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SUFFICIENTLY DECAYED

In January this year Jean Weber wrote to me offering me the honour of Fan Guest of Honour at the 1999 World Convention if Melbourne won the bid in September. As I wrote back to her, I thought I was beyond surprise in fandom.

Why me? Why not or ? Or even or ? I benefit from faulty fan memories. True, like Katisha, I'm sufficiently decayed — by September 1999 I will have been in fandom for over 31 years — but I'm a fannish spring chicken compared with several other people, including at least two living Sydney fans who joined fandom before World War II.

I have three years to worry about my Guest of Honour Speech, so I won't squander one possible topic: Fannish Jants Who Ought To Be Guest of Honour Instead Of Me. A pretty boring topic, but it should be good for an hour or so if I can't think of anything else. (Whether anybody turns up to the Fan GoH Speech or not, I must give it. All ideas welcome.)

The year that wasn't

That letter from the Aussiecon III Bidding Committee was a great start to the year. It's been downhill ever since.

At the beginning of the year I paid a fortune (I keep saying 'a small fortune'; hah! it was a dinkum *fortune*) to publish and post two issues of *Metaphysical Review*.

In the same month I felt impelled by pressures from the company for which I do most of my work to buy Quark XPress 3.31 for Windows. \$1700 from City Software. Ouch.

The washing machine died. \$1000 to buy another one. (The old one was secondhand, and not repairable.)

The tax bill arrived, with only two months to pay. That would have been okay, if I'd thought to save it.

After many repairs and resurrections, my watch died. I bought it for £5 at the end of 1958 after receiving a cash prize for achieving equal top marks in Grade 6 at Oakleigh State School. Thirty-eight years old, and it died this year! Since I had no money at the time, Elaine gave me a new watch. It is reliable and wonderful — just what I should have bought ten years ago — but it's not my *real* watch, which will never run again.

The bar radiator died; the Dimplex oil-filled radiator, which replaced it, works much better than the bar

radiator ever did, but we could have done without that extra bill at that particular time. (And now the Dimplex has died, only five months after we bought it!)

The lights needed replacing.

The CD player died, after 11 years of sterling service. Most CD players last only a few years. We thought ours was immortal. It wasn't. We played a lot of LPs (remember vinyl?) while waiting to be able to afford a new player. The new player is superb, but I wish the old one had waited another year.

My mother, in her late seventies, was feeling well until this year, but recently she's had a couple of falls. No bones broken, but even she is feeling mortal these days.

And then . . . and then . . .

I write little about my paying work in fanzines because my paying work is as boring as the next fan's. Officially I'm a freelance book editor. In fact, since 1984 I've had an arrangement with the secondary education section of Macmillan Education: they throw me a guaranteed amount of work every month and I put their work before anybody else's. I'm not a 'contractor' because neither of us has ever signed a contract, but the arrangement has worked nicely for twelve years.

One big problem — the arrangement was always been between me and Brian McCurdy, head of secondary education. I've done freelance work for Macmillan since 1974, but until 1984 it was very irregular work. In July 1984 I was earning less than the minimum wage from freelancing. One day I rang Brian to see if any projects had turned up. He was surprised to hear that I had had no freelance work for six weeks. 'We must do something about that,' he said. And he did.

The beginning of the arrangement was a bit rocky, because at that stage I was feeling too ill to do all the work that was flung at me. Also, Brian asked me to work at Macmillan's South Melbourne office for two years while I learned how to handle books the Macmillan way.

In 1986 the arrangement became far more comfortable when Macmillan lent me the money to buy my own computer (an AT: two 360K drives; 620K RAM), and improved further in 1992 when Elaine bought me the 386 and I began desktop-publishing using Ventura 3 and a Hewlett Packard 300-dpi laser printer.

The first sign of changes in the arrangement showed up about two years ago, when I had to buy a 600-dpi

printer to continue producing camera-ready copy. During the last year or so rapid changes in the printing and publishing industry have sidelined (or sideswiped) my little enterprise. Desktop publishers are now expected to provide books on computer files that can be converted directly into film. Without owning a Macintosh, which I can't afford, I can't do this to Macmillan's satisfaction, although at the beginning year I spent a fortune on Quark XPress.

The final blow (it seemed) came in early August this year, when Brian rang to say that he was taking early retirement at the end of that month. My nice little world seemed to have fallen in. It might still do so. Brian has retired, after (as I can see now) spending several years training three or four people to take his place. Few people are privileged to work for a really effective, pleasant boss who is brilliant at solving problems instead of causing them. Brian McCurdy leaves a gap, although at the moment there seems no reason why I can't work with his successor(s). The Arrangement, as I think of it, still exists, but work has become much more difficult. It is much harder to pile up hours from editing than it is

from desktop publishing. Like most people in this country, suddenly I seem to be working harder and earning less.

It's a familiar story. The only real surprise in it is the neatness of the arrangement that has existed during the last twelve years. I feel like I'm still standing on a precipice. Will I be pushed over the edge? Will I jump? Or will I continue ambling along the edge, as I've been doing since 1984?

What have I been doing recently apart from worrying about work (waking up at 5 a.m. suffering from Quark nightmares, fghodsake!) or hoping that Zagreb might win the bid for 1999? Not a lot, apart from reading and listening to music. I'll include my usual Recent Reading list somewhere in this issue. I should be publishing fanzines, but I don't feel creative or rich at the moment.

As ever, the call of Nova Mob rang loud over the land, and I wrote a very rough piece on Iain Banks's non-SF novels for the November Nova Mob. Race Mathews did a vastly better job of writing about Banks's SF books. My talk appears below, and Race's will appear in the next *SFC*, if not before.

A TASTE FOR MAYHEM: Preliminary notes on IAIN BANKS'S NON-SF NOVELS

The legend

Banks, Iain with or without a middle 'M.', is the stuff of legend.

The legend runs that he had published three novels before someone told him he was an SF writer and dragged him along to a convention. The legend adds that he decided to join the SF community and write real SF books when he discovered the capacity of the British fan for putting away booze at conventions.

The legend hints that he absorbs as much booze and illegal chemicals as he ascribes to his characters. This can't be true, or he'd be dead by now.

Another legend has him abseiling the outside wall of a hotel during a convention, an adventure that he ascribes to a character in *Espedair Street*.

Are these legends true? Iain Banks confirms some of them in an interview with Alan Stewart (*Ethel the Aardvark*, March 1992). The story of the wall-climbing incident is even weirder than the legend:

It used to be when I got drunk I loved climbing things like buildings and bits of industrial plant and machinery: that sort of stuff. I promised my girl friend I'd stop doing it, but then I was standing on the outside of the Metropole Hotel chatting with Tony Roxborough who's editor at Ventura. It was part of a suite of rooms with this enormous gigantic bedroom and I was standing at the end of this balcony after an enormously long party — about 5 o'clock in the morning — the sun was just coming up. I spotted that this other balcony outside the sitting room was only about six or seven feet away so I handed my drink to one of the people (I think they were

from Andromeda Bookshop in Birmingham) cause I'd spotted a loophole, you see, because I wasn't actually climbing. This was about the third or fourth storey, and it was actually a traverse; I wasn't actually gaining any height. So I did this, but unfortunately at the same time as this there was a burglar taking things next door and the suite adjoining that, which was part of the convention where they were getting together the daily newspaper. This person appeared and walked off with some jewellery and a camera and other bits and pieces. Fortunately the lady who was asleep in there got a glimpse of him and he didn't look at all like me. He had short hair and no beard — at the time I had much longer hair — and he didn't have a Scottish accent.

About half an hour later I was sitting talking to this totally young-looking policeman who looked like he shouldn't be out on the streets at that time of night, saying, well, actually I was staying at the hotel. They didn't even take my name, let alone take a statement from me.

After about four hours' sleep, myself and John Jarrold, my science fiction editor for Orbit, went down to the bar and found out what exactly had happened. At ten o'clock in the morning we were there for a morning hot starter as it were, and I was ordering John's gin and tonic and my bloody mary when this American guy came up and said 'Hey, they let you out'. I didn't believe him, and said, 'What are you talking about?' 'Why aren't you in jail or prison?' he wanted to know. I'm still asking him what's he talking about.

It seems that this rumour had started up instantly that I was a cat burglar, an international jewel thief, and

that either I'd been abseiling down from the top of the hotel dressed as an SAS, you know anti-terrorist squad, with the balaclava and all the rest, dressed in black, or that I was dressed in a Spiderman outfit. Several people swore blind they'd seen all this happen. One and a half thousand Americans left that day to go back to the States and they all left believing this had happened.

When Banks was in Melbourne, although he was not allowed by his Penguin minder to meet the SF fans, he was interviewed on radio by Terry Lane. During that interview he confessed to a 'taste for mayhem'.

In talking about the main character of a much later novel, *Complicity*, Banks said of him: 'A deeply unpleasant character. My hope and expectation was to offend as many people with *Complicity* as I did with *The Wasp Factory*.'

Is the legend true?

Mayhem? Offensive? All part of the legend, no doubt, but the secret of Banks's success is that he never offends, no matter what his characters do. His style is chatty but always precise and vivid, funny without being wildly grotesque, visionary without being pretentious. In short, Banks is not 'the artist as public nuisance', as Robert Hughes described the visual artist of the late twentieth-century, but the artist as private charmer. This is art that hides art, delicious to read, but difficult to talk about.

Banks can write well because he's had lots of practice. In the *Interzone* interview (No. 86, August 1994) Banks says that he wrote and submitted, during a period of 16 years, six novels before he had anything accepted for publication. Also, he wrote *Consider Phlebas* before *The Wasp Factory*, his first novel, was published.

Double career?

Banks has surprisingly little to say about the nature of his double career. 'I definitely feel more at home with SF because you've got far more control . . . But by a degree, *fraction*, writing mainstream fiction is more rewarding, simply because you feel you've achieved more having had to wrestle with reality as well as with your imagination.'

The dividing lines between Banks's SF and his non-SF are thin. The first three novels purport to be founded in 'ordinary' reality, but it's a rickety foundation. *Walking on Glass*, for instance, is divided into three sections, seemingly unconnected. In the most typical section, a young man on the loose — not at all sure of his place in the world — falls in love with a delectable young lady, but is in turn betrayed by the delectable young lady and his best friend. This becomes a familiar theme in Banks's non-SF books. In another section, two people sit playing impossible games in a tower that looks out over a bleak landscape. They cannot remember how they came to be in the tower. They will be allowed to escape the tower only if they think of the right question, not the right answer. This 'fantasy' section proves to be a connected part of the whole story.

