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Where did our Kate go?

This is the slightly shortened text of my talk to the September 1992 meeting of the Nova Mob, Melbourne's sf discussion group.

I

I can think of two reasons why I volunteer to give a talk once a year at Nova Mob. One is to prevent the onset of terminal brain death. Twenty years ago I could write a long essay or review every month or so. Now I'm doing well to write one paper a year. But at least I try to exercise the old brain a bit and discover new facets of some favourite author.

The second reason for volunteering to do such a talk is to introduce you to the works of an admirable author. This can give me a lot of pleasure when I discover an excellent author, such as Jonathan Carroll, whose works are not yet well known.

But what if the research itself makes irrelevant the aims of presenting such a paper? What happens if, after reading vast numbers of books and stories by a particular author, I can no longer recommend her? I've met my sticking point, my Waterloo — the novels published by Kate Wilhelm since the mid-1980s.

II

If you were an American audience, I would hardly need to explain why I'm a fan of Kate Wilhelm's novels and short stories. They did very well in America during the 1960s and 1970s. She gained a Nebula Award for the short story 'The Planners' and a Hugo Award for her novel *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*. She had novels and short stories in the Hugo and Nebula nomination lists almost every year from about 1967 through to the late 1970s. Since then her popularity seems to have faded in America, but certainly not disappeared.

The situation in Britain and Australia has always been very different. During the 1970s, Gollancz in Britain published in hardback almost all of Kate Wilhelm's books, but many of them never achieved a paperback edition, or, if they did, they disappeared quickly from bookshop shelves. Eventually Gollancz gave up trying to make money on Wilhelm's work, and dropped her from its list. As far as I can tell she has not had a British edition, hardback or paperback, of any of her recent books. In Australia she has always been an unknown author, with only a few of her books appearing in local bookstores.

I became an admirer of Kate Wilhelm's in the late 1960s after I read some of the short stories she had published in the *Orbit* series, edited by her husband Damon Knight. (There are advantages to nepotism: she had a story in every issue of *Orbit* except Numbers 13 and 21.) 'Somerset Dreams' is the story that stays most clearly in my mind, but I also enjoyed 'The Encounter', 'Windsong' and 'The Infinity Box'. It's interesting that when I looked back over my copies of *Orbit* I found that I did not like most of the stories that won the greatest praise for Wilhelm, such as 'The Planners' and 'April Fool's Day Forever'. Gollancz in Britain and Harper & Row in America, both of whom were sending me review copies at the time, were publishing simultaneous editions of Wilhelm's novels. My particular favourites were *The Clewiston Test* and *A Sense of Shadow*. I disliked intensely *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, by far the most successful of Wilhelm's novels, but it was followed by *Juniper Time*, which I still think is Wilhelm's best novel.

And at that stage, in 1979, I stopped reading Wilhelm's books, although I still collected them all. And at about that time they disappeared almost com-

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pletely from the shelves of Australian bookshops.

There was nothing deliberate about not reading Wilhelm's books from the 1980s and 1990s. It's just that our house is full of as-yet-unread books. One of these days, I knew, I could give myself the acute pleasure of catching up on all her later books.

What did I find when I did the reading for this talk? Hardly a total lack of pleasure, but certainly a great letdown. What the hell was I going to talk about? I would have preferred to talk about some other subject rather than give a negative talk, but by the time I had done the research for *this* talk I did not have enough time to do the reading for any other.

In short, I've just had the experience equivalent to discovering a perfect recipe for soufflé, which works perfectly for over a decade, but suddenly finding that the soufflé falls flat nearly every time I try it.

What happened to Kate Wilhelm? Why has her special talent gone flat? I'm sorry; there's no getting out of it. Here is the tale of my great letdown.

III

What are my pleasant memories of Kate Wilhelm's work?

Since the last two books of hers I read were the novels *Juniper Time* and *Welcome, Chaos*, they are glowing memories — of a literate, readable style, of memorable main characters, of an extraordinary sense of landscape, and an acute sense of the imminent disaster. In my memory, all her best works are dire warnings of some sort: what Brian Aldiss once called 'pure bracing gloom'.

