UK, and for some years he was the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. His author biography proclaims he 'loves detective novels above any other literature, films, plays or television'.

*Death Under a Little Sky* is his debut in the genre. His obsession with crime fiction is reflected in both his chapter headings and the names his main character gives aspects of his inherited property. There's an Agatha Wood, Reacher Island in the middle of his lake, a Morse Field and, for some reason, Meryton is the closest town.

Jake Jackson is a successful Detective Inspector in a big city. However, his marriage is failing and when his uncle leaves him Little Sky, a remote estate in the countryside. Jake decides it's his opportunity for a fresh start.

Little Sky is isolated with no phone connection, no internet, and no bathroom. However there is a 'huge library, primarily of detective fiction ... it is the most wonderful room Jake has ever seen'. The nearest 'settlement' is Caelum Parvum, population 8, including Livia Bennet, a beautiful young vet.

Livia invites Jake to join her team in an annual local tradition, the hunt for St Athelmere's bones. Not real bones but a bag of sticks hidden by the owner of the local shop. But this year the bones in the bag are human. Enter Detective Chief Inspector Watson of the Meryton Police. Jake, who has experience of solving cold cases, joins the investigation.

In what follows, Abell brings together the story of a man searching for his true identity with a whodunit, a police procedural, and elements of a thriller.

The end result is contrived, confused and in need of a good editor.

## Rural noir

### BROKEN BAY

by Margaret Hickey

(Penguin; 384 pp.; \$32.99)

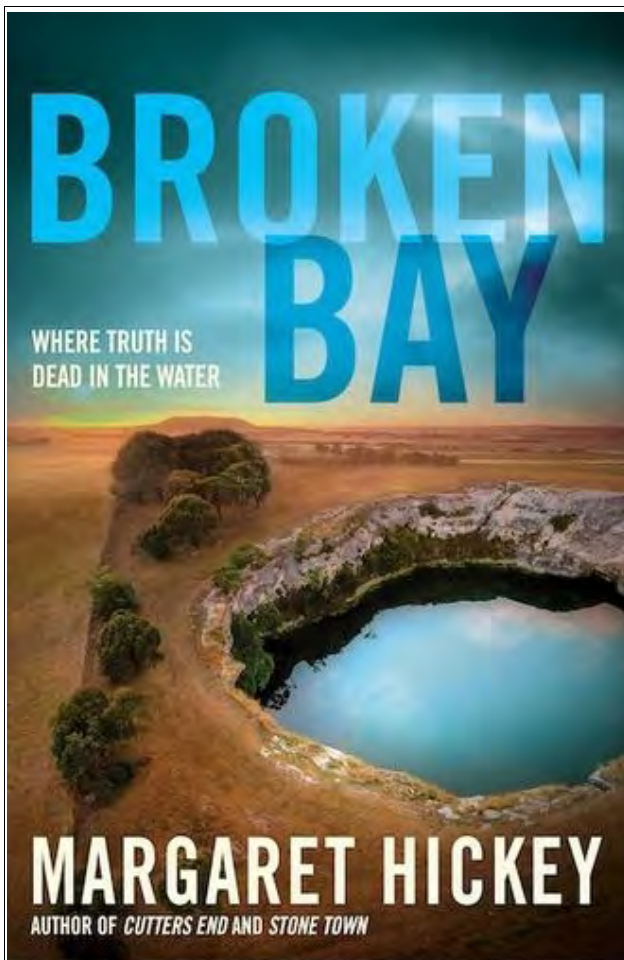
When Jane Harper's *The Dry* was published in 2016, a new sub-genre of crime fiction, Australian Rural Noir, was born. Many authors have since

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

Rosa had been an activist distributing pamphlets calling for abortion clinics throughout Ireland. Rosa was reckless and 'had principles and no-one could persuade her she was wrong'. She was also close to a wealthy German exile, Wolfgang Kessler and his son Frank. Banville in his prologue has revealed the truth about the Kesslers, which makes Rosa's involvement with the family even more unlikely.

However, the mystery of Rosa's death is less important to Banville than his exploration of the strained relationship between his two main characters and the extraordinary complicity of the Irish Catholic Church in finding a safe haven for Nazi criminals.