In *The Bridge*, as we are shown at the beginning of the novel, a car accident has pitched the main character into a self-constructed alternate reality. In this alternate

reality, a city exists on a bridge that stretches in each direction to the horizon. Its pylons are anchored in a line of islands that stretch across this huge stretch of water. A train service provides transport along the city, and all human activity, including work, entertainment and living areas can be found on the bridge. In the book's last pages, the main character awakes after many months in a coma. It has all been a dream, not a separate fantasy world.

'The Wasp Factory'

Banks's first great success, the book that created the Banks legend at one go, was *The Wasp Factory*, a bizarre concoction that seems to surpass all barriers of good or bad taste. As the uniquely icky character says of himself: 'Two years after I killed Blyth I murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my young cousin, Esmerelda, more or less on a whim. That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again. It was just a stage I was going through.'

The Wasp Factory's main character is an isolated chap who spends most of his time on an island that is barely joined to the mainland by dunes. He has set it up as a private fortress. His father has allowed him to miss school altogether, and he has constructed around himself a primeval world of signs, portents and warnings that keep everybody at bay except his father. The book begins as the boy's father warns him that his psychotic brother Eric has escaped from custody and his heading back home.

As I've said, Banks confesses to an enjoyment of mayhem. 'Mayhem' is a mild word for what happens in *The Wasp Factory*, which is narrated by a very unreliable witness. The thesis of Kev McVeigh, a British critic and editor, is that not only has Frank not killed his brother, sister and cousin, but that they probably never existed. Mad Eric might not exist either. If that is the case, who is Frank's father, and what does he believe is happening when Frank purports to take phone calls from the crazed Eric? And what happens at the end, when Eric does seem to put in an appearance?

The power of this book is in its tone of cheerful malevolence. A tale told by a funny, articulate murderous paranoid is a lot more interesting than the biography of John Q. Citizen. Here, more than anywhere else in his work, Banks uses the power of seemingly simple language to make the most unlikely events seem inevitable.

'The Bridge'

The Bridge, on the other hand, is not completely satisfactory, because its intensity is undermined by its 'He woke up and found it was all a dream' structure. It is given validity by Banks's down-to-earth style. While the main character is living within the Bridge world he really tries to adjust himself to the shifting expectations of the other inhabitants. Why, for instance, is he given a luxury apartment in what is otherwise a rundown, rather seedy world? Why is he given an allowance that enables him to dress well and make friends? He doesn't question the world itself because it is completely lived in. Banks shows

us that the elements of this world are skewed artifacts of the main character's Scotland: a world of bridges, lakes, trains, rundown apartments, old lifts, stone rather than concrete. Each major section of the bridge seems to him like a fortress, and the image of the castle/fortress remains central to Banks's later novels. This is warm, user-friendly Kafka; skewed, but not alienating.

'Espedair Street'

I read Iain Banks's next non-SF novels, *The Crow Road*, *Espedair Street* and *Canal Dreams*, in that wrong order, which proved to be a disservice to *Espedair Street*. To read *The Crow Road* after the first three novels is to see a pupa, the amusing, twisted entertainer, replaced by a glorious butterfly, a major artist. To travel backwards to *Espedair Street*, as I did, is to find a novel halfway between the two states.

Espedair Street first. It seems to have no fantasy elements, except that it is based on one of the most luscious of modern fantasies: what it would be like to be a rich, popular and talented pop star. Banks asks: what it would *really* be like? Why are all those fabulously successful pop stars often struck down by ghastly events?

The only person who could tell you if Banks has guessed right would be some rich, popular and talented pop star whose success peaked in the late 1970s, only to find the members of his band dying like flies and his own desire to go on perform extinguished.

Is this self-pitying stuff? Tragic? Not a bit of it. Daniel Weir, the pop star and song writer who tells the tale, is self-pitying, but Banks has no pity for Weir's self-pity. At the moment of his first great success, Weir has this moment of revelation:

I remember taking rather a lot of drugs that autumn, staying in that grand, impressive house. Once I climbed a tree and reclined on a long oak bough, quite at my ease, head buzzing, while watching a juggler on the gravel path beneath me. I lay there, elbow on branch, head in hand, looking down at the circus juggler, and watched the Indian clubs whirling up towards me and then back down, and thought that there was something quite profound and remarkable about watching juggling from above, especially when the juggler was too intent on his skill to notice the observer. It was one of those perfect metaphors one only ever experiences under the simplicities of a drug; at the time it is both obviously unique and impregnably apt, and — afterwards — utterly unfathomable.

And several times, in those balmy autumn days, I thought, *This is the life*.

Do you blame me?

Banks is in all his work trying to capture an experience that is 'both obviously unique and impregnably apt', yet his comic spirit rebels against mysticism. He gives his characters wonderful moments of intense experience, but drops clues that they presage disaster. This reminds me of Jonathan Carroll's propensity for allowing his characters delirious happiness the moment before dropping them through the trapdoor to hell.

Banks's characters meet the hard realities of life, all right, but the attractiveness of Banks's work is that his characters savour their disasters. His life having ground

to a stop, years after his great successes, Daniel Weir sits feeling useless in a giant mausoleum of a house in Edinburgh. In one of Banks's funniest scenes, two friends drop in, accompanied by a gigantic, stupid and slobbery 'dug'. The dog commits Banksian mayhem throughout the house.

Espedair Street is about Weir slowly awakening from his mood of despondency.

I left the flat depressed but, as I walked down Espedair Street, back into town under a glorious sunset of red and gold, slowly a feeling of contentment, intensifying almost to elation, filled me. I couldn't say why; it felt like more than having gone through a period of mourning and come out the other side, and more than just having reassessed my woes and decided they were slight compared to what some people had to bear; it felt like faith, like revelation: that things went on, that life ground on regardless, and mindless, and produced pain and pleasure and hope and fear and joy and despair, and you dodged some of it and you sought some of it and sometimes you were lucky and sometimes you weren't, and sometimes you could plan your way ahead and that would be the right thing to have done, but other times all you could do was forget about plans and just be ready to *react*, and sometimes the obvious was true and sometimes it wasn't, and sometimes experience helped but not always, and it was all luck, fate, in the end; you lived, and you waited to see what happened, and you would rarely ever be sure that what you had done was really the right thing or the wrong thing, because things can always be better, and things can always be worse.

Then, being me, I felt guilty about starting to feel better, and thought, *So, you've heard a little bit of home-crocheted philosophy, and seen somebody worse off than yourself; is this all it takes? Your revelations come cheap, Daniel Weir; and your soul is shallow . . .* but even that was part of the experience, and so explained, and expiated, by it, and under that startlingly gaudy sky — like something from one of my ma's Woolworth's paintings — I walked, and felt I could be happy again.

This passage, showing Banks at his best, revels in the ecstasy felt by his character at a particular moment, but laughs at the idea of ecstasy arising out of simple revelation.

'The Crow Road'

In *The Crow Road* we find a vast elaboration of all the themes from earlier Banks non-SF novels, combined with a swaggering mastery of the novelist's craft.

As in *Walking on Glass*, *The Bridge* and *Espedair Street*, the main story-teller, Prentice McHoan, is surely a version of how Banks sees himself: a bit awkward and shy, a youngish man who keeps failing in great enterprises; desired by every girl but the one he worships; a chap who ingests lots of grog and illegal substances; whose fate works out for the best, no matter what mayhem he wreaks on himself and others.

But Prentice only appears to be the main character of the novel, since he is the story-teller of large sections. Much of it, however, he could know nothing about. The complex structure of the book, telling the story of three generations, gives importance to every member of the

McHoan family.

The book begins with the explosion of Prentice's grandmother, Margot McHoan, at her funeral. Somebody forgot to remove her pacemaker before she was cremated. When Banks takes us back in time, we find that Margot McHoan is one of the most attractive characters in the novel.

At the beginning of the novel it seems that the main family problem is Prentice's split with his father Kenneth. This impression is subverted when Banks takes us back twenty years into a world in which Kenneth is a young man about to meet the woman who will become his wife. If Prentice is self-pitying and self-destructive, Kenneth is a much more attractive character: a man of honour and humour who becomes a successful writer of children's stories. His relationship with his brothers and cousins and his own sublime final act overshadow Prentice's continued petty attempts at self-destruction.

The telling of stories

The Crow Road is essentially a novel about the telling of stories. In one of the flashbacks, Kenneth takes his kids up into the hills, and tells them about the 'mythosaur'. Accompanying them are Prentice's cousins, including Ashley Watt, the little tomboy who later becomes Prentice's confidante. Kenneth assures Prentice that the mythosaur is just a story, but this episode is contrasted with an episode in the childhood of Rory, Kenneth's brother. Rory is too scared to sleep one night after being told stories of dragons. He is reassured that dragons don't exist, but discovers many years later that they do. In *The Crow Road*, even the simplest story has treacherous possibilities.

Rory disappeared ten years before the main action of the novel, but Banks makes him its the pivotal character. Rory is somebody who passionately believes in stories; his only real success in life has been as a travel writer. His mistake is to winkle out some true stories about members of the McHoan family.

Super plotter

But that is to anticipate the last quarter of the novel, which I leave for you to discover. I mention it because it shows one of Iain Banks's great skills: plotting. This takes the form of misdirection. For two-thirds of the novel's length we believe that it is just a funny and vivid old-fashioned family saga.

As I've said, the central story seems to focus on the split in the McHoan family caused by Prentice's unwillingness to talk to his father. Their dispute seems to be about religion: Prentice's father is fanatically against it; Prentice is sort of in favour of it. His protestations of mild agnosticism enrage his father; his father's rage enrages Prentice. Prentice refuses to take money from his father for his university fees, then proceeds to drop out.

While this story rolls along, Banks constructs an entirely different story, placing little clues seemingly at random throughout the narrative. This is the story of Prentice's missing uncle Rory and his relationship to two of Prentice's other uncles, Hamish and Fergus. Banks makes the last quarter of the book into a murder mystery without disrupting the rich pattern of the rest

of the book.

Banks's passion

But careful plotting is not enough to make a masterpiece, and *The Crow Road* is, so far, Banks's only masterpiece. The main quality in the novel — in fact, the only quality that matters in any novel — is passion.

Banks endorses a rich all-encompassing belief in experience itself, the same belief that appears in *Espedair Street*. Prentice, like all the family, swings wildly from delight to despair, but they all believe that nothing should be shirked from.

