# SF COMMENTARY 92

**July 2016** **72 pages**

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Cover: Carol Kewley: 'Poems for the Space Race'

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**Front cover: Carol Kewley: 'Poems for the Space Age'. :: Back cover: Vintage Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Island'.**

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**Ray Sinclair-Wood** usually writes for my magazines as **Ray Wood**. He lives in Quorn, near the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. Despite the fact that it is often very hot in Quorn, Ray enjoys bushwalking as well as reading and writing and watching films.

# Ray Sinclair-Wood

## Poems of the Space Race

Merely to know
The Flawless Moon dwells pure
In the human heart
Is to find the Darkness of the night
Vanished under clearing skies.
— Kojiju (1121–1201)[1]

Ray Sinclair-Wood.

**1**

The Space Age might be said to have begun with the 1903 book, *The Exploration of Cosmic Space by Means of Reaction Motors*, by the Russian Konstantin Tsiolkovski (1857–1935). Or with the designing and testing of rocket engines from 1914 on, by the US's Robert Goddard (1882–1945). Or on 3 October 1942, when the German Wernher von Braun's team at Peenemünde first successfully launched a liquid-fuelled rocket, the V2, to an altitude of 84 km, that landed 187 km away; Walter Dornberger, in charge of the project, said, 'Today the spaceship has been invented.' Whenever it did begin, of course the Space *Age* continues to this day. But what I'm referring to here is the Space *Race* between the then Soviet Union and the United States.

It might be said that the Space *Race* began with the USAF's plan to put the world's first satellite into orbit in the International Geophysical Year of July 1957 to December 1958. It was called 'Project Vanguard'. But the US's public was shocked when the Soviets, as the Communist Russians were then usually known, beat them to it by getting their 84 kg *Sputnik 1* into orbit on 4 October 1957. However, in the eyes of the general public around the world, *Sputnik 1* was when the Space Race began. It wasn't a *race* in the world's eyes before that.

It's probably difficult for young people today to understand how enormous the shock was to Americans at that time. The US had emerged from the Second World War generally convinced that the Soviet Union was a backward society incapable of any kind of truly advanced technology. Average Americans believed that they were masters of the planet, especially technologically, despite the Cold War then being so intense. And suddenly they weren't. The shock was compounded by *Sputnik* being followed by the failure of the US's 'Project Vanguard' to launch a satellite into orbit.[2]

One of the best descriptions of that initial American shock that I've ever read is in Stephen King's 1981 *Danse Macabre: The Anatomy of Horror*[3]. It's worth quoting in full. His book begins with it:

> For me, the terror — the real terror, as opposed to whatever demons and boogeys which might have been living in my own mind — began on an afternoon in October of 1957. I had just turned ten. And as was only fitting, I was in a movie theater [and] just as the [flying] saucers were mounting their attack on Our Nation's Capital in the movie's final reel, everything just stopped. The screen went black ...
>
> The manager walked out into the middle of the stage and held his hands up — quite unnecessarily — for quiet ...

We sat there in our seats like dummies, staring at the manager. He looked nervous and sallow — or perhaps that was only the footlights. We sat wondering what sort of catastrophe could have caused him to stop the movie just as it was reaching that apotheosis of all Saturday matinee shows, 'the good part'. And the way his voice trembled when he spoke did not add to anyone's sense of well-being.

'I want to tell you,' he said in that trembly voice, 'that the Russians have put a space satellite into orbit around the earth. They call it ... *Spootnik*.'

This piece of intelligence was greeted by absolute, tomblike silence. We just sat there, a theaterful of 1950s kids ... We were the kids who had ponied up a quarter apiece to watch Hugh Marlowe in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and got this piece of upsetting news as a kind of nasty bonus.

I remember this very clearly: cutting through that awful dead silence came one shrill voice, whether that of a boy or a girl I do not know, a voice that was near tears but that was also full of a frightening anger: 'Oh, go show the movie, you liar!'

The manager did not even look towards the place from which that voice had come, and that was somehow the worst thing of all. Somehow that proved it. The Russians had beaten us into space. Somewhere over our heads, beeping triumphantly, was an electronic ball which had been launched and constructed behind the Iron Curtain. Neither Captain Midnight nor Richard Carlson (who also starred in *Riders to the Stars*; and oh boy, the bitter irony in that) had been able to stop it. It was up there and they called it Spootnik. The manager stood there for a moment longer, looking out at us as if he wished he had something else to say but could not think what it might be. Then he walked off and pretty soon the movie started up again.[3]



Adelaide people drove north at night to get away from the city lights so they could watch *Sputnik 1* orbiting overhead. I remember when we were out there that along each side of the highway were rows of parked cars, and people standing out by them looking up at the sky. Though they were talking to each other casually, they were clearly in awe of the satellite. The roads out of the city were packed with cars going out to see it, and returning from seeing it, night after night.

The very next month after *Sputnik 1* the Soviets successfully launched *Sputnik 2* into orbit, carrying the dog Laika. With the Cold War in progress the shock of *Sputnik 2* to the West was that it was nearly 500 kg big. This meant that the Soviets alone on Earth could launch into space missiles carrying nuclear bombs, and bring them down anywhere on the planet. At that time the US couldn't do this, and in response hastily installed missiles in the UK, Italy, and Turkey to be close enough to reach Russia. Then came *Sputnik 3*, launched in May 1958. It was more than two and a half times heavier than *Sputnik 2*, and stayed in space for two years.

In December 1957, the Americans rushed to launch a satellite a month after *Sputnik 2*. *Vanguard 1* was watched on TV around the world. And moments after lift-off it fell back to earth, and exploded. The humiliation for the US and the West as a whole was great. (However, the reaction of many Australians at the time was a little odd. There was a rather guilty feeling of amusement that the Americans were failing, and that the Soviets of all people were beating them.) The first successful US launch was the 14 kg *Explorer 1* on 31 January 1958.

Just one illustration of the impact on the world is that in some respects Chairman Mao Zedong's disastrous 'Great Leap Forward' in China, which led to perhaps as many as 50 million deaths, was a product of *Sputnik*. In November 1957, while in Moscow, he declared that, because of *Sputnik*, which had so enormously impressed him, now the 'East wind prevails over the west wind'. During his 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958–62, achieving a new agricultural or industrial record in China was called 'launching a sputnik', and high-yielding farmlands were called 'sputnik fields'.[4]

And so the Space Race had begun. For several years more the US worked desperately to equal and then pass the Soviets. But for quite a while every time they seemed about to catch up the Soviets jumped ahead again. The US didn't catch up until the mid 1960s.

I don't know when the general public believes the Space Race ended, but for me it ended on 21 July 1969 when, watched on TV by an estimated one-fifth of the world's population, the US's Neil Armstrong took that first-ever human step onto the surface of the Moon. (A fifth of the world's population watching something on TV isn't unusual today, but it certainly was back then.) The Soviets, in one of the greatest exhibitions of sour grapes that I think history records, claimed that they'd never been interested in reaching the Moon first. In reality, a series of disasters in the later 1960s prevented them getting there. Therefore, the actual Space *Race* was over. It had lasted for a couple of months short of 12 years. And the US had won.

A slightly amusing aside. Sending animals rather than humans into space at first was because no one knew what effect it would have on humans, especially weightlessness (for example, would the body's organs still function?) But when the US launched *their* first test animals into space starting in 1959, they were not dogs like the Soviets' Laika, but monkeys named Able and Baker, and eventually in January 1961 a chimpanzee named Ham. It seemed to me to demonstrate the almost fanatical Anglo-Saxon love of dogs, and I suppose the fear of the outcry that risking the lives of dogs in space might incur.

I'd been reading SF from 1948 on, particularly the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* (renamed *Analog* in 1960),

*Galaxy Science Fiction* from its start in 1950, and a heap of other more short-lived SF magazines. And I remember that before *Sputnik 1* orbited you were looked on as a bit weird if you read that kind of thing, even by many of your school mates and teachers (at least in Adelaide in South Australia where I lived then). *Sputnik I* not only dramatically ended humankind's insular, inward-looking attitude to our Universe — at least for a while — but it also changed forever the world's attitude to SF. In a single day *Sputnik* had made SF respectable, because we were now living in what up until then had been a science-fictional world.

**2**

The Moon has always been one of our most powerful and prolific symbols. Jack Tresidder in his *Dictionary of Symbols*[5] begins his entry about it thus:

> Fertility, cyclic regeneration, resurrection, immortality, occult power, mutability, intuition and the emotions — ancient regulator of time, the waters, crop growth and the lives of women. The moon's appearances and disappearances and its startling changes of form presented an impressive cosmic image of the earthly cycles of animal and vegetable birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth. The extent and power of lunar worship and lunar symbolism are partly explained by the moon's enormous importance as a source of light for night hunting and as the earliest measure of time — its phases forming the basis of the first known calendars. Beyond its influence on the tides, the moon was widely believed to control human destiny as well as rainfall, snow, floods, and the rhythm of plant and animal life in general and of women, through the lunar rhythms of the menstrual cycle.

And as in modern times poets came more and more to live in big cities, the Moon became even more important to them because it had become the most significant element of Nature remaining in the crowded built-up streets where they now spent their lives. Hence the constant appearance of the Moon in modern poetry, one of the last remnants in it of the natural world humans had once lived all their lives in, but had abandoned for the jobs and seductions of artificial city life.

Nature in cities where it does occur can scarcely be called 'Nature' at all.[6] Too often trees are carefully shaped, and grow in unnatural straight lines, and their debris is removed from under them. Grasses are trimmed almost to the ground. Flowers are segregated and grown in orderly plots. Dangerous animals and reptiles are banished. City-dwellers are cooled artificially from the summer heat, and warmed from the winter cold. Most walking is replaced by cars, buses, trams, and trains. Nor, as always, does one dare to look too long at the Sun. Only the Moon remains inviolate and natural and available to city-dwelling poets for long contemplation.

**3**

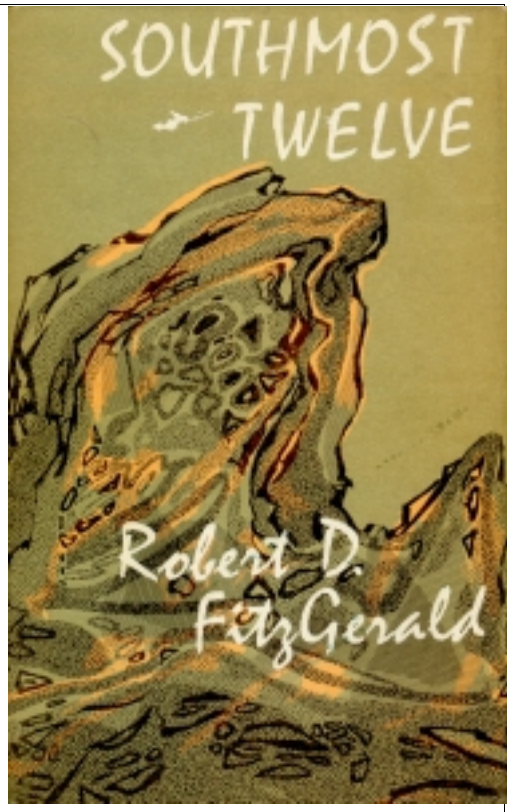
Space *had* featured in poems before the Space Race began. A poem by the Australian **Robert D. Fitzgerald** (1902–87) was published in April 1954, three and a half years before *Sputnik 1*.[7]

*Beginnings*

Not to have known the hard-bitten,
tight-lipped Caesar
clamped down on savage Britain;
or, moving closer,
not to have watched Cook
drawing thin lines across
the last sea's uncut book
is my own certain loss;

as too is having come late,
the other side of the dark
from that bearded, sedate
Hargrave of Stanwell Park,
and so to have missed, some bright
morning, in the salty, stiff
north-easter, a crank with a kite —
steadied above the cliff.

Beginnings once known
are lost. Perpetual day,
wheeling, has grown
each year further away
from the original strength




of any action or mind
used, and at length
fallen behind.

One might give much
to bring to the hand
for sight and touch
cities under the sand
and to talk and trade
with the plain folk met
could we walk with the first who made
an alphabet.

But more than to look back
we choose this day's concern
with everything in the track,
and would give most to learn
outcomes of all we found
and what next builds to the stars.
I regret I shall not be around
to stand on Mars.

Lawrence Hargrave (1850–1915) was the Australian aeronautical pioneer who experimented especially with wing designs using models and kites. Many people back then regarded him as a crank, yet he was an extraordinarily prolific inventor. In fact, he used four box kites to get himself hovering 3 and a half metres off the ground in 1894. I've read, though I can no longer remember where, that the Wright Brothers used some of his research for the wings of their first aeroplane. He and some of his designs were featured on Australia's $20 note from 1966 to 1994.

For non-Australian readers, I should say that James Cook (1728–79) was the English navigator who explored the east coast of Australia, and more of the Pacific and Southern Oceans than any other explorer.

I wonder if Fitzgerald recollected his 'I regret I shall not be around/to stand on Mars' at the time of the first Moon landing in 1969? In 1954 most people would have scoffed at the idea that humans would stand on the Moon only 15 years later. I can't recollect who it was now, but in the late 1940s one of the US's top scientists was asked by the US government whether it ought to aim at getting into space at that time. His advice was that there was no sense in doing it — I think he said in the foreseeable future, or it may have been not until the next century.

What's most significant about Fitzgerald's poem is that it illustrates the eager way poets had in the past always looked forward to the future. It's significant because, unusually, as the Space Race heated up poets began more and more to have misgivings about it. And these misgivings became rather general after the first Moon landing.

Of course there are poets who write from many different roles. Some are story-tellers. Some are songsters. Some are philosophers. Some are dramatists. But some are also seers, visionaries, prophets — and it's the poet as seer whom I'm concerned with here.

4

I'll look at five poems in particular, two composed early during the Space Race, and three about the first landing on the Moon on 20 July 1969, and the first human stepping onto the Moon's surface the following day. As I said, for me this landing marked the end of the Race, so these last three might be said to represent poets' summations of it.

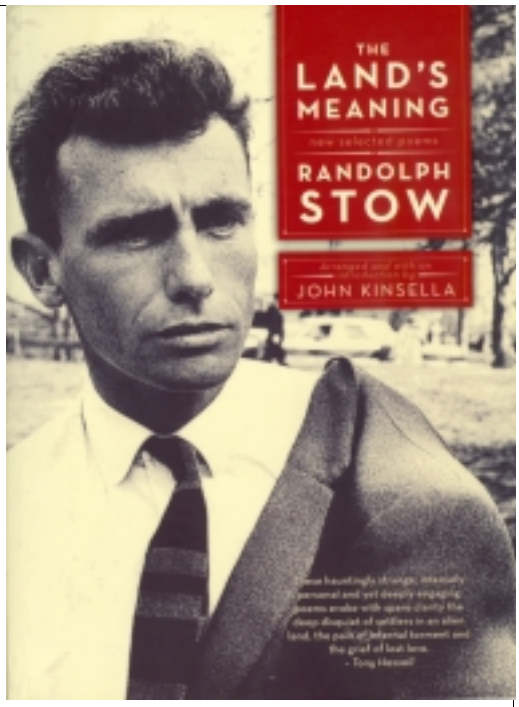
The two composed early in the Race were by Australians. The first is **'Endymion'** by the Anglo-Australian poet **Randolph Stow** (1935–2010).[8]

Stow's work has been neglected, but is undergoing a much-deserved revaluation. A recent book of his poems is John Kinsella's 2012 *The Land's Meaning: New Selected Poems: Randolph Stow*.[9] Sydney author Suzanne Falkiner's biography, *Mick: A Life of Randolph Stow* (University of Western Australia Publishing), was published in February 2016. And Text Publishing has put back into print his later novels, *To the Islands* (1958), *Tourmaline* (1963), *Visitants* (1979), *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980), and *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984).

*Endymion*

My love, you are no goddess: the bards were mistaken;
no lily maiden, no huntress in silver glades.

You are lovelier still by far, for you are an island;
a continent of the sky, and all virgin, sleeping.




> And I, who plant my shack in your mould-grey gullies,
> am come to claim you: my orchard, my garden, of ash.
>
> To annex your still mountains with patriotic ballads,
> to establish between your breasts my colonial hearth.
>
> And forgetting all trees, winds, oceans and open grass-
> lands,
> and forgetting the day for as long as the night shall
> last,
>
> to slumber becalmed and lulled in your hollowed
> hands,
> to wither within to your likeness, and lie still.
>
> Let your small dust fall, let it tick on my roof like
> crickets.
> I shall open my heart, knowing nothing can come in.

It was first published in 1962, but apparently written as early as 1960 or 1961,[10] at the time when the Space Race, especially to get to the Moon, had become feverish, and was constantly in the news.

*January 1959* — the Soviets' *Lunik 1* flew past the Moon.
*March 1959* — the US's *Pioneer 4* flew past the Moon.
*Autumn 1959* — NASA started training the US's first seven astronauts. The Soviets were already training 20 cosmonauts; 'astronaut' in the US is 'cosmonaut' in Russia.
*September 1959* — the Soviets' *Lunik 2* landed on the Moon — the first-ever human-made object to land elsewhere in space than on Earth.
*October 1959* — the Soviets' *Lunik 3* circled the Moon and sent back the first pictures ever of the Moon's far side, which we humans had never seen before.

So at that time Stow would have been as aware, as most people in First World countries were, of the race to the Moon.

Up until this time Stow had been writing, particularly in his first three novels — *A Haunted Land* (1956), *The Bystander* (1957), and *To the Islands* (1958) — about how people in Australia had so badly mistreated and were still mistreating both the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants; and about the terrible damage this mistreatment was doing in turn to the very same European invaders-destroyers themselves. And here suddenly in 1959 for him was the possibility of the same thing happening to the Moon. He must have despaired of humans ever learning from their past mistakes. He must have wondered if we humans would ever learn to do better, to do differently. He must have felt that those ancient mistakes were about to be exported into space itself.

And he would have seen the photos in our newspapers of the Moon's surface shot from robotic spacecraft flying past it, photos such as the ones I still remember when they were first published, of the far side of the Moon. In Australia we had no colour TV then (not until March 1975), and our newspaper photos were still only black and white. But even though perhaps the only photos of the Moon's surface he saw were black-and-white ones (magazines might have had coloured ones — I can't remember now), telescopes had already shown that the Moon was in fact not the romantic blue-white that we see with our own eyes from Earth, and that poets had always celebrated. And these spacecraft flying close to the Moon certainly confirmed this.

So 'And I, who plant my shack in your mould-grey gullies,/am come to claim you: my orchard, my garden, of ash', is he himself, visualising a pioneer from Earth landing on the grey, ash-coloured Moon, and starting the same old act of land-violation and therefore the consequent boomeranging self-violation all over again? Of course, farming the surface of the Moon similarly to farming on Earth would be impossible. But his is a poetic image for whatever kind of despoliation humankind may inflict elsewhere off-Earth, and not a literal image for farming.

> And forgetting all trees, winds, oceans and open grasslands,
> and forgetting the day for as long as the night shall last,
>
> to slumber becalmed and lulled in your hollowed hands,
> to wither within to your likeness, and lie still

is how the Moon's surface will reshape that pioneer into its own image. But for the pioneer, 'I shall open my heart, knowing that nothing can come in.' After all, for Stow what *is* there on the desolate, waterless, airless, and vegetationless Moon to 'come in'? Therefore that pioneer was bound to be reduced by the Moon to its 'nothing' too.

So for Stow, the horror was how much worse the impact of an alien landscape such as the Moon's — and after it other landscapes on Mars, or Venus, or planets around other stars — would be on humans landing on them to despoil them. The meaning of the land to Stow — his best-known poem is actually titled 'The Land's Meaning'[11] — was inextricably related to the humans living on that land. Both had an impact on each other, and if you, the human on that land, treated it badly, it'd revenge itself on you in return. So how would the Moon treat humans who treated it badly too?

The Eastern religions he was familiar with had taught him that there are no two separate entities: Land, and Human. They're both inescapably one and the same. 'Body is land in permutation,' he says in his poem '*From The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the Tao Te Ching*', VII.[12] As the physicist Fritjof Capra says in his book, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*,[13] which Stow knew:

> The most important characteristic of the Eastern world view — one could almost say the essence of it — is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness.[14]

All is One to the Eastern mystics Stow was familiar with, and the shock of humans adding the so far pristine landscape of the Moon to the already violated landscape of the Earth must have been a blow to him, as his apprehensive poem shows.

Many poets during the Space Race, but especially immediately after the 1969 Moon landing, wrote about it, and one frequent theme in their poems about these explorations of the Moon was how they'd destroyed its ancient and revered myths. And so, many of them felt that the romance of the Moon had been diminished. Stow uses the ancient Greek myth of Endymion, who was loved by Selene the Moon-Goddess. When Zeus put him to sleep perpetually on Mt Latmos, she came down to Earth to make love to him every night. But now, Stow says of her, 'My love, you are no goddess: the bards were mistaken;/no lily maiden, no huntress in silver glades.' She is 'lovelier still by far' only so long as she is 'an island/a continent of the sky, and all virgin, sleeping', that is, only so long as she, the Moon, has not been violated by humans landing on her and colonising her.

This is far from Fitzgerald's completely uncritical 'I regret I shall not be around/to stand on Mars'. And it's interesting that Stow wrote like this a decade before so many poets reacted negatively to the 1969 Moon landing.

**5**

Next I want to look at a poem from probably a little earlier than Stow's, by the Australian **Elizabeth Riddell** (1907–98). It was published in November 1959.[15] Only two months before, the Soviets had landed *Lunik 2* on the surface of the Moon — the very first 'invasion' of the Moon's actual surface by humans. It seems that this *Lunik* may have been intended to make a soft landing, but that it accidentally crashed instead. Riddell treats it as an invasion.

*After Lunik Two*

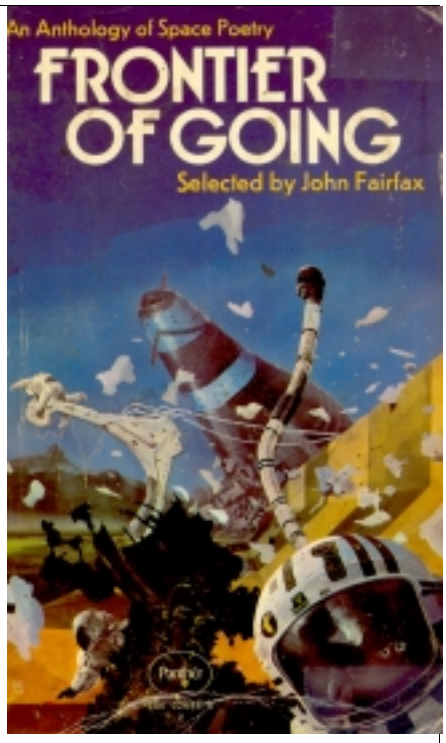
It was like falling out of love, a wisp of grief,
Identifiable pain, unease, regret
As for the end of summer when a brilliant feather
Lies on the grass and the bright bird flown on.

It was a sort of cruelty, a small torture,
A shudder in the skin, and yet
That night the pure moon floated like a leaf
Moist, pale, and patterned in her familiar way
Between her stars and clouds, the candid moon.

No mark of the insolent arrow on her cheek,
No crimson kiss or tear to show her wound,
She passed on her dark acres to the deep
Green gulf of day, and so with her
My fears and sorrows into caves of sleep.


The 'caves of sleep' also refers to the Endymion myth that Stow used. Zeus let Endymion, who was supremely handsome, choose his own fate, and he asked Zeus to put him to sleep forever so that he'd never grow old and lose his beauty. So he sleeps eternally in a cave on Mt Latmos, where the Moon Goddess Selene comes from the Moon every night to worship his beauty, and be his lover. (Her coming down from the Moon was an ancient explanation of the Moon's light shining down on Earth.)

The 'insolent arrow' — *Lunik 2* — that marks 'her cheek' has you think of




Eros' (Cupid's) arrow. If gold-tipped it inflames its target with passionate and irresistible love; if lead-tipped and blunted it repels love instead. And Eros was often depicted as mischievous, and even the bringer of tragedy through love. Hence his arrow is 'insolent', she says.

Both kinds of arrow are relevant to the poem. One interpretation is that the repellent arrow has wounded Selene so that she will never love Endymion down on Earth again. The other is that *Lunik 2*, being shot into the Moon by humans instead of by a mythic God, represents humans taking over from Selene, or banishing her, instead. Either interpretation says that the ancient and long-standing Moon myths are now only of the past, and their loss is as grievous and painful and regretful as 'falling out of love'.

But she says, perhaps with relief, though it's 'a sort of cruelty, a small torture,/A shudder in the skin', there's 'No mark of the insolent arrow on her cheek/No crimson kiss or tear to show her wound'. At least not that she can see from here on Earth. However, her 'fears and sorrows' arising from this invasion of the Moon go with Selene 'into [the] caves of sleep'. So, she's saying, the old uninvaded, unblemished Moon exists in reality no longer, not after *Lunik 2*; it can now only exist for her, Riddell — just as the Moon too can now only preserve her beauty, Selene's beauty — hidden away like Endymion in his cave, asleep.