From the epigraph at the beginning to the unexpected twist in the epilogue, *The Lock-up* is a beautifully written, intense exploration of love and loss, grief, and consolation.



followed Harper’s formula of crime in a small country town, some more successfully than others.

Award-winning author **Margaret Hickey** has lived most of her life in small rural towns, and her PhD focused on depictions of landscape in Australian literature. Both experiences have informed her writing. *Cutter’s End* (2021) explores the dangers of Australian deserts, while *Stone Town* (2022) highlights the secrets that can be hidden in the Australian bush.

***Broken Bay***, her third novel featuring her Greek–Australian Detective Sergeant Mark Ariti, is set on the Limestone Coast of South Australia, a region known for its treacherous underwater worlds of sinkholes and caves, where Ariti is on holiday.

Broken Bay, four hours from Adelaide, is ‘a small town tough, full of ugly buildings and squat houses. Perhaps it was on the verge of discovery by sea-changers but the wave of city cash seemed a while off yet’.

The town is buzzing with the news that Mya Rennick, Australia’s leading cave diver, has died while exploring a newly discovered sinkhole on the land of wealthy farmer Frank Doyle. However, when the rescue team brings her body to the

surface they discover it’s not Mya but Eloise Sinclair, who had disappeared twenty years earlier.

As there isn’t a full-time police presence in Broken Bay, Ariti’s boss orders him to stay and assist the police investigation.

Ariti discovers the long-running rivalry between the Doyles and the Sinclairs. The Sinclairs had been wealthy from lobster fishing while the Doyles were poor dairy farmers. But the fishing failed and land prices rose at the same time. Murray Sinclair had to sell off his fleet of boats and his house in town. When his French wife Juliette committed suicide, Murray turned to drink and died of a heart attack, leaving four children. Eloise was the youngest.

The Sinclairs tell the police that, although the family enjoyed both cave and sea diving, Eloise couldn’t dive. They had been too protective to allow her to be exposed to the danger. They therefore cannot explain how she has died in a sinkhole in full diving gear.

The truth is as shocking as it is unexpected.

In *Broken Bay*, Hickey creates a town full of distinctive characters, from the irascible motel owner to the elderly owner of the town takeaway, and Chomp, a fisherman who lost his arm to a shark. Her detective understands the role of gossip in small communities. Talking to the locals helps him uncover the past history of the Sinclairs and the Doyles.

The end result is a cleverly crafted story of love, infidelity, obsession, and the breathtaking beauty of the underground world of the Limestone Coast, a world that most of us will never see.

**THE SUMMER PARTY**  
by Rebecca Heath  
(Head of Zeus; 384 pp.; \$32.99)

**Rebecca Heath** also sets her debut crime novel ***The Summer Party*** on the coast of South Australia.

Lucy Ross has returned to the beachside town of Queen’s Point. Her grandmother has died and her house needs clearing. Lucy has been reluctant to return, but a newspaper article about human remains discovered on the nearby beach is ‘the prod she needed to finally make the two hour trek’ from Adelaide.

Suppressed memories of the summer of 2000 that she’d spent here with her grandmother ‘jostle for prominence’, the year she’d met the wealthy Whitlams, whose house on the hill still dominates the town.



The town has changed. Trendy cafes have replaced empty shops. Chic gift shops and slick surf shops sit where once there was only a second-hand clothing store ... And on the corner, across from the pub that's been renovated into a gorgeous hotel, sits the glass-fronted, elegantly lit "Whitlam Homewares".

Lucy remembers her naïve 15-year-old self, seduced by the glamorous lifestyle and the charisma of the teenage Whitlam siblings, culminating in the annual summer party held at their house.

Lucy brings her own troubles with her. Her husband has recently died and her successful career in finance is on hold, after an outburst at a client. Vulnerable and lonely, Lucy once more becomes emotionally entangled with the Whitlams.

Inevitably buried secrets are uncovered, as the body buried on the beach is identified and Lucy has to confront distressing truths about the past.

Heath's debut shows real promise — but 'the Whitlams'? Depending on your age, it either conjures images of Gough and Margaret or the Band or the Canberra suburb.