Some members of the family express this directly through a pungent version of ultra-fundamentalist Christianity.

Kenneth McHoan, Prentice's father, believes in the direct power of story and myth:

... my father taught us that there was, generally, a fire at the core of things, and that change was the only constant, and that we — like everybody else — were both the most important people in the universe, and utterly without significance, depending, and that individuals mattered before their institutions, and that people, were people, much the same everywhere, and when they appeared to do things that were stupid or evil, often you hadn't been told the whole story, but that sometimes people did behave badly, usually because some idea had taken hold of them and given them an excuse to regard other people as expendable (or bad), and that was part of who we were too, as a species, and it wasn't always possible to know that you were right and they were wrong, but the important thing was to keep trying to find out, and always to face the truth. Because truth mattered.

Which is wonderfully highminded, and as close as any character in any novel has come to expressing my own general position. Unfortunately, as Prentice discovers, at least two characters in the novel have died because of their unflinching willingness to face the truth. Prentice survives: it's experience rather than truth that matters.

There are many truths, and Banks sees them summed up best in the Scottish landscape, which is the unshakable foundation of his non-SF novels. Banks's finely etched images of Scotland bestow greatness on *The Crow Road* and, to a lesser extent, *Espedair Street*, *Whit*, *Complicity* and *The Bridge*.

Here's my favourite moment from *The Crow Road*. Kenneth as a young man returns home after some years away at university:

He rested his arms on the top of the wall and looked down the fifty feet or so to the tumbling white waters. Just upstream, the river Loran piled down from the forest in a compactly furious cataract. The spray was a taste. Beneath, the river surged round the piers of the viaduct that carried the railway on towards Lochgilphead and Gallanach.

A grey shape flitted silently across the view, from falls to bridge, then zoomed, turned in the air and swept into the current of the far bank of the river, as though it was a soft fragment of the train's steam that had momentar-

ily lost its way and was now hurrying to catch up. He waited a moment, and the owl hooted once, from inside the dark constituency of the forest. He smiled, took a deep breath that tasted of steam and the sweet sharpness

of pine resin, and then turned away, went back to pick up his bags.

— Bruce Gillespie, November 1996

The Crowd

The Mailing Comments

MAILING No. 171, AUGUST 1996

Jenny Glover: THE TIME IS OUT OF JOINT

First class convention report. Thanks very much. I hope one day to attend a British convention, but that hasn't happened yet.

Because I haven't travelled to an interstate convention since 1981, I haven't taken a room in a convention hotel since then. And because of *that* I always find myself carrying, for day after day, across miles of convention carpet, a large *brown* bag that fills with fanzines. Your bag and mine must meet one day.

I don't really have time to reply to *Cyber Bunny*, except to say that it's impressive. (A Nicholas article combined with Jeeves artwork! *That's* an achievement.) Maybe I'll have time later to write a proper letter of comment.

Jean Weber: JEANZINE No. 110

I keep seeing well-remembered names from the past in your fanzines. Joy Window! What's she doing these days? The last person in Melbourne who had her phone number was Roger Weddall. Now we don't know where she is. If you speak to her, ask her to get in touch if ever she visits Melbourne.

Janice Murray: THE SEATTLEITE

Most of the bitching round here is about Windows 95 rather than Windows NT. Windows 95 and I are currently on speaking terms (thanks to help from Dick Jenssen in particular), and I know little about Windows NT.

My fascination with fonts (or 'typefaces', the correct term) has much to do with their incredible expense to typesetters until the introduction of Windows TrueType four years ago. When I was operating an IBM Electronic Composer for Norstrilia Press in the early 1980s, each *size* of each *case* of each *typeface* (i.e. each type ball) cost \$50. If Norstrilia Press had gone into photosetting (which would have ruined us financially forever), each typeface would have cost hundreds of dollars. Authentic Adobe fonts are still much too expensive (\$150–\$200 for all fonts in a typeface), but the introduction of multi-font CD-ROMs has changed the situation wonderfully. The only trick is to guess the actual name of a typeface from the bootleg name used on the CD-ROM. (At least the manual that comes with Corel programs tells you a typeface's actual name as well as its bootleg name.)

Has anybody a copy of a typeface that's suddenly

become very popular under its authentic Adobe name of 'Giovanni'? It's a very attractive book and magazine face. I can't afford it from Adobe, and Corel hasn't issued a bootleg version yet. Customers are asking for it.

Your mother's dog sounds even dumber than our ginger cat Theodore. Every morning Theodore rushes out the door, quite sure that this particular morning we will have taken away the bricks that are blocking the back entrance to our garden. It matters not that we have not moved the bricks and have no intention of moving the bricks. Theodore seems almost incapable of learning; after all, it's only taken him two years to realise that Polly is a cat who really lives here, and is not an alien enemy cat who will disappear if Theodore spits hard enough.

Thanks for the page on PAWS. Animal rights societies are active in Australia. Their campaigns during recent years have concentrated on attacking the incarceration of battery hens. They've broken into the properties of some of the worst offenders and caused damage, but have not yet been able to close facilities or change the law. However, they've raised doubts in people's minds, to such an extent that lots of people now buy from shops that specialise in free-range chickens and eggs.

Lyn McConchie: FAN'ATIC No. 53

Your note about attending the World Fantasy Con makes me realise that I've attended only one convention at which I've known very few people: my first convention, the Melbourne SF Conference of 1968. It was an awkward weekend, but I survived because the program was entertaining. I still avoid parties at which I suspect I will know few people.

You were asking about a visual art form suitable for people who can't draw. Dick Jenssen has discovered a new artform: computer graphics. He generates fractals, distorts and changes their colours using Corel Photopaint or Paint Shop Pro, then uses Photopaint to combine them with each other, pieces of clip art or bitmapped photographs. The results are spectacular — in colour. (And colour printers are amazingly cheap these days.) I will use some of Dick's graphics as artwork in my fanzines, but since I can only afford to print in black and white, I lose much of their spectacular quality. Dick would be pleased if other fanzine editors would like to feature his creations. He supplies them on TIF files.

Singular Productions: AUGANYX

Thanks for my very own Phillustration. Would it frighten *SF Commentary* readers if I used it on the cover? Probably.

Linnette Horne: ILLEGITIMATE NON CARBORUNDUM

Your life continues to be as fraught/exciting as ever, but it's hard to comment on experiences that have little connection with my own life. Scary stuff. Thanks for the blow-by-blow. At least you can never say that you lack material for your next novel.

Perry Middlemiss:

THE BEST OF ANZAPA, Vol. 15: 1982/83

Another mighty effort, Perry; so mighty that nothing I say can do justice to what's in front of me.

My 1982 was a peculiar year, rather like my 1996. My career went bung, good and proper, but I maintained an absurd hope that Something Might Turn Up. Nothing turned up until mid-1984. I had several years of minuscule income; therefore I couldn't produce genzines; therefore I felt diffident about fandom in general; therefore I produced few apazines. In those years, I was sick of being patronised by precisely those people who made life so difficult for so many during Aussiecon II. As you say, Aussiecon II in 1985 cleared the air in many unexpected ways.

In 1996, my economic collapse hasn't happened yet, but again I'm finding it hard to produce genzines. At the moment I can't see why I shouldn't be able to maintain my Anzapa and Acnestis activity.

In 1982 Elaine paid for the Mt Buffalo trip about which I write in my article. These days she can't find a spare week in which we might return to Mt Buffalo. Not that it matters; the memory of visiting paradise can be just as potent as the visit itself.

David Grigg, the man with precognitive powers. It's more than a little amazing to find on 1982 someone writing about the fannish possibilities of the Internet.

John D. Berry gets to the heart of fandom as I wish it were. Also he describes the type of fanzine I'm trying to produce in *TMR*.

I was going to say 'How do we get Allan Bray back into ANZAPA?' But we did get him back after Anzapacon, only to lose him again. At least one overseas fanzine reviewer has mentioned that Allan's article is the highlight of this *Best of ANZAPA*. A pity you didn't feel free, Perry, to clean up Allan's spelling and syntax.

Thanks for reprinting Judith's remarks on London, which explain why she stays there but I will never move there, and Marc Ortlieb's article about the nature of fannish time. I've wanted to reread that ever since it appeared, but of course that mailing of ANZAPA disappeared into the Gillespie-Cochrane Archaeological Dig (our house) and has never been seen since. Marc provides a theory for the phenomenon I noticed long before he wrote about it. *How* did I produce eight issues of *SF Commentary* in its first year? *And* eight issues the year after? *And* umpteen apazines in between? *And* write umpteen reviews for both my own fanzines and those of other people? I have no idea. Now in a good year I might produce a few apazines a year, one large genzine, and one talk/article for Nova Mob. Where did all that time go?

Rereading Joseph's article makes me feel doubly glum. He might well have predicted that Labor would regain power some time before 1992, but instead could not have predicted that the Tories minus Thatcher would stay in power and become even more reactionary than they had been under her. What a total mess Britain must be by now (i.e. as messy as Howard and Kennett want to make Australia).

Lots of other good things in this collation, including the statistics at the end. Thanks again, Perry.

LynC: LYNX No. 27

I know I've seen you and Clive once since Estelle was born, but I cannot remember where, and I don't think I got around to saying hello. The only news I have of you is from ANZAPA and Carey Handfield. (The first we'd heard of your house move was from Carey a few days ago.)

So thanks for all this information and experiences about kids and cats.

'Two years without sleep are starting to take their toll.' You don't say. One night of interrupted sleep stops me functioning all the next day. Two years of sleep deprivation! The horror!

Your experiences give me a sharp insight into aspects of my own mother: after all, she had two children in fourteen months (Robin, my sister, after me), then Jeanette less than three years later. The trouble with kids is that they can have no notion that their mother might be at the end of her tether. As you say, a mother just goes on being *needed*.

Hey, we're here listening, even if that's the best we can do.

Terry Frost:

SWANK LIVING IN THE BRECHTIAN 90s No. 1

Thanks for the tips on learning HTML. Not that I've become connected to the dreaded Net, every aspect of which sounds threatening. I'm sick of learning new software. I just want to publish fanzines.

Bits of your 'soundtrack for this zine' even sounds weird to me. I can do without Robert Goulet, Julie London, the Four Freshmen and Cocktail Capers. *Ben-nett and Basie* could be worth checking out.

I also ignored the Olympic Games. Why bother about people who are extremely good at doing things that are not worth doing in the first place?