So now the myths of thousands of years are being destroyed. And again, like Stow, Riddell has foreshadowed the general reaction of poets to the landing on the Moon a decade later on — her own reaction is to hide from the invasion of the Moon in Endymon's 'caves of sleep'.

**6**

Fitzgerald's poem was written before the Space Race, and Stow's and Riddell's not long after it began. The last three poems I'll now look at were written immediately after the first Moon landing in July 1969.

Two poetry anthologies appeared shortly after the landing. They were **John Fairfax**'s 1969 ***Frontier of Going: An Anthology of Space Poetry***, which contains UK poems; and **Robert Vas Dias**'s 1970 ***Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age***, which contains American poems.

There's a website listing 'Speculative Poetry Anthologies: Bibliography of English-Language Science-Fiction, Science, Fantasy, and Horror Poetry Anthologies' of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, at http://sfpoetry.com/books/anthos.html. It includes the recent **Tim Jones and P.S. Cottier** (edited), ***The Stars Like Sand: Australian Speculative Poetry*** (2014). However, the three Australian poems I've given above are not included in Jones & Cottier, though their book ranges as far back as the nineteenth century.

I'd also like to point out a book that SF fans may be familiar with, **Laurence Goldstein**'s 1986 ***The Flying Machine and Modern Literature***.[16] His Preface, Introduction, and especially the first part of chapter 11, **'The Moon Landing and Modern Literature'** — the part subtitled 'The Rivalry of Poet and Astronaut' (pp. 191–203) — are relevant to my subject.


The first of these last three poems is **'To the Moon, 1969'**, by the American poet **Babette Deutsch** (1895–1982). It was published the very next day after the Moon Lander had settled on the Moon.[17]

*To the Moon, 1969*

You are not looked for through the smog, you turn blindly
Behind that half palpable poison — you who no longer
Own a dark side, yet whose radiance falters, as if it were fading.
Now you have been reached, you are altered
beyond belief —
As a stranger spoken to, remaining remote, changes from being a stranger.
Astronomers know you a governor of tides, women as the mistress
Of menstrual rhythms, poets have called you Hecate, Astarte, Artemis — huntress whose arrows
Fuse into a melt of moonlight as they pour
upon earth, upon water.

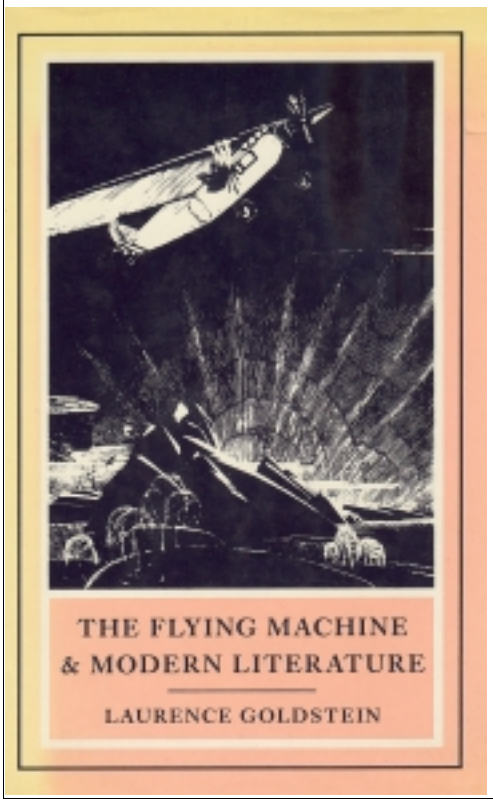
We all know you a danger
    to the thief in the garden, the pilot
In the enemy plane, to lovers embraced in your promise
    of a shining security. Are you a monster?
A noble being? Or simply a planet that men have, almost casually, cheapened?
The heavens do not answer.
Once, it was said, the cry: 'Pan is dead! Great Pan is dead!'
    shivered, howled, through the forests: the gentle
Christ had killed him.
There is no lament for you — who are silent
    as the dead always are.
You have left the mythologies, the old ones, our own.
But, for a few, what has happened is the death of a divine
    Person, is a betrayal, is a piece of
The cruelty that the Universe feeds,
                                while displaying its glories.

For Deutsch the 'smog' of industrial pollution is a 'half-palpable poison' that had already blinded the Moon seen from Earth before the Space Race even began. And its once-mysterious dark side was rudely dragged out from its hiding-place when *Lunik 3* circled the Moon in October 1959, and transmitted photographs of it back to Earth. But despite throwing light on her dark side, the Moon's 'radiance falters, as if it were fading' too. So the Moon has been a victim of attack after attack, and 'Now you have been reached [by the astronauts] you are altered beyond belief'.

Those three descriptions move forward through time to the landing itself. The next three move backward through time instead. The modern scientist comes first, specifically astronomers who relate the oceans' and seas' tides on Earth to the influence of the Moon. Further back in time is that women have always measured their lives cyclically by the Moon. Furthest back of all — you might say even before humans appeared on Earth — are the Goddesses of the Moon, the Goddesses of myth: 'Hecate, Astarte, Artemis'. She gives just three names, but could have added many more such as Cynthia, Diana, Luna, Phoebe, Proserpina, and Selene.

Did Deutsch intend this rhythmical moving forward and backward to echo the cyclic nature of women's lives? After all, it was only men who went to the Moon, so it may be a gentle dig at that. In June 1963 the Soviets had sent just the one woman into space, Valentina Tereschkova, but the US sent none at all up to the 1969 Moon landing. And no woman ever landed on the Moon — only 12 men.

She continues the pattern of threes next, in the Moon being a danger 'to the thief in the garden, the pilot/In the enemy plane, to lovers embraced in your promise/of a shining security'. So the cycle moves from negative in the first three, positive in the second three, and negative in the third three. Three is the great spiritual number. It symbolises spiritual synthesis such as in the Christian Trinity; unity in diversity; creativity; the threesome of birth, zenith, and descent; etc.




Now, after this trilogy of triplets she asks her question, posing three possible answers, 'Are you a monster?/A noble being? Or simply a planet that men have,/almost casually, cheapened?' A three again. But her answer is only that 'The heavens do not answer'. Perhaps the heavens of previous ages no longer have any say in the matter.

There's an ancient story that, as Jesus was being crucified, at the moment when the veil in the Temple was torn into two a cry went around the world, 'Great Pan is Dead!' The name Pan was sometimes used before then for a universal God, and this cry was taken by Christians to mean that the birth of Christianity had brought about the death of Paganism. In mediaeval times Christians even pictured the Devil as Pan. But now that men have invaded the Moon, 'There is no lament for you', no lament such as 'Great Pan is Dead' for the Moon who, through this invasion, is now dead too. The Moon has been torn away from 'the mythologies, the old ones, our own'. The myths of the millennia that preceded the landing, and were so deeply embedded in us, are now no more.

However, she says, though the world is rejoicing in the landing, 'for a few, what has happened is the death of a divine/Person, is a betrayal, is a piece of/The cruelty that the Universe is witness to/while displaying its glories'. In the midst of watching this incredible act of humans putting foot on the surface of the Moon — and seeing the 'glories' of the Universe — is this cruel deicide, this killing of the ancient Goddesses of myth.

The word 'gentle' is ironic when she says, 'the gentle/Christ had *killed* him [Pan]'. It's echoed a little further by 'the *death* of a divine/Per-

son ... a *betrayal'* [my italics in all three]. That she gives 'Person' an initial capital connects 'Person' to 'Christ'. So she sees the three betrayals — of the Moon, of Pan, and of Christ — *all* as pieces 'of/the cruelty that the Universe feeds,/while displaying its glories'. Notice the three again: there's a trinity of deicides too.

Goldstein does say that this 'poem is an elegiac curse upon the astronauts for their act of deicide' (192), but I'd hardly go as far as calling it a 'curse'. Deutsch's word 'lament' is as far as she goes.

It's the same response to the Space Race as Stow's and Riddell's. It was a common response from many poets, especially after the landing.

Goldstein continues after his phrase, 'act of deicide':

> From all accounts the negative response of poets to the moon landing took supporters of the space program by complete surprise. If there was one ally in the public they had counted on it was the visionary poets, who had generated for millennia the myths and texts which inspired engineers to construct machines that flew. Poetry and science had been joined in mutual wonder against drab bourgeois misgivings about spending priorities. Hardly a book exists about space travel that does not quote Tennyson's 'Ulysses' on the need to seek a newer world, 'To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths/Of all the western stars'. Or the conclusion of T. S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding': 'We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time'.
>
> If poets once felt this way, why no longer? *The moonflight was deliberately designed as a sacred event, as the culminating modern type of 'magical flight' into the heavens. It was undertaken not principally as a source of practical benefits but as a symbolic expression of humanity's continuing quest for self-definition and spiritual renewal.* [My italics] (192)

In fact, there's an old Gaelic word for exactly the kind of voyage Goldstein describes as 'a sacred event' in the passage I've italicised. It's an 'immram'. The word means a 'wonder-voyage', that is, a journey from our real world into a spirit world, and back. Early examples of immrama are *The Voyage of St Brendan*,[18] *The Adventure of Bran*, and *The Voyage of Mael Duin's Boat*. 'Immram' is not a word that Goldstein uses, although it'd have been most apt for what he says there.

However, his twelve-page discussion about poets' largely negative reaction to the Moon landing is well worth reading, though too much for me to summarise here. But for me, he doesn't go deep enough.

That's because for me an important point is that the Space Race wasn't only a conflict between Soviet cosmonaut and US astronaut to be first to step on the Moon. It also turned out to be an undeclared conflict between the technician and the poet for possession of one of humankind's most enduring and valuable archetypes: the Moon *her*self.

Throughout literary history what has the poet (indeed, the artist of any kind) been — especially the poet as seer? I think that **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** sums it up best at the end of his 1797 poem, **'Kubla Khan'**.

> Could I revive within me,
> Her symphony and song,
> To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
> That with music loud and long,
> I would build that dome in air,
> That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
> And all who heard should see them there,
> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Bear Coleridge's image of the poet in mind while reading Goldstein's report of an incident that took place during the Moon landing:

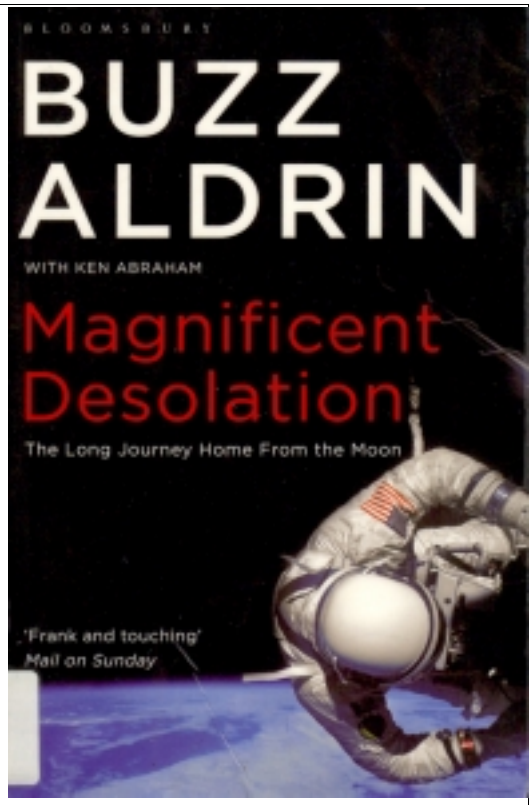
> On the morning of Armstrong's and Aldrin's descent to the lunar surface in their module, Mission Control reported to the astronauts:
>
> > An ancient legend says that a beautiful Chinese girl called Chango has been living there for four thousand years. It seems she was banished to the moon because she stole the pill of immortality from her husband. You might also look for her companion, a large Chinese rabbit, who is easy to spot since he is always standing on his hind feet in the shade of a cinnamon tree.
>
> Michael Collins [the Commander] responded, 'Okay, we'll keep a close eye for the bunny girl.' What is this story, this bit of comic relief but an exorcism of myth itself? It treats parodically the traditional elements of lunar mythology, the beautiful moon maiden and the promise of immortality. The large rabbit reminds one of the theatrical Harvey;[19] they occupy the same universe of blithe nonsense that Reason rolls back in its quest for

quantifiable data. The meaning of the exchange is: we have by this act outgrown the make-believe of our childhood; we declare our independence from archetypes. (196)

Coleridge's myth-making artist-poet-seer who 'on honey-dew hath fed,/And drunk the milk of Paradise' is far removed from the test pilot and astronaut Collins of *that* anecdote.

I don't mean to say that either one is superior to the other; I merely want to show the difference, and to suggest that the Moon landing threatened poets in a very fundamental way, so that most of them reacted to it badly.

To lament the diminishing of ancient myths and the banishing of old gods would not be a poetic failure, if the poets who did it *also* saw them in the nexus of this immensely greater and newer mythology to do with us humans stepping off our tiny, inward-looking planet and out into the vastnesses of our Universe for the very first time. Perhaps what was needed after the Moon landing was a new poet on a par with the Homer who turned a small intra-tribal Mycenaean stoush in western Turkey into *The Iliad* — a poet of the same stature who could turn the Space Race into a poem of a similar power. Why shouldn't our poets today get on with creating new mythologies instead of merely clinging to the old?




**7**

It's interesting that there was also an anthology of poems published immediately after another great twentieth century event similar to the Moon landing. This was the first non-stop solo crossing of the Atlantic Ocean by aeroplane, made by the US's Charles Lindbergh (1902–74) in May 1927, taking 33 and a half hours. His plane was named *Spirit of St Louis*. The event was greeted with incredible hysteria of the kind we might associate with the world's greatest rock stars in more recent decades.

This 1927 anthology, ***The Spirit of St. Louis: One Hundred Poems***, resulted from a poetry competition. The **'Note by the Editor with the Awards'** begins:

> More than four thousand poems from more than three thousand contributors were received in the course of the Spirit of St. Louis competition. The poems came from all parts of the United States, and from Canada, France, England, Australia, Germany, Holland, Spain, Mexico, Switzerland and other countries. Even little Monaco was represented.[20]

(Goldstein's Chapter 6 is titled 'Lindbergh in 1927: The Response of Poets to the Poem of Fact'.)

The competition's Third Award was given to **'The Flight'**, which was by the same **Babette Deutsch** who wrote 'To the Moon, 1969'. 'The Flight' is 117 lines long, too much to quote here, but I'll quote the last sixth of it, its last two paragraphs.

> Here is the thing
> That in the stress of mortal life stands firm,
> Setting the lion's valor in the worm,
> Pouring upon this jungle world a splendor
> Larger than sunset fires, and more tender,
> Showing to the mean heart and cruel mind
> Provinces undiscovered, rich beyond imagination,
> Not to be defined.
>
> Humbly, as he,
> And with the same smiling austerity,
> Let us too fly
> Through the known danger and the perils chanced,
> Guessing what salty roadsteads, what grim sky
> Regard our struggle. So we shall have danced
> Our dance with fate, the Masqued One,
> And have trodden
> The windy spaces that the eagles tread.
> 'Even the best are dead

Soon' ... But forever
Remembered virtue shines, and does not die. (85)

Now *that's* the poet in the traditional role of seer. Here there's not a single word of doubt about a flight that was 1927's equivalent of the flight to the Moon in 1969. But here the 'splendor [of the explorer is]/Larger than sunset fires', and shows 'to the mean heart and cruel mind/Provinces undiscovered, rich beyond imagination' that are so immense that they can't even be 'defined'. And she tells her readers 'Let us too fly/Through the known danger and the perils chanced' — that is, we must emulate Lindbergh's daring in our own lives and in the future.

What a difference to her saying in 1969 that the Moon may be 'simply a planet that men have, almost casually, cheapened', and to talk in terms of a 'lament', a 'betrayal', and a 'cruelty'.

Of course you have to accept that Deutsch was 32 years old when she wrote this, and 74 years old when she wrote 'To the Moon, 1969'. And of course you have to accept that 1927 was a very different year from 1969. 1927 was before the Great Depression, and after what was still called 'The War to End Wars', when the Second World War, which made a mockery of that name, wasn't even on the horizon. This was the Jazz Age, the name of the period from the end of the First World War in 1918 to the Stock Exchange Crash that began the Great Depression in 1929. These were 'The Roaring Twenties'.

But despite that, I think you still need to wonder at the huge change from the ecstatic reception so many poets gave to the Atlantic crossing, to the generally negative reception they gave to the Moon landing.

**8**

The next poem I want to look at in detail is **'Moon Landing'** by the Anglo-American poet **W. H. Auden** (1907–73). It was first published in September 1969.[21]

*Moon Landing*

It's natural the Boys should whoop it up for
so huge a phallic triumph, an adventure
  it would not have occurred to women
  to think worth while, made possible only

because we like huddling in gangs and knowing
the exact time: yes, our sex may in fairness
  hurrah the deed, although the motives
  that primed it were somewhat less than *menschlich*.

A grand gesture. But what does it period?
What does it osse? We were always adroiter
  with objects than lives and more facile
  at courage than kindness: from the moment

the first flint was flaked, this landing was merely
a matter of time. But our selves, like Adam's,
  still don't fit us exactly, modern
  only in this — our lack of decorum.

Homer's heroes were certainly no braver
than our Trio, but more fortunate: Hector
  was excused the insult of having
  his valor covered by television.

Worth *going* to see? I can well believe it.
Worth *seeing*? Mneh! I once rode through a desert
  and was not charmed: give me a watered
  lively garden, remote from blatherers

about the New, the von Brauns and their ilk, where
on August mornings I can count the morning
  glories, where to die had a meaning,
  and no engine can shift my perspective.

Unsmudged, thank God, my Moon still queens the heavens
as she ebbs and fulls, a Presence to glop at,

Her Old Man, made of grit not protein,
still visits my Austrian several

with His old detachment, and the old warnings
still have power to scare me: Hybris comes to
an ugly finish, Irreverence
is a greater oaf than Superstition.

Our apparatniks will continue making
the usual squalid mess called History:
all we can pray for is that artists,
chefs and saints may still appear to blithe it.

Some of those words may be unfamiliar to you: 'menschlich' (German), 'human/humane'; 'osse' (late Middle English, now dialect), 'prophesy'; 'mneh', 'whatever', usually with a shrug of indifference; 'glop' (Middle English, now dialect), 'be startled/frightened/astounded'; 'Hybris' (original Greek spelling of 'hubris') — in ancient Greek tragedy it means 'defiance of the Gods', which has to be its meaning here, since Auden capitalises it and uses the Classic Greek spelling; 'apparatnik': 'apparatchik' was a Communist Party official in the Soviet Union, hence what we'd call a 'bureaucrat' — the suffix '-nik' became popular in the West after Sputnik, as also in 'beatnik', 'refusenik', etc.

Wernher von Braun (1912–77) was the German rocket pioneer who designed and perfected the V2 rocket for the Nazis during the Second World War. Afterwards he was one of the chief architects of the US space program, in particular the Saturn rocket he and his team began planning as early as 1959, and that launched the Apollo missions to the Moon. 'Austrian' refers to Auden's much-loved summer home in Kirchstetten, Austria, that he owned and used regularly from 1957 until his death in 1973.[22]

Auden treats the Moon landing scornfully.

He has a shot at the US allowing only men to be astronauts: notice 'Boys' gets a capital and refers to children, but 'women' doesn't get one and refers to adults. His 'huddling in gangs' and obsession with measurement, i.e., with technology ('knowing/the exact time'), led men to be less than human, less than humane. So he seems to be saying that women are more likely to be human and humane than men.

The Moon landing is 'A grand gesture. But what does it period?/What does it osse?' Which asks what is it both the end of, and the beginning of? That is, does it have a meaningful place in the long march of civilisation, or is it merely a slip-up, an accident that shouldn't have occurred, a bypath that shouldn't have been taken? He uses the Middle English words 'osse', and later 'glop', to emphasise the long and interconnected passage of time that he thinks the Moon landing is no more than an irrelevant oddity in.

Because of men's obsession with 'objects' rather than with 'lives', from the moment men made the first tool ('the first flint was flaked') landing on the Moon was inevitable, though they never had an equal passion to understand their *selves*, and have made no advance on the first man's — Adam's — understanding of *himself*.

(What he says about tools is now outdated, in that in recent times we've become aware that the first tools of all may have been made by women and not men, tools that the mostly male scholars long ignored: hair string, and woven baskets.)

He even has a shot at the worldwide televising of the landing, saying how lucky Homer's heroes were not to be filmed. He means that TV removes the mystery and the romance and the art of events, such as the Trojan War as it's described in *The Iliad*. If the Trojan War had been filmed for the nightly TV News, how much would that have belittled it?

His shrug of indifference, 'Mneh!', marks the start of the second part of the poem. He turns away from both the desert-like landscape of the Moon and the 'blatherers/about the New, the von Brauns and their ilk', to his Austrian garden instead. Every time I read him here I can't help but reflect how Voltaire's Pangloss says to Candide at the end of *Candide, or the Optimist*,[23]

> 'There is a concatenation of all events in the best of possible worlds; for, in short, had you not been kicked out of a fine castle by the backside for the love of Miss Cunegund, had you not been put into the Inquisition, had you not travelled over America on foot, had you not run the Baron through the body, and had you not lost all your sheep which you brought from the good country of El Dorado, you would not have been here to eat preserved citrons and pistachio-nuts.'
>
> 'Excellently observed,' answered Candide; 'but let us take care of our garden.'

Auden too, turns away *from* the Moon landing *to* his Austrian garden, and counts not 'the exact time' of the astronauts but 'the morning/glories' instead; turns *to* his garden where 'to die [like Hector at Troy] has a meaning', and 'no engine [like the Saturn rocket that launched Apollo to the Moon] can shift my perspective [from this old Earth out into space]'.

He thanks God that his Moon 'still queens the heavens/as she ebbs and fulls, a Presence to glop at'; the Man in the Moon still appears to him; and ancient 'warnings [made by Gods]/still have power to scare' him. Defying the

Gods will still bring one to an 'ugly finish' — being irreverent is even worse than being superstitious.

His third and final part of the poem, the last stanza, generalises perhaps with too little warrant from what's gone before — the poem may have been better without it. He says how our bureaucrats will continue as they always have to make 'the usual squalid mess' of things, and our only hope, the only defence against them that we have, is to pray that there will continue to be 'artists,/chefs and saints' to light up our lives, to fill them with joy. Perhaps he wants to include the Moon landing in that 'squalid mess'; and certainly his list of artists, chefs, and saints excludes the technicians — the scientists and engineers and astronauts, that is — responsible for taking humankind to the Moon.

**9**

You'll find this strange reversal of roles between poet and technician in many of the poems written about the Space Race, as opposed to the utterances and the writings of the astronauts and other technicians involved in it.

Fitzgerald's unquestioningly forward-looking 'I regret I shall not be around/to stand on Mars', from before the Space Race, has changed. Early in the Race it's become Stow's 'wither within to your [the Moon's] likeness' where 'I shall open my heart, knowing nothing can come in', and Riddell's 'falling out of love, a wisp of grief/Identifiable pain, unease, regret'. And by the time of the Moon landing itself at the end of the Race, it's become Deutsch's 'death of a divine/Person, ... a betrayal, ... a piece of/The cruelty that the Universe is witness to'. And there are poets such as Auden who, like Candide, turn their backs on the drive into space altogether, to cultivate their gardens instead.

So now it's no longer the poet in his role of visionary, of prophet, who leads humankind into the future. It's no longer Coleridge's poet of the 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair'; no longer one who leads the poet's listener or reader to 'Weave a circle round him thrice,/And close your eyes with holy dread,/For he on honey-dew hath fed,/And drunk the milk of Paradise'. I'm talking about visionary poets in their role as commentators on the Space Race — as I said before, there are many other roles for poets, and many other kinds of poems than the ones I'm quoting.

And so the Space Race led to the technicians — the scientists, the engineers, and the astronauts (who've so often been scientists and engineers themselves) — becoming the visionaries, the prophets, the seers, in place of the poets. It's the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who landed on the Moon with Armstrong, who said, 'I believe mankind must explore or expire.'[24] And the planetary scientist William Hartmann who said, 'either civilization will collapse, or humans will reach Mars.'[25] And the physicist and TV science presenter Brian Cox who only recently said, 'It won't turn out well for us if we sit here on Earth and don't bother with space.'[26]

Those are the kind of things that *poets* would have said before the Space Race, but subsequently handed over to the *technicians* to say. Yet how ironic it is that the technician Aldrin himself writes as late as 2009:

> Reflecting metaphysically [when on the Moon] was contrary to our mission. We weren't trained to smell the roses or to utter life-changing aphorisms. Emoting or spontaneously offering profundities was not part of my psychological makeup anyhow. That's why for years I have wanted NASA to fly a poet, a singer, or a journalist into space — someone who could capture the emotions of the experience and share them with the world. Neil and I were both military guys, pilots who were accustomed to keeping our feelings reined in.[27]

*He* knew how much poets were needed to provide the words for such an extraordinary event. But the poets themselves turned out to be unable—or at the least unwilling—to do just that.