When I began the current reading scheme, I started with the short story collections that have appeared since 1979. They are *Listen, Listen* (1981), *Children of the Wind* (1989) and *And the Angels Sing* (1992).

I was certainly not let down by reading the short story collections. ***Listen, Listen***, in particular, makes good reading. But that was to be expected, because all the stories in *Listen, Listen* were written in the middle to late 1970s, the same period that produced *Juniper Time*.

The first story, a novel-length piece called **'The Winter Beach'**, I had already read as the first part of the 1983 novel *Welcome, Chaos*. It stands up fairly well by itself, although I remember the novel treatment as somewhat meatier.

'The Winter Beach' tells of Lyle Taney, a single woman in her late thirties, about as typical a Wilhelm main character as you can get, who loses her job on the east coast and decides to take a long working holiday in a house on the Oregon coast. Since Kate Wilhelm moved to Oregon in the late 1960s, almost all her work has been set there.

The main character of 'The Winter Beach' is contacted by secret service people, who ask her to watch the nearby house on the coast. The bloke living there is supposed to be highly dangerous to the American state; she is blackmailed into keeping a watch on him. She does. She becomes friends with the bloke in the house, and his companion. She finds out that they are the goodies, not the baddies. They are trying to protect their secret, which is immortality, from all the secret services in the world. As the spooks close in, Lyle sets off in her car up a mountain road. She feels very tired and sick, but cannot risk going to a motel or hotel. The rain closes in; it's usually raining on the Oregon coast, in fact as in Wilhelm's fiction. Lyle finds an isolated parking spot high in the mountains. She gets sicker and sicker, falling into a delirium. All her doubts and dreams run through her mind, as the rain belts down. The reader becomes convinced that she is dying. After a few pages, we find her waking up, very tired and thirsty, in the morning. Slowly she recovers. We realise that she has been inoculated with the immortality drug. Without meaning to, she has become part of group whose secret might tear apart the world!

The strength of Wilhelm's approach is that she always starts from known present-day details, introducing her sf or fantasy elements slowly and surreptitiously throughout the story. Her characters are not the usual idiot supermen of typical American sf, but are professional women, often single, who are well off but never wealthy, women facing a life crisis of some sort. Wilhelm can sketch the lives of these women accurately and with great sympathy. The science fiction or fantasy element of the story enters when her woman character is afflicted by Forces Larger Than Herself. Throughout the 1960s or 1970s these forces were usually represented by creepy scientists trying to control the world, or nasty CIA or FBI agents, also out to control the world. These stories had a strong sense of paranoia, but were hardly 'anti-science stories', which is the label that some of the sf reviewers pinned on them. Wilhelm took the trouble to find out how actual research in particular fields might be done. Her writing makes everything tactile and visible; she gives reality to her villains as well as her heroes.

However, while she can give a sense of reality to even her slightest stories, Wilhelm's in-

stinct for melodrama often undermines the reality. If she were a funny writer, she might be better known outside America. Her main characters are always highminded people, often facing a life crisis because of their highmindedness rather than because of the crass ordinary realities that annoy the rest of us. Her male characters are particularly hard to take. In 'The Winter Beach', the mysterious stranger fits almost ridiculously the cliché of the handsome older man who sweeps the lonely lady off her feet. When he convinces her that he is the holder of the secret of immortality, which must be protected from world governments, he can do no wrong. Her only instinct is to protect him from harm. In other stories where the lead male character is about the same age as the lead female character, he is always resourceful and devastatingly attractive. Wilhelm's main characters don't waste time when they decide to go to bed with each other. No foreplay, just astounding orgasms followed by much meaningful conversation. Without realising it, Wilhelm often descends into romance writing at its most obvious.

Given that the central emotional situation in a Wilhelm story is usually a bit ho-hum, what makes it interesting? In 'The Winter Beach', most of the excitement comes from Wilhelm's appreciation of the coastal landscape. Oregon is usually the main character of a good Wilhelm story. After clambering around the rain-soaked cliffs with Lyle Taney in this story, you just want to wring out your clothes and dry out somewhere.