## Spooks

### THE SECRET HOURS

by Mick Herron

(Hachette; 384 pp.; \$32.95)

British writer **Mick Herron** is hailed by many as John Le Carré's successor and by others as the new Anthony Trollope, considering him the shrewdest satirical commentator in Britain today.

Herron is currently riding a well-deserved wave of success. Already two of his 'Slough House' spy stories are Apple TV series, with a talented cast including Gary Oldman and Kirsten Scott Thomas.

Herron's spies are MI5 failures, the Slow Horses, condemned forever to the repetitive task of 'unfulfilment' and boredom in Slough House, 'to look back in disappointment and stare round in dismay' as they live out the aftermath of their professional errors.' There are eight Slough House thrillers, but Herron's latest, **The Secret Hours**, breaks with his established pattern because it's a prequel, an origin story of some of his most memorable characters.

*The Secret Hours* begins with both a remarkable first sentence, 'The worst smell in the world is dead badger', and a tense remorseless pursuit of Max Janacek, a retired spook, through the Devon countryside. Only at the end does the reader understand why.

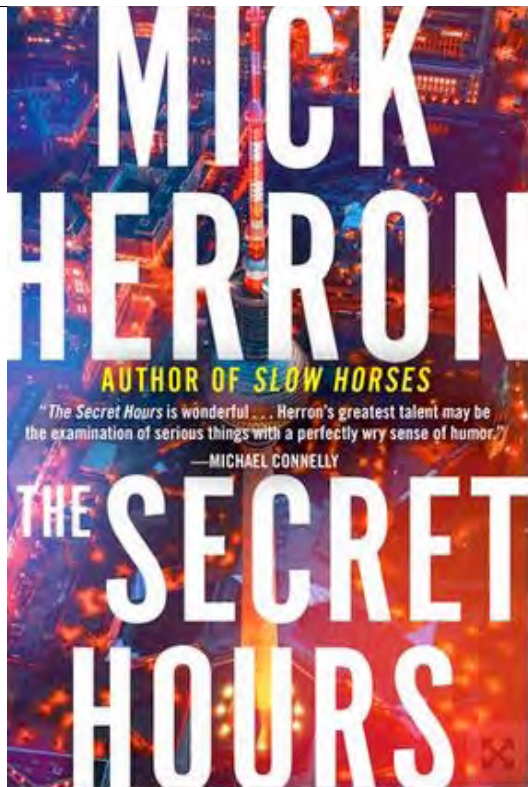
Meanwhile in Whitehall, the outgoing Prime Minister in a fit of pique has decided to take his revenge on the Park (the headquarters of the intelligence service) for cramping his style when Foreign Secretary, by instigating an enquiry called Monochrome. Herron doesn't name the Prime Minister but, as he had taken a minibreak at Peppa Pig World, he doesn't need to.

Junior officers at the Park believed at the time that in 'any contest between its top banana called First Desk (the formidable Diana Taverner) and the PM, it was the latter who'd be queuing at the dentist's afterwards, carrying his teeth in a sodden handkerchief".

Two years into their enquiry, the Monochrome committee has investigated little because they don't have access to the Park's archives.

Their remit states that they have to request specific files. First Desk tells her assistant: 'We keep records for our own devices, not to provide a ready-made history for anyone who comes looking. Between the work names and the coded locations this Monochrome outfit'll be lucky to piece together who did the coffee run yesterday,





let alone who shagged who in a safe house in 1987”.

Then, one day, the Otis File mysteriously appears in the shopping trolley of Malcolm Kyle, deputy chair of Monochrome. The file documents an operation in a recently reunified Berlin in 1994 and suddenly the committee has something to investigate and a star witness voluntarily giving evidence.