**10**

Auden's 'from the moment/the first flint was flaked, this landing was merely/a matter of time' belittles what I feel is the most astounding thing about our entire human story.

The early humans in themselves weren't very strong or very fast or possessors of great stamina compared with many of the other animals they lived among, and that preyed upon them too. But the three things they did have that far more than made up for their weaknesses, were the ability to reason sequentially, imagination, and the hand with four fingers and thumbs that could oppose each finger precisely — in itself an incredibly potent tool. Indeed, I'm certain you can say that the human hand is the greatest biological tool of any life form on Earth.

The hand was essential to the other two: without it they could *do* nothing at all. The hand made it possible for reason and imagination to flourish amazingly. I've read that dolphins possess reason and imagination, but if you ask, 'Where are their cities?', the answer is another question, 'Where are their hands?'

You must consider that long, long ago humans, who otherwise had only their arms and hands to hold out in defence, picked up and held sticks in front of them instead, to keep predators further at bay. And instead of clenching their fists to strike at those predators, picked up stones to hurl at them. In other words those humans had the imagination to extend their arms, and to empower their fists *with tools*.

Then consider the millennia-long development of such tools until those same humans could build a tool to take themselves up into the air off the planet Earth, out into the vacuum of space itself, taking along with them 385,000 km away and 385,000 km back, the very air and food and water and temperature that they couldn't live without, landing on the airless Moon, and walking and marvelling and leaping and joking on its surface.

The Saturn rocket alone that boosted *Apollo* into space was 111 metres high, and when loaded weighed eight million kg. The tiny Command Module alone contained over two million parts and had 566 cockpit switches. What incredible

tools *they* therefore were! And who can ever forget the immense spectacle of the fiery and thunderous launch itself from Cape Canaveral? How staggering it is to consider the distance between the tools that picking up a stick or a rock represent, and the spaceship that flew to the Moon and back. And how staggering it is to consider the entirety of no more than the imagination and reasoning behind every single part and purpose involved in it all.

How can any poet dismiss all of that as 'merely/a matter of time', as Auden does? Certainly you can't fault his comment as applied to the *inevitability* of the onward progress of toolmaking and tools. But I think you *are* fully justified in expecting a far more visionary poetry than that.

**11**

Last I want to look at just one of the many Space Race poems that attacked it and in particular attacked the Moon landing itself as a waste of both money and industry, that poets thought should have been better put to other uses. I remember seeing an overall figure of $US29 billion for the cost of working up to, and then landing Armstrong and Aldrin on the Moon, and that the number of people involved in the project was more than 400,000. Many of the poets of the Space Race wished all that money and effort had been put into solving problems here on Earth, such as feeding the World's starving people, and eliminating suffering around the World. (One estimate I've seen of the cost of putting humans on Mars is a staggering $US400 billion.)

The English poet **John Moat** (1926–2014)[28] wrote this poem, in 1969. It's an exemplar of many other poems about the same theme.

*Overture I*

In whose name — the nun standing there,
Deflowered and smiling, handless Lavinia,
The hand that fed gnawed clean by friendly teeth;
That sweet smell savouring the air
Of mustard and burning children; that calf
White-eyed, white flesh on tottering knees;
That rain that strips off all the leaves;
That crate of drillings, that sack of human hair;
That nigger thrown from a moving car,
His bleeding testicles between his teeth;
That twelve years' Jane pacing outside the bar,
Offering anything for her weekly share
Of tea; those rats now grown immune to death —
I ask you, in whose name and by what power
Have you set out to colonize the stars?

It's a single sentence. And it begins by asking 'In whose name'. Then between the em rules it lists eight typical abuses happening at that time around the world including in the US, to both people and to the environment. It ends by completing that opening question which has now been made ironic by that list: 'in whose name and by what power/ Have you set out to colonize the stars?'

The Vietnam War (1954–75) was in progress at the time of the Moon landing, and I think several of the incidents in the poem occurred in that war, in particular the tortured nuns and burning children, if I'm remembering right. The nun is seen as similar to the Lavinia in Shakespeare's 1594 Roman play, *Titus Andronicus*, in which she's raped and then has her hands cut off and tongue cut out so there's no way she can say who raped her. I think the burning children refers to the use of napalm bombing in Vietnam, though mustard gas used in war is not the same as napalm. Those of us old enough will probably think of Nic Ut's photograph,[29] which encapsulated that war so much, of the nine-year-old girl Kim Phuc burned naked by napalm and running screaming down the road from her South Vietnamese village Trang Bang. But that happened on 8 June 1972, three years after Moat's poem.

The 'rain that strips off all the leaves' may refer to the use of Agent Orange, sprayed from planes between 1961 and 1971 to defoliate trees over large areas of Vietnam to make the Vietcong and North Vietnamese enemies easier to spot, and also to destroy the crops that could feed them. Or it may be the acid rain caused by burning fossil fuels on an industrial scale since the nineteenth century. 'That crate of drillings, that sack of human hair' may be the gold from teeth and shaven hair taken from Second World War Concentration Camp victims by the Nazis. And the 'nigger thrown from a moving car' refers to the terrible crimes in the US against Afro-Americans still taking place even then — the battle for desegregation was still at a height.

However, it's not essential to identify Moat's eight examples in order to understand the poem. They're all of appalling suffering inflicted upon humans, and damage inflicted upon the environment typical of the whole world. And his question is why we should put all that money and effort into exploring space — landing on the Moon being up to then the most significant symbol for that — rather than into alleviating human suffering and saving the Earth's environment.

The question can't be faulted, but in one way it's unfair because it's so selective. Landing on the Moon, and going

even further 'to colonize the stars' can be replaced by so many alternatives. You can just as easily point to, say, lavishly staging the Olympic Games every fourth year, or to the World Cup Football; or to how most people in First World countries eat far more than twice as much as they actually need, food that, if distributed more evenly around Third World countries, would probably eliminate starvation in them; or to the huge expense and labour that goes into making films for entertainment.

All the poems that savage the Space Race in general, and the Moon landing in particular, easily arouse First World democratic readers' indignation at the misdirection of so much money and effort. But that same indignation isn't aroused nearly as easily if the same poets savage instead the very same readers' extravagant living standards — their expensive motor cars, wardrobes full of clothing, lavish houses, air-conditioning, TV and films, etc, as examples of that same misdirection. Landing on the Moon doesn't affect people personally. Those other things that I list do. The Moon landing is far easier for poets to attack.

Moat's question is an example of what I call the 'Democracy Paradox'. Fundamentally, democracy puts government into the hands of every adult person in democratic countries. But individuals in such countries almost all claim endlessly that each one of them, despite having the same vote as everyone else, can't possibly change anything much at all. But that misses the whole point of democracy, that each person must all life long act — and vote — as if it's always of vital importance, as if the very fate of the country depends on him or her alone. *Each one of us* is Prime Minister, or Premier, or President, not just a single supposedly helpless woman or man.

The Democracy Paradox is that the same people who eschew their individual responsibility for their country's government also demand the maximum individual share in everything that their government offers. 'I'm not responsible' on the one hand, but 'Gimme' on the other.

However, I should add that *this* poet John Moat wasn't like that. He 'and [his wife] Antoinette, who had a wide circle of friends, channelled their resources into causes in which they believed, sometimes leaving themselves short in the process'.[30]

The correct answer to Moat's question, 'In whose name' did these men land on the Moon is therefore, 'In *my* name' — at least in democratic countries. And it's the correct answer to all the other poets of the Space Race who asked the same or similar question in similar countries. This is not to say that the question is wrong; it's just to put it into its proper perspective.[31]

**12**

I find it remarkable that so many of those who wrote poems about the Space Race, and in particular about the Moon landing, abdicated from their millennia-long role as seers. It's as if the journey to the Moon and back, the reality of the Moon, and even space itself, turned out to be too big for them to handle. None of the poems that I've read about humans going out into space goes anywhere near rising up to the level of the events it commemorates. None deals with them using the spiritual power of an immram. Yet surely such tremendous events demand words with the grandeur of an epic poem, even if only in poetry as short as a lyric or an ode.

But where *is* the poem about the Moon landing so great, so visionary, that all people know it, probably by heart; recall it every time they think about the landing; and quote from it without even looking it up?

It's significant that a poem popular with astronauts themselves was not composed during or after the Space Race, but a couple of decades earlier. It was written in 1941 during the Second World War by the US poet **John Gillespie Magee Jr**. He was a Spitfire pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, based in England.[31]

*High Flight*

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air ...

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Michael Collins, the Commander of *Apollo 11* for the first Moon landing, carried a copy of this poem on his July 1966 *Gemini 10* space flight, and quoted it in his 1974 autobiography, *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys*. And the US President Ronald Reagan quoted from it in his address to the nation after the *Challenger* disaster of 28 January

1986. Those a just two examples of its use.

I quoted Goldstein above: 'Hardly a book exists about space travel that does not quote **Alfred, Lord Tennyson**'s poem **"Ulysses"** on the need to seek a newer world'. In Tennyson's 1833 poem Ulysses says to his crew,

> Come, my friends,
> 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
> Of all the western stars, until I die.
> It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
> It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
> And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
> Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

So why is it that when we need to quote something magnificent about venturing out into space, we need to go all the way back to 1833 to find a poem that's equal to the task? It's illuminating that the most-quoted words about the Moon landing today are not the words of a poet of then or since, but the words of the astronaut and engineer Neil Armstrong as he took the first human step on the Moon, 'That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind'.

Why did the poets miss out so hugely? Was it that they were too overwhelmed by one of the greatest events, if not *the* greatest, in human history?

## Notes

1 Translated by Edwin A. Cranston, in Carol Ann Duffy (ed), *To the Moon: An Anthology of Lunar Poems* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 11.

2 For information about space exploration I used the volume *Outbound* in the Time-Life Series *Voyage Through the Universe* (Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, 1990), and Andrew Chaikin, *Space* (London: Carlton Books, 2002), together with *Wikipedia* and a few other Internet sources. I found that *all* of these differed from each other in some details. I'd be delighted if anyone can correct me, and also source references I've had to make from no more than my antiquated and therefore now unreliable memory.

3 Stephen King, *Danse Macabre: The Anatomy of Horror* (London: Futura, 1991), pp. 15–22.

4 Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker & Co, 2010), pp. xviii, and 37. Estimates of the number of people killed during those four years are in chapter 37, 'The Final Tally', pp. 324–34. They range between 23 and 55 million, and tend towards the higher figure.

5 Jack Tresidder, *Dictionary of Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Traditional Images, Icons and Emblems* (London: Duncan Baird, 1999), p. 136. He has six times more material than I've quoted. Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), translated by Jack Sage from the Spanish *Diccionario de Simbolos Traditionales* (Barcelona, 1958), has four dense pages about the Moon's many symbolisms, pp. 204–7.

6 A delicious essay about how misguided and foolish modern First World human attitudes to Nature are, is Aldous Huxley's 'Wordsworth in the Tropics', in his book, *Do What You Will* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), pp. 113–29.

7 *The Bulletin* (Sydney: 1880–2008), 7 April 1954, p. 2. Subsequently published with six small changes in Robert D. Fitzgerald, *Southmost Twelve* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962), pp. 58–9.

8 First published in *Poetry and Audience* (Leeds, UK: School of English, Leeds University, 1953–present), 11 May 1962. First published in Australia as one of six poems by Stow titled 'Endymion and Other Poems', illustrated by Sidney Nolan, Number 9 in the series 'Australian Poets and Artists', in *Australian Letters: A Quarterly of Writing and Criticism* (Adelaide: Mary Martin Bookshop, 1957–68), Vol. 5 No 2, December, 1962, p. 6. The series was published separately in 14 booklets between 1960 and 1972 as *Australian Artists and Poets*, the Stow–Nolan booklet being Number 9 (Adelaide: *Australian Letters*, 1963).

9 John Kinsella, *The Land's Meaning: New Selected Poems: Randolph Stow* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2012). It contains 71 of his poems, a very small oeuvre, you might say. But as Kinsella says, '[His] slim body of poetry weighs more than most oeuvres many times its size.' p. 9. Suzanne Falkiner says that Stow had around 147 poems published altogether.

10 Date of composition courtesy Suzanne Falkiner. Stow often wrote poems but held them back for long periods before having them published, and at other times didn't even send a poem off for publication until someone asked him for one.

[11] 'The Land's Meaning', first published in Randolph Stow, *Outrider* (London: Macdonald & Co, 1962), pp. 20–1. Kinsella, op. cit., pp. 96–7.

[12] First published in *Poetry Australia* (Sydney: South Head Press, 1964–92) No 12, October 1966, pp. 7–10. Kinsella, op. cit., pp. 143–8. The reference to 'Tourmaline' is to Stow's 1963 post-apocalyptic novel, *Tourmaline*. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's 6th century BCE *Tao Te Ching* is the Chinese poem in 81 chapters describing the nature of mystical experience, and how to live according to it. Stow's *Tourmaline* contrasts its teachings to Christian teachings of the more fundamentalist kind in particular.

[13] Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1975). Stow spoke of reading it in a May 1981 interview with Bruce Bennett, so he'd have known that first edition — Anthony J. Hassall (ed.), *Randolph Stow:* Visitants, *Episodes from Other Novels, Poems, Stories, Interviews, and Essays* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 374.

[14] Capra, op. cit., third edition updated of 1991, p. 130.

[15] *The Bulletin* (Sydney: 1880–2008), 25 November 1959, p. 2. Elizabeth Riddell, *Selected Poems* (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992), p. 55. I've used the final version, which adds commas at the ends of lines 1 and 11.

[16] Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[17] First published in *The New York Times*, 21 July 1969, p. 17. Also published in Robert Vas Dias (ed), *New Poems of the Space Age: An Anthology* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970), pp. 61–2. I've used the words and setting from *The New York Times*; in Vas Dias's collection 'the Universe feeds,' is altered to 'the Universe is witness to'.

[18] You can find *The Voyage of St Brendan* in J.F. Webb (tr.), *Lives of the Saints* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965). Brendan was a fifth–sixth-century Irish saint who, legend says, sailed a coracle to America nearly a thousand years before Columbus. The oldest version of his seven-year-long immram is from the eleventh century.

[19] Harvey is the invisible six-foot high rabbit in Mary Chase's 1944 stage comedy, *Harvey*; also filmed as *Harvey* in 1950 with James Stewart playing the drunkard, Elwood P. Dowd.

[20] Charles Vale [pseudonym of Arthur Hooley] (ed.), *The Spirit of St. Louis: One Hundred Poems* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. iii. Not to be confused with Charles Lindbergh's own book, *The Spirit of St. Louis* (New York: Scribner's, 1953). Deutsch's poem is in Vale, pp. 81–5. I checked the names of the hundred poets whose work was selected against the names in the Index to Joy Hooton and Harry Heseltine, *Annals of Australian Literature* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1992), but found none of them there. So perhaps no Australian poem was selected.

[21] First published in the *New Yorker*, 6 September 1969, p. 38. Also published in Robert Vas Dias, op. cit., pp. 21–2. It's set out here as in Vas Dias, with the third and fourth lines of each stanza indented. But Duffy, op. cit., pp. 127–8, sets it out without the indents.

[22] Kirchstetten, in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 387, 450.

[23] Voltaire (1694–1778), *Candide; or, The Optimist* (1759), translated by Tobias Smollett (1761–65), chapter 30.

[24] Buzz Aldrin with Ken Abraham, *Magnificent Desolation: The Long Journey Home from the Moon* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009), end chapter 22. In the UK edition, p. 312.

[25] William K. Hartmann, *A Traveller's Guide to Mars: The Mysterious Landscapes of the Red Planet* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), p. 434.

[26] Brian Cox, quoted by Ellie Zolfagharifard, 'Life, Love and the Universe', *Sunday Mail* (Adelaide), 5 October 2014, p. 22.

[27] Aldrin, op. cit., pp. 37–8. In the film of Carl Sagan's 1985 SF novel *Contact*, when Ellie Arroway reaches her destination in the Vega system and is dazzled by the spectacular view, she says, 'They should have sent a poet.'

[28] I think it was first published in his friend John Fairfax's (selected and introduced) *Frontier of Going: An Anthology of Space Poetry* (St Albans, UK: Granada Panther, 1969), p. 58. But I've not been able to verify this. Fairfax's collection did come out in the few months after the Moon landing, so it's likely.

[29] Nick Ut is Huynh Cong Ut (1951– ), a Vietnamese photographer. The photo, titled *The Terror of War*, was almost not published because of the girl's full-frontal nudity. The then US President Richard Nixon questioned its veracity. It won Ut the 1973 Pulitzer for Spot News Photography. Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the burned girl in the photo, is now a Canadian citizen.

[30] 'John Moat-Obituary', *Telegraph* (UK), 11 October 2014.

[31] It's irrelevant to the above arguments, but in fact it's been estimated that each dollar spent on the Apollo Moon missions returned $14. So the Apollo missions were therefore more profitable than most businesses have been.

[32] He joined up before the US entered the war. On 3 September 1941 he flew to 33,000 feet on a high-altitude test-flight in the new Model V Spitfire. After it, he sent the poem to his parents, writing, 'I am enclosing a verse I wrote the other day. It started at 30,000 feet, and was finished soon after I landed.' He died in a mid-air collision a few months later. Versions of the poem vary, particularly in punctuation. The one I quote is from http://www.skygod.com/quotes/highflight.html and is claimed to be accurately copied from the handwritten original.

**— Ray Sinclair-Wood, 2013**

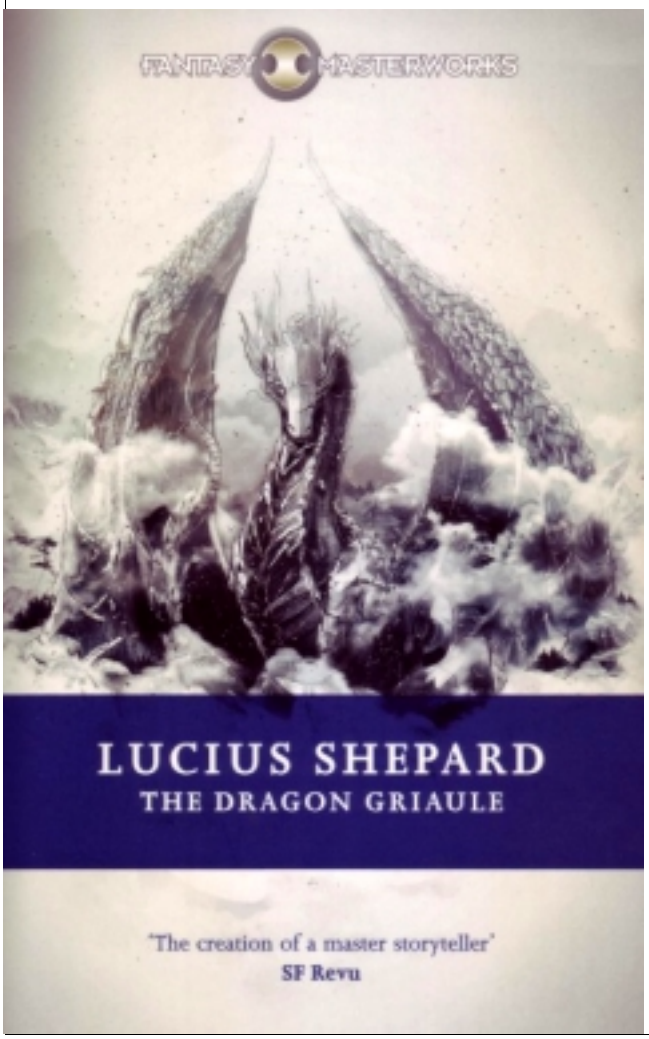
**Michael Bishop** received a Nebula Award nomination in 1916 for his novelette 'Rattlesnakes and Men'. His illustrated young person's book ***Joel-Brock the Brave and the Valorous Smalls***, was published in June.

# Michael Bishop

## Scalehunter: Lucius Shepard and the Dragon Griaule Sequence

Discussed:
***The Dragon Griaule***. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2012, $45 hc; 431 pp.
***Beautiful Blood: A Novel of the Dragon Griaule***. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press; $40 hc; 291 pp.

**First published:**
*New York Review of Science Fiction* **315, November 2014**




### A question of scale?

Nearly thirty years ago, I was pleased to introduce Lucius Shepard's debut collection of his mature short fiction, *The Jaguar Hunter* (Arkham House, 1987, pp. ix–xii). At that early point in his career, he required little or no introduction to savvy enthusiasts of fantasy and science fiction. He had already garnered a host of nominations for Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, and in 1985 he had collected a John W. Campbell Award as the field's Best New Writer.

What could I say about Lucius Shepard that others had not already said? His first novel, *Green Eyes* (1984) bore this front-cover prediction by writer and critic Damon Knight: 'Right now ... I believe I am one of about twelve people who know how good Lucius Shepard really is; tomorrow there will be thousands.' So I wrote that Shepard had a strong grounding in the English classics and a varied history of travel and work experience that lifted him well above novice status. I also wrote that he had already 'shown signs of outright mastery that both humble and enormously cheer all of us who believe in the power of imaginative fiction to speak to the human heart.'

Late in my introduction, I confessed, 'My own favorite . . . is "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule" — a story that, in the indirect way of a parable, implies a great deal about love and creativity.' Back then, of course, no one knew that Shepard would ever jump from my misnamed 'parable' into a work of the scale of both ***The Dragon Griaule***, a collection of a half dozen long stories, and his posthumous novel ***Beautiful Blood***, which together constitute his own monumental *Moby-Dick*, even if his saga necessarily has an episodic quality lacking in Melville's epic fish tale.[1]

## I. *The Dragon Griaule*

### A. 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule'

Why did I like 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' so much? Initially, it put me in mind of works by both Gabriel García Márquez and, less plausibly, Jorge Luís Borges. Shepard's tale is far shorter than the former's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, of course, and far longer than any of the latter's essay-like *ficciones* (e.g., 'The Circular Ruins', 'The Lottery of Babylon', 'The Library of Babel', etc). But it offers a flavourful Latin American backdrop akin to that in García Márquez's novel and suggested Borges to me by excerpting passages from several books of Shepard's own invention. (However, excerpting fictional works was something more typical of Frank Herbert in his *Dune* novels than of Borges, who did *allude to* imaginary books.) But I also liked Shepard's story's promise of heroic world building, and plotting, implicit in the Brobdingnagian dragon Griaule — 'that mile-long beast paralyzed millennia before by a wizard's spell, beneath and about which the town of Teocinte had accumulated' (*BB*, 11).

Also interesting was the fact that, despite his grand ambitions, Shepard declined to jettison from his toolkit standard genre tropes. *Green Eyes* deals with zombies, and later, in *The Golden* (1993), he tackled vampirism, but did so by borrowing his novel's setting from the etchings in Giambattista Piranesi's famous series of plates, *Carceri d'invenzione* (c. 1745; 2nd edn 1760; 'Imaginary Prisons'). Clearly, for Shepard, the quality of a story depended less on its category tropes than on the seriousness and originality with which he used them. If zombies, then why not a dragon?

In his story notes for 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule,' all original to *The Dragon Griaule*, Shepard admits that at the Clarion Writers Workshop at Michigan State University, stuck for a story idea, he scribbled in his notebook: 'fucking big dragon'. . . because 'Big stuff . . . is cool' (*TDG*, 423). Had anyone told him that this 'idea' was akin to a ten-year-old's fascination with Godzilla and action-flick explosions, Shepard might well have grinned and invited that person to self-pollinate. So to speak.

But in the same story note, he also informs us, 'Generally speaking, I hate wizards, halflings, and dragons with equal intensity.'[2] But if ever he could justify using a category trope, he slid it into the pot. In this case, he persuaded himself that his 'immense paralyzed dragon', overmastering 'the world around [it] by means of its mental energies', qualified as 'an appropriate metaphor for the Reagan Administration', which, in the early 1980s, he saw as 'laying waste to [his beloved] Central America' (*TDG*, 423).

Or, at least, Shepard later *asserted* that he did. Tellingly, however, Reagan had not yet become president when he claims he conceived the tale and presumably its metaphorical underpinnings. Or maybe those underpinnings came to him after Reagan was inaugurated, for 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' did not appear in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* until December 1984. Or, to speculate further, maybe it was not until he began writing 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter' (ca. 1986) that this metaphor took shape in his mind. Or until 'The Father of Stones' (ca. 1987) ... Or until ...