What the Fuck's Wrong with Utopian Thinking? Thanks for giving me a fanzine title, Terry. A pity I don't have the guts to use it. (I'm trying to think of a contraction for it. *WHAFWUT?*) At least a fanzine of that title wouldn't receive review copies of scholarly tomes on Buddhism. (I handed the books to a friendly Buddhist.)

Leanne Frahm: ANOTHER FROGGIN' FANZINE No. 2

I suppose all the other Melbourne members have told you about K&M's. It's Melbourne fandom's Friday-night gathering place. Elaine and I didn't get there for years, but recently we've been turning up every few weeks. At about 7.30 p.m. a few of us go on from there to Ciao, a fine Italian restaurant a few blocks away. Other groups head for any one of the fine Asian-food restaurants in Little Bourke Street. Now that John and Sally have

moved to Geelong, we rarely go to our old rendezvous (Eastern Inn in Clifton Hill). A pity, since it has cheap Chinese food that is better than much you can buy in Little Bourke Street.

It looks as if all our parents and parents of people we know are suffering from Horrible Diseases at the moment. It sounds as if you know how to provide real help to Kerry's mother.

The story of Kerry Jr and Merita sounds just like the plot of an Anne Tyler novel. Anne Tyler is just about the only living novelist who writes about what people are really like *and* makes it entertaining. (That's the connection between you and Anne Tyler.)

Richard Hryckiewicz: ANYTHING BUT AVERAGE No. 13

I haven't read any of the books on your list, but I am also a *Dilbert* fan, so I must buy some of the collections. All Adams does, surely, is write down dialogue he hears in the office.

I'm still waiting to find out whether I can afford to pay 1995-96's taxes. I had extreme trouble paying those for 1994-95. And that's with the help of a creative tax consultant. How did your tax saga resolve itself?

I can just see the living rooms of *Star Trek* fans filled with VCRs simultaneously attempting to tape every episode of every *ST*-based series as they all run at the same time on different channels.

Your contribution is a pretty good documentary on how ghastly Australian society has become under Kennett and Howard (and Hawke and Keating; I don't forgive them, either). Write the script for *Brazil II: Kennettsville*.

Waiting for a medical appointment has improved greatly during the last year or so: our chiropractor has been dumping his computer magazines on the waiting-room table. That's how I discovered *Australian PC World*, which I now buy regularly. I love those reviews of software I can't afford to buy and probably don't need anyway.

Michael O'Brien: MODULE No. 121

The American Constitution makes a strict division between Church and State, so no wonder a few eyebrows were raised when a Supreme Court Justice gave an opinion that might undermine the Constitution.

You should write a novel about 'Kate from East Hobart', including the true stories as well as those you make up.

Your page about TV programs was lost on me. I watch almost no TV these days, except a very occasional *Inspector Wexford* episode. Good movies have been stolen by pay TV. If it were not for SBS documentaries and the occasional video, I'd ditch the TV set altogether.

I am, however, a connoisseur of radio, which is why I enjoy your bimonthly radio column. You should apply for a job with the *Age Green Guide*. You would be a fairer commentator than their current Radio columnist.

It's nice to know that some things are absolutely constant in the universe: Keith Curtis, for example.

Did you hear Paul Voermans' wonderful radio tribute to H. G. Wells on last Sunday's (17 November) 'Books and Writing'? I hope his piece appears in print somewhere. (He's probably already sold it to *24 Hours*.)

I don't think anybody claims Wells was a pleasant person. I once read a biography of him by an author who detested him. Must have been a hard slog for the biographer. The other detest-and-tell-all biography is, of course, by Anthony West, Wells's son by Rebecca West. I haven't read that yet. What nobody can work out at this end of the century is how and why Wells was attractive to women.

Did you know that H. G. Wells actually met Orson Welles? It was in Texas in 1940, after the kerfuffle about the radio play of *War of the Worlds* and before Orson went off to make *Citizen Kane*. They interviewed each other on radio, but I don't think the program was recorded.

Where did Keith Curtis get the money to buy 'the largest weatherboard home in Hobart'? What a mind-boggler to finish your fanzine, Mike! Give me such a house and I could also fill it with books in two years. All I need do is unpack the boxes of books in my workroom.

Sally Yeoland: LE CHAT PARTI No. 24

John Bangsund: LES SOURIS DANSENT No. 7

Enjoyable reading, but nothing on which I can comment. This is about as much as we knew when we saw you last. Now we'll have to wait for occasional missives from Geelong to find out What Happened Next.

John Newman: COLLOQUY

I never know whether I'm 'politically correct' or not. My view is that as long as guns exist in private hands, Martin Bryants are inevitable. It's all those governmental iffings and buttings and sidesteppings and distinctions between guns that annoy me. If you've got a gun and you're not a police officer or armed services officer, you shouldn't be legal. (And the British police operated without handguns until recently.) It looks as if now there will be several million hidden guns left in Australia. Who said my fellow citizens ain't cuckoo?

I'll give three cheers for the 'Dummies' books, because dummies like me need them. *More Word 6 for Windows for Dummies* is particularly well written (cf the Microsoft Word 6 manual). I had to learn Word 6 in a weekend, and that book (and Elaine's tips) saw me through the vertical learning curve. *Quark XPress for Windows for Dummies* is mainly good, but fudges the one element in Quark XPress that defeats me — its use of master pages. *Pagemaker 5 for Windows for Dummies* seems good, but I haven't plunged into Pagemaker yet.

Marc Ortlieb: ENERGY 170

Glad to have you back in ANZAPA in a solo capacity other than OBE. You deserted us for some time; had we all done something wrong?

I'm told the Windows 95 and Windows NT interfaces are as easy to use as the Mac interface, but nothing associated with computers is 'easy'.

I agree that extraordinarily good rock music is still being produced. None of it is played on radio, except in Brian Wise's 'Off the Record', 3RRR, 10 a.m. Saturdays. And there are many new songs that are brilliant because of their lyrics, but I would never know unless I bought the CDs. To do that, I must often rely on reviews. And doing *that* can be tricky and expensive.

I started selling books in order to make room on the

shelves for the vast number of books that are currently in boxes. So I put aside a small pile of 30 or 40 books that I can only just bear to get rid of. I show them to Elaine before I'm allowed to take them to Smith's Books. She then decides to keep a quarter of them. If she tries to throw out any books, I decide to keep half of them. The books in the boxes stay where they are.

David Grigg: MEGATHERIUMS FOR BREAKFAST No. 12
Standing in front of 2000 people attempting to sing! My very worst nightmare. Umpteen cheers for bravery, David.

'Half an hour walk three or four days a week.' Not bad. That's what I aim to do, but it's unusual these days for me to do more than one such walk a week. Having a sore foot for more than a year (because of the long walks I used to do) got me out of the walking habit.

MAILING No. 172, OCTOBER 1996

Alan Stewart: YTTERBIUM No. 41

I don't when I dropped off other fanzine editors' lists — but you list many Australian fanzines I've never seen. It's hardly surprising that media fans don't send me their publications, but I would like to trade for perzines. I wonder how one hangs out the fannish shingle these days: 'I'm still publishing; I trade fanzines; they appear irregularly, but they always appear eventually; I want to trade for your fanzine.'

When I began, all I had to do was pub my ish; the traded fanzines flowed in from all over the world. These days? *TMR* was praised immoderately in *Apparatchik* at the beginning of the year. Nobody noticed.

Weller: BURY MY SOUL AT EXIT 63

During my only trip to America, I ran out of money before I could get to the West Coast or the Canadian Rockies. I still have a lot of travelling to do — in some decade or other.

Modern Business Practice #101 has become the rule here as well. A friend related the harrowing story of being the bunny selected to reduce staff numbers by 10 per cent. Nothing wrong with the staff; collectively and individually they had had a very good year. The Board just decided that it was a great idea to reduce staff. Our friend had to invent vast number of categories, rate each employee according to each category, then tell the unlucky people they were It. The wife of one of them is expecting a baby in February. Our friend was able to find jobs for two of them immediately in other companies, but nothing can hide the idiocy of the employer's arbitrary decision.

Thanks for the next episode of the family cliff-hanger. Families are having a hard time hanging from cliffs these days.

Marc Ortlieb: ENERGY 171 STAIRWAY TO CLEVELAND

Energy

Macmillan Education Australia Pty Ltd is probably as cost-conscious (polite phrase) as the Education Ministry. A few years ago my friend Martin found himself becoming *the* computer person for Secondary and Primary Publications, because he was the only person in the building who had any idea how to fix problems on the five or six computers then in operation. One day he shut his door and announced: 'I will no longer fix anybody's computer problems. I will no longer discuss

computers. I am an editor. From now on I will edit books.' This worked. When Macmillan finally went ga-ga over computers (one Mac for each desk), they had to hire a DTP Production Manager to control the whole operation, as well as hire Production Managers for each of Primary, Secondary and Tertiary. Martin had long since departed for Melbourne University Press.

We didn't confine the moggies merely because of Council regulations; it was for our peace of mind. Two cats caught in factories in two weeks was enough worry for one year. Only one cat, Theodore, appears at all upset about the new arrangement. Life is for catching mice, and we are stopping his ghod-appointed task. The others, even our catten, Polly, seem to enjoy staying in the yard.

Another Joan Osborne fan! I heard the hit song, 'One of Us', on the radio as I was dial-flicking, but of course the (commercial) station failed to back-announce the title. I had to ask everybody at K&M's one night before I found somebody (Dennis Callegari) who could suggest the name of the performer who might have sung the song that was driving me nuts. When I bought *Relish* I found that some of the songs (especially 'Spider Web') have even sharper lyrics than 'One of Us'. The process of tracking down just one song was so difficult that I will probably stay ignorant of almost every song and performer on the Top 40. Not that that prevents me from spending a fortune on CDs.

You've told me *exactly* why I should avoid media conventions.

Cleveland

Nice to see the ancient and mystical art of fannish fiction revived — 'ancient', because although I'm told other fanzine editors publish such fiction, they don't send their publications to me; and 'mystical', because I was never much good at writing fannish fiction. As Dizzy (and even Bruce Gillespie) might say, 'Nothing exists in fandom until it is written down, preferably in duplicating ink.'

'Fractal rubbish'? That explains the inside of our house. I thought it was merely the result of many years of clutter by two people, both of whom work at home and neither of whom can bear to clean up.

Eric Lindsay: KINGDOM OF THE BLAND

I suspect I'm the only person in Australia who receives *Eidolon* as a traded magazine, and I also suspect that

Jonathan & co. will cut me from the list Real Soon Now. I'd better publish the next *SF Commentary* instead of enjoying myself writing for ANZAPA.