'Moongate', the novella that closes *Listen, Listen*, is set in the mountainous eastern desert of Oregon. Wilhelm's main character, Victoria, has gone up into the mountains because she has been invited to stay with a prospector friend of hers. She gets lost along the winding mountain roads, and stops for the night until she can work out a way to return home. In the bright moonlight she gets restless:

> She looked behind her at the camper, silver and shining, beyond it to the pale road, farther to the black velvet strip that was the gorge, the black and white cliffs, the sharp-edged mesas . . . For a moment she felt regret that she would never be able to share this, or explain it in any way . . .
>
> She saw boulders on the crest of the hill and went to them and sat down. To the east the brilliant sky was cut off by high, rounded hills; far off in the west the horizon was serrated by the Cascade peaks. Closer, there were mesas and jumbled hills, a dry wash that kept reversing its ground- figure relationship, now sunken, now raised. She lost it in the hills and let her gaze sweep the valley, continue to the dirt road she had driven over earlier, the kinky black ribbon of the gorge . . . Platinum whites, silver whites, soft feathery whites, grays . . .
>
> Something stirred in the valley and she shifted to look. What had registered before as a large shadow now had form, a hemispherical shape that looked solid. . . . A patch of pale orange light appeared on the shape and something crossed before it, blocking the light momentarily. Then another shadow appeared, another . . . The shadows moved onto the desert floor where they reflected the moonlight just as her own camper did and, like her camper, they were vehicles. Campers, trucks with canopies, trailers, motor homes, station wagons . . . They lined up in a single column and moved toward the dirt road, without lights but distinct in the brilliant moonlight, too distant for any noise to reach her. More and more of them appeared, bumper to bumper, a mile of them, five miles, she could not guess how far the column stretched.

The rest of the story is Victoria's attempt to make sense of this vision in the moonlight. At first she thinks she has stumbled across a top-secret military installation. She runs, gets lost, and in the morning can find no sign of the vehicles, or even trace where they might have come from. Nobody believes her story, until her investigations lead her back to the same spot, in the moonlight, when one night she sees American Indian warriors come out of the canyon. The spot proves to be a timegate, but one that opens randomly and with very unpredictable results, and the rest of the story is a bit of a letdown after the wonderful page in which she sees the silent column of vehicles in the moonlight.

I used this passage not merely to show Wilhelm's use of visual landscape, but also to show a strength of her writing: her ability to show people undergoing sudden slippages of perspective or changes in consciousness. Almost every good Wilhelm story contains a moment of disorientation that one remembers long after forgetting everything else in the story. In 'Somerset Dreams', perhaps her best work, her main character is being commandeered by the memories of the old people who live in a dying little town called Somerset. This process is never explained; the reader experiences it directly as it happens to the main character.

In the short story collection ***Children of the Wind***, consciousness-changing is the main subject of a story called **'The Gorgon Field'**. This is the second novella introducing Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Liedl, whom Wilhelm soon turned into the detective heroes of a series of mystery novels. Charlie is a New York detective who has taken early retirement from his job as an arson specialist. Constance has taken early retirement from her job as a psychologist. In this story, as in all the later novels, they are lured out of their idyllic retirement farmhouse, somewhere in upstate New York, to solve a mystery. As in most of

the novels, the puzzle itself is rather offbeat, and it's questionable whether the story offers any real 'solution'.

In 'The Gorgon Field', the client is Deborah Rice, whose father, as she says herself, is 'your typical ignorant multi-millionaire'. Her father, Carl Wyandot, has bought a valley near Pueblo, California, to which he has moved all his operations. Deborah and her brother Tony want to gain power of attorney over their father, because they charge that he is going mad. They base that charge on the fact that he seems to have fallen under the influence of a Mexican bloke named Ramón, who describes himself as a shaman. Charlie and Constance fly out to the valley, become part of the household of Carl Wyandot, and find themselves falling under the influence of Ramón. Wilhelm then has great fun playing with various motifs from Indian magic, in particular the theme of the magic three-dimensional neolithic maze. There is such a maze inside the valley, and Constance is guided into it. There she undergoes a mystical experience that Wilhelm creates convincingly for the reader. In the end, we are never quite sure what has happened, except that her journey through the maze gives her slightly psychic powers which she uses in some of the later books. At the moment when she believes herself deep within the maze, guided by Ramón, Charlie watches from outside the maze:

> in the centre of the formations, on top of the highest of the gorgons, . . . two figures, Constance and Ramón, shining in the moonlight. He felt the world swim out from under him and caught the post for support, closed his eyes very hard. When he opened them again, the figures were gone. He raced back toward the gorgons. When he got there, Ramón was emerging carrying Constance.