Purportedly, though, this take on *The Dragon Griaule* tales provided an extra-literary motive for writing these six stories and *Beautiful Blood*, but readers today will likely miss this subtext or else engage with Shepard's saga because his writing seems to transport them to a romantic alternate world that gains force through its steady accretion of real-world details. Further, the scale of his eponymous beast, not to mention that of his whole outsized fictive enterprise, demands a commitment to surface events that allows its self-alleged metaphorical content to crawl into a cave and hide — if not *just like* the dragon Griaule, then definitely *sort of* like it. Still, Shepard's subtext probably holds as little meaning for readers today as do the historical events underlying the satire in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which most of us enjoy for its astonishing surface story.

In *The Dragon Griaule*'s opening tale, Meric Cattanay arrives in Teocinte to propose painting the dragon with colors tainted by poisons that, over time, will slay it. The town has offered a fortune to anyone who achieves this feat, but the city fathers deny Meric either a go-ahead or the resources to do the job. After all, he's just told them that his method could take fifty years. *So what?* Meric scolds. They've waited centuries for a paladin to deal Griaule a fatal *snicker-snack*, whereas *his* plan's beauty inheres in its use of local plants, pigments, and labour to fulfil its goal. The council appoints Jarcke, the female mayor of Hangtown (a shanty village on the dragon's back), to guide Meric to the creature, where he beholds the 'glowing humour' in its monstrous eye in a long but evocative paragraph that may explain why Jarcke bothers to live in Hangtown at all (*TDG*, 19).

After Teocinte's city council approves Meric's proposal and the town begins its epic effort to paint Griaule, the story focuses on a doomed love affair between Meric and Lise Claverie, wife of Pardiel, the foreman of a paint crew who nearly kills Meric. But leap ahead four decades: now in his seventies, Meric must keep a haughty new mayor from proposing a 'temporary work stoppage'. This man believes that Teocinte's bully-boy army has made it a regional power and that Griaule's poisoning has now become a moot point. Meric protests, 'But all your rapes and slaughters are Griaule's expressions. His will' (31).

Later, Meric meets a young woman perched on a tier just beneath Griaule's eye. She reminds him of Lise, as most

1 Shepard's 'The Glassblower's Dragon', one of his tautest and most lyrical stories, has no clear link to the Griaule Sequence, but it repays seeking out and reading; go to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (April 1987) or to *Nebula Awards 23* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

2 Bob Kruger, a friend of mine as well of Lucius Shepard's, tells me in an email dated 28 October 2014, that 'Lucius' claim to despise hobbits, et al., was characteristically disingenuous. He admitted to me that he loved *The Lord of the Rings* so much that he went in search of another book with 'lord' in the title and hit on *Lord Jim*. I think Tolkien and Conrad were his two biggest influences.'

A day later, Bob sent this addendum: 'There's a tad more to it, actually. What Lucius really said was [that] he read the book "as a kid". Given what we know about his age, that's very unlikely. *The Return of the King* didn't come out until 1955 in the UK, at which time Lucius would have been twelve, but almost no one in the US knew about the series until the Ace edition came out a decade later' (29 October 2014).

women do, and explains that she remembers having once been intimate with him under Griaule's wing. Ever since, she has been 'a little in love' with him. Then she stands and declares, 'He's dead', meaning the dragon, an ending much too abrupt. Shepard, sensing its abruptness, ends his story by quoting from an invented book, *The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule*, by one Louis Dardano, an excerpt that throws into doubt the narrative preceding it by leaching Meric's whole dragon-painting enterprise of its dignity and meaning (31–8).

Or does it?

## B. 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter'

The volume's second tale, 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', limns the early history of Catherine, only child of a widowed scalehunter named Riall. Riall has forced her to sleep every night on a large patch of golden scale — to inoculate her against Griaule's wrath by inducing some of its baleful essence to 'seep into her' (40). The girl's beauty and self-confidence generate in her 'a certain egocentricity and shallowness of character' (41), and she earns a reputation that prompts a man from Hangtown to essay rape. Catherine seizes a scaling hook and kills this attacker.

Brianne, a quasi-friend from Hangtown, a former rival for another man's affections, happens upon Catherine and tells her to stay put while she summons Teocinte's mayor to conduct an exculpatory investigation of the scene. Instead, Brianne tells the brothers of the foiled rapist what Catherine has done, and Catherine, seeing the brothers approach, retreats into the dragon's mouth.

Later, deeper into its gullet, she finds a protector in Captain Amos Mauldry, an odd old man who annoyingly tells her, 'We are every one of us creatures of [Griaule's] thoughts' (51). He claims to have expected her and to know in advance, via the dragon's occult mental powers, what she will think, say, and do, so that he, Mauldry, may function as her guide and confidant (52). To Catherine's revulsion, however, this man lives with a colony of devolved parasitical human beings who once saved him from death ...

Here, let me pause. When I first read this novella, in a handsome stand-alone edition published by Mark V. Ziesing out of Willimantic, Connecticut in 1988, I liked it very much. I may have recommended it for a Nebula, and I am undeniably cited on the rear jacket flap of this edition as having regarded Shepard's first Griaule story as 'a parable'. But not long after strewing laurels on 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', I learned something distressing about it.

Lucius Shepard, despite or because of his literary talent, had his quirks and demons. Feeling belittled or balked and hence justified in exacting payback, he occasionally used his gift to attack those who had affronted him or, he felt, disparaged his work. He did this more often earlier in his career than later (or so I assume on report), and I can point to at least one story from three distinct collections that takes this sort of revenge. Sadly, 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', earlier gathered in Arkham House's *The Ends of the Earth* (1988), is one such story.

Writer and critic Gregory Feeley — whom Shepard probably respected — published a notice of *The Jaguar Hunter* conceding his talent but also asserting that he did not yet have it under full control. However, Shepard apparently believed that he did, and Feeley's review steamed him, like a clam. Perhaps thinking to disarm its criticism with ridicule and to warn off others who would deny an emerging 'Shepard Is Our Shakespeare' consensus, he stole Feeley's surname, or a near twin ('the feelies'; later, 'the Feelys'), as his label for the human parasites in Griaule's gut. Discovering this fact did not make me think ill of other examples of Shepard's work, but it did make me queasy about *this* novella.[3] And, knowing now that he reported a birth date four years later than his real one and often tweaked his own biography to self-legendise, I view these silly characters as misshapen warts on the story's structure.

Further, to keep his readers from harbouring *any* sympathy for these beings, Shepard describes them as 'Harmless creatures' that 'pass their time copulating and arguing among themselves over the most trivial matters' (52). He designates as the colony's prime ancestor 'a retarded man', one Feely (53) and describes his pseudo-clones as having 'weepy eyes and thick-lipped slack mouths, like ugly children in their rotted silks and satins' (55). In short, we are told that they are pathetic. But given their origin and their extra-literary purpose, I wish that Shepard had chosen to elevate story over 'satire'. But even if this capitulation to one of his demons weakens 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', it does not render it entirely contemptible.

Indeed, at one point, Shepard has Mauldry concede of the Feelys: 'they do have moments when they shine' (52) — as, for example, when they saved Mauldry's life and when, after Catherine begins exploring Griaule's deep interior, they carry an unconscious botanist named John Colmacos, who was gathering berries near Griaule's mouth, to safety. Still, these beings mostly discomfit Catherine and often goad Shepard's narrator to ridicule. But they do have plot uses, and Shepard does try to exploit their literary utility.

After many adventures inside the sleeping Griaule (including witnessing the attack of a giant white worm on thirty male Feelys), Catherine falls in love with Colmacos, who soon becomes addicted to a drug, brianine, that the two often take together in the weird glow of Griaule's heart wall. Catherine has also tried, without success, to escape from the belly of the creature and, at length, somewhat adjusts her attitude toward the bemused Feelys to devise a new escape plan.

Of it, she thinks, 'It wasn't much of a plan, nothing subtle, nothing complex' (57), and here I see Shepard subconsciously critiquing his own failure of imagination and pushing ahead via an act of will rather than one of creative ardor. An erotic scene that follows this passage, however, partially redeems itself by morphing Catherine's disaffection with her and the botanist's lovemaking into a credible epiphany: She realises, while aping the 'perturbed and animalistic rhythm' of the ever-lascivious Feelys, that she has reached 'the nadir of her life' (89).

Later, Catherine gives each Feely accompanying her and Colmacos to their escape point a fatal brianine-laced cake. (She has failed to consider the slightness of their builds.) Dumbstruck, she senses that 'for all her disparagement of

3 I heard of this element in Shepard's novella from Feeley himself, who, in a note, wondered how I could praise a story that mocked his name simply because Shepard resented some of his judgments in his *Jaguar Hunter* review. I replied, honestly, that I had never made the connection between the 'feelies' in this story and Feeley's surname. But once I understood what had happened, I regarded Shepard's 'revenge' as both petty and lingeringly malicious.

them', the Feelys 'were human' (91). In writing his story, then, did Shepard grow fond of these feeble-minded creatures and begin to feel a scosh of guilt for taxonomically appropriating Gregory Feeley's surname? If so, this line rings false as apology. Further, the fact that other Feelys later *thwart* their escape hints that Shepard never abjured his sad private metaphor of critics as parasites. In context, given that his take on these 'pitiful half-wits' (116) stems from personal bias, the metaphor may even work. Sometimes. Sort of.

But it still stinks.[4]

After these and other events, Catherine undergoes a parody of death (or not); revives in the body of a near-perfect double, whom we have already briefly met; and reunites with a resurrected Captain Mauldry, who leads her back into the world that she has longed for years to revisit. She returns to Hangtown and accosts Brianne, whose betrayal immured her within Griaule. And, in this climactic scene, Shepard wrings more charity and rue from Catherine's pique and bitterness than ever he squeezes from his own.

'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter' ends with a fine, if overladen, paragraph in which Catherine spares Brianne; settles in another town; composes a book called *The Heart's Millennium*; attains a fleeting fame; marries a colleague of the late Colmacos'; bears this man's sons; and limits all her later writing to a private journal. Then Shepard puts period to his tale, writing that 'from that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in between' (114).

These, I believe, are the words of a writer disclosing his heart, and, along with the scene preceding them, they echo deep into the volume's third tale, the 81-page novella 'The Father of Stones.'

## C. 'The Father of Stones'

In this story, Shepard orchestrates a lurid pulp mystery and courtroom drama that you could almost expect to run across in an issue of *Weird Tales* from the 1930s, perhaps with a Margaret Brundage cover depicting a priest poised to sacrifice a drugged and naked female to his cult's dragon god while a flock of shadowy acolytes stand behind the altar as watchers. Take note: I mean this characterisation as praise, not as putdown, for Shepard treats this scenario with full pulp commitment. He narrates it in a style just far enough over the top to fit his subject matter but just subtly witty enough to sell its readers on the unlikely *likelihood* of its near-risible plot machinations.

Some have argued that Shepard, in his longer stories, especially those from later in his career, strings scenes together as if making them up on the fly. 'The Father of Stones' first appeared in 1988, well before his career midpoint, and thus would escape this criticism, but let me stress that it *does* escape it, and admirably. Could it be more succinct? Sure, but, in 'The Father of Stones' the stylistic filigree and the melodramatic plot twists contribute to the sultry pulp atmosphere in ways that legitimate their presence. What we read is a Wilkie Collins *Moonstone*-style romp with existential angst stirred in to help us forgive ourselves — or the author to forgive himself? — for relishing such juicy high-camp vittles.

The mystery begins after the murder of the cult priest (Mardo Zemaille) at the hands of the daddy (William Lemos) of the drugged and naked female (Mirielle Lemos) in the cult's spooky hangout (Temple of the Dragon). Anyway, William Lemos insists that his attorney (our protagonist, Adam Korrogly) must base his defence on his self-excusing, but potentially precedent-setting, plea, namely: 'The Dragon Made Me Do It.' Korrogly both salivates over and quails from using this defence because it could (1) make his reputation, if he wins, or (2) totally undo him, if he doesn't.

Everyone in Port Chantay, where the trial takes place, knows that Griaule exerts a malefic influence over the entire country, even over citizens living outside the Carbonales Valley where the dragon sleeps — but a verdict finding Lemos not guilty of lethally conking the priest with a stone formed in the lizard's acidic intestines, would allow ne'er-do-well after ne'er-do-well to employ this defence for crimes ranging from mopery to human mutilation. Shepard sets up this situation with great economy in scenes between Korrogly and Lemos, Korrogly and Mirielle (the daughter), and Korrogly and other witnesses. The trial scenes in particular move with tension and snap, and Shepard's characterisation of Korrogly makes him at once sympathetic (in that he feels intensely his assumed class inferiority) and edgily self-serving (in that he has few qualms about using Lemos or Mirielle for his own purposes, whether career-oriented or lascivious).

To summarise at greater length would undercut the reader's pleasure in discovering the secrets of Shepard's characters — Lemos', Mirielle's, the priest Zemaille's, and those of such supporting players as the mysterious Kirin and her maidservant Janice, whom Korrogly, uncharitably, regards as a 'drab'. More summary would also dull the excitements of the trial scenes and the reversals and re-reversals that stun Korrogly and end the tale, for these finally lead him to an epiphany that seems not just a fustian revelation but an event-dictated change of perception that will rule him ever after.

Besides, the tale's final line — 'One way or another, the dragon was loose in Port Chantay' (196) — has a cool pulp fillip that causes this reader, at least, to flash back on certain scenes and to chuckle in malign delight.

## D. 'Liar's House'

The opening of this novelette reverberates with the portentousness of Holy Scripture, specifically, the first five verses of the Gospel of John. Hearken to a few of its grandiloquent prefatory phrasings:

4 Bob Kruger has a *slightly* different view of the matter, as he explains in an email sent on 28 October 2014: 'It's not fair that Greg was put to this test by Lucius' — that test being, by Bob's own definition, an act of malice. But in explanation, not exculpation, a day later he likens the provocation of calling these creatures 'Feelys' to dropping 'a flaming bag of dog poo' on the porch of someone who has withheld Halloween candy to a trickster. Also, he likens the responses of the victim and others (mine included) to *kicking* that flaming bag. This analogy strikes me as funny, but I still would not wish to have my name mocked in this public way. (Who would?) Bob ends his first message by observing that 'Outside of the text, the Feelys don't exist. At some level, your take, my take, and Greg's take on Lucius' motivations are just projection and irrelevant to criticism. You don't need to know anything about Greg Feeley to understand the Feelys, or about Lucius himself for that matter.'

> IN THE ETERNAL INSTANT BEFORE the Beginning, before the Word was pronounced in fire, long before the tiny dust of history came to settle from the flames, something whose actions no verb can truly describe seemed to enfold possibility, to surround it in the manner of a cloud or an idea, and everything fashioned from the genesis fire came to express in some way the structure of that fundamental duality... (197)

This paragraph goes more floridly than the famous opening of the Gospel of John ('In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', etc.), but Shepard, to cut him some slack, has geared it to explaining the queer duality of Griaule's soul rather than to establishing the coevality of Christ with Yahweh the Creator.[5] (Dragons, after all, are very different from you and me.)

Anyway, in young Teocinte's only inn, called by some 'Liar's House' (but formally known as Dragonwood House, a hotel-cum-tavern-and-brothel), lives a troglodytic former stevedore named Hota Kotieb. Rampaging in Port Chantay, he once murdered ten men to avenge the death of his wife in an avoidable coach accident, then fled to Teocinte and rented an upstairs room at the back of this establishment. Its chief notoriety, besides its occupancy by working girls, derives from its owner's claim that it was built from wood sawn from trees that once grew on Griaule's back. No one credits this boast, however, because no one can believe that a sane lumberjack or carpenter would ever venture onto such spooky terrain to harvest timber. And so the inn bears the sobriquet 'Liar's House'.

Hota has no skill as a wood carver, but because Griaule fascinates him, he fashions crude images of the beast from scraps of wood and decorates his quarters with them; later, he goes abroad to make bigger likenesses and one day spies a dragon much smaller than Griaule — but a vital, living creature — circling the sleeping Griaule's snout and maybe trying to communicate with him. Hota thinks of this smaller dragon — which has a body length of nearly forty feet — as female. Soon, he watches her vanish behind Griaule's sagittal crest and scrambles after her to try to catch her up-close and diabolical. He gets his wish, but not quite as he expected, for he

> slapped aside a pine bough and stepped into a clearing where stood a slender woman with bronze skin, long black hair falling to the small of her back, and wearing not a stitch of clothing (204).

And so begins a peculiar relationship that discloses this avatar of the she-dragon as a quasi-human woman self-christened Magali.[6] Hota secures clothes for her and escorts her to Liar's House to live with him. She cannot help studying the figures ingrained in the timbers making up the establishment, and Hota himself discovers in the wood 'narrow wings replete with struts and vanes, sinuous scaled bodies, fanged reptilian heads,' that is, '[a] multiplicity of dragons' (208).

Meanwhile, Magali develops an appetite and craves *meat*, her rude consumption of which, one evening in the inn's tavern, draws hostile stares from three male patrons. When their haughty blond leader derides Magali, Hota mangles the cad's hand and faces down his friends. Afterward, Hota and Magali learn that the townsfolk have grown wary of them and that the proprietor wants to evict them, even though Magali is pregnant (with Griaule's child, via Hota's agency) and the town has no other inns. I will not summarise it, but Shepard gives us another strong ending in his wrap-up to 'Liar's House': a gaudy penny-dreadful climactic scene of enormous power.

In his note for this story, Shepard admits that he 'received some criticism for the literate interior life of [my] ox-like protagonist', a complaint that he finds valid reasons to dismiss. He also admits that after publishing 'Liar's House', he hit upon an idea that would have explained Griaule's reasons for wanting offspring and that 'would have [also] made the link between this story and the last ['The Skull'] more apparent'. He adds, 'I was tempted to go back in and rework the story,' but decided not to (worse luck), to let his readers discover for themselves 'how a writer's style evolves'. With a candour that blithely excuses the copout, he confesses, 'Then perhaps I was just being lazy' (428).

Frankly, I would have more respect for Shepard's easy self-criticism if he'd removed that 'perhaps'. If he could write a substantive note for each story in *The Dragon Griaule*, what kept him from reworking 'Liar's House'? It's a good tale, but, by Shepard's own admission, *it could have been better.* And now, most likely, we will never know.

## E. 'The Taborin Scale'

This novella centers on forty-year-old George Taborin from Port Chantay, owner of Taborin Coins & Antiquities, a numismatist who buys a glass jar of items at a junk shop in a district of Teocinte that never gets full sun and who finds in this jar 'a dark leathern chip, stiff with age and grime, shaped like a thumbnail' (244), but larger. Later, in a bordello, Ali's Eternal Reward, he massages it with a cotton ball until it emits a blue-green lustre. Sylvia, a prostitute, identifies it as a dragon scale, and agrees to provide George her services for two weeks in exchange for the scale, lured in part by his residency in a hotel considerably plusher than her brothel.

During their time there, George continues rubbing the scale and so triggers a fleeting vision of an earlier period in the landscape's history:

> As [their hotel suite] receded, it revealed neither the floors and walls of adjoining rooms nor the white buildings of Teocinte, but a sun-drenched plain with tall lion-colored grasses and strands of palmetto, bordered on all sides by hills forested with pines. They were marooned in the midst of that landscape ... then it was gone, trees and plain and hills so quickly erased, they might have been a painted cloth whisked away, and the room was restored to view. (251)

Sylvia begs George to trigger another such reality break, but he cannot fathom her eagerness to revisit an experience that has so clearly unsettled her.

5 Dragon's souls, 'unlike the souls of men', we herein learn, '[enclose] the material form [of the creature] rather than being shrouded with it' (216). The practical effect of this phenomenon is that dragons 'control [their] shapes in ways [human beings] cannot' (*ibid.*).

6 This name evokes that of Mowgli, the boy in Rudyard Kipling's two *Jungle Books*, but I have no idea if Shepard means for us to conflate them. Still, the characters Mowgli and Magali share a feral-child nature and an initial apparent innocence that Magali's later behaviour totally subverts.

After telling him that he must heed Griaule or suffer misfortune, Sylvia recites from a book, *Griaule Incarnate*, purporting that the dragon is an all-controlling god whose 'blood is the marrow of time'.[7] She also informs George that, when bored at Ali's, she writes stories about her fellow whores and their supportive sorority. So George rubs the scale again, and this act, the fantasy trigger giving 'The Taborin Scale' its status as a bastard hybrid of Wells's *The Time Machine* and Doyle's *The Lost World*, plunges them back into the prehistoric past — but for how long, neither can imagine.

A hawk soars high above the plain to which they have fallen. Later, trekking through this empty landscape, they find that in swooping from aloft, the hawk has metamorphosed into a dragon, with a fiery orange 'jewel' in its throat. The hill where Griaule once lay has vanished, but Sylvia recognises this smaller version of the lizard for Griaule as a youngster, an idea that George resists until his meeting with three other dispossessed Teocinteans, all holding Sylvia's opinion, forces him to recant his doubts. The dragon, whatever its name or provenance, rules over this desolate plain and makes known to them, much as would God, where in its simmering reaches they may bide and where they may not.

The three adult strangers foraging for mangos have with them 'a gangly young girl in deplorable condition, twelve or thirteen years old' (266), whom George learns to address as Peony and whom he kidnaps because the party's members have abused her. George takes Peony back to Sylvia, having earlier learned that her crew was transported to this hostile tract soon after her father saw Peony 'fooling around with something' that she refused to show him. So both the girl's party and George and Sylvia have wound up here through an uncanny magical agency.

Their return to latter-day Teocinte occurs in an equally unlikely way, via a vast prairie fire set by the dragon, a fire that Shepard vividly evokes; indeed, it sweeps by like state-of-the-art CGI on a humongous screen. Suddenly back in their present, they hear a 'chthonic rumbling' and see pouring from Griaule's mouth 'the creatures that dwelled within', plus many 'derelict men and women who ... had sought to shelter inside' (293), this last group being the 'Feelys' that in this 2010 addition to the Sequence, Shepard tellingly chooses *not* to identify as such. Later, George witnesses 'a mountainous transformation, the coming-to-life of a colossus' (294), as Griaule awakens from a millennia-long sleep, shakes Hangtown from its back, and crushes underfoot the shanties of a ramshackle barrio: a remake in prose of an early Godzilla flick.[8]

7 This same page features a footnote declaring that the book's author, Richard Rossacher, a medical doctor, manufactured from the dragon's blood 'a potent narcotic that succeeded in addicting a goodly portion of the Temalaguan littoral' (252). This 'fact' provides the basis for Shepard's posthumous novel, *Beautiful Blood*, his longest and last tale about the dragon Griaule.

8 Shepard loved movies as a medium, but loathed movies that did not come up to his standards. It would be interesting to hear him speculate on what Hollywood might do with a well-funded Griaule adaptation, but if any of its moguls now elect to take on that challenge, he will never see it, never rant about how the idiots have transmuted the gold of its original literary source into special-effects pabulum for studio stooges and slavering fan boys. Still ...

In any case, George pursues Peony into what remains of Teocinte, to Ali's, for the child loved Sylvia's stories about the place. Upon finding her, he carries her through all the panicked refugees-in-the-making and 'all the toxins of dementia' (297) poisoning the town's atmosphere. And when the dragon dies, despite Meric Cattanay's prediction that the paint on its body would cause it to 'cave in like an old barn' (297, fn.), it does so more spectacularly than Meric could have imagined. The main narrative concludes in a flourish of apocalypse, mixing melancholy and half-assed ecstasy in a show of celebration and redemptive trivia — George's certainty that he will 'find his treasure again' (299), *viz.*, Griaule's private hoard. Even in *re*reading the ending of this over-the-top chapter, I could only grin and think, 'Hell, yeah, Lucius — *hell, yeah!*'

But there's more: Chapter Eight of 'The Taborin Scale' purports to be an 'Excerpt from *The Last Days of Griaule* by Sylvia Monteverdi', George's whore, who notes, ten years after the dragon's death, that she has spent her time documenting Teocinte's 'rebirth and its newest industry, the sale and distribution of Griaule's relics, fraudulent and real' (301). She explains that eight years after her last sight of George and Peony in Port Chantay, he told her that the scattering of Griaule's body all over the world achieved just what Griaule wanted. George gave her the adventure-impelling scale, now in a glass pendant, saying, 'We are part of a scheme by means of which he will someday come to dominate the world as Rossacher's book claimed he already had' (304).

Near her excerpt's end, Sylvia writes, 'I have not yet broken the glass in which the scale is encased, yet ... someday I will, if only to satisfy my curiosity about George' (305). She speculates about his and the adult Peony's supposed father-and-daughter relationship, which she implies has 'sexual elements', justifying the passage by alleging 'I needed to think meanly about something I valued in order to walk away from it' (306). It's a second ending to a story already over: the coda of a Hollywood movie or an Elizabethan tragedy. I approve it. In my view, Shepard owes Sylvia the last word, and here he concedes it to her.