Thanks for the congratulations. It was a bit much having to keep the news quiet from January to September. When I see that display advertisement for Aussiecon III, I imagine thousands of media fans scratching their heads, saying: 'Greg *Who?* George *Who?* Bruce *Who?*' Come to think of it, the rest of fandom is probably saying 'Bruce *Who?*' I promise to produce another fanzine soon . . . or the year after that.

Can I put in an order for the latest *Secret Book of Computers?* The one you sent me is useful, but is now very out of date. Send a bill this time.

If you want Baskerville, I'll send it to you. I'm pretty sure I have both Postscript and TrueType versions kicking around somewhere.

I've bought an average of two computer magazines for each of the last few months, and even they pile up quickly. My aim is to save all the Tips & Tricks sections, then donate the magazines to op shops. But I realise that large amounts of the Tips & Tricks material deals with the Net and Web matters. I'd better keep them till I get on the Net, just in case some of this incomprehensible junk proves useful.

Roger Sims: FANTASY SCOPE Vol. IV, No. 1

As I have found in the past, and you are about to find out to your cost, Marc Ortlieb takes a very dim view of running genzines through ANZAPA. A pity, since often a genzine is as interesting as an apazine. Still, amateur fiction (as opposed to fannish fiction) is stretching even my patience a bit far. (Stormann's 'The Flight Home' is not something I would ever run.)

We already know from reading Lyn McConchie just how glamorous is the life of a writer. But Laura Resnick's piece is also welcome. At least Laura helps to explain why writers who are deeply caring human beings in their fiction are often offputting, even monstrously egotistical, when encountered in person. In recent years I've decided that perhaps I was lucky to be born without much talent for writing fiction.

At least Laura Resnick has a wonderfully cynical view of her profession, a view that might well be adopted by the pompous writers who are interviewed by *The Age*, *The Australian* or the ABC's 'Books and Writing' program.

Thanks for the cat stories. We usually have five cats at any one time, and usually one cat (TC at the moment) who appears ready to keel over. TC is well into his forty-ninth life, and intends to make it to his fiftieth. Very shocking are the sudden deaths of young cats (especially Monty, at the age of six, from liver cancer).

Lyn McConchie: FAN'ATIC No. 54

I've missed something. Who was 'Rachel', and when did she enter the story of your trip?

You're the first person, apart from an Angeleno, who has ever described Los Angeles as a 'fabulous place'. Everybody else reviles it. Tell us more.

Gerald Smith & Womble: RAMBLINGS No. 3

It's wonderful the ways dentists can find to spend thousands of dollars of your money, isn't it? But then,

it's equally wonderful what they can do (sometimes). A year or so ago I had the two halves of a tooth split off at different times. There can't have been much left, but my dentist completely rebuilt the tooth at a price I could (just about) afford. Twenty years ago he would yanked out the tooth and charged \$5 for his trouble.

Now that the Coalition industrial legislation has finally been passed by the Senate (a betrayal by the ratfink Democrats) I have no doubt it will 'completely tear asunder the fabric of industrial relations in Australia and turn the clock back to the nineteenth century'. If anybody is still employed.

I usually don't like novels with multiple viewpoints, which is the main reason why I found it hard to become interested in *Permutation City*. The Brian Aldiss novels that I don't like, for instance, are those with fractured viewpoints. George Turner has always disagreed with me on this point; but then, George has written some brilliant novels with interesting multiple viewpoints (*The Sea and Summer*, for example).

I wish I could assure you that Mt Buffalo remains the same as the place we first visited in 1982. However, we haven't been back for six years, so don't know if any unfortunate changes have been made. What is eternal (until Kennett decides to stuff up national parks) is the landscape of the plateau itself. We've still never been to Cradle Mountain National Park in Tasmania, although we've long promised ourselves such a trip. And we haven't yet been to the New Zealand fjord area.

A year or so ago, when I was waiting for massive dental work, I picked up one of the 'women's magazines', only to find the tacky details of Elton John's various torrid affairs. Put me right off my toothache. Not even *Rolling Stone* or *Q* has ever plunged into these murky topics. Australia's women must now be immensely well educated about non-hetero and kinky sex. (Does my mother still read *Women's Weekly*? Merciful heavens!)

I don't claim to know the 'solution' for anything economic, but I doubt that you know any more about the subject than I do. It just seems to me that the best guide to what might work is to take the opposite tack from the direction taken by both Labor and the Coalition during the last twenty years. That direction has merely made the rich richer and the poor poorer, and unemployed vast numbers of people who would prefer to work. This is the opposite from my social aims. Which solution would really work? How would we know, except by conducting experiments? And that's what New Zealand has done: a peculiarly malignant experiment, with results that are even worse than those appearing here.

People can't save what they ain't got; if your real income has been halved since 1976, which is the case for most of us, you don't have any money over for saving.

A GST would make it impossible for me, as an extremely small businessperson, to stay in business. I would have to add a GST to the services I offer, i.e. collecting tax on behalf of the government, and pricing myself out of work. My work would dry up altogether.

All tax should be tariffs or income tax, with no deductions — i.e. a receipts tax. This would mean that I would pay three or four times more tax than I do now, but would also mean that salary earners would pay the

same amount, and the Kerry Packers of our society would each pay about \$100 million more tax per year than they do now. Such a measure would, by itself, get rid of the '\$8 billion gap'.

Jean Weber: JEANZINE No. 111

Aw shucks, Jean; wait till I blush awhile. Thanks for the congratulations. Too bad that I can think of at least twenty fans who are both more ancient than I am and more deserving of the Fan GoH spot: I guess they can name themselves as well. I will take up the challenge, and use it as an excuse to stay on the sidelines until the first weekend in September 1999.

Your description of the nattering habits of your travelling companions shows exactly why I would never go on a four-wheel-drive camping tour to anywhere. There must be an easier way to see Cape York Peninsula.

RIP Minou. *Sigh*. A pity that we didn't get to meet such a fabulous fannish cat.

I agree with you about the sterling qualities of the Paralympians. My authors have run quite a bit about the Paralympics and the Veterans' Games in the Phys. Ed. textbooks I edit. Thanks for the extra material on Jim Nomarhas. Several fans had mentioned that a NSW fan had done something outstandingly Olympian, but I take so little notice of the Olympics that the name did not ring a bell.

Jeanne Mealy:

RESULTS OF THE 1996 PRESIDENTIAL ANZAPOLL

I really did mean to vote for the Anzapoll. My mailing disappeared under a pile of other mail. I remembered to vote, but long after the deadline. Sorry.

But I doubt if the result would have been different if I had voted. *Congratulations, Terry!*

Michael O'Brien: MODULE No. 122

As far as I can remember, my only radio interviews were during the late 1970s or early 1980s. The egregious Peter Couchman (yes, I looked up that adjective; it fits) interviewed me at 3AW, when it was still in Latrobe Street. Somebody-or-other (Barbara Horn?) at 3LO interviewed Carey and me, representing Norstrilia Press, when we launched one of our books. Neither interview gave us much chance to say what we were really about.

It's very unlikely that you've heard the only satisfactory interview I've been given: John Weeks for his 'Spectrum' program on 3MDR-FM, Dandenong Ranges. This station, which originates in Belgrave, can only be heard along a path at a tangent to the Melbourne metropolitan listening area. You might pick it up in Frankston, but not in Ferntree Gully. John is trying to build a library of SF-based sound material. It seems a shame that nobody from the SF community can hear his weekly program.

Thanks for all the other news. Nothing like a good dog story (or, better still, a story about a bad dog). Thanks, also, for the news about your mother's eye operation. It's nice to know that as I head rapidly towards middle age, some old-age ailments become increasingly treatable. (I'm beginning to sound like Harry Warner Jr! In the late 1960s, when I was entering fandom and he was in his early fifties, he was already

writing about his fears of approaching old age.)

Michael Powell is fairly rude about J. Arthur Rank in the two volumes of his autobiography.

The big news story of the last two weeks (for *Age* readers/3LO listeners) has been the sacking of Doug Aiton. It's struck me that I will have nobody to listen to in the afternoons next year. Which means that, like many people, I will no longer bother about 3LO programs. ABC Radio has really cut its own throat — I suspect that 3LO's ratings throughout the day will drop remarkably next year. On his farewell broadcast, Doug Aiton pointedly failed to mention station manager Sue Howard (until a few weeks ago the hero of this year's 3LO triumphs). As she admitted, she had to decide who would go and who would stay. I suspect that her method was not malevolent; she knew that Aiton was the one 3LO broadcaster who could pick up another good job elsewhere. Already he's been hired to appear on 3AW next year. John Faine, however, who is Melbourne's best broadcaster (and will give a mighty lift to the 9.30 a.m.–midday spot on 3LO next year) remained basically unemployed during the two years he did not have a regular spot.

All the hoo-ha about Doug Aiton obscured the fact that the Federal Government has shafted the ABC, and that Sydney ABC has shafted Melbourne ABC. I certainly won't be listening to whichever interstate twit 'replaces' Terry Laidler in the 7 p.m.–10 p.m. slot. But I rarely listen to Terry Laidler now. He's a bit too earnest; not at all the person to replace Doug Aiton from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Seems as if I'll be listening to a lot more classical music and Philip Adams next year.

Thanks for the very good summary of the appeal of *Punch*. I've never bought it myself, but there are many good magazines, including the *New Yorker*, that I've never bought.

Leanne Frahm: ANOTHER FROGGIN' FANZINE No. 3

Hi, Leanne. I was going to ask you how you and Kerry had survived the advent of Terry Frost in darkest downtown Slade Point, but I see you've had far more serious matters — the fate of Kerry's mother — on your mind. Best wishes for you and your family at this time of 'constant sadness'.

Great snake story. I bet you're now a revered pin-up in carpet-snake households throughout North Queensland.

Elaine doesn't pretend to be romantic, and I'm romantic only when I think of it, so this year we both forgot our wedding anniversary until a week afterward. Usually we don't remember until my sister Jeanette rings up to offer congratulations! Jeanette remembers because our wedding anniversary is the exact day and exactly ten years after that of my sister Robin and brother-in-law John. In March 1999 they reach the 30-year mark and we reach 20 years.

Yes, DEFRAG (or DISK DEFRAGMENTER, as Windows 95 calls it) is more entertaining to watch than any of those boring games. I run it every few weeks just to watch Windows jiggling those little blocks of bytes.