IV

At the beginning of the 1980s, Kate Wilhelm was one of America's foremost woman sf and fantasy writers, surpassed in reputation possibly only by Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ. For all I know, Wilhelm's reputation may still be intact in America, but now she goes almost unpublished outside that country. *The Dark Door*, the second Constance and Charlie mystery novel, seems to have been the most recent of her books published in Britain.

Wilhelm's career of the 1980s and 1990s starts promisingly enough, with the first Constance and Charlie mystery novel, *Hamlet Trap*. But that doesn't appear until 1987. Apart from *Welcome, Chaos* in 1983, which I would claim as vintage Wilhelm, and a novel called *City of Cain* that is so forgettable that I have forgotten it completely, she published little except a short story collection between *Juniper Time* in 1979 and *Hamlet Trap* 1987. From then on, she has kept publishing at an extraordinary rate: *Crazy Time*, a novel, in 1988, *The Dark Door*, a Charlie and Constance mystery, in 1988, *Children of the Wind*, an sf collection, in 1989, *Smart House*, the third Charlie and Constance mystery, also in 1989, *Sweet, Sweet Poison*, the fourth Charlie and Constance mystery, in 1990, *Cambio Bay*, a fantasy, also in 1990, *Death Qualified*, a book that's half sf, half mystery, in 1991, *And the Angels Sing*, an sf collection, in 1992, *Seven Kinds of Death*, the fifth Charlie and Constance mystery, also in 1992, and already in 1993, *Justice for Some*, a mystery starring a new character, Judge Sarah Drexler. But there has been no new novel that I would call a true sf novel since 1983. Why?

Hamlet Trap, which begins this flurry of activity, is a thoroughly well-made mystery, without any sf or fantasy elements. It centres around the coastal town of Ashland, Oregon, whose main industry is tourism that is centred upon the summer season of its repertory theatre. At the novel's beginning, a new director has been hired for the season. Gray Wilmot, the prima donna new director, is obviously going to clash with Roman Cavanaugh, who has controlled the theatre and the town itself for many years.

All this is very conventional mystery novel stuff, and is sketched in with great economy and verve. Wilhelm shows a talent we had never seen in her work before: an ability to animate a large number of characters, and keep them interesting and distinct from each other. Until now she has always confined herself to a narrow stage of characters. The town and the theatre itself come to life within the first few pages, a bustling world filled with believable and interesting people.

Wilhelm's main character, however, is one familiar to Wilhelm's readers:

> Ginnie was rangy, with dark curly hair that she kept too short. She wore sweatshirts, blue jeans, and crazy T-shirts and sneakers . . . Ginnie had lived with him after her mother died, then she had gone away to school and at twenty-four had returned, two years into her master's program. She didn't give a shit about the degree, she had said cheerfully then. She had hung on for the experience of designing sets and now she was ready to go to work. . . .
>
> She was now independent. The first smooth-talking, handsome actor who came down the pike and saw a good thing in her because of who she was, who her uncle was, would twist her like wet spaghetti, he had thought, and he had been wrong. She treated them all with affection, like pets.

There's more than a hint of sex-

ual assessment here, since the viewpoint character is Ginnie's uncle, Roman Cavanaugh. We're back in familiar Wilhelm territory: the independent, sparky, emotionally and sexually charged woman who must oppose the smooth father figure, but whose father figure is her only real blind spot.