Finally, I must point out that the theme of an older man protecting a younger female, or trying to, features prominently in 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', 'The Father of Stones', 'Liar's House' (in an odd but not disqualifying variant), and 'The Taborin Scale'. Moreover, a hint of the incestuous erotic in the 'protection' that the man offers his female ward enters every story but one. However, in 'The Taborin Scale', it strikes me as unfair to Taborin, who in its climax (a reprise, on a larger scale, of the apocalypse in 'Liar's House') acts heroically on Peony's behalf, albeit with an affect-free doggedness that turns every other person in that scene's encompassing chaos into an obstacle to be flung into the fire.

Yes, there is nonsense in 'The Taborin Scale', just as there is in many a Jacobean or Shakespearean tragedy, but there is also force, much of it stemming from Lucius Shepard's willingness to take flamboyant, even heroic risks. If nothing else — and, in truth, a great deal 'else' inheres — I marvel at his daring.

## F. 'The Skull'

'The Skull' constitutes the most recent and the longest story in *The Dragon Griaule*. Its first publication occurred simultaneously with that of this collection. It has to rank as among

the last stories Shepard wrote before his death on 18 March 2014. I can hardly claim status as a Shepard specialist, but after three readings, I find this novella the strangest and most oddly beguiling narrative in his canon. Most of it takes place in the early twenty-first century, as none of the other stories here comes close to doing, for *their* settings range from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century and, in one case ('The Taborin Scale') at least partly in a dreamscape two millennia or more ago.

The two main characters in 'The Skull', George Craig Snow (who goes by Craig or Snow) and Xiomara Garza (*aka* La Endriaga, *aka* Yara), both embody a recognisable latter-day type. Snow, a seeker-slacker from the States, winds up in Temalagua working for a scam charity and living with a woman named Expectación. (The title of his unfinished memoir is *He Lives With Expectation*). On the other hand, Yara, when she meets Snow, is a seventeen-year-old Goth girl in Ciudad Temalagua running cash envelopes for a new fascistic group called the PVO (i.e., the Party of Organised Violence), which Shepard tells us in his final story note 'was an actual Guatemalan entity, very much in the ascendancy when I was first there' (431). Yara and Snow meet near his door stoop, when she asks a boy sitting next to him, 'Who is this asshole?' (312).

So much time has passed since the events of 'The Taborin Scale' that the opening of 'The Skull' includes backfill about the removal of the dead Griaule's scales, the draining and storing of its blood, etc., and, finally, the transfer of Griaule's 600-foot-long skull 1100 miles to the Temalaguan court. (The disposition of the blood directly influences the nation's history and so the events in Shepard's last work, *Beautiful Blood*.) The skull eventually winds up near the palace outside Ciudad Temalagua. In the early 1900s, the palace burns. Vines and other vegetation cover the skull, but tourists visit it anyway and have unsettling dreams in its vicinity. A cult arises. Nearby slums turn into battlegrounds for drug thugs and right-wing army squads.

'The Skull' carves sections out of recent Central American history and plays the magic-realism card like a trump. At the same time, though, Shepard slings around smart-ass detective-fiction metaphors as if he were Raymond Chandler or, more modishly, Robert Crais. Often, these not only amuse, but also serve to background Snow against this sinister Temalaguan milieu without emasculating him of his Americanism.

In part II, reputedly an excerpt from his memoir, Snow describes with hard-bitten Elvis Cole snark the women entering Club Sexy: 'About four PM each weekday, "*La Hora Feliz*," the ladies would come breezing in, all bouncy in their low-cut frocks, sunglasses by Gucci and make-up by Sherwin-Williams' (316). After visiting the jungle where Griaule's skull resides and fearing that he is falling in love with Yara, Snow sardonically admits that 'love was something I had hoped to avoid — she wasn't the sort of girl you gave your heart to unless you were looking to get it back FDA approved and sliced into patties' (336). But the stink of unease about the skull has instilled in him a paralysing dread, and when he has to climb a ladder after Yara to reach the dragon's mouth, he hesitates. On the other hand, when he *succeeds* in climbing into it, he reports this reaction:

> on reaching the top, standing beside the wicked bronze-green curve of the fang and gazing down at the squat, I had an unwarranted sense of power. It was as though I'd scaled some hithertofore unscalable peak and was for that moment master of all I surveyed. Yara took my hand and her touch boosted the sensation. I felt heroin high ... (322)

Just as earlier I speculated that Shepard may have been critiquing his own storytelling when Catherine faults her impromptu escape plan, here Shepard appears to share Snow's exhilaration, and to exult in his working out of his still incomplete tale. It's as if Shepard recognises, again, the epic potential of the Griaule Sequence, suspects that he is fulfilling it scene by scene, and hopes that at this point in his climb (up into the dragon's skull) he is scaling the daunting heights of his own ambition. Moreover, just as Snow beholds the favela-like squat beneath the skull with 'an *unwarranted* sense of power', Shepard realises that, this fleeting high aside, he himself still has heights to climb before he reaches either the summit or the prospect of rest.

He may have had this sense of exaltation because his setting and the actions of his characters all reflected his desire, set forth in the last sentence of his last story note in *The Dragon Griaule*, to highlight the political facets of his project.[9] Indeed, Shepard calls 'The Skull', of all his dragon stories, 'the most grounded in my life experience and in the political realities of Central America' (431). In his mind, it has its contemporaneity to commend it, as embodied in its autobiographical elements and its political savvy. It is not *mere* fantasy, but a fantasy with clear links to our presumptively significant Here and Now. Griaule becomes a metaphor not only for nasty Reagan-era colonialism (after all, Reagan is dead), but also, after Griaule's death and dismemberment, for right-wing Central American tyrannies and — I'm guessing, as perhaps Shepard was too — for the brain-rotting influences of millennial jungle cults. In short, he felt it necessary, as have other genre writers, to justify, or at least to rank, his work by the degree to which it utilises or comments on the 'real world' as it purportedly exists today.

I share his defensive bias, and I find this story, among the six in *The Dragon Griaule*, its most beguiling and compelling — except for 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule', my first favourite because the first I read. How autographical is it? Shepard does not tell us, but who really cares? How faithful to modern Central American realities is it? 'The Skull' *incorporates* these realities, but does not illuminate them. It *alludes* to the autobiographical and the historical, but subordinates both to the demands of character, plot, and climax in an off-trail but oddly compelling fantasy.

The major elements here include the disembodied dragon (of course); an American expatriate (Craig Snow); a charismatic girl (Yara) with a powerful psychic link to Griaule; a jungle community of 'adherents' devoted to resurrecting at least the spirit of the dead beast; a love story between the expat and the dragon girl; Snow's ten-year exile from Temalagua to Concrete, Idaho (the inadvertent real-life hometown of writer Tobias Wolff as recounted in his memoir *This Boy's Life*); the vanishing of Griaule's skull from its jungle setting, along with eight hundred adherents and their female leader; the expat's return to Temalagua; the cold-blooded execution of two of Snow's gay friends as a direct result of his asking the owner of Club Sexy for sensitive information ...

Not to mention ... *take a breath* ...

9 Shepard: 'The important thing ... is that writing "The Skull" returned me to my original motivation in writing about Griaule, and if there are to be further stories about the dragon and his milieu, I think they'll be more focused upon the central theme, the political fantasy, than those that preceded it' (431).

Snow's Miami-based affair with the disaffected wife of the PVO defense minister, to learn what has happened to Yara; his trip back to Temalagua to a village called Tres Santos, where Jefe, the leader of the PVO, lives; Snow's meeting with this small, athletic man; his mind-boggling discovery of Yara as a counsellor-cum-servant to Jefe, whom all the women in Tres Santos fear, knowing that he has killed their men; Snow's awareness of a 'mechanical grinding' (378) in the stairwell of a lofty structure in Tres Santos, to which Jefe retreats 'to fly'; the resumption of physical relations between Yara and Snow; Yara's recounting for him of Griaule's rebirth in the form of a 'beautiful little man, naked and perfect' (381), an event foreshadowed by Magali's 'birth' in 'Liar's House'; and Yara's conspiring with Snow to slay Jefe in his 'lair' (411), the building where, every day Jefe 'flies' for hours in, amongst, and through the deluge of silver chains hanging from its ceiling.

That's plot. What about character? Snow strikes me as a sort of deracinated stand-in for Shepard, but, again, I am guessing. In any case, Snow seems aimless and adrift but for his fixation on and love for Yara. Canelo, an associate of Guillermo, owner of Club Sexy and a friend to Snow, nails Snow when he says, 'You go blundering about, thinking you can solve any problem because you're superior to the pitiful, fucked-up Temalaguans, but all you do is make more trouble for us' (354). Then Canelo says, 'You're like a half-assed method actor, man. One who almost buys into his character, but can't quite get there' (355). Early on, the reader finds it hard to refute this judgment. Even when Snow begins his dalliance with Loisa Barzan in Miami, as a way of learning Yara's fate and reconnecting with her after ten years, Canelo's assessment seems spot on.

Yara has more going on internally and historically than does Snow, even though twelve years his junior. Often, mysteriously, people call her 'La Endriaga', and Guillermo tells Snow that this sobriquet signifies 'a creature part snake, part dragon, part female' and that 'people call her La Endriaga because she lives in the jungle near the skull' (317). Soon, Snow learns that Yara has a diamond-shaped tattoo on her lower back — crudely, he thinks of it as a 'tramp stamp' — the central scale of which is 'hard', with a 'distinct convexity' (325). Initially, Yara will not let him touch it, so he assumes it an advanced or magical sort of implant, but, during sex, touching it elicits from her orgasmic reactions that startle or even horrify Snow (342).

Further, Yara does have a sort of political power. At seventeen, she raised money for the Party of Organised Violence. In the clearing where the enormous skull has its home, she acts as chief spokesperson for Griaule's disembodied spirit, taking messages from it in a closet behind its brain, dispensing jobs or counsel to its acolytes, and interpreting its agenda: 'I know the idea of a renewal is involved. An alchemical change, a marriage of souls' (338). And when Snow asks how she can trust Griaule, 'a giant lizard that has a really good reason to hate us', or believe that anything it does will help them, she says, 'Savagery, poverty, and injustice are shoved in our faces every day. We're fucking desperate! If change makes things worse ... so what?' (339; ellipsis Shepard's).

Yara's political power includes appearing to Griaule's followers from on high, from the mouth of the skull, and summoning them for a silent mass that Snow can describe only as a 'zombie-like connection between the adherents and their queen' (341). Although Yara does not speak aloud, the scene recalls Catherine addressing the Feelys in 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', to warn them that the dragon's heart will soon beat, once, and that they may not wish to remain inside the creature when this weird millennial event occurs. Fearing a like, or worse, imminent disaster, Snow flashes on Jonestown and decides to leave while he can still save himself (342).

Ten-plus years on, he rediscovers Yara in Tres Santos, after first meeting in a cantina the 'slim, pale, diminutive man' (371) whom others call Jefe. Jefe harbours the seething anger of an abuse victim in the body of a Latin mighty mite. He announces that his obscure village has no greater attraction than he, boasting, 'People come from all over to ask for my advice. I counsel them, and sometimes I put on a little show. An entertainment. It's only an exercise routine, but I'm told it's unique' (373).

When Jefe seizes Snows' backpack to see what it contains and Snow tries to grab it back, Jefe almost crushes his hand. He then swallows five blue pills from a bottle in the pack with no observable effect. In fact, he escorts Snow to the pink building sheltering the village brothel, opens a door to a stairwell to go upstairs for 'an hour or two', and tells Snow that Yara will provide coffee, etc. (376).

*Yara!* Snow can scarcely believe he's found her. And, after some initial heavy-duty recriminations and wrangling, Yara fills him in on what occurred during his absence and how she wound up as Jefe's spokesperson and nursemaid. She describes in evocative detail the heat-engendered miracle (reminiscent of that in 'The Taborin Scale') resulting in 'the act of transubstantiation' (380) that this miracle required, namely, the rebirth of Griaule — an event akin to that depicted in 'Liar's House' — as the human avatar now indifferently answering to 'Jefe.' To Snow's dismay, Yara says that Jefe has a recurring dream in which he 'stands in an arena before thousands of people' to tell them that 'when the dream becomes reality he will undergo a change' that 'will enable him to regain his original form and to fly as he once did, without the need for mechanical aids' (383), these being the innumerable chains, in the extraordinary 'lair' atop the pink building, that he uses to 'fly.'[10] And, persuaded of Jefe's recidivist lizardliness, i.e., the idea that any further transubstantiation of his baleful self will bode only calamity for humankind, Yara and Snow resolve to bring Jefe down, *literally* down, by acting in concert.

The story then suspensefully works itself out as it must, amid the grinding of chains and later the pouring out of a Greek chorus of village women, like Furies, who help Snow, now armed with a machete, dispatch the die-hard Jefe:

> The women descended upon him first, first Itzel with a hoe, blood welling from the trench she dug in his chest, and the rest, stabbing and cutting and pounding, exacting their vengeance for rape and murder and innumerable humiliations. (417)

10 This activity of Jefe's made me wonder if it had a real-world analogue, so I took a few minutes to Google *Is there an exercise that involves 'flying' in or among chains?* The first article so summoned was 'Dragonfly Migration', which reports that every autumn during both dragonfly and kestrel migrations, these species fly south together, with hawks eating the green darners accompanying them. Many green darners predict many kestrels, just as small numbers of dragonflies imply fewer kestrels. No word in my query mentions dragons, but *flying* by itself was enough to summon them. Thank God that *chains* did not call up essays with equally irrelevant, but wholly different, subject matter.

Unfortunately, more succeeds this scene, and although Shepard clearly knew that he needed something more to bring it safely to rest, part VII, the novella's — and the entire collection's coda — consists of four Faulknerian paragraphs replete with sorrowful Latinate bombast and and unconvincing self-importance.

I will never forget Jefe flying in his implausible 'lair', or the lengths to which Snow and Yara go to halt his noisy flights, nor will I ever dismiss the story's structure as haphazard or Snow's character as less than credible, but ultimately the vast metaphorical significance of the dragon Griaule seems too slippery to hang onto and Shepard's personal implication that it represents the dire influence of the Reagan administration's — or any administration's — Central American foreign policy a self-justification that he may have had to believe to finish 'The Skull' and to begin writing *Beautiful Blood*. In any case, despite the novella's beguiling strangeness and several memorable episodes, it winds up feeling overwrought, fantastic in its least positive sense, and empty. Part VI affirms this judgment by reading as if even Shepard cannot fully approve his accomplishment. As Snow and Yara seek some semblance of safety in they drive toward the north, Snow muses:

> It seemed to him all they had undergone and felt and done would one day be diminished and relegated to mere narrative, its heroes oversimplified or their heroic natures overborne by the mundanity of detail, a story so degraded, so shorn of wonderment by telling and retelling that — despite love and redemption, suffering and loss, mystery and death — it would be in the end as though nothing had happened. (420)

And:

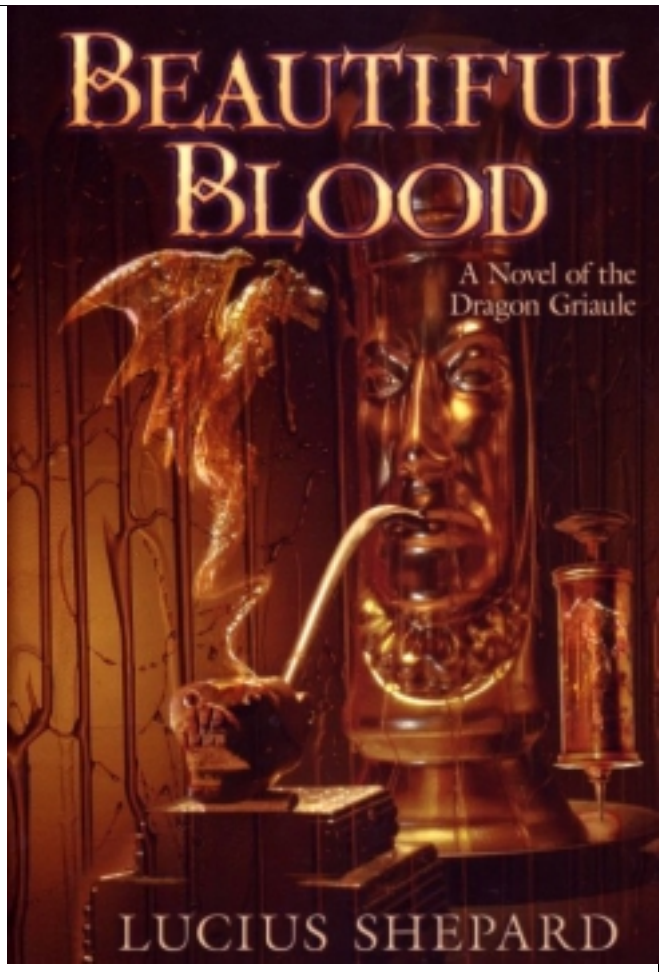
> although it went against every negative of his former faith in nothing, he submitted to belief and believed ... believed in alchemy, in the marriage of souls, in accomplishment and noble obligation, and believed also that he would never fail her again, nor she him. (420; second ellipsis Shepard's)

Here, Snow strives to persuade himself both that something has really happened and that his former faith in 'nothing' has crumbled before the enumerated beliefs he now claims to embrace. But I believe (though I wish I did not) that it is Shepard doing the same damned thing, for all his rhetorical sleight-of-hand does is drive *me* to think that he would have done better to substitute for his last four overwrought paragraphs something like this: 'And Snow and Yara lived happily ever after ... almost.'

## II. *Beautiful Blood*

### A. Unanswerable questions

This novel — as noted, Shepard's last — takes us back to the origins of the Dragon Griaule Sequence. Its publication by Subterranean Press in 2014 occurred nearly thirty years after 'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule' reached print in *F&SF* (Dec 1984). It hearkens back not only to that fine seminal story but also to its nineteenth-century time period and its main character, Meric Cattanay, who in *Beautiful Blood* makes two or three dubiously effective cameo appearances.




In *Beautiful Blood*, the more or less linear thrust of *The Dragon Griaule* yields to heavy backtracking and the expansion of the story of Richard Rosacher, a character whom Shepard first mentions in a footnote in 'The Taborin Scale' (252; see fn. 7 in *this* essay). The novel's jacket copy asserts that it has 'profound metaphysical overtones' and that it 'raises — but does not answer —significant questions', queries such as, 'Is the dragon merely a bizarre but entirely natural phenomenon? Or is he/it the manifestation of some divine purpose? And to what extent are the actions of men ... the reflections of its implacable but enigmatic will?' (rear cover flap; my ellipsis).

As the jacket copy tells us, each question remains moot, and in each instance the resultant ambiguity has the effect of acquitting Shepard of foisting off on us either pat or over-contrived answers. Apparently, having conceived of Griaule as an allusive terrestrial mystery, Shepard *cannot* answer these questions, and thus writes from a platform of narrative agnosticism allowing him to accept, dismiss, or doubt the godhood of Griaule as the loose contingencies of his story demand. In fact, the ambiguity of Griaule's meaning allows him to create characters unlike himself, or his standard world-weary protagonists, by assigning them philosophical stances vis-à-vis Griaule that encompass belief, atheism, or some posture in between.

I have a hunch, which I cannot substantiate, that this was how, apart from various forms of self-medication, Shepard wrestled with the crazy-making enigmas of life, death, and 'God'. That hunch, I confess, is an impertinent one. But if his characters' perception of Griaule as a malignant force has any metaphorical value other than his own take on the folly of American foreign policy, I would argue that it is what

he saw as the stance of the *Cosmos* vis-à-vis humanity. Does it care? Does it not care? Shepard, I'm fairly sure, leaned toward the latter view, but loathed having to do so, for the results of cosmic indifference to humanity's collective and individual fates appalled him.

Maybe that's why he keeps trying to transmute the problematic Griaule into less than credible human beings — Magali and Jefe, who, after all, are dragon spawn — or, in *Beautiful Blood*, into the drug *mab* (i.e., *more and better*), which affords anyone who ingests it a subjective simulacrum of the Good Life. A mab-enriched life never degrades (as Griaule's golden blood never clots or degrades), so long as one keeps taking it, and therefore gives joy and meaning to even the lowliest person, providing a remedy 'to the depredations of time itself and thus to every ill associated with aging' (14).

## B. This hematologist's life

In essence, then, *Beautiful Blood* constitutes a biography of the ambitious hematologist Richard Rosacher, who realises early on that the residents of Teocinte 'would pay dearly to see their hovels turned into palaces, their lovers into sexual ideals, and they had no will ... to resist temptation, whatever toll it might extract' (26; my ellipsis). Rosacher also has some trials acquiring blood to test and process into mab (although, as we discover later, it actually requires *no* processing), as well as an adventure that nearly kills him when, to escape a shape-shifting midnight-black monster from Griaule's throat, he leaps from the dragon's lip 'into the brush below' (34).

*Beautiful Blood* unfolds episodically rather than via the premeditated cogitations of a well-oiled 'plot'. The one story element possessing the pleasing quality of gears efficiently meshing derives from the first appearance of Meric Cattanay, whom Rosacher meets on a bench outside Teocinte's council chamber. Cattanay has gone there to persuade the council to approve his strategy for killing Griaule. Rosacher insists on going in before him (although Cattanay arrived earlier), explaining, '[The] council will be in a more receptive mood after I have done than they are at the moment' (44), and makes good on his prediction by offering the city a percentage of his mab profits if it will legitimise the operation. Understanding that Cattanay's plan will take decades, Rosacher persuades the city fathers that a protracted death for Griaule will allow Teocinte to grow in wealth and power (if they also approve the militia he asks for to protect their investment); further, every connected townsperson will prosper, along with their descendants. Here, in fact, it feels as if Shepard is cannily plotting, not just linking episodes like so many mismatched hopper cars.

Elsewhere, events feel less contingent and as random, and often as unsatisfactory, as the unfolding of life itself. Chapter 4 opens *four years* after chapter 3. Rosacher recalls nothing of their passage, but deduces that the mab trade has financed both his regal quarters and the hiring of the courtesan, Ludie, who loaned him the cash he needed to pay Timothy Myrie for securing his first syringes of blood from Griaule's tongue. Moreover, *seven years* elapse between chapters 5 and 6, with Rosacher again ignorant of their passage but savvy enough to realise that a dream messenger clad in a black suit has come to warn him of an attempt by the Church on his life. The Church, whose chief deity is not Christ but an entity called the Gentle Beast, resents the impact of mab on the faithful and resists the adoption of Griaule as a figure in its pantheon. The messenger, though, calls the dragon 'An incarnation' and tells Rosacher, 'His flesh has become one with the earth' (72). After escaping murder, Rosacher has animal sex with a dumpling-faced servant whom he repays with 'a coin from atop the dresser' (79). Then Teocinte's militia, led by Arthur Honeyman, an illiterate henchman of Rosacher's, attacks a local cathedral as payback to the Church for trying to kill him. It may follow that Rosacher would seek such revenge, but the chapter feels at once perfunctory and melodramatic.

In any event, it abruptly ends, and *four more* lost years pass between it and the start of chapter 8, in which, seated on one of Griaule's paint scaffolds, Rosacher speaks with Meric Cattanay about 'happiness', to little real purpose, before visiting Hangtown and *Martita's Home in the Sky*, a tavern run by Martita Doan. Now a widow, once as a maid she became the virtually faceless object of his lust and so conceived a son. To her regret, Martita did not carry the child to term. These revelations affect Rosacher, but mostly to fill him with anger toward Honeyman and Ludie for failing to tell him of his unborn child's brief fetal existence. Later, on Griaule's back, these two rebuke him for his 'incompetence', claiming that mab profits 'are down nearly thirty per cent' (109) and admitting that they have struck a deal of their own with council leader Breque.

Then, by pushing him from the dragon, Honeyman tries to murder Rosacher, who again escapes death, this time aided by pieces of a shattered scale — a 'leaf storm' of golden insects — which so harry and sting Honeyman that *he* falls. When these glowing flakes beset Rosacher, they trigger in him 'a crackling scream', upon whose noise he surfs 'as if it were a wave' (116–18). With the help of Jarvis Riggins, an old scalehunter, Martita saves Rosacher, sheltering him in her tavern from Ludie's prying. This time, when he awakes, he realises that he has lost *only days, not years,* of his life. Also, mab enables him to view Martita as a goddess, in whose body he recurrently drowns.[11]

Five weeks after Honeyman's attempt on his life, Rosacher accompanies Riggins into Griaule's gut for a look-see. Riggins accepts the dragon's divinity, an idea that Rosacher once scoffed at. Now he has an epiphany: He realizes that the creature has become an ecosystem 'supporting a vast biotic community' (133); consequently, he begins to suspect that he, too, could profitably adopt the scalehunter's vision:

> He needed a building, an edifice the equal of a cathedral

11 Despite, as well as because of, her easy sexuality, Martita Doan is the most admirable woman in the two Griaule books. In contrast to most of the other women in these stories — Lise, Catherine, Brianne, Mierelle, Magali, Sylvia, Yara, Ludie, et al. — she has both earnestness and great-heartedness to recommend her. She is clearly of 'low birth', a 'drab' who has ascended by dint of a brief marriage and hard work. Albeit star-struck by Rosacher, she is so by virtue of her origins and her generosity of spirit, not the impact of mab. Of course, the man on whom she has fixated cannot truly love her: She is not his intellectual equal, a flaw that he finds less tolerable than pride or sexual duplicity. Sorry: We are in the realm of fantasy here, and only in hip, consciousness-raising twenty-first-century cartoons —think the *Shrek* franchise — do princesses marry ogres or princes ogresses. Shepard declares that Rosacher and Martita remain 'great friends' (149), but dramatises only two brief subsequent 'friendly' exchanges.