Thanks for the font names — but none of these are 'real' font names. 'Lynda' turns out to be Lydian. Century Gothic is also Avant Garde. Installing Word for

Windows installs Footlight, but I can't find out its 'real' name.

Terry Frost: TABULA RASA No. 1

You mean you're not over the moon to add the greatest honour of all — ANZAPA OBP — to your CV?

I'm looking forward to that holiday up north. As long as it's vicarious.

Phil Wlodarczyk: DIARY OF A DOOM JUNKIE

You have a very serious addiction problem, Phil. You really should seek counselling.

I wish I could find anything on the computer that gives me half the fun that Doom gives you. But I will not, ever, ever, be lured into playing computer games. I might end up a Doom junkie too.

John Bangsund: PHILOSOPHICAL GAS No. 92

Lots of good stuff here, but most of it I've read in other places. Since I cannot understand the bases of prestressed concrete poetry I skipped 'More Adventures in Prestressed Concrete Verse'. The subject matter is as interesting to me as my complete list of Rolling Stones cover versions (which I compiled for Vida Rousseau a few years ago) would be to you.

My announced lack of interest in travel seems to be achieving results at last. Terry Frost is writing a 'virtual trip report' for me of his North Queensland journey. What's your next holiday destination? Don't bother going; send Terry.

Sally Yeoland: LE CHAT PARTI No. 25

I hadn't realised the immense distance between Geelong and Melbourne until you and John moved there. Since both of us seem to have stopped using the phone, I will read issues of *Le Chat Parti* to find out the information I used to hear over the dinner table at Eastern Inn.

My time would go very quickly if I could afford not to work. At the moment I'm supposed to be editing mathematics textbooks (snort of derision from the members of ANZAPA). An hour is a very long time in the maths textbook editing field. I make scrawly marks on the manuscript for an hour, fall asleep for an hour, stagger to my feet, wash my face, grab another cup of coffee, and attempt to 'edit' for another hour. If I could spend all day writing fanzines, the days would slip by.

Your experiences attempting to set up Internet connections are exactly what I expect to happen to Elaine and me, which is why we're reluctant to undergo the torture and expense.

Poor deprived Theodore, confined to our backyard, was finally able to have a fight the other week. A new cat in the neighbourhood, young, spry and naïve, climbed into our backyard although none of our cats can climb out. After epic yodellings and spittings, Theodore chased the intruder cat to the front fence, where it went straight up the rose-tree branches and over the fence. Theodore was not willing to do the same, but he was very pleased that he had chased off an enemy.

I still haven't joined a video library, because one of my shelves is beginning to groan under the weight of as-yet-unwatched videos. Not to mention the Warner Bros Humphrey Bogart videos, the entire series of which

Ali Kayn leant to us a few months ago when she was moving house. So far I've watched only two of them: *Dark Passage* and *Casablanca*.

Of the other unwatched videos, I've bought some of them, but others have been given to me. When I gain some spare time, usually after 11.30 p.m., usually I read rather than watching TV or videos.

Of the movies on your list, I've seen all of *Ed Wood* and the second half of Branagh's *Henry V*. It was a big mistake missing the first half of *Henry V*; again I'm reminded that Shakespeare makes very good cinema. Dick Jensen recommends Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* as one of the best movies of recent years, but I still haven't seen it.

My mother has looked a lot older only in the last year or so, but that's because a few health problems have reminded her, perhaps for the first time, that she might be mortal. One of her sisters, my Auntie Daisy, has just turned eighty, but looks as if she's in her early sixties. (When she was in her sixties, she looked as if she were in her forties.)

With the exception of an uncle who died when he was fifty, the rest of my aunts and uncles on my mother's side are still alive and most of them are well, although some are frail. My father and all his brothers and sisters are now dead.

No, the main clients for Macintosh are printers, typesetters and publishers, which is why we've run into real trouble because we don't have one. A Macintosh Powerbook plus a Pentium chip (to run Windows 95) and Mac versions of the necessary software would cost about \$13,000–\$14,000, so we cannot justify buying one. But this means I can no longer do desktop publishing for Macmillan. Which explains why I'm hand-editing incredibly boring maths textbooks, although I'm quite willing to learn Quark XPress and Pagemaker for Windows.

Nowhere in this issue do you mention what's most important about your apazine: the typeface in which it is set! It looks like Perpetua.

David Grigg: FANFARONADE

I still use WordStar 6 because it's much easier to use than anything else. Besides, I've set up the system that I can place Ventura codes into my WordStar files, which can be imported into Ventura 4.1.1. If I were using Pagemaker regularly, I could use Word's own style sheets and not have to bother about codes. But I'm not yet familiar enough with Pagemaker to make that step. WordStar is still the easiest way to write letters and, best of all, it's mouse-free.

I've never learned WordPerfect 5.1, but I still like to have it available because it's one of two word-processing programs (the other is Word 6) that can be exported directly from the PC version to the Macintosh version.

I'm still not 'extremely happy' about Windows 95, but I've learned to live with it. I still like File Manager much better than Explorer, but can't use it because it deals only with 16-bit files.

My mailings of the *Grong Grong Gazette* would certainly be in this house somewhere. However, I doubt whether they can be found without setting aside six months for an archaeological dig.

Tell us more about Microsoft's Video for Windows. I haven't discovered it yet. (Okay, I realise that at this moment I should ring you to arrange lunch in South Melbourne. But it's 11 p.m., so I won't.)

So far you're the only person in ANZAPA or Acnestis who has responded to Barry Oakley's piece about poetry. He's usually a fine writer, particularly in his weekly *Australian Magazine* columns, but he excelled himself in that article. 'The windowless room of now.' Yes, a magnificent phrase. As a reader of poetry and fiction, particularly science fiction, I see myself trying to break out of that windowless room.

I know of Christopher Brennan, but no, I don't know his poetry. It's difficult to find collections of major Australian poets, even in the most literary of bookshops, but I will look out for Brennan.

Good to see that you get letters of comment on your Webzine. I haven't overcome Internet inertia yet. What I want to do is place the latest issue of whatever I've publishing on a Web page; plus a complete index of *SF Commentary* and *The Metaphysical Review*. If anybody shows interest in any particular issue or article, I will be able to download it. (In fact, it would be just as easy to use the laser printer to send material to people through the mail, but I don't know of a cheap, easy way to distribute an index.) It is *not* easy to do an electronic version of *SFC* or *TMR*, since I use Ventura codes to prepare the text. I would have to strip off the old codes and add new codes (HTML?), then work out some way to add the graphics. Headaches, headaches.

Thanks for the arguments against the Mac religionists. Not that argument would ever influence them. As I've explained, I can't make headway against the Macintosh prejudices at Macmillan.

I doubt whether I would buy any of the CDs on your list, apart from the CD of Schubert lieder sung by Barbara Bonney. Most of your favourite music is a century or two earlier than the music I like. For guaranteed pleasure, I listen to Haydn and Schubert more than other composers, but I always go back to Mozart and Beethoven and, as a special treat, to Berlioz.

I hadn't heard of *Lullaby Journey*, and it's unlikely that I'll buy *The Swoon Collection*.

I doubt if I've left myself space this issue to publish anything about my current favourite CDs. I'm years behind in doing my CD lists, because there are still some CDs from 1994 and 1995 I haven't heard. My favourite Classical CDs for 1996 so far are:

- Keith Jarrett playing a selection of Haydn's keyboard sonatas.
- Rafael Kubelik and the English Chamber Orchestra playing Dvorak's *Legends*.

The position of Favourite Popular CD of 1996 is still too close to call: contenders include:

- Dave Alvin's *Interstate City*.
- The Rolling Stones' *Rock and Roll Circus* (only 28 years late, but welcome for all that).
- Joan Osborne's *Relish*.
- Iris Dement's *The Way I Should*.
- Ella Fitzgerald's *Complete Ella Fitzgerald Songbooks*

(16 CDs).

- Emmylou Harris's *Portraits* three-CD career retrospective.
- The Black Sorrows' *Radio Waves*, a three-CD retrospective based on ten years of concerts.

Thanks for the information about the typefaces you've used. The body text is Palatino? It looks quite different from the Palatino that my printer emits. Not that I should be astonished; every version of Garamond looks different from the other.

Jeanne Mealy: LAND OF 10,000 LOONS

For a few paragraphs you and John sounded as if you were having a great time, with not a care in the world. It must be a bit of a joke to be told by Bill Clinton how great is the shape of the American economy. Of course we hope you are both re-employed soon, since that's the only way you'll be able to afford the trip to Aussiecon III in 1999. (I'm told you were at Aussiecon II, but I didn't meet you there.)

I've always been glad to live in Melbourne because we don't have earthquakes, tidal waves or tornadoes. *Twister* is exotic stuff to Australians, but when I was in America in 1973 several people described to me just what it is like to hide in the basement while a tornado approaches. 'The sky turns green,' Sandra Miesel told me, 'Bright green.' When I was a kid the scariest thing I saw was the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*. That didn't stop us seeing the film at least once a year.

'Is our civilisation moving forward or backward?' Very backward, very fast.

Surely membership of five apas is at least three too many? I have great trouble maintaining membership in two. A few years ago, when my other apa was FAPA, not Acnestis, I had no time to do mailing comments.

Okay, what's 'potluck'?

The newspaper report on calicivirus was accurate. Rabbits, an introduced species, have been a plague in Australia since last century, destroying vast areas of vegetation and many Australian species. Myxomatosis, a disease introduced during the 1950s, came close to wiping out wild rabbits, but they developed immunity. It's hoped that the new calicivirus will do the job this time.

Cath Ortlieb: YOU REALLY KNOW YOU'RE HOME WHEN YOU FIND A WOMBAT IN YOUR BED No. 47

Forgive me, but I've forgotten the origin of the name of your apazine. I know the explanation must be way back there, 47 or more mailings ago, but finding it would mean digging long and hard.

Extracting pieces of writing from Elaine is not easy. She's now contributing regularly to *The Secret Garden*, the gardening apa, and she'd probably send you a copy of *Weeders Digest* if you begged and pleaded (and had a real interest in gardening). The real breakthrough in the Elaine Cochrane Fannish Writing Career was her volunteering to deliver a paper on R. A. Lafferty to the October Nova Mob. Real good stuff, too.

BOOKS READ RECENTLY

These are books read since the end of June 1996. The ratings are:

- ** Books highly recommended.
- * Books recommended
- ☹ Books about which I have severe doubts.