And in many ways we stay in familiar Wilhelm territory in this novel, except that she has replaced the science fiction element with the far more prosaic mystery element. There is a striking contrast between *Hamlet Trap* and Wilhelm's best sf work, which is attractive because she gives form and feeling to the various currents of political and social menace that many American sf writers and readers felt during the 1960s and 1970s. In *Juniper Time* rival groups within the government battle to extract the secret of the artefact that an astronaut has found circling the Earth. In *Welcome, Chaos*, a government security organisation is the villain. These works reflect the crises that America was undergoing during the 1960s and 1970s.

Suddenly, in *Hamlet Trap*, this sense of social menace disappears. The menaces are far more local, entirely dependent on the obsessive relationship that all the people in the town have with their theatre. The action begins when Ginnie's casual boyfriend Peter is killed when he slips into the back of the theatre merely to drop a parcel. Ginnie finds the body, but runs away, unable to believe what has happened. Unfortunately she doesn't show up until the next morning, and is charged with the murder. In the process of solving the mystery, Charlie and Constance uncover twenty years of the town's nasty secrets. The solution to the mystery only marginally depends on the character of Ginnie, and seems trivial when we get to it. Meanwhile Charlie and Constance solve Ginnie's own problems, which go back to childhood. This part of the novel, essentially one giant red herring, is much more vivid than the pedestrian murder mystery. At the end of the novel, all is pretty much back to normal, as you expect at the end of any murder mystery.

When I read *Hamlet Trap*, I enjoyed it a lot. I like a good mystery, and Wilhelm certainly knows how write one. But when will she get back to doing what she does best?

What Wilhelm does very badly is comedy, as she proves in ***Crazy Time***, her worst novel. The sf gimmick is quite unconvincing; she would have been better to use an idea that is unashamedly fantasy. A man is mistakenly disintegrated as the unfortunate side effect of an experiment gone wrong. Instead of dying, he somehow disappears into the ether, only to reassemble himself at odd moments. He proceeds to haunt the villains who disintegrated him. Slowly he coalesces enough to fall in love with the main woman character. There are baddies and goodies, and love and pratfalls, but almost no real comedy. This one of those books you can't believe anyone would bother writing, let alone complete and send to a publisher.

Gloom really set in when I read ***The Dark Door***, the second of the Charlie and Constance mysteries. By this stage, I had become very sick of Wilhelm's private detectives. They are almost caricatures of the main characters Wilhelm used in her 1970s sf novels. In the earlier books, such characters were younger and had interesting problems. In the mystery novels, they are older, as befits the author, who turns 65 this year, and retired, and extraordinarily complacent. They are always stroking each other, mentally and sometimes physically, and being cute in all sorts of small objectionable ways. At least Hercule Poirot was ludicrous when he exercised his 'little grey cells'; in the Wilhelm novels, Constance does most of the worrying and legwork, while Charlie always solves the mystery in a predictable and insouciant way. There is nothing more boring than private detectives who are always right but never funny.

One might be able to ignore these boring characters if only the mystery novels worked as mystery novels. *The Dark Door* is memorable, but falls apart in my mind whenever I think about it. There is even an introductory science fiction section that tells how some poor alien loses his interstellar probe. It has, of course, ended up on Earth. We meet a family who are investigating an old deserted country hotel. As they step into the place they have just bought, all the characters undergo terrible headaches. The main character finds himself reaching for his rifle. In what I must admit is one of Wilhelm's most effective scenes, he cannot stop himself from murdering his whole family. When he escapes from the scene, he sets out to solve what is already a haunted-house, or rather a haunted-hotel story. He changes identity, does his own detective work, and discovers strange circles of mad and murderous activity that have surrounded various isolated old deserted hotels during recent years. He begins to burn them down, one by one. The locus of evil, which we already know is the nasty failed interstellar

probe, keeps shifting. The insurance people call in Charlie and Constance, who then set out on their own haunted-hotel quest. This is hardly a mystery novel at all, but a weird sort of celebration of mayhem and arson. *The Dark Door* must be the most peculiar mixture of genres that I have ever read.