> and devoted to a similar purpose, yet constructed in such a fashion so that its function would be unclear to the Church until late in the day ... [The Church] would rattle their sabers and might, in extremis, be provoked to send an army against Teocinte; but the militia had grown powerful enough to defend the city and, once Mospiel's troops had a taste of mab, it would be a short war. (134–5; my ellipsis)

This desire for a building supports Rosacher's apprehension that the House of Griaule (as he renames the Hotel Sin Salida upon rebuilding it after its imminent destruction) will supplant every other religion. After all, how can any church 'stand against a religion that delivered on its promises in the here and now, whose sacrament bestowed rewards that were tangible and immediate, and not some vague post-mortem fantasy' (133)?

This chapter ends when a creature from Griaule's biotope, a flat, slimy critter seven or eight feet wide, oozes toward Rosacher and Riggins, and Riggins identifies it as *'Armaga lengua'*, or 'Devil's tongue' (136). Sadly, this scene reminds me of novels with pasteboard covers that, as a grade-schooler, I checked out of our school library in Mulvane, Kansas, in the 1950s. Ostensibly SF, they bore on their spines either a launch-ready rocket ship or an atom with orbiting electrons, and whenever their pseudonymous authors needed to jog the plot, they introduced the surefire menace of a hostile alien or a hideous planetary monster, so that my heart beat faster and hair arose on my nape. Despite his oft-expressed contempt for the cheesy, Shepard uses this same tactic in *Beautiful Blood* at least three times,[12] and each occurrence made me wince in dismay.

After the House of Griaule rises upon the ruins of the Hotel Sin Salida, Rosacher works to 'create a fantasy religion [wedding] the sybaritic to a faux spirituality' (142). As he does, Martita tells Rosacher that in ten years he has not noticeably aged. Meanwhile, the town's militia readies an attack on Temalagua for reasons contrived to get Rosacher out of town and keep the action rolling. Breque and Rosacher confer, Ludie dies from a fall from her horse, and Rosacher composes two essays that the adherents of his 'fantasy religion' esteem as prophetic sermons: 'On Our Dragon Nature' (162) and 'Is The God I Worship The God I Cause To Be?' (163). Rosacher falls in love with a woman named Amelita Sobral, an agent of Breque's taxed with locating Ludie's will. 'For the life of him,' writes Shepard, 'Rosacher could not fathom why he loved Amelita' (173). Neither can the reader, who, to boot, cannot fathom *her* attraction to *him*. Her end comes abruptly and beggars belief (179–85), but involves injecting herself with dragon's blood after earlier asserting that she would find it 'interesting to grow old and wrinkled' (177).

Rosacher purportedly grieves for eight months. Temalagua and Mospiel plot war against Teocinte's militia.[13] Then, at least partly at Breque's behest, he sets off for Temalagua in search of a former scalehunter, Oddboy Cerruti, whose name appears in a secret folder alongside that of a man called 'Carlos', who, we at length learn, is the enlightened king of Temalagua. Rosacher finds Cerruti on a vast plain and quickly picks up on the fact that he has a friend named Frederick. Frederick is one of Shepard's hybrid monsters, a man who has metamorphosed into 'a black featureless mound half the size of a full-grown elephant' (210). Cerruti communicates with Frederick telepathically, and Frederick, who has a taste for horseflesh, soon eats Rosacher's steed (albeit with his permission), and Rosacher believes that maybe the monster can kill Carlos and make it look as if some fierce animal has done for him.

Rosacher and Cerruti cross into Temalagua and arrive at a jungle longhouse. Here, Frederick snatches a woman whom Cerruti has taken to a nearby hut for a sexual encounter and spirits her away. The village headman sends a runner to tell the king what has happened, and Rosacher now determines 'that if the king could be brought to Becan [the village in question], it would ... be proof that Griaule's will was at work here' (240; my ellipsis). Even so, Rosacher also realises that to murder Carlos would be 'to kill a man who had done far more good than evil' (237).

Later scenes testify to Carlos's goodness, even if an odd 'variety of narcissism' (271) colours his personality. While hunting Frederick, who has presumably eaten Cerruti's woman, Carlos suffers a coral snake bite in Rosacher's company, and Rosacher fears that everyone will suspect *him* of murder. Before Carlos's demise, however, he learned from the king that Teocinte's militia is not as powerful as he believed and that Carlos had 'no designs against a country that is ready to tear itself apart' (258); it is Mospiel, rather than Teocinte, that the king feared. Lessoned thus, Rosacher sets off for Chisec, a Temalaguan village, suppressing his anxiety about what 'might be following behind' (272).

I felt cruelly yanked about by these narrative jumps. The only aesthetic justification I can imagine for them all would abide in textual evidence that they reflect a like apprehension on Rosacher's part, and I fail to find this evidence in his oddly unmotivated moves from one place to another throughout the novel. Perhaps this jumpiness reflects that of life itself and also the author's embrace of existential randomness. And perhaps I have little or no right to complain about this aspect of the novel. But I've summarised at such length because I could not otherwise sequence its events, which often feel to me as disconnected as the purportedly scattered pieces of Griaule's pillaged body.

## C. And yet ...

Only the sixteenth chapter and a brief epilogue remain, and it is hard to find in any earlier passage a scene embodying a climax, grand or otherwise, to the bulk of *Beautiful Blood*. Chapter 16 opens with the words, 'Rosacher remained in Temalagua for *eight years*' (273; my italics). He passed this time 'organizing hunts for the creature' known as Frederick, which the men in Rosacher's hire drove 'south to the Fever Coast', at which point our protagonist terminated the hunts altogether (274).

Indeed, not until Griaule awakes and reduces Teocinte to ruins (see 'The Taborin Scale') does Rosacher work up the emotion 'to visit the country he had once called home' (275). Describing the thousands of people there 'picking over the [dragon's] corpse' (276), Shepard informs us that

> Rosacher entertained the notion that he was observing the annihilation of a normal-sized lizard by a Lilliputian

12 Yes, I've done the same thing in a story or two, and, early in this essay, I praise Shepard for seeking to add life to moribund genre tropes. But *these* scenes, in a novel obviously meant for adults, lack credibility.

13 In *The Dragon Griaule*, I supposed Teocinte and Temalagua cities within the same country; in *Beautiful Blood*, they are separate countries, with cities that also bear their countries' names. (Have I misread?)

> race of hominids who performed the functions of ants and beetles, and dwelled in a settlement of dirty gray canvas that hid the bulk of their repulsive habits from view. It was both an epic and [a] dismaying sight, one that called to mind the majesty of nature and at the same time posed an inescapable comment on the vile nature of mankind. (276–7)

Allusions to Brobdingnag and Lilliput illustrate that in *Beautiful Blood*, as well as in his earlier collection of Griaule stories, Shepard made scalehunting a conscious goal of both titles, i.e., raising weighty thematic concerns and highlighting vast existential ironies via imagery and rhetoric.

In the foregoing excerpt, he riffs on a well-known passage from *Gulliver's Travels* in which the Brobdingnagian king characterises Europeans as 'the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the Earth'.[14] In short, Shepard uses Jonathan Swift's literary tools as scaffolds to prop up a theologically (not a politically) guyed tapestry that, from part to part, has insufficient thread to make the whole outsized structure seamlessly cohere.

Still . . .

The novel winds down with a final meeting between Rosacher and Breque in which the latter character, now 'an unrecognizable shrunken personage' (277) in a canopied bed, tells Rosacher, 'Death is simply a shabby theatricality at life's end to which we have all been given tickets ... with the possible exception of you' (278; Shepard's ellipsis). The two then talk awkwardly until Breque mawkishly announces, 'We were great men!' (280) and urges Rosacher not to judge himself too harshly. Auctorially, Shepard baldly notes that 'Rosacher could not help being moved by these sentiments' (281), a point that he might more artfully have made by indirection.

Later, Rosacher catalogues Breque's words to him 'under ... the charitable impulses of fiends, men responsible for thousands of deaths who at the end sought to bestow their blessing on the world' (282; my ellipsis). And, indeed, when Breque dies, the tremor that Rosacher feels is perhaps either an intimation of Griaule's passing 'soul' or 'a misperceived symptom of [his] own decay' (283).

The epilogue has as its setting 'an island far from anywhere' (285), a vague but quiet place where occasionally blood is spilled but where Rosacher can brood on dragon Griaule's 'evolution' through the stages of its conjectural deity. The epilogue, and hence the novel, concludes with an excerpt from a journal that Rosacher now keeps. This excerpt contains a sketch about a crab in a wooden whistle, a 'crustacean genius nurtured by its musical house and taught to seek in all things a grand design' (290), a sort of meaningful minor of Griaule, a metaphor *without* a clear signifier. The epilogue also contains an equally brief interrupting tale about an island storyteller, one Walker James, who, drunk on the tropical sky, wonders aloud if it doesn't make Rosacher sad that 'we won't never hear a story to match all that sky and stars!' (291).

Did Lucius Shepard believe that he had told such a story?

Perhaps he recognised that he had not. I would argue that he suspected just that. His epilogue stands not as an apology but as a lament, and it features some of the most touching writing in these in these two flawed but intermittently beautiful books.

14 Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Oxford, New York: Oxford World's Classics paperback, Oxford University Press, 1986, 1989, 121.

## *The Dragon Griaule Sequence* by Lucius Shepard: A Guide

***The Dragon Griaule***. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2012 containing:

**'The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule'** (novelette), *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Dec 1984); ***TDG***, 9–38.

**'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter'** (novella), first appearance as a small book from Shingletown, CA: Mark V. Zeising, 1988; a subsequent appearance in *Asimov's Science Fiction* (Sep 1988); initially collected in a volume titled *The Ends of the Earth*, Sauk City, WI, Arkham House, 1988; ***TDG***, 39–114.

**'The Father of Stones'** (novella), stand-alone title from Baltimore, MD: Washington Science Fiction Association, 1988; ***TDG***, 115–96.

**'Liar's House'** (novelet), stand-alone title from Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2004; previously posted on *Sci Fiction* (Dec 2003); ***TDG***, 197–239.

**'The Taborin Scale'** (novella), stand-alone title from Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2010; ***TDG***, 241–306.

**'The Skull'** (novella), first appearance in ***TDG***, 307–421.

**Story notes** (one entry for each of foregoing stories), first appearance in ***TDG***, 423–31.

***Beautiful Blood: A Novel of the Dragon Griaule***. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014, 291 pp.

## Author's note

This essay-review took me far longer to write than I anticipated, and I grew weary of it owing to the difficulty of getting a grip on exactly what was happening, and why, in both *Beautiful Blood* and in more than half the stories in *The Dragon Griaule*. I felt obligated to finish, no matter what conclusions I drew, because I kept a review copy of the collection for nearly two years before asking Bill Shaffer at Subterranean Press for a copy of *Beautiful Blood*. I hoped that owning the novel would motivate me to do a long piece about both titles for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*.

Here, then, I thank Kevin Maroney of *NYRSF* and Bill Shaffer of Subterranean Press for their extraordinary patience.

I thank Gregory Feeley and Bob Kruger for replying separately to questions about either the books under review or their author, Lucius Shepard (1943–2014), whom we each knew in different capacities and from different perspectives. I also thank them for suggesting changes to the text, to improve its prose or to correct factual inaccuracies. I tried to *resist* being swayed by their critical takes on Shepard's writing, but confess that in a few instances either I agreed with these takes initially or I adopted their readings and tried to address them in my own way, seeking to be fair to both titles and their author without subverting my own standards or becoming either man's mouthpiece. Still, their help was invaluable, and I cannot fail to note that fact here, even if they dislike, as they have every right to, some—or a lot—of what they now find in this no doubt exhausting essay-review.

**— Michael Bishop, 2014**

# I must be talking to my friends

## Bruce Gillespie, with Elaine Cochrane

## Flicker, Harry, and the kittens: The saga

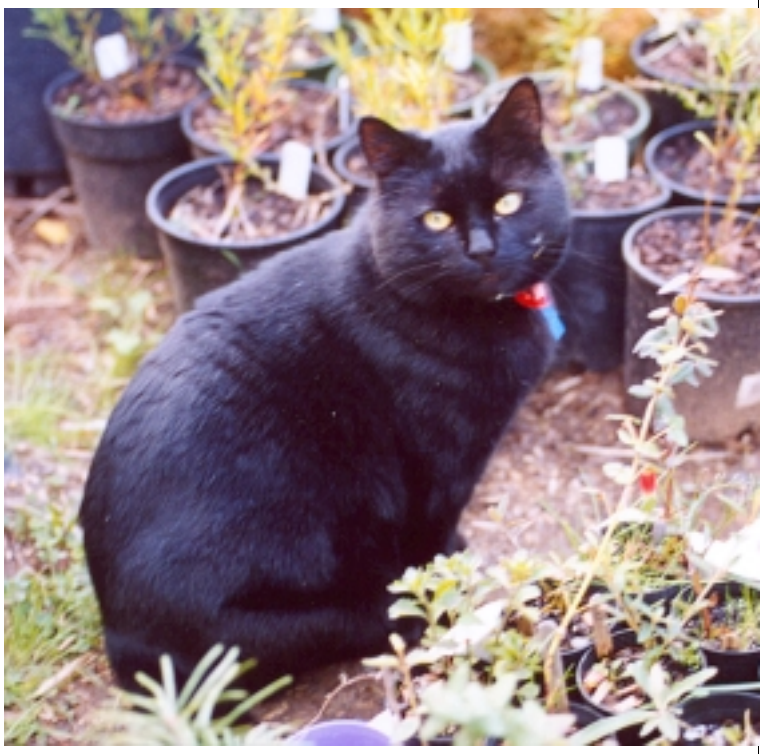
### Photos by Elaine Cochrane and Yvonne Rousseau

First there was an artist named Alan Robert Sumner. He lived round the corner in one of the oldest houses in Collingwood, Melbourne's second oldest suburb, on the corner of Wellington and Easey Street. He used to natter to Elaine when she went past. He enjoyed the company of Theodore, our ginger cat, who often slept or hunted in his side garden all day.

In 1994, Alan Sumner died, and his house was sold. The house had much historical interest, so Yarra Council refused permission to the new owner to knock it down, but arcane planning regulations meant it could not be reused as a house; nor could it be refitted as a commercial property, as the new owner had planned, because it did not have enough car parking spaces. The owner had little option other than allow it to decay. One set of squatters after another moved in, despite the surrounding cyclone wire fence, and were ejected. Each set of squatters cannibalised the interior of the house. The final set had even used the steep wooden staircase as fuel.

In late September or early October 2003, we were walking past the house one night and encountered a very hungry female torbie cat, who, from the feel of her belly, was obviously feeding kittens. Elaine went back with a small amount of food, which was promptly devoured. She went back again the next night, and met a young fellow holding a can of cat food. He told her that the kittens were upstairs, in a hole in the floor. There was no sign of the female cat, that night or the next.

Since no good mother cat would abandon her kittens, Elaine set to work. She tracked down the current owner of the house, who told her to bring a ladder, and met her at the house. When they managed to clam-



**Flicker, when younger.**

ber to the second floor the kittens were easily located by their squeaking. With the owner's assistance she fished the five kittens out of their hole, and took them up to our vet, John Sandford, for checking over. Their eyes were open, but only just; he estimated they were not quite three weeks old. Over the next few weeks John and his wife Kerrie patiently coached Elaine in how to take care of very tiny kittens.

Thus began the weeks in which Elaine worked the hardest she has ever worked. Every few hours she had to feed each kitten with formula from a bottle, and wipe its bum, just to keep it alive. Since it was still winter, the cats were in constant danger of dying of the cold, so at first they were kept in a large cardboard box, surrounded by blankets. They huddled together in one cat-bundle. They learnt about the bottle and to recognise Elaine almost instantly, but it was a few days before they were developed enough to use the litter tray. About the same time, their purrs turned on. As they developed and became more active they were transferred to a large cage where they could be safe and have some room to move around. The other cats were very curious about them, but posed no danger. After several weeks John said they were ready to be weaned, and the

**Top: Five kittens keep each other warm: from the top, clockwise, the kitten who became Miss Smith; the kitten we called Yoda; Titch, who became Sampson; Tas, who became Leila; and Rascal at the bottom.**
**Middle: Yoda and Titch (Sampson) warming up under the column heater.**
**Below: Harry and Flicker at Collingwood.**

kittens began to eat independently. Violet started stealing from the kittens. She was very puzzled when they all crowded under her, trying to suckle from her.

All this time, Elaine kept checking the old Sumner house in case the mother cat returned. There was no sign of the tiny torbie, but she caught glimpses of black cats' ears in the long grass.

During the next four weeks Elaine called in favours from friends and colleagues from the firms for which she was doing freelance work, lining up future homes for the kittens. Sarah Endacott took two of the kittens, the tortie Tas (renamed Leila) and the black-and-white kitten (who became Miss Smith). Charles and Nic Taylor took the black kitten, which they named Rascal. A work colleague of Elaine's took my favourite, Titch (a tiny tabby kitten). Renamed Sampson, he returned to us five years later, but that's another story. We have not kept contact with the people who took the ginger kitten.

Meanwhile, we gradually became aware that the very timid owner of the black ears was lurking in our garden. He would leap over the fence, then run, limping, along the back of our side garden. He was so timid that we could not approach him, but Elaine began to leave a lump of meat for him every night. He would hurtle over the fence, grab the meat, and jump back over the fence. We called him Flicker, because all we ever saw of him was a flicker in the grass. He was painfully thin.

One night several weeks later I took out the piece of meat instead of Elaine. A black cat came and rubbed around my legs. I was amazed. When this happened the next night, Elaine said, 'That's not Flicker. This cat's got white feet.' Thus on 21 November 2003 we found we were feeding two cats, not one. We called the second cat Harry. Although he was not timid like Flicker, we only saw him at night, briefly. Strangely, our three resident cats, Sophie, Polly, and Violet, were not phased by all these feline comings and goings.

Over the next months Elaine gradually coaxed Flicker closer with food, and in early February 2004 she was able to pick him up and take him to the vet for a check-up, neutering, microchipping, and formal adoption. When she released him from the box again he promptly shot over the fence, but he came back immediately when she called and did not leave the garden again thereafter. He realised that he really did have a home, but he was still very, very timid.

We also started to see a lot more of Harry. He was a puzzle, because although hungry he wasn't starved like Flicker, but enquiries among the neighbours brought no claims of ownership. A few days after Flicker's trip to the vet, Harry turned up during the day and was similarly boxed, snipped, and chipped. A few days later he turned up with a note attached to his new collar with the address of his owners. This was a family who lived on the other side of super-busy Wellington Street and several streets down. Harry had only been pretending to be a very hungry stray.

When Elaine went to see Harry's owners, she found that their name for him was Socks. He was never allowed inside the house. The bloke said: 'We thought old Socksie was putting on a bit of weight, but it was a bit of a surprise when he turned up one morning wearing a collar and minus his nuts.'

They'd had him since a kitten, and said that his mother was a tiny torbie named Peaches and his father was a 'big black Burmese' (that is, Flicker). After some discussion it was agreed that Elaine could become his new owner.

At this stage neither Flicker nor Harry would come inside our house, but with further coaxing eventually both would come into the kitchen to eat, and then scuttle outside again. Flicker slept in a protected spot under bushes in the garden; Harry slept who-knows-where. The weather turned wet and miserable, so one night Elaine picked Flicker up, brought him inside, and pointed him to a blanket she'd placed on the kitchen floor. Flicker looked very doubtful, as if he didn't really believe this was permitted, but he crept onto the blanket and from then on he began to sleep in the kitchen. And one night, when Elaine was sitting on the couch, Flicker leapt onto her lap. He had finally found a home.

Flicker must have had a very favourable beginning. As soon as he felt safe at our place, he became very civilised. He decided that since he could trust us, he could trust anyone who came into our house; every visitor's lap was his by right. He also became the top cat of the household. Harry, meanwhile, was not willing to stay in the house for more than a few minutes at a time. He had been taught that he was not allowed inside houses and would disappear over the fence.

One night in May 2004 Harry disappeared. His previous owners had not seen him either, so when he had not returned for a week we assumed he had been hit by a car. (The cat owned by our next-door neighbours had been killed on busy Wellington Street not long before.) Flicker mourned. He sat in the back yard, and waited for his Harry to come home.

About six weeks after Harry disappeared, we received a phone call. The people from the microchip registry rang to say that 'your black and white cat Harry is in Werribee'. Werribee is a suburb 37 km from Collingwood, almost off the southern fringe of the city as you head down to Geelong. Harry certainly couldn't have walked there, so our guess is that he fell asleep in the back of a truck on Wellington Street, had woken up in Werribee, and had somehow survived.

Since we have no car, Elaine rang her sister Margaret, who happened to have a free day. Margaret took the cat basket down to Werribee and retrieved Harry. The woman who had phoned the microchip people said that she did not realise that Harry was a stray until he tried to steal her cat's food; she said, 'He's the only cat who has ever made friends with my cat.' Harry is a very cheerful cat, even when desperate.

When Margaret brought Harry home, he stepped out of the cat basket. Three of the other cats looked up, as if to say, 'Oh. So you're back, are you?' Flicker was totally delighted. He rushed up the Harry, and started licking him. Harry was very hungry and very tired. He slept for most of two days, ate lots, and purred while Flicker kept licking him.

If the phone call from the microchip agency had been made a few weeks later, we would have already left Collingwood for Greensborough. In October, the five cats were put in cages and taken up to the vet's (the ever-helpful John Sandford's) to stay overnight. We fin-

**We three kings of Greensborough:**
**(top:) looking through the back door: Harry, Flicker, and Archie;**
**(middle and bottom:) how to fill a garden seat: Harry, Archie, and Flicker.**

ished packing at 3 in the morning, and got up at 5 in the morning as the removalist arrived. By mid afternoon we had moved to Greensborough. The next day John delivered the cats to their new home.

Harry was panic-stricken, and the others weren't too happy. Harry thought he had been left in Werribee again. It seemed as if he would howl all night, so Elaine got up and slept on the couch, surrounded by all the cats except Violet. (Violet had her own story; she had to stay in the front part of the house to avoid being slaughtered by Polly, who was half her size.)

**Flicker liked to be the centre of attention. From left: Bruce, Flicker, Claire Brialey, and Mark Plummer.**
**(Photo: Yvonne Rousseau.)**

During the following days, Harry became used to the fact that this was his new home. The cats went out into the cat enclosure and made it part of their home. Harry's expedition had taught him that it was OK to be inside a house after all, but he never gave up his quest to find a way out of our house and go home to Collingwood ... or at least to explore Greensborough.

Flicker became truly head of the house, and guardian of us all. Only five months after we moved to Greensborough, I disappeared for four weeks. I travelled to America, thanks to the Bring Bruce Bayside Fund, enjoyed myself, but nearly kissed the ground when I finally got off the plane back at Tullamarine in March 2005. Elaine said that Flicker had missed me very much, and had spent the four weeks gazing mournfully out the front window.

The worst period of Flicker's otherwise very comfortable new life was when Archie died unexpectedly in 2013, only six years old, from kidney failure. For nearly a year, Flicker would search the house, hoping to find Archie somewhere around the place. He was quite sure we had done something horrible to his great friend.

When Sophie died in 2008, Polly, the oldest cat, had expected to become the top cat. She had waited long enough. She was sure that TC had handed the position to her when he died two years after she arrived as a kitten. Flicker disagreed. He believed *he* was top cat. This dispute was never resolved, until finally Polly died of old age, nearly 20, in November 2014. Again, Flicker missed her greatly. It was no good being head of the house if his tribe kept disappearing one by one.

Because of the way that Flicker arrived in the house, we had no real idea of his age. John Sandford guessed he might have been four years old when we acquired him, but he could have been older. He began to show the signs of what we thought of us encroaching old age. He stopped eating more than a token amount of his crunchies each day, and he became thinner. Elaine took him to the Greensborough vet, but routine tests showed nothing obviously wrong.