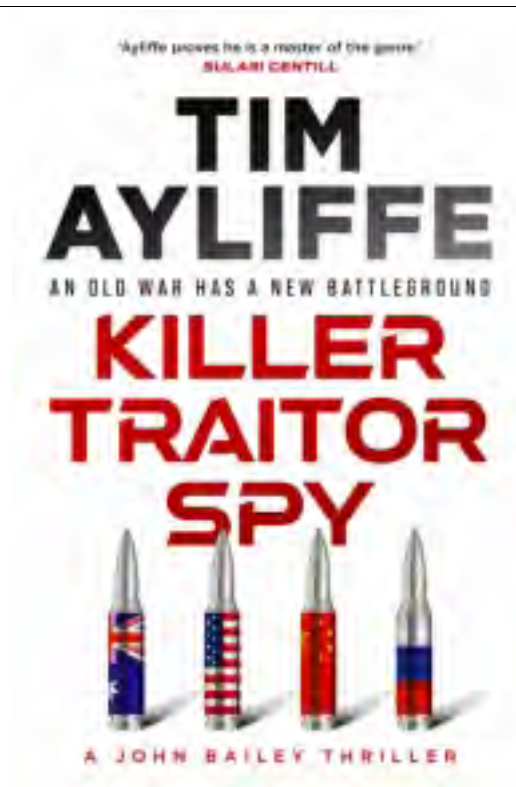
*The Secret Hours* is marketed as a standalone novel but, to understand all the nuances, you should go back to the beginning of Herron’s remarkable ongoing story and *Slow Horses*. You won’t regret it.

**KILLER TRAITOR SPY**  
 by Tim Ayliffe (Simon & Schuster  
 Australia; 320 pp.; \$32.99)

*Killer Traitor Spy* is Australian **Tim Ayliffe’s** fourth thriller featuring investigative journalist John Bailey.

Ayliffe, a journalist himself for more than 20 years, is the Managing Editor of Television and Video for ABC News. He has said that he created John Bailey’s world ‘so that I can explore real-world issues in a way that readers can be informed and entertained’, claiming that ‘everything I write has happened, will happen or could happen’.

This approach to his plot-driven thrillers has resulted in considerable success, including plans



for a TV series by CJZ productions, Australia’s largest independently owned production company.

*Killer Traitor Spy* which explores known aspects of Russia’s covert attacks on the West, begins with an attempt on the life of a Russian ex-pat, Dimitry Lebedev, resulting in the poisoning of a sex-worker, Scarlett Merriman, with a Soviet nerve agent. Lebedev had been negotiating to disclose information about a major intelligence breach in Canberra, but now he’s disappeared.

The next day, Lebedev’s closest friend and Kremlin critic Mikhail Volkov dies suddenly of a heart attack while jogging, and another, Leonid Oblonsky, is found murdered in Hyde Park.

Bailey is a friend of Scarlett and begins questioning how and why she was poisoned, but it’s a call for help from CIA agent Ronnie Johnson that leads his investigation into dangerous territory. Johnson tells him: ‘We’re not that different, y’know. Intelligence officers and journalists. We both chase the truth. Investigate. We just do things ... differently.’

Their investigation inevitably brings them to Canberra in search of a traitor hidden within the government, resulting in a violent confrontation in the leafy, quiet suburb of Yarralumla.

Tense and action packed, *Killer Traitor Spy* is a timely reminder of the danger of traitors hiding in plain sight.

— **Anna Creer**, 2023

## ‘Chloe Surveys Her World’: Some more artwork

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**Dennis Callegari generated for me several pieces of art under the general description of ‘Chloe Surveys Her World’. I sent him a photo of Chloe, our imperious cat who really believes she runs the Cochrane–Gillespie household. You can see one perspective on the front and back covers of this issue. Chloe doesn’t mean any harm (except occasionally to her sweet sister Zelda, who just wants Chloe to like her), but Dennis’s AI program thought otherwise.**

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*Below:*  
**‘Chloe, proprietor of  
the Old Curiosity  
Shop’.**





# SF Commentary 114

November 2023

84 pages

DENNIS CALLEGARI AND JIM BURNS PLAY WITH A.I. ART.

WAKES CELEBRATING LIVES LOST IN 2023:

VALMA BROWN, LEE HARDING, JENNIFER BRYCE.

TRIBUTE TO HELENA BINNS 1941-2023.

HORTON on CORDWAINER SMITH'S TIMELESS FIRST STORY.

WOLF interviews CONEY.

KIM HUETT: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND A LOOK AT AUSTRALIAN SF PUBLISHING

DURING WORLD WAR II.

COLIN STEELE'S BOOKWORLD.

ANNA CREER on CRIME FICTION.