Peculiar. Off-key. These are the words that I keep finding to describe each of these late 1980s novels. ***Sweet, Sweet Poison*** is an acceptable little mystery, but the solution to the mystery, as in *Hamlet Trap*, does not seem to have much to do with the main action of the book. Kate Wilhelm does not seem to have grasped the essential point of this kind of mystery: that the solution of the mystery must be interesting in itself, and integral to the whole action of the book. In the best Agatha Christie books, for instance, the solution is always an act of pure theatre: you've made the wrong conclusions because what you thought was happening was in fact the opposite of what was really happening, and Christie could always play the essential conjuring trick that diverted your attention but proved so satisfying when the truth was explained at the end. At a guess, I would say that Wilhelm is not good at conjuring tricks.

The Charlie and Constance mysteries hit absolute rock bottom with ***Smart House***, whose story is comprised of nothing but the most typical elements of the most ho-hum mystery story. I really can't help feeling that Wilhelm wrote this over a wet long weekend. In ***Seven Kinds of Death***, you get to the solution, and it is more puzzling than the mystery was. Okay, you say at the end, now I see how the murder was done, and now you've shown me the murderer, but I can't actually remember why he would want to murder her. Again, you get the feeling that Wilhelm was writing the book out of sheer necessity. There's no spirit in it at all.

Everything in these books points to a lapse of attention, a deliberate turning away from known strengths. Why? That's the answer I cannot give you. If I had been struck by some blinding revelation, I would have been a lot happier about giving this talk. In a piece that Charles Platt published in *Dream Makers* in 1979, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm interview each other. What they talk about most is money. If you're a professional writer in America, you have to earn your living through your craft. There are few grants, and seemingly little of the endless academic and semi-governmental junkets that keep many writers barely alive in Australia. But at the end of the 1970s, Damon Knight's career fell in the mud when Harper & Row cancelled his *Orbit* series of anthologies. He has published a few novels during the 1980s, and a new novel last year, but nothing terribly successful. At the same time, Kate Wilhelm's career was doing quite well, especially after the Hugo Award for *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*. Surely she could have kept the family coffers full by continuing to write fullblooded sf novels?

Not if ***Juniper Time*** failed in the bookshops. I have no evidence either way, that it did or did not fail. It certainly did not win the awards that Kate Wilhelm might reasonably have expected for it. Her best novel, it has a very coherent plot, a wonderful sense of foreboding as American society collapses under the weight of continent-wide drought, and a most extraordinary evocation of the desert areas of eastern Oregon. In the main characters' encounter with the desert we find a superb example of Wilhelm's ability to present a combination of human courage and near-mystical visionary insight. For me, everything works perfectly in this book, but if it sold badly, it might have made the author question the whole basis of her craft. After all, *Juniper Time* appeared just as America was about to take a sharp political turn right, but Wilhelm's sympathy in the novel is unashamedly for the little people, especially Native Americans, about to be destroyed by unthinking governments. As solid a piece of environmental fiction as has ever appeared, it could well have been published in the wrong year. I just hope somebody republishes it soon.

What do we find when eight years later Kate Wilhelm begins to churn out novels again? A complete lack of interest in either large-scale environmental matters or the plight of the little person in America. From 1987 on, Kate Wilhelm authenticates her characters and settings with endless descriptions of the comfortable buildings they live in, the beautiful clothes they wear, the delicious foods they eat — the solidity of their place in society. She retains her ability to render landscapes, but only once does she return to her beloved Oregon eastern uplands. These are not mere tales of outrageously rich people, although some characters are, but are tales of comfortably upper middle class

people, who would never see themselves as being rich, but would see themselves as perceptive and artistic: people of all-round good taste, like Kate Wilhelm herself. At the same time, the detailed and careful writing of the 1970s work tends to disappear in a flurry of short observations. Her sentences become shorter, more choppy, much less informative than the language of her best pieces of fiction, such as 'Somerset Dreams'.

Take ***Death Qualified***, for example. It is a recent novel that at first seems to be a return to form for Kate Wilhelm. Subtitled *A Mystery of Chaos*, it might have been mistakenly taken by many people as a straight sf novel.