However, in September 2015 he almost stopped eating altogether, and looked miserable. Elaine agreed that he should have an ultrasound. A small lump showed up, but hidden so deeply that it would have been too difficult to carry out a biopsy. The vet said bring to bring him back in four or five weeks for a second scan. After four weeks Flicker was very much more subdued, and the second scan showed that the lump had become very large. Flicker was dying of a very aggressive cancer. High-dose cortisone gave him another good week, but on 16 October, we took Flicker for his last visit to the vet. Elaine buried him in the back yard.

We had thought that if either Harry or Flicker died first, the other would follow shortly after. They had been very rarely out of sight of each other for the last 11 years, and they often slept curled up together, or licked each other. As long as Harry realised he was lieutenant, not boss, they had a perfect cat friendship.

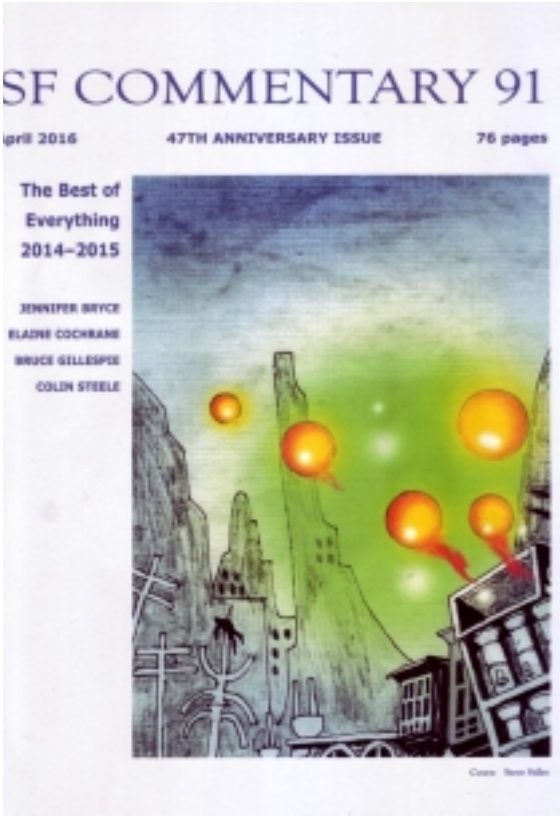
Harry did look for Flicker for awhile, but not with the obsessive concern that Flicker would have shown if Harry had gone first. Perhaps that was because we had taken the vet's advice and shown him Flicker's body. Harry did need reassurance, though, and sought attention much more actively than in the past. And he decided to take advantage of the new situation. Instead of being pushed aside by Flicker when he wanted to sit on Elaine's lap, now Harry could sit on her lap. Indeed, for many years he did not like sitting on laps, but now he does. He is more affectionate to me than he has ever been. But he is lonely.

Sampson's reaction was the surprise. He did not get on with either Flicker or Harry, and has his own part of the house and garden. But he became frantic, rushing out into his garden and back again, clearly looking for the leader of his gang. He, like Harry, has become much more demonstrative. He's even making overtures of friendship to Harry, but as yet they are not reciprocated.

The house feels rather empty. We had five cats when we moved here, and now we have only two.

**— Bruce Gillespie (with much help from Elaine Cochrane), 8 January 2016**

# Feature letters





***SF Commentary 91*** **cover: two versions. The first one, which was despatched on the print edition, is incorrect. The second version, from the downloadable efanzines.com version, is correct.**

## Apology to Steve Stiles

**[*brg* On the morning of 9 April 2016, I woke up feeling rather chipper. Nice emails were appearing in response to *SF Commentary* 91, but I was a bit puzzled that I hadn't heard from Steve Stiles. He had sent me the cover illustration for the issue, so I had sent him one of the first three copies to go in the mail. It took two weeks to reach him. My morning was ruined by the following email sent by Steve.*]**

**STEPHEN STILES**
**8631 Lucerne Road,**
**Randallstown MD 21133, USA**

Bruce, I worked very hard on that cover and was very happy with it. Why did you do *that* to it? If there was some problem perhaps you could've contacted me, or mercifully not used it. I'm very disappointed.

(9 April 2016)

**[*brg* I had thought Steve would be over the moon about the presentation of his artwork on the cover of *SFC* 91. What could have gone wrong? I looked again at the cover of the print edition.**

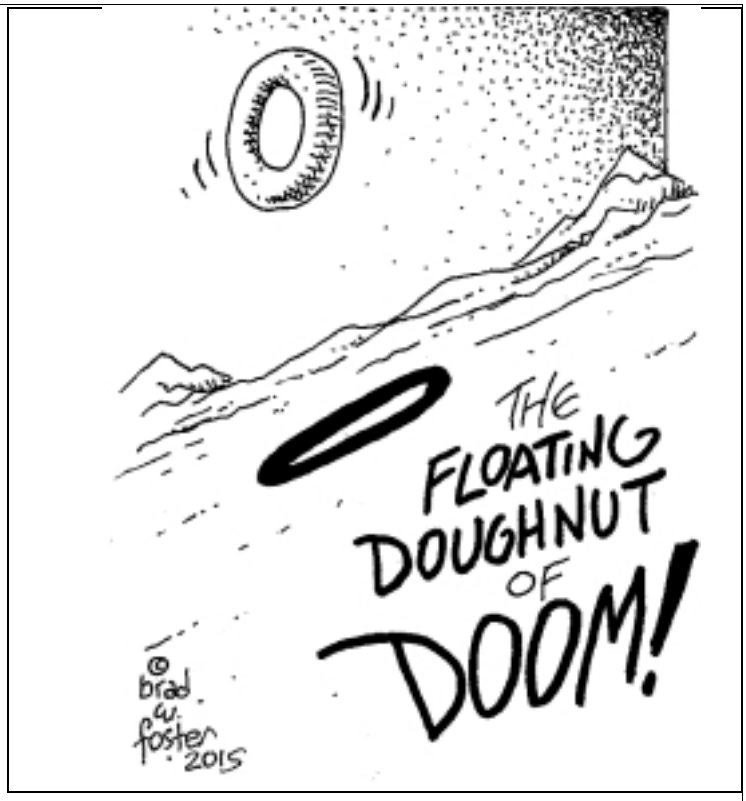
**Oooooohhh ... sickening thud of Gillespie stomach.**

**In the excitement of producing the cover, the very last item to be prepared for the issue, I had done something that I could never have imagined myself doing, because I had never done it before. I had pressed the wrong buttons on Quark XPress when importing the illustration into the cover layout. I had pressed Ctrl + Shift + F instead of Ctrl + Shift + Alt + F. Only about half of the illustration was showing in the panel, not the complete piece of artwork. I had perpetrated a mortal wound on the artistic body of Steve Stiles, our most respected fan artist, the bloke who should have won the Hugo Award for Best Fan Artist many times, but has never quite achieved it. (In 2016 he is the only person on the Hugo ballot I would recognise as a fan artist.) How could I possibly make restitution?**

**I thought of reprinting the whole issue with the correct cover, but cannot afford the printing and postage. I was able to attach the correct cover on the two downloadable versions (portrait and landscape) from efanzines.com.**

# Epic lists

**MARK PLUMMER**
**59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrery**
**CRO 7ES, England**




My list-of-things-to-do has included 'Write to Bruce' for several months now.

It has also included, and in a slightly higher spot, 'Write to Robert Lichtman', prompted by the receipt of *SFC* 90 a few months back and my letter therein where I mention receiving the previous *SFC* and Robert's *Trap Door* at the very back-end of 2014, and the consequent reminder that I had (demonstrably) written to you about *SFC* while *Trap Door* had gone unacknowledged. And it still has, although now you prompt me about *Quoz* and so I guess you leapfrog *Trap Door* (still unacknowledged, 13 months later) in the order of priorities.

I wanted to say something about your list of favourite SF and fantasy novels read during 2015 so far, as mentioned in your email to us about *Banana Wings* 60 back at the beginning of December, and presumably due to surface in *SFC* at some point (the list, that is). First, I feel especially privileged to see a Gillespie List in its primal less-than-fully-evolved form, and I am of course eager to see whether the two or three books in the relegation zone do in fact survive the last four months of the year, or get demoted to the fictional equivalent of the Vauxhall Conference League (a reference which I immediately realise will probably be lost on an Australian).

It's also marginally gratifying to see that the books I've also read — *Station Eleven*, *Orfeo*, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, *The Three-Body Problem*, *My Real Children* — would probably also make my top 15, except not the Fowler, but only because I read that one in 2014.

And, come to think of it, the Powers and Walton were both December reads and so my list — also virtual — would have looked somewhat different on 1 December, even setting aside the question of whether I would claim *Orfeo* for SF and fantasy. It did leave me thinking that I should get CDs of Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* and Shostakovich's Fifth, mind, although I'm equally conscious that if I do I'll probably listen to them, re-read what Peter Els (as channelled by Powers) has to say about them, and then put them on the shelf convinced that I'm too thick to appreciate this kind of thing as I revert to my usual listening of the Rolling Stones and Jefferson Airplane.

**[*brg* Not so. Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, recorded by a Melbourne group on a small local label in the early 1960s, was one of my first favourites when I discovered classical music in 1968. And Shostakovich's Symphony No 5 is the greatest of his epic-symphonies-that-are-rather-like-novels. You'll find listening to it will have the emotional impact of reading *War and Peace* in three-quarters of an hour.*]**

I wonder whether there was a key event a few years ago that touched off a fictional interest in Shostakovich, given he's the subject of Julian Barnes's latest too. I suppose there's a job for an academic in charting the movements of Powers and Barnes in the early years of the decade to see if they intersect.

And talking of claiming books for SF and fantasy, I've seen somebody somewhere in the last few days questioning the genre credentials of Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins*, arguing that it's really only a genre work by virtue of association with *Life After Life*. I still haven't read it, so I can't comment. But I suppose the point does connect with several of *SFC*'s letter column comments about what is and isn't SF and the utility of claiming marginal slipstream works. It all rather seems like the reverse of the classic literary snobbism — it can't be SF because it's good — where we're saying that it is SF because it is good.

**[*brg* That's not what I was arguing. I was saying that a bit of searching will find many novels that are really SF novels, although they are not labelled as such. In many cases, the label is left off in order to increase book sales.*]**

The only Strugatsky I've read is *Roadside Picnic*, albeit years ago, probably in the 1979 Penguin edition, which used the Antonina W. Bouis translation from 1977. I say probably, because at some point we traded up to the Gollancz SF Masterwork (2007), although I gather that's still the same Bouis text. It made little impression on me at the time. I keep hearing that the new translation by Olena Bormashenko is hugely superior, so I should probably trade up again to the 2012 Chicago Review Press or the 2014 Gollancz SF Masterworks edition. And the new translation of *Hard to Be a God* supplants Wendayne Ackerman's earlier translation, which was itself based on the German translation — not that we have either — while Gollancz SF Masterworks is issuing *Monday Begins on Saturday* in April, although I'm not sure whether that's the unauthorised translation by Leonid Renen from 1977, the 2005 translation by Andrew Bromfield, or another new translation.

Clearly I need to revisit Patrick McGuire's really rather excellent essays in *NYRSF*, and all will become clear.

Other than that, I guess most of the other books on your list appeal to some degree or another, except for *The Wonders* by Paddy O'Reilly, and that's only because its existence, and indeed its author, had completely eluded me up to now, although it'll probably turn out that you wrote about it and her in a previous *SFC* or **brg** and I've simply forgotten.

**[*brg* None of the above. I knew of Paddy O'Reilly's *The Wonder* because it won the Norma K. Hemming Award for 2015, a jury award. It's an entertaining social-satire-cum-SF novel that nobody in the Australian SF press had noticed ... because it wasn't labelled as such. Before winning the prize, O'Reilly had published novels and books of short stories.*]**

I see I didn't read that much 2015 SF last year, and none of it struck me as unambiguously superb or good as the best of 2014. (Claire will probably say this is just me being old and grouchy, and that position is being reinforced by me reading about those Strugatsky books and thinking, ooh, they're only 250 pages or so.) There was a lot of good stuff around in 2014, which inevitably I only really got to last year, and my personal touchstone turned out to be the BSFA Award shortlist. Because the award is presented at the Eastercon, it's usually the earliest of the best novel shortlists to be announced, and typically it has five books, none of which I've read, and I conclude that I have zero prospect of reading those five books by Easter and so don't even try. Last year a nominations tie meant the list contained eight books, and by chance it turned out that I'd already read three of them, which is nearly half, and so I only had to buy and read the remaining five, which was surely entirely doable before the voting deadline at Easter. Yes, I know. But it was a particularly strong list, I thought, including several books that up to that point I didn't see getting much attention elsewhere, such as Nina Allan's *The Race*, *Europe in Autumn* by Dave Hutchinson, *Wolves* by Simon Ings, and *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North.

(This year the BSFA is trying a system where member nominations produce a longlist, followed by a second round of votes to produce a shortlist. I believe the administrator is currently seeking acceptances of nominations, and the list will appear any day now. It'll probably have five books on it, none of which I've read, and so I'll give up.)

Of the 2015 books I've read so far, my favourite was probably Liz Hand's *Wylding Hall*, a ghost story borderline novel/novella (for Hugo purposes it's the latter although within the wriggle room for the former) about an early seventies folk rock band despatched to a country house to work on their album, a period and subject matter that plays to my prejudices. Ian McDonald's *Luna* is pretty good too, SF set on the moon just like it was in the old days, albeit resolutely contemporary and hugely character dense, although it suffers from being only half a novel. I liked *Railhead* by Philip Reeve, within the constraint that generally I don't really get on with YA books, and I don't think it's as good as *Mortal Engines*.

Outside of SF I worry that I'm pursue the cliché trajectory — see, for instance, Guy Salvidge's letter in *SFC* 90 — towards crime writing, which mostly involves working my way through the Ruth Rendell back list at a rate of three or four books a year (there's a *lot* of backlist), and a few ongoing series by writers like Elly Griffiths, Sara Sheridan, and Cleo Coyle. And hurrah, there's a new Liz Hand 'Cass Neary' novel due in April.

But back to *SFC*, about which I haven't really said all that much. I do find that some issues are, shall we say, Bruce Deficient, with you giving over far too much space to other people, good and interesting though they may be. No 90 is mostly letters, and so should suffer from the same problem, but doesn't, I think because your correspondents do manage to be suffused with Bruceness. I'm not at all sure that I'm explaining that well, but the effect is that there seems to be more Bruce than is tangibly present. And there's Steve Stiles on the cover to remind us that for all your slick presentation such that *SFC* wouldn't look out of place on a (cultured, highbrow) newsstand, you fannish credibility remains intact, which is not to say that Steve's cover is amateurish but rather that it helps reinforce the fannish tone. (I hope Steve would know that's what I meant but it's probably worth spelling out).

Good letters from many of your usual correspondents, especially Doug Barbour and Patrick McGuire, who I don't seem to see anywhere else. And Steve Jeffery, who I do, although it occurs to me that not so long ago I'd see Steve in person several times a year and yet I can't recall the last time we met. Which reminds me that you include a brief letter from Peter Simpson, an unfamiliar name although I see he lives less than 20 miles from here. There are of course an awful lot of people who live within 20 miles of here, but the fact that it includes one of your correspondents who I don't otherwise know seems remarkable, and further proof that you only superficially belong on that cultured, highbrow newsstand.

**[*brg* Peter Simpson is an Australian who moved to London many years ago, then married and settled there with his family. I keep hoping he will visit next time he returns to Melbourne, but this didn't happen the last time he was back. He has maintained his subscription for many years.*]**

I'm not quite sure how Martin Morse Wooster got the impression I was collecting fanzines as a 12-year-old in 1976. I was talking about model soldiers. Although I'm sure the two are easily confused.

Patrick McGuire talks about the an Australian novel that uses the expression 'house mover' to talk about the people who move a person's possessions from one property to another, and how in the US the same phrase is more likely to imply people who physically move a house from one location to another. Over here we'd share the Australian understanding, mostly I think because the concept of physically moving a house is so outré. I don't know what it says that the British usage emphasises the removal aspect of the job rather than the surely more pertinent moving bit. It'll probably turn out to be something to do with what the Victorians considered to be polite. And I can confirm that our usage is absolutely 'macaroni cheese' rather than 'macaroni and cheese', but can offer no theories as to why we don't bother with the conjunction. Perhaps it was something to do with rationing.

Anyway, I feel this is starting to read like an APAzine, so let's talk about television, something we seem to be watching more and more of, much to my surprise. Currently, we're waiting on the concluding episode of *War and Peace*, due to air later tonight. It's been a pretty good adaptation, I think, and as I've never read it I'm not conscious of the inevitable compression of 600,000 words into six-and-a-half hours. We've also been watching *Deutschland '83*, a subtitled drama

set unsurprisingly in Germany in 1983, in which a young man from the east is co-opted into becoming a not-very-good spy in the west. Full of all sorts of oh-yes-I-remember-that moments about the era. I also rather liked *1864*, as mentioned by Steve Jeffery, although I keep being amused by the seemingly small pool of Scandinavian actors. There's a moment when Didrich encounters Johan and says something to the effect, 'Don't I know you?' I'm mildly disappointed that Johan (Søren Malling) does not reply, 'Yes, in 150 years we will co-present a political magazine programme.'

Oh, and I did buy that 22-disc Stravinsky box set, and listened to the whole lot gradually over several months. Sadly, nothing new that really sticks. Still, new GoGo Penguin album came out on Friday.

(8 February 2016)

# The Better Place

**RANDY BYERS**
**1013 N. 36th, Seattle WA 98103, USA**

## Randy's summary of his section of 'Tanglewood: Golden Years', editorial, *Chunga* 24, April 2016, p. 1:

In December 2015 I received news that nobody wants to hear. First I learned that the scattered seizures I'd been experiencing since August were caused by a tumor in my right frontal lobe. Then, after surgery to remove and diagnose the tumor, I learned that it was grade IV glioblastoma multiforme. This is an extremely aggressive form of cancer that I was told point blank was likely to shorten my life. The survival statistics are grim. Without treatment, the average survival rate is twelve months. With treatment, the average survival rate is fourteen months. 30% of people with this cancer survive three years. Only 10% survive five years.

Needless to say, my life has been turned on its, er, head since all this happened. I haven't worked since the beginning of December, so I'm getting an early taste of retired life. Not bad, other than the nasty treatment part of things. Once I get through the current phase of treatment, which should last through the end of 2016, the hope is that the cancer will be in abeyance, and I'll be able to take time off from treatment to travel and enjoy whatever remains of my life. One of my oncologist is optimistic that several factors in my favor will get me into the small cohort that survives five years, but there's no guarantee.

Now my family and fandom are rallying around me in a way I've never experienced before, and I find myself floating on an oceanic feeling of connection to something larger than myself, especially my family, with whom I've always been very close. The thing I've come to realise in recent days is that this something larger will survive after I'm gone, and the fact that I'm connected to it means that my life hasn't been a complete loss.

(22 May 2016)

**[*brg* Thanks to Randy for his account of the condition that has blighted his life, because he says it much better than I could. I feel very distressed about**


**Randy Byers, December 2015.**

**Randy's dilemma, because he's one of my favourite people in fandom. He was very kind to me during my week in Seattle in 2015. He and the *Chunga* crew (Andy Hooper and carl juarez) have done great things in fanzine publishing over the last decade or more (to read all issues of *Chunga* in PDF format, go to http://efanzines.com).**

**Bear all this in mind while reading the following cheery, well-informed letters of comment from Randy. They were written several months *after* his diagnosis.*]**

It occurs to me to wonder whether I should just write LOCs on Mark Plummer's LOCs to *SFC*. Apparently that would give me twice the material to respond to at times! But Mark's letters also always seem to contain material, even widely disparate material, that I want to respond to, which must prove that he's some kind of genius.

For example, in this issue there's his comments about Richard Strauss — a composer I've been getting more interested in lately too. Initially this was because I'd gotten into twentieth-century opera composers, and his early twentieth-century operas are some of the most popular of the century — a century in which opera became less popular over all, as did classical music in general. I've been listening to his tone poems as well, because interest in early twentieth-century classical almost inevitably leads you back to the late romanticism of the late nineteenth century. As for opera, I managed to see a performance of his *Ariadne auf Naxos* at the Seattle Opera last year, and discovered it wasn't the comedy I had assumed it was, but rather a post-modern parody of tragic opera that is just as poignant as it is farcical. It struck

me as truly brilliant, both musically and conceptually, and now I'm curious about the other operas he wrote with the librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal. All the better if they're conducted by Zubin Mehta.

**[*brg* My interest in Richard Strauss goes back to the moment in fannish history that crystallised many elements in my life — the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* in September 1968 in Melbourne. I had been becoming more and more interested in classical music, because of radio listening, and propaganda and record playing by Lee Harding and John Bangsund, but had not actually bought a classical record until the film came out. But the soundtrack appeared in Australia only six months later, so I bought Karl Böhm's version of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, whose first few minutes feature at the beginning of *2001*. But the rest of the piece proved to be so astonishing that I started exploring music as a whole, not just Strauss. I had much less cash for spending on records in 1968 than I had a few years later, so my next purchase was the Time-Life boxed set of Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic playing the Beethoven symphonies (1962 versions). Playing a symphony one a night for nine nights, in late 1968, remains the greatest event of my listening experience ... but my musical journey did start with Strauss. From then on, I would quite often hear his tone poems on ABC radio, although it was quite a few years before I heard one of his operas, *Der Rosenkavalier*. I've only ever seen two operas in an opera house. Thanks to a free ticket offered by a friend, one of them was *Ariadne auf Naxos*. You're right about that one, Randy. In recent years, our friend Dick Jenssen has given us copies of Blu-rays of some of Strauss's greatest/crankiest operas, especially *Salome* and *Elektra*. I once saw *Der Rosenkavalier* on TV, with subtitles, and only then realised that it is very funny.*]**

Whom I have never met at The Better Place pub that Mark also mentions (Craft Beer Co on Leather Lane in London), although I was at the pub a couple of times in 2014. Most memorably was one crowded evening when we somehow found a table large enough for me, Mark, Claire, Jim de Liscard, Meike, Spike, and Tom Becker. This was a very unusual configuration of people in my experience, and of course it all turned into a very smoffish discussion of the Worldcon that was just about to happen. It was one of those moments where I really felt I was in the heart of fandom, which definitely includes fake fans like Jim, who will never even know about this comment (if you publish it) unless Mark passes it along. But one of the things I love about fandom — and our connections in it — is that this communication may very well take place, just as all that fast and furious Worldcon gossip took place in The Better Place that strange, enchanted evening over a year ago and an ocean.

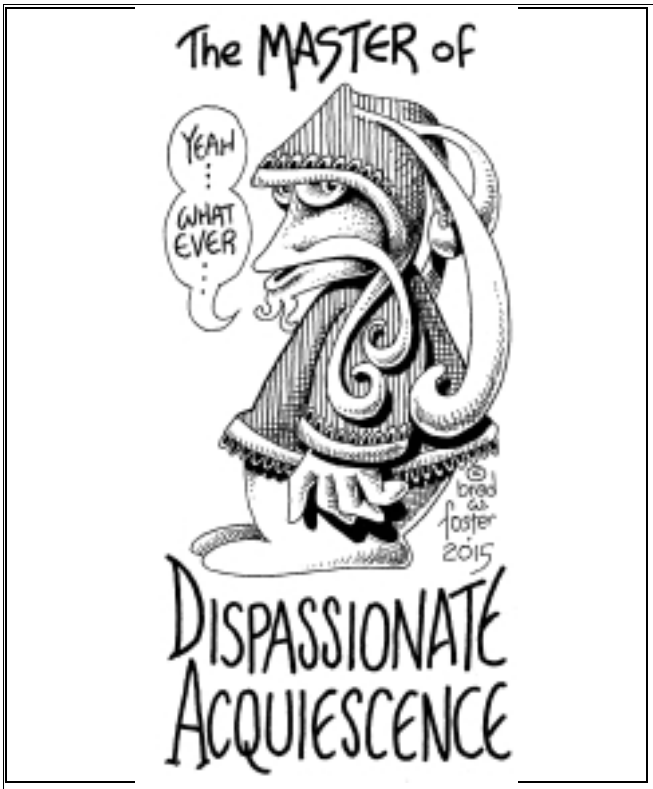
Anyway, I've never met Zubin Mehta, but as soon as Mark mentioned him, the thing that immediately sprang to mind was the line Mark cites from 'Billy the Mountain'. Mark mentions the Ben Watson book *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* in his Zappa-related letter in the new *Chunga*, but it's about something else entirely. 'Billy the Mountain' has long been my favorite song by Zappa, and I remember clearly (well, sort of) the first time I heard it. A young couple who had moved to Salem, Oregon from California, and whom I met while working in the X-Ray Department at Salem Hospital during my high school years, invited me over to their apartment for a kind of reunion during my freshman year of college. After dinner, they got me stoned (thus the 'sort of' clearly) and put on 'Billy the Mountain'. Within minutes I was laughing so hysterically that I had to lie down on the floor. Eventually Nate's mountainous face loomed over me and inquired whether I was okay. I was in heaven, as far as I was concerned!