** *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*

by Anthony Cronin (Paladin 0-586-09011-8; 1990; 290 pp.)

John Bangsund made Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan) famous throughout fandom when he began to write new 'Keats and Chapman' stories in his fanzines. In mundane literary circles, O'Brien's reputation has been growing steadily during the last thirty years. Cronin's story is not just a biography, since it is partly Cronin's biography as well: writers drinking and knocking around Dublin, forever trying for the big success that never happened. O'Brien's story is that of a writer-against-himself, a dour and snappish alcoholic who wrote funny books, a man who wrote some classic Irish novels, then disowned them in favour of doomed attempts to write a big commercial success. It's Cronin's story too, and that of post-independence Ireland. O'Brien's friends try to help him, but they can't; Ireland tries to lift itself by its bootstraps, but keeps falling over (at least during the central period of O'Brien's life). Here is a book filled with flawed, funny, sad people, etched clearly by Cronin: both great biography and illuminating social history.

* *A Summons to Memphis*

by Peter Taylor (Knopf 0-394-41062-9; 1986; 209 pp.)

I discovered Peter Taylor because of a *Time* review of a book of his short stories. Taylor's literary persona is that of the sane Southern gentleman, the last of a nearly extinct group within American society. His prose is calm and ironic: never hysterical, never ornate. Under this guise of sanity, he writes about slightly skewed people. He does here, too, but his narrative is so well crafted and smooth that somehow the point of the story escapes me. I know that something really remarkable is revealed here somewhere, but I've never quite found it. (Taylor's books of short stories are more satisfying than this novel.)

* *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*

by Peter Høeg (Harvill/HarperCollins; 1992; 409 pp.)

I realise that this is everybody else's favourite novel, but, well . . . could somebody please tell me what actually *happens* at the end? And what actually *happened* to the boy on the roof? Miss Smilla tells us at the end of the novel that she has had a blinding flash of inspiration, *but doesn't tell us what it is*. This is my Irritating Novel of the Year. Yes, it has lots of vivid stuff about snow, and Greenland, and the Inuit, but it is also a laborious novel, and the plot makes no sense at all. (Why does Smilla remain

alive throughout the novel, when she should have been bumped off by the baddies within the first 30 pages?)

* ***Dream Weavers***

edited by Paul Collins (Penguin 14-02-026208-3; 1996; 283 pp.)

This is Paul Collins's latest anthology for Australian Penguin: stories of heroic fantasy and magic. The cover is striking and the package looks good, but not many of the stories are interesting. Some, such as Tony Shillitoe's 'The Innkeeper', have effective ideas, but the stories themselves plod, plod, plod, letting their ideas trail in the dust. The only stories with much fire to them are Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God' (a gritty combination of sword-fightin', blood-lettin' and powerful magic) and Ian Haywood Robinson's 'The Crypt of Fleeting Hope' (an effective variation on the locked-room, which-door-should-I-choose? puzzle story).

** ***Ladder of Years***

by Anne Tyler (Chatto & Windus 0-7011-6302-X; 1995; 326 pp.)

Tyler's 1972 novel *The Clock Winder* (see below) has basically the same story as her latest novel *Ladder of Years*. A person leaves home, usually because he or she is too eccentric or wayward to stay there, and wanders into a situation in which other people come to lean on him or her (usually her). Eventually the new situation has the same constrictions as the old, and the heroine (usually) must make an ambiguous choice between the old and the new. When I read each new Tyler novel, I rarely notice the similarities between the plots until towards the end; I'm much too interested in the particular characters who hold centre-stage in this particular story. In *Ladder of Years*, the leading character walks away from a beach on which her family are holidaying. She hitches rides as far as she can, then settles in a small town, and vanishes from sight. But she must earn a living; she needs to find a place in this new society; and then she finds people leaning on her. The humour and perceptiveness of Tyler's writing is as brilliant as ever. Great pleasures remain in life, and reading Tyler's fiction is one of them. I just hope that next time she finds a new plot.

👉 ***The Anvil Chorus***

by Shane Stevens (Andre Deutsch 0-233-97807-0; 1985; 343 pp.)

I bought this novel because of a favourable review in a reputable journal, but it's a stinker. For the first third of the book, it has some of the bite of a Simenon novel, but eventually it becomes a very average variation on the theme of Nazis-in-hiding killing people in an attempt to find the gold that (of course) was smuggled out of Germany at the end of World War II. If this book had had any elegance or real cleverness, it might have been fun.

** ***A Dream Journey***

by James Hanley (Horizon Press 0-8180-0623-4; 1976; 368 pp.)

A few years ago, certain that I had discovered The Great Undiscovered British Writer, I bought as many James Hanley novels as I could lay my hands

on. *A Dream Journey* is not great, and in parts it is so irritating that I nearly gave up reading it. I was glad I finished it; it has that kind of lurid vividness that stays in the mind long after exemplary novels have been forgotten. Hanley has a manic style that tries to get the exact flavour and pitch of every lived experience. The trouble is that his main character is an alcoholic artist who hasn't painted for years, his life held together only by the concern and hard work of his distraught wife. The middle section describes the events that pitched them into hell; in particular, one night during the London blitz. The tale of this one night is remarkable, as Hanley captures the mixture of terror and elation that gripped people while they sheltered in basements during long nights of bombing. He writes a wonderful scene in which people stagger out of the house in the morning, stare into the blue sky, their faces full of the joy of living, and say 'It's a wonderful day! Isn't it a wonderful day!', free for a few hours from the sound of falling bombs. As a novel, *A Dream Journey* is strange; as an experience, it's unique.

* ***Walking on Glass***

by Iain Banks (Futura 0-7088-2774-8; 1985; 239 pp.)

It was Dave Langford who put me onto Iain Banks. He mentioned the first three Banks books, saying (more or less) that they were SF books by an author who didn't know yet that he was an SF author. Banks discovered the real stuff soon enough, and decided to become The SF Author Named Iain M. Banks. I hope the early novels do not fall out of print. They are learner's novels; full of piss and vinegar, but ending with nothing more than 'It was all a dream, and then I woke up'. *Walking on Glass* tells three parallel stories that eventually are shown to be linked. One of those stories, seemingly science-fictional until near the end of the novel, proves to be another 'it was all a dream' yarn. This book has too many tricks, and not enough real feeling, to be satisfying, but it also shows plenty of Banks's humour and vigorous style.

** ***The Clock Winder***

by Anne Tyler (Arena 0-09-946960-X; 1972; 254 pp.)

As I've mentioned already, the plots of *The Clock Winder* and *Ladder of Years* are very similar, but Tyler's style was already so well formed in 1972 that one can easily go back to this early novel. An older woman is left a widow; she hires a young woman to look after her, but the young woman insists on being nothing more than the handyman. The older woman comes to depend on the younger, but also takes her for granted. The younger woman returns to her family; there she is again sucked into the all-enclosing family. Which 'family' should claim her? The novel works because all the characters leap off the page; in fact, I cannot think of another novelist who can keep ten characters talking vividly at a dinner party without causing confusion or boredom to the reader. Highly skilled and satisfying.

** *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*
by George Saunders (Jonathan Cape 0-224-04247-5; 1996; 179 pp.)

George Turner sent me a copy of this book at about the time somebody mentioned it in Acnestis, my other apa. Nice coincidence. Saunders writes bitter comedy that reminds me of Tom Lehrer mixed with Garrison Keillor, without providing the easy laughs of either. You find yourself wincing as much as laughing: this is the near future in America, and it won't be fun. 'Bounty', the novella that ends the book, tells of a pilgrimage through a near-future USA undergoing a chaotic civil war; in other stories, characters work in weird, broken-down theme parks that might all be called CivilWarLand. There are moments of human redemption, but not many. Saunders seems to be saying: this is the America you voted for, mugs, and this is what it will be like to live in.

** *The Bridge*
by Iain Banks (Pan 0-330-29715-5; 1986; 286 pp.)

If only Banks had felt self-confident enough at this stage of his career to write *The Bridge* entirely as SF or fantasy! Instead, it proves to be another 'I recovered and it was all a dream' novel. I enjoyed the world the main character appears to be inhabiting: a long bridge-city, stretching vast distances in each direction, inhabited by wonderfully old-fashioned trains, towers, walkways — and even an ancient elevator. Weird things happen; the bridge-city is a genteel *Brazil*land. The tale of the bridge falters just as the background story comes into focus; the conceit nearly works.

** *The Crow Road*
by Iain Banks (Abacus 0-349-10323-2; 1992; 490 pp.)

This is the masterpiece Iain Banks was working towards, and the masterpiece he may spend his career retreating from. *The Crow Road* is so well-made, so complex and intricate and interesting and passionate and vivid, that he is unlikely ever to do better than it. Must be a bummer to have this happen so early in a career. Generations of families overlap each other; various Scottish landscapes and cityscapes enfold into each other; everything is delicious, especially the disasters. This is the Iain Banks book to read.

* *Writers of the Future, Vol. XII*
edited by Dave Wolverton (Bridge 1-57318-1996; 480 pp.)

I received this as a review copy. I know I should ignore any Bridge publication on ideological grounds, but I didn't because (a) the Scientologists, who own Bridge, actually encourage and support young writers by throwing money at them; and (b) I can't see any sign of the prejudices of the organisers affecting the judges' decisions when handing out the prizes. This book might concentrate on new writers, but it is a lot more readable than most original fiction anthologies. The best story, 'After the Rainbow', is by Fruma Klass, the wife of Philip Klass, known to SF readers since the early 1950s as William Tenn. I assume that Fruma is a mature-age beginner. Full marks for maturity;

she knows people. What happened to the inhabitants of the Ark when they poured out over dry land, hoping to repopulate the earth? Fruma takes the Biblical proposition literally, and has lots of fun with it. For instance, whence came the people who married Noah's offspring in order to begin the process? From over the hills, of course. Klass shows how you can subvert a myth by seeming to take it seriously. Other promising new writers include Edwina Mayer ('Dead Faces', a powerful psychic-detective story), Jerry Craven ('The Savant Death Syndrome', a scary piece about clumsy foreigners in South-east Asia), and Russell William Asplund (the gently amusing 'The Unhappy Golem of Rabbi Leitch').

* *Cause of Death*
by Patricia Cornwell (Putnam 0-399-14146-4; 1996; 340 pp.)