It begins in classic Wilhelm sf style. A man named Tom works as a janitor in a scientific establishment. He has no memory of his past; each day is the same as the one before. We are given to understand that he is the subject of some sort of psychological–pharmacological experiment. He manages to evade taking his daily pill. As the effects of five years of dosing wear off, he regains his memory of his real name — Lucas Kendricks — and identity, and escapes from the scientific establishment to return home. In the next scene, we meet his wife Nell Kendricks, whose home is at Turner's Point, in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. She had to struggle on alone after her husband disappeared for five years. She hears that he is headed home, but that the police believe that he has murdered and mutilated two women during the journey. One day, as she climbs the mountain track up to her favourite waterfall lookout, she sees Lucas there, looking wildly happy. As she rushes toward him, he falls, shot, and plunges down the waterfall. She has a rifle with her, and is known to be a crack shot. There is no evidence that anybody else was in the area. She is arrested and charged with murder.

Enter Barbara Holloway, the main character. She is a woman lawyer who had given up her career, disgusted with the entire legal system. Her father persuades her to take the case of Nell Kendricks, a case everybody agrees is hopeless. And, after endless investigations, she solves it, after a fashion.

The traditional Wilhelm trademarks are here: smooth prose, the sense of evil organisations screwing up people's lives, the deft evocation of mountain scenery (which turns out to be very important to solving the mystery), and of course, the intense, independent, incredibly intelligent and resourceful main woman character, overshadowed only by her resourceful, irresistible father and the sexy, easy-going but idealistic new man in her life.

These three characters certainly come to life in the book, as do quite a few of the minor characters, but their concerns are entirely insular. The book concentrates on the defence of Nell Kendricks rather than the reasons why her husband Lucas died. No matter how hard she tries, Wilhelm fails to give much life to the mystery of what happened to Lucas in the first place. That solution, when offered, has little to do with the attempted sf theme of the book. And because of this weakness in the book, the division between its two mysteries, it has none of that general concern that makes the 1970s sf books so powerful. *Death Qualified* is not really *about* anything. Time and again, Wilhelm tries to develop the metaphor of Chaos theory into a deep and meaningful statement, but it never seems connected to the action she presents. Her main character emotes a lot about the failures in the law, but Wilhelm takes a very conservative, steady-as-she-goes view of the law. The Wilhelm of the 1970s would have assumed from the start that the law is stacked against the poor and innocent, then developed the idea from there.

What I'm accusing Kate Wilhelm of doing is pulling in her horns, dropping her bundle — whatever the phrase you want to use for a failure of literary nerve sometime in the early 1980s. I don't know why this happened.

I would *guess* that she has taken up the habit of writing much too fast. Her former mastery of plot development disintegrates in novel after novel. There is too much toing and froing and awkward bits of stray story that would have been stitched into the whole if the author had gone through it one more time. I would *guess* that she is writing too fast because she must: that she is the family breadwinner these days, that the Charlie and Constance mysteries sell well, and that her writing is paying the bills. That hardly explains the peculiar quality of the non-Charlie and Constance mysteries or her recent fantasies *Crazy Time* and *Cambio Bay*.

I would *guess* that she has seen that adventurous story-telling and crusading themes don't cut too much ice with today's sf market. I hope that she's wrong in that assumption. Certainly she throws up no real challenges to society in any of the fiction after *Welcome, Chaos*. Her characters are now all well off, and live in cosy environments. Wilhelm is now concerned about the protection of prop-

erty and personal integrity. No one would ever suspect from her books of the 1980s and the 1990s that many of the worst nightmares of 1970s science fiction are coming true. Disappearing ozone layer? Greenhouse Effect? Worldwide political disintegration? Where are they? They were all themes that the 1960s or 1970s Kate Wilhelm would have tackled with gusto. Now she hardly seems to live in the same world as we do.

In Wilhelm's 1993 world, everybody is nice and safe. But they're not in *our* world. One day soon I hope that Kate Wilhelm will awaken from the long intellectual slumber that seems to have settled over her during the last decade. Some day she will realise that America and the rest of the world suddenly became far more dangerous while she wasn't looking. When she does, I suspect she will write the great classic sf disaster novel that we've been expecting from her since 1979.

Meanwhile I suggest that you read her novels and short stories from the 1960s and 1970s, since I cannot recommend that you seek out her recent novels.

— Bruce Gillespie, 29 August 1993