Patricia Cornwell won millions of readers with her first four novels; now she seems determined to get rid of them. The first half of *Cause of Death* is claustrophobic and convincing, but Cornwell lets her story slip-slop into a ridiculous tale of sabotage and not-very-suspenseful derring-do. Will I read her next book? I suppose so, but perhaps wait for the paperback.

** *Whit, or Isis Among the Unsaved*
by Iain Banks (Little Brown 0-316-91436-3; 1995; 455 pp.)

Yes, I should have discussed *Whit* in my piece about Iain Banks's non-SF novels. But I didn't have time to include it in the Nova Mob talk, and speaking there about it wouldn't have added much to my general thoughts on Banks. This is a very clever story, full of delicious surprises, owing as much to SF as general fiction. Isis sets out from the isolated human colony into the big bad alien world and proceeds to find out much about it and herself. But the 'human colony' is an isolated religious community, and the 'alien world' is a strangely twisted version of modern Scotland. Is this, then, merely a version of *Candide*? Or even *Roderick*? An upbringing in the religious settlement has left Isis naïve about modern life, but she shows a remarkable ability to adapt. She needs to, because she discovers that it's not the outside world that is corrupt, but the secluded 'saintly' environment that sent her on her pilgrimage. Nothing defeats Isis, not even a major betrayal of her lifelong beliefs. In the Banksian battle between Life and True Belief, Life wins yet again.

** *Borderline*
by Leanne Frahm (MirrorDanse 0-9586583-0-7; 1996; 128 pp.)

I enjoyed this book greatly, but then, I knew I would. My regret is that it features only five of Leanne Frahm's stories. (*Borderline*'s useful Bibliography lists 25 stories. Will the other 20 remain unreprinted?) 'On the Turn' is one of the best short stories I've read. It merely improves on re-reading. This is rich, dark stuff about fraying marriage, dank undergrowth, creatures of the shore, and the final rejection of earth by the moon. (Of

course! Right this moment, by writing that phrase, I've just discovered the way in which every word in this story contributes to the overall pattern.) 'Ithaca Week' and 'Olivetruffles' are one-idea stories with a wry aftertaste. 'The Lamadium Affair', seemingly a conventional tale about humans trying to understand an alien culture, has a very intense feeling to it. You possibly have to read it twice to judge its real depth. 'Borderline', published here for the first time, shows that SF can still be great fun.

** *Canal Dreams*

by Iain Banks (Macmillan 0-333-51768-7; 1989; 198 pp.) This is the thriller that Iain Banks published between *Espedair Street* and *The Crow Road*. A Japanese woman cellist who refuses to fly finds herself on a ship in the Panama Canal at a moment when rebels stop the movement of all shipping. Things worsen from then on. Hisako Ondo's initial fear of life makes a sharp contrast with the contempt for life shown by the rebels who capture the ship. Her growing willingness to take on the responsibility for surviving is compared with the feckless disintegration of these rebels without much of a cause. Like most of Banks's books, *Canal Dreams* has a reverse Franz Kafka quality; his characters step forward in fear, seemingly about to be crushed by the traps of the twentieth century, yet discover a treacherous path that leads upward and outward from despair. I keep feeling that Banks has not yet discovered what his books are really all about. When he does, he will write a masterpiece that will turn around our whole perception of what fiction might achieve.

** *The Scarlet Rider*

by Lucy Sussex (Forge 0-312-85293-2; 1996; 350 pp.) Considering that this novel tells of some desperate matters — loss, murder, isolation, supernatural obsession — it's an oddly cheerful experience. Perhaps this is because *The Scarlet Rider* is such a *frantic* narrative, terse and vivid, covering a huge range of experience. Unemployed one day, next day Mel is hired by a publisher to track down the author of a 'lost' early Australian narrative. As her own household breaks up, Mel meets a wide range of new acquaintances, each of whom lays claims on her life. Mel's life seems about to shatter: somewhere there's a ghost in her machine, pulling apart those strands in Mel's life that she believes should hold firm. I'm not sure that I solved more than a few of this book's mysteries during my first reading, yet I was carried along by the assurance of the author's style and the sharp quirkiness of her humour. Just as I was settling down to savour a quiet, neat ending, the last chapter exploded in my face. What a coup!

** *Dealers in Light and Darkness*

by Cherry Wilder (Edgewood Press 0-9629066-4-6; 1995; 166 pp.)

Cherry Wilder, the author we love to claim as Australian, is actually a New Zealander who has lived in Germany since the 1970s. Her career began while she was living in Australia, and this remains the country where readers appreciate her. For all that, I did not know of the existence of this Ameri-

can-published collection of Wilder's short stories until Yvonne Rousseau brought it back from overseas. This is an important, if much too short collection from a major SF writer. Wilder combines a quiet authority of experience and utterance with a style that most writers would kill for: apt, compressed, allusive. Hence her stories are mysterious: strange accretions of events that slowly reveal their truths. In 'Odd Man Search' and 'Something Coming Through', the two best stories in this collection, it takes most of the story to find out what kind of a world we have entered, let alone making sense of the nature of its people. As in the stories of Gene Wolfe, many characters are not quite human, and many landscapes would be uninhabitable by twentieth-century people. Yet, as in Wolfe's work, all the clues are here; they are presented so tersely, however, that reaching each story feels like absorbing a novel. Several of the stories, including 'Odd Man Search' and 'The Dreamers of Deliverance', are set in the same post-holocaust world. 'The Ball of Hilo Hill' has connections with *The Luck of Brin's Five*, Wilder's Ditmar-winning novel from the mid-1970s. Despite these connections, each story sets the reader adrift in new waters; exciting experiences all.

** *Oyster*

by Janette Turner Hospital (Knopf 0-09-183312-4; 1996; 402 pp.)

This is one of those novels released in the right place at the right time. Written well before the Pauline Hanson fiasco, it illuminates the North Queensland mind-set in a way no newspaper article ever could. For the SF reader it provides an interesting contrast with Iain Banks's *Whit*. Both novels tell of religious communes ruled by charismatic leaders; both tell of the people who try to escape the communes. In *Whit*, good humour and bravery lead to self-discovery and personal freedom; in *Oyster*, paranoia boils off every page like fog; nobody can escape. The disciples of charismatic self-appointed prophet 'Oyster' arrive in the almost invisible North Queensland town of Outer Maroo, only to be whisked off to an out-of-town opal mine. They never leave. Any stranger who arrives in town never leaves. Mail is never sent; nobody but a few landholders owns enough petrol to reach the nearest town, which is hundreds of miles away. The town's inhabitants, suspicious of Oyster and his crew, succumb to their own oppressive version of Christianity. Heat rules. Nobody takes action until disaster takes over. Does this powerful brew of a novel work? Not entirely. *Oyster* has many great pages, and many pretentious, extraneous pages as well. Hospital might have told its story in a less irritating way. But *Oyster* has a ring of absolute truth that will not let you go. Each time I hear bad news from North Queensland, I think of Outer Maroo and *Oyster*. Scary.

** *The Firm*

by John Grisham (Arrow 009-917941-5; 1991; 421 pp.)

I read this book because at a certain point in the film (which fortunately I saw on TV, and therefore

could switch off) the plot suddenly goes haywire. 'The book must be better than this,' I said to myself, and sure enough, it is. On the surface, *The Firm* is a tale of momentous processes: the corruption of American law; the all-invasive quality of the Mafia. This is a book constructed entirely of events and conversations; no extraneous sloppy 'fine writing' here. Rapidly Grisham draws us into the strange life of this Memphis law firm. He bats the plot along at a wonderful pace as ultra-corruption wriggles up from under the carpet of ultra-respectability. For awhile I thought this might be a realistic novel. No such luck. Grisham's squeaky-clean main character, clever enough to get himself out of this mess, is pure fantasy. I allowed for the fantasy, and found myself with a book that is not so much a suspense novel as a subversive comedy. As in *The Client*, Grisham sees America divided between two monstrous 'firms', the Mafia and the FBI, each as unscrupulous as the other. Most people are caught in the crossfire; few individuals escape.

- * ***The Client***
by John Grisham (Arrow 009-917941-5; 1993; 458 pp.)
Longer than *The Firm*, with a plot that tends to slackness in the middle, *The Client* is an entertainment that never feels believable. Its trigger situation is ludicrous; not that a nine-year-old boy overhears a Mafia secret and thus changes his life forever, but that the secret could have been entrusted to a lawyer hack (and therefore heard by the boy) in the first place. The endless resourcefulness of this nine-year-old is also unbelievable (although Grisham makes grim humour of an American kid's reliance on film and TV characters models when tackling situations), and most of the other characters are too good or too bad to be true. As in *The Firm*, Grisham's America is a grim cityscape dominated by egotistical lawyers, slack policemen, maniacal FBI agents and murderous Mafia thugs. All very entertaining, but two novels of Grisham are enough for me.

- * ***Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex***
edited by Ellen Datlow (St Martin's Press 0-312-

14019-3; 1996; 316 pp.)

This is the only disappointing Ellen Datlow collection I've read. Usually she draws out of authors more than they give other editors, but this time most of them are defeated by the subject matter. To hear these writers tell it, sex in America has become a grim and desperate business, replete with every peculiarity but pleasure. Sex, to me, is one of the great agents of human redemption, yet only Roberta Lannes's 'His Angel', grim but shining, rises above the limitations the other authors place upon themselves. There's not much hope for anybody in Bruce McAllister's 'Captain China', but it's a first-class piece of *faux naïf* story-telling. *Off Limits* has a few reprints, including Samuel Delany's 'Aye, and Gomorrah . . .', which doesn't bowl me over in the way it did when I first read it in 1969, and Elizabeth Hand's 'In the Month of Athyr', which is certainly effective, but not redemptive. Robert Silverberg's 'The Reality Trip', which I thoroughly disliked in 1970, now has for me a gleam of humour and real perception which I don't find in most of the other stories.

- ** ***The Keys to the Street***
by Ruth Rendell (Hutchinson 0-09-180163-X; 1996; 310 pp.)

For pure pleasure, there's nothing like reading a great novel from a favourite author. 'She's done it again!' I said to myself. 'How can she keep pulling the lollies out of the bag, year after year?' Part of Rendell's secret is her sense of place and her love of London. Four seemingly disconnected stories are told about Regent's Park: the people who live near it, those who cross it during the day, and the homeless people who live in it at night. Eventually the stories interconnect to make a pattern like the paths in Regent's Park. There is a wonderfully ambling quality to this book that merely disguises its perfect sense of plot and character. I read for pleasure; few writers give more pleasure than Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine.

— Bruce Gillespie, 30 November 1996