Anyway, many thanks to Mark for explaining a joke in the song that has stumped me for over 30 years. I was never even sure that they were saying 'Oh Mein Papa', although that's what it always sounded like. It's just that the words made no sense to me, and now that the joke is explained ('Oh Mein Papa' is a song by Eddie Fisher, and Fisher equals fissure, which is what Billy the Mountain causes in the Earth's crust when he treads across North America). I have to say it's no wonder I didn't understand it. That's pretty effing obscure, and well beyond even rhyming slang on that front, I'd say. This kind of arcane scholarship is Mark's fannish forte, and only one expression of his genius.

**[*brg* My knowledge of Frank Zappa is almost zero, except for the album *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, with Papa John Creach's great violin solo. Yes, Mark's mind does work wonders — infinitely more subtle and amusing than my own.*]**

But I guess that actually exhausts my responses to Mark, so I'm going to pivot to what I've been reading, which seems like a safe enough general topic for *SFC*. Last year, because of the Puppies brouhaha, I actually read the three non-Puppy novels on the Hugo ballot, which was the first new SF I'd read in what seemed like eons (not counting the last of the Banks Culture novels, which I read after Iain Banks's death in 2014 in the run up to the Worldcon where he would have been Guest of Honour). I liked all three, too, although especially the eventual winner, Cixin Liu's *Three-Body Problem* and Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Sword*. I voted for Liu's novel over Leckie's, but only because Leckie had already won the Hugo the previous year for the previous volume in the 'Ancillary' trilogy. I ended up reading the third volume in that when it came out, and I found it (and the whole trilogy) utterly brilliant. Among other things, she includes a call-out to Banks in the third book that I really liked. (A character comments: 'What sort of name is that? Didn't Notai ships usually have long names? Like *Ineluctable Ascendancy of Mind Unfolding* or *The Finite Contains the Infinite Contains the Finite*?')

Lately I've been trying to focus on reading mostly women writers, in an attempt to correct for my tendency to do the opposite. At some point I stumbled across Leckie's list of her ten favourite SF novels (http://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/68381-the-10-best-science-fiction-books.html), which includes a lot of writers and books that I also love. I was intrigued, but not surprised, to see both Andre Norton and C. J. Cherryh on her list. Cherryh's influence on Leckie was pretty obvious, and Norton's influence on Cherryh is pretty obvious too. In any event, Leckie list got me going back and reading some of the early Cherryh novels I'd been curious about since seeing a reference to them on Usenet (rec.arts.sf.written) as 'magic mushroom novels'. Specifically, *Wave without a Shore* (1981), *Port Eternity* (1982), and *Voyager in Night* (1984) were described as books in which she headed off into pretty strange territory for someone who was also winning Hugos at the time for her blockbuster novels of adventure and political intrigue. *Cuckoo's Egg* (1985) is another offbeat novel from her early years that explores some of her favour-




ite themes from a very different viewpoint, but those other three books are very strange indeed, approaching the metafictional in the case of *Port Eternity*. Cherryh, in an interview a few years later, said that Donald Wollheim basically had an agreement with her that he would publish these nearly avant-garde works by her as long as she kept them short and kept sending him the blockbusters as well. It's hard to imagine any publisher giving a writer that kind of leeway in today's publishing environment, at least while still paying them a living wage. I was very much struck by the idea that these weird novels of Cherryh's ended up in the same mass market wire racks that were mostly filled with safer fare. What a strange era!

As for Norton, I had a couple of novels sitting on the pile from the last time I binge-read her, not long after she died, but I've also gotten more interested in her earliest SF novels, which I somehow never got to as a Norton-loving adolescent working my way through a shelf of her books at the Salem Public Library. They must not have had her '50s books any more by the time I was doing that. Probably never replaced them when the first editions wore out. One of the main things Norton, Cherryh, and Leckie share is an interest in orphans/outsiders who are thrust into a hostile alien environment in which they struggle to survive a contest amongst a myriad of half-comprehended political factions. Frequently the protagonists turn into aliens themselves; that's how they survive. It seems like a very fannish theme, doesn't it? A stranger in a strange land. The protagonists are required to control themselves emotionally, lest their vulnerability open them to threat, but eventually the emotional dams burst and temporary comfort is found. Well, I find a lot of appeal in these kinds of stories, which probably says something revealing about me. Mark Plummer's mileage may vary.

(29 February 2016)

**[*brg* I'm not sure I would deliberately seek out female authors in the SF field, but perhaps that's because many of the books by female authors that Claire Brialey mentions in her ANZAPAzines and in *Banana Wings* are published by smallish British companies whose books are very difficult to track down from Australia. In Australia, however, books by female authors dominate the dark fantasy and fantasy fields, and also appear quite often as prize-winners in the SF field. We really don't have many male SF writers from the last 20 years who come to mind as major figures: Greg Egan, Sean Williams (although I rarely see his books in local shops), and Sean McMullen publish overseas, but my mental list stops there at the moment. Rick Kennett publishes ghost and dark fantasy stories, as does Terry Dowling.**

**I'm afraid I didn't get past page 40 of the first Leckie book — I found the prose rather wooden, almost impossible to read. Or maybe I just couldn't visualise the characters or the background. However, Karen Joy Fowler's latest, and *Station 11*, are high on my list.**

**And I've never read any Cherryh or Norton, I must admit. Lots and lots of gaps in my SF reading.***

I have to admit that I found the opening of *Ancillary Justice* heavy sledding too, and I understand that most people do. She throws you into the middle of this very strange situation and doesn't give you much help sorting it out at first. I'm not sure what kept me going, but I think it was the tension between the two story threads that of course ultimately converge in a powerfully charged way. I'm not sure about the 'wooden' prose, although I think Rich Coad used a similar term. She does use a technique out of Banks that sometimes seems a bit precious and clunky to me in his writing too: a line of dialogue followed by a long bit of exposition/meditation followed by another snippet of dialogue at such a remove that sometimes it's hard to connect the two bits of dialogue. But ultimately Leckie is grappling with artificial intelligence in a very unusual way. The bit that really struck me in the first book was when she tossed off brief exposition about how AIs needed emotions in order to make decisions, otherwise they'd be stuck in logical loops trying to make choices between things about which they had insufficient information. All three books present tons of information about what the different characters are feeling, and this information is central to the protagonist's understanding of the agendas of different factions in the plot. It's unusual to see such emotional intelligence in a space opera military story.

(29 February 2016)

**[*brg* Thanks for providing a way in to *Ancillary Justice*, Randy. Too bad I've already sold my copy via Alan Stewart. If the Melbourne SF Club library was up and running, I could borrow a copy from there.**

**You mention Iain Banks. I've read almost all of his non-SF books, but very few of his SF books. Maybe I don't need to, now that Paul Kincaid has written his book-length study of Banks. (Recently accepted for publication.)**

**There are even one or two Philip Dick and Brian Aldiss books I haven't read. And I really must read all the Robert Aickman books I've bought over the years — I seem to be missing only one. Also quite a few Karen Joy Fowler books I haven't read, and some Elizabeth Hand books that I haven't been able to track down yet. And quite a few Lisa Tuttle books. No time .... no time ...*]**

It's a given that we'll never run out of books to read, isn't it? However, I should add that given a couple more minutes to think about it, the reason I was able to push my way through *Ancillary Justice* despite needing to go back and re-read much of the beginning seems pretty obvious. I wanted to read *Ancillary Sword* so I could decide whether it deserved a Hugo or not. I was determined to get through the first book so that I'd be ready for the second one.

(1 March 2016)

# Other bad news from true friends

**[*brg* Randy Byers is not the only person who made my 2005 trip so enjoyable who has suffered recently from the outrageous slings of bodily fortune.**

**In the last two weeks I've heard that JOYCE KATZ who, with ARNIE KATZ, was the major organiser of my trip, has suffered a major stroke. Although affected on her left side, already she is making a recovery, but has a long way to go. Best wishes from their Australian friends to both Joyce and Arnie.**

**The following (abridged) news was just as shocking when I received it, because I had had no warning. You can find the complete version in the editorial of the most recent edition of ROBERT LICHTMAN's *Trap Door*. Robert took over the American side of the organisation of the Bring Bruce Bayside Fund when Arnie and Joyce were not able to attend Corflu and Potlatch in San Francisco in 2005. I met CAROL CARR, his wife, for the first time in 2005. Another two true friends stricken:**

**ROBERT LICHTMAN**
**11037 Broadway Terrace,**
**Oakland CA 94611-1948, USA**

**Robert's summary and updating of his editorial, *Trap Door* 32, March 2016, pp. 12, 41**

[In 2004] my then-doctor noticed something in the blood test results for my annual physical that raised a red flag for him. A bone marrow biopsy confirmed his suspicions. I had a relatively innocuous, slow-growing (or never-growing) condition called MGUS ('mug-us'), which stands for — sit down! — 'monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance'. This meant there was an abnormal protein in my plasma cells, and it's unclear what caused it ...

Over the next ten years I dutifully took my blood tests and watched as the number of bad cells slowly rose ... In October 2014 the numbers suddenly jumped. They were still below the threshold for full-blown multiple myeloma ... The tests turned up a lesion on one of my ribs where the aberrant cells had decided to eat away at the bone. Treatment started in March 2015 ...

But 2015's health news hasn't been all about me. Over the July 4th weekend, Carol began to notice that she was making a lot of typing errors — but only with her left hand. When she next started having some weakness on her left side, she was pretty certain that she'd experienced a mild stroke. It turned out not to be a stroke, but a brain abscess on her right frontal lobe. This diagnosis gave us a (ahem!) heady mixture of terror and relief. She was operated on almost immediately, and the abscess drained ... The cause of the abscess, like the cause of my cancer, remains mysterious. After less than a week in hospital, she was transferred to an excellent rehab facility where she spent nearly a month working with some excellent physical therapists ... Now, aside from using a cane and experiencing some fatigue ('The family that naps together ...'), she's pretty much back to her normal self ...

My last round of chemo ended in early October 2015, and almost immediately I was scheduled to undergo radiation to deal with that lesion on my rib ... I started having severe lower back pain and weakness in my right leg that make walking and driving difficult. More tests determined that this was caused by a flare-up of disk degeneration in the lower back that was now pressing on my sciatic nerve. Did the hard surface aggravate what was already happening, or was it a coincidence? — yet another mystery ...

Instead of the robust, energetic person you know and love, moving quickly — according to Carol, much too quickly — through the universe, I'm now slowed down and walk more like those people I used to call 'old'. As you might expect, I'm not happy about this state of affairs, but glad that medical science continues to come up with new ways to keep me alive ...

Speaking of 'new ways', I started a fresh round of chemo around the time I published *Trap Door* 32 with a new drug that had only gotten FDA approval last November. It came with an extensive and scary list of possible side-effects, one of which was that my system might not be able to handle it at all. The initial infusion was done very slowly at its outset because of that, but happily I tolerated it and have had none of the side effects in subsequent sessions — a great relief.

The best news of all is that after completing the initial eight-week cycle of infusions every week my 'numbers' have improved enormously. The key number has gone down to what it last was in 2006, making Carol and me and my doctor very happy. This won't last forever — those crafty cancer cells have a way of figuring out new fronts of attack — but we'll continue to counter-attack as well.

(22 May 2016)

# Invisible worlds

**GERALD MURNANE**
**PO Box 40, Goroke VIC 3412**

**[*brg* I read your *Something for the Pain* last weekend with great enjoyment. The surprise is not so much enjoying pages of material about horse racing, an activity that is alien to me, but to find so much that bears directly on my own experience. But that was much of the attraction of *Tamarisk Row*, when I first read it more than 40 years ago — I felt that this book speaks to and for me.**

**As you would guess, the chapters that resonate most strongly with my own experience are the last**

**chapters, when you front up to Destiny and Free Will, and alternate universes and the like. I've always seen these as major themes of the literature I call 'science fiction'. Perhaps Éluard's 'invisible world' within our world describes best what I am looking for, although because of my upbringing and inclinations, I would never have thought to look for such a world within any sporting activity. But now I remember the sentence in your book (on p. 16) that echoes best my own experience: 'Racing was often for him what it has been sometimes for me: a sort of higher vocation excusing us from engaging with the mundane'. I have spent my whole life trying to escape the clutches of the mundane, which is why I was so overjoyed to discover the first signs of what I would later discover was science fiction when I was five years old. Imagining escaping from mundanity altogether by escaping from Earth! Well, I've learned much since then, including pretty strong evidence that there are no habitable bits of the universe we can travel to. Later I came to define a piece of science fiction as a fiction set in the future or an alternate past, rather than in the past or the present. But even then, I gained much from an insight in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, a book I might never have read if you had not pointed to it. To paraphrase what I remember of a book last read many years ago: Musil writes that at any moment of time anything might be other than what it is. Which I suppose ties in with your speculations about alternate universes. As you might know, there is a whole branch of fantasy devoted to alternate universes, which include detailed maps, descriptions of social systems and family structures, etc, but unfortunately nearly all of these novels resemble each other. Nearly all of them are by authors trying to recreate some of the excitement they felt when they first read *The Lord of the Rings*. Occasionally I find a book with a real sense of otherness, but not often.*]**

I was prompted to write today by my interest in the matter of alternative universes. I was re-reading your letter to me of a month ago, and a simple proposition occurred to me. First, tho, I have to mention a claim that I read many years ago by a woman whose husband and sons had an alternative universe that had arisen from their having set up, many years before, a simple model railway system. The system grew, as you can readily imagine, but not as some sort of reconstruction of an actual American railroad company or local route (the family concerned were Americans). No, the man and his sons made their railway landscape part of an alternative country somewhat like the USA but with a different history, culture, whatever. The alternative country absorbed more and more of the lives of its founders/discoverers. The woman writing about these developments reported with amazement that she observed her husband and sons one evening spending an hour and more at the dining table with pens and paper (this was all in the pre-electronic age) in an effort to decide on the prices of silver and gold in their railroad universe! Maybe they kept themselves abreast of the rises and falls in their stock-market also?

Anyway, the woman seemed to observe all this with condescension. She claimed that daydream-worlds were almost always the work of males. I thought no more of her claim until I recalled a few years later the Gondal-universe invented by the Brontë sisters, helped by their brother, Branwell.

I was going to write that I've devised or laid out or described in writing many an alternative universe — well, many an alternative district or landscape, usually with a racecourse in it, The Antipodean Racing Project, so to call it, which I began in 1985 and have kept going ever since, is far and away the most detailed and ambitious of all my schemes, and anyone inspecting it in the far future, when my archives are made public, will probably want to ask the question that occurred to Catherine, my wife, when I first showed the project to her in the mid 1990s: how on earth did I find the time to keep my secret world going while I was working full-time and caring for a family and writing book after book?

Yes, I was going to write what I eventually wrote in the previous paragraph, but I've sometimes wondered lately whether what I should write is not that I *devised* or *laid out* or *described in writing* any such thing as my alternative universe. I've sometimes wondered whether the essential quality of mine and of every other alternative universe is its having *pre-existed* my discovery of it. I mean, what if my two island-dominions with their forty-two race-courses and all their multitude of details were always *out there* or *in here* and waiting for someone to look with the right sort of gaze in the right direction and so to see them?

(27 November 2015)

# The shine on the skull

**MURRAY MOORE**
**1065 Henley Road, Mississauga,**
**ONT l4Y 1C8, Canada**

Here I was, wondering why Steve Stiles was not an *SF Commentary* cover artist, and *SF Commentary* 90 arrives. So, one thought I do not need to think. I cannot decide who best could write a story to go with Steve's art, Philip K. Dick or Jack Vance. Maybe Ron Goulart or Keith Laumer.

I am intrigued to see in this *SF Commentary* two pencil drawings by Jim Burns. Did Jim submit them?

**[*brg* He posted them on Facebook, then gave me permission to use them in *SFC*.*]**

The Ether Centre is either a fine name for a building in which a SF convention occurs (early space opera) or a bad name (surgical anaesthetic). For all I know you lot give ether an exotic-to-me verbal twist, e.g. the Etter Centre, or 'See you at the Eat Ur'. Did Continuum publish a convention newsletter, titled *Etherline*, perhaps?

From the shine on your skull, Bruce, in the photo of you presenting Merv Binns with his Peter McNamara Award — hurrah! — you are one with Telly Savalas and Yul Brynner, flaunting your skull. You could be a retired professional wrestler. Merv therefore is your trainer.

**[*brg* The shine was made even shinier by the fact that a slide was being projected behind me featuring white type that happened to fall right across my skull. Helena Binns did her best to take photos of the event, but all her photos showed the great white slash across my bean. Ted McArdle's photo, which I used, managed to disguise this oddity a bit.*]**

My news is that I, like Cath Ortlieb, am a secretary of a fan organisation. In January I will begin as the secretary of the board of the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association (CSFFA), but my duty is different than Cath's. The board meets most months in a chat room. All of the words typed are saved. My job as secretary will be to review the written record and distil the important bits. CSSFA Chair Clint Budd, when he recruited me, did not mention that I, like Cath, will be receiving 'peculiar requests from the Internet'.

I am pleased to report that during Loncon I met Gillian Pollack. I learned from her, in the Small World Department, that Gillian spent time here, in Mississauga, at the Mississauga campus of the University of Toronto.

No printed SF discussion during the 2016 Continuum? Melbourne fans should meet regularly, say monthly, to listen to a speaker share his knowledge about printed SF. Seriously, I envy your access to the Nova Mob meetings. On my only visit to Melbourne, in 2010 to attend Aussiecon 4, I believe the monthly meeting was cancelled.

**[*brg* Yes, because we conducted a special Nova Mob meeting at the convention itself. News of it probably got lost in the program book.*]**

Confoundingly, Lucy Sussex's *Blockbuster!*, in Canada, is priced $23.50 for trade paperback and $35.59 for e-book. ?backwards pricing not this is.

I said on an eList that 'I was perversely relieved to learn, reading the comments on the *File 770* report of Ned [Brooks]'s death, that Ned did not fall from his roof. Falling seemed wrong to me. A stroke? A heart attack maybe? In the comments (of the report of Ned's death), his executor George Beahm said the deck was damp, the ladder slid, and Ned fell not from the roof but from the ladder.

That Ned fell from a ladder and not from his roof is a detail without relevance to the result, yet I am confirmed in my feeling that Ned was not a man who would fall from the roof of his house.

Lloyd Penney mentions Clifford Simak as a poet of SF. I am reading the first volume of a series that will re-print all of Simak's short fiction. But at present only the first volume is offered as a printed book: volumes two and three are e-books.

In a fine used book store in Saratoga Springs, New York, during this year's World Fantasy Convention, I considered, but passed on buying, a collection of Stanislaw Lem reviews of imaginary novels. Did I err? Surely, an usual book for $10.

**[*brg* *A Perfect Vacuum: Perfect Reviews of Nonexistent Books* (HBJ, 1978) is one of my favourite Lem books I read during the 1970s and early 1980s. I must re-read it sometime.*]**

Searching our public library for Karen Russell I see a story by her in the 2008, 2010, and 2014 editions of *The Best American Short Stories*. I have added *Swamplandia!* to My Lists. I have 175 items on My Lists, books mostly, also DVDs, that interest me that I can borrow from our public library. The list costs me nothing, and the storage is elsewhere, also costing me nothing. No Strugatsky brothers though: *Hard to Be a God* I must buy.

Which is the best Jennifer Egan with which to begin?

**[*brg* *The Keep*, followed by *Look at Me*. Her recent, award-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is much less interesting than her earlier novels.*]**

Patrick McGuire responding to Steve Jeffery regarding readers ascending from crude writing to sophisticated writing: famous University of Toronto professor, like McLuhan, book about the Bible, that guy, I read that at bedtime he read SF. 'University of Toronto Bible expert'; no joy. 'famous university of toronto professor' leads to, yes, Northrop Frye, author of Anatomy of Criticism, Blake expert, sleepy-time SF fan.

Dave Freer is a Baen Books author and, as such, Bruce, I presume, not a type of writer of interest to you.

The date is 3 December, the time 10:22 p.m. When Mary Ellen and I returned from a long walk and a shirt for me, in mid-afternoon, in our mailbox I found *SF Commentary* 90. And, apart from eating my evening meal, I have read all 68 pages. A good day's fanac.

(3 December 2015)

**[*brg* Did *SFC* 91 reach you okay? I hope you noticed your noble visage on the back cover.*]**

Shock horror surprise yes!

(28 April 2016)

# From Kasey Chambers to Ann Leckie

**DOUGLAS BARBOUR**
**11655–72nd Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 0B9, Canada**

I've been listening to Kasey Chambers. I suspect you have mentioned her, but can't recall when. I am listening to *Carnival*, which is terrific alt.country Aussie-style. *Bittersweet*, her new album, I haven't heard enough of yet, but it too is good. I'm not quite so taken by her two collaborative CDs, but they're fine.

**[*brg* My first reaction to Kasey Chambers was that she was merely an imitation Iris DeMent, but I've warmed to her since then. Also, she seems to do well in America (has been on *A Prairie Home Companion*, for instance) without hitting the top of the charts. Her *The Captain* CD was number one on our pop charts for six months about 10 years ago. I have quite a few of her albums, plus two done with Shane Nicholson (then husband, now ex), and they are really good. But there are many female singers within the alt.country/blues field that I like a lot more. Especially Iris DeMent.*]**

I note the number of recent SF works by scientifically oriented writers. I'm reading Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* right now, and may have even included Alastair Reynolds's recent work, with his Africa-centred tales of a robustly colonised solar system. Also, Charles Stross has written wonderful novels about the truly 'post-human' robots living our future for us. In all of them the Earth of the 34rd, 24th, or 25th century has undergone mostly terrible changes, which we already know are coming. In 2312, the oceans have risen 11 metres, New York is a new Venice, the streets and avenues


have become canals at about the 12th floor levels of all the skyscrapers. Of course, science and technology have adapted. However, the tone is one of basic acceptance of how it will be, with stupendous loss of life, both human and animal, that necessarily accompanies such traumatic changes to Earth's ecosystem.

Of course, you and I won't be here (unless special life-extension discoveries happen very soon).

(5 December 2015)

**[*brg* I bogged down halfway through *2312*, and only reached page 60 of *Aurora*. This is no longer the Kim Stanley Robinson of the early short stories and novels.**

**Re coming disasters. A scientist friend, whose specialty is glaciology, was one of a group of scientists who became aware of global warning in the early seventies, based upon the evidence from the Antarctic ice cores, but nobody listened then except David Suzuki.*]**

I like the collaborations with Nicholson okay, but not as well as Chambers' solo CDs. I like Iris Dement, but what I've heard of the latest seems a little slack to me (ah, so we can disagree about something).

I am finally tracking down Sara Watkins's recent old albums; she sang a Jackson Browne song beautifully on the tribute album to him. It was one of my favourites from the past year.

Warren Haynes's new album, *Ashes & Dust*, an alt. country–blues–extended guitar thing, has been growing on me: I now really like it.

The Paris talks: Even hold further global warming to 2 degrees will not prevent a lot of disaster. I think it's interesting that the SF writers I've been reading find a way to both acknowledge the disaster and present a hopeful technological possibility that some parts of humanity will get through it. I'm enjoying *2312*, despite all its lists and other narrative interruptions, because it seems that Robinson is trying to imagine how people in space will manage on these smaller world. (Yesterday, I heard on the news stories of how living in weightlessness so far has only managed to age the astronauts with loss of bone density etc; so Stross's insistence on the fragility of the old humans as against the robot civilisation is darkly funny and pertinent).

(6 December 2015)

I am listening to CD 18 of that Beaux Arts Trio boxed set as I type: one of Beethoven's many trios, all delighted and complex, reminding one of just how much he wrote. Only in my seventh decade am I really getting into the real piano music of the nineteenth (and twentieth) century.

The Featured Letters: Jerry Kaufman is but one of many correspondents to mention Bishop's article on Philip K. Dick. I just reread, for the first time decades, *The Man in the High Castle* (my 1975 Gollancz hardcover edition, which I must have reviewed at the time), much of which I had forgotten, including his usual subtle touch with ordinary people as characters and the way he represents the US Reich and the German Reich itself mainly through reportage and propaganda, hearsay, and rumour — a very sly bit of narration. It is also rather interesting to read it at this point in the US's ongoing presidential primaries, with the Donald Trump seemingly set on becoming their own homegrown Mussolini, if not Hitler.

Nice of Jerry to recall the great *Pacific Northwest Review of Books*, which allowed many of us to review some really interesting stuff. I have to tell him, however, that Kathleen Fraser is a US poet.

I didn't mean to *accuse* Steve Jeffery of being a fan, and I certainly enjoy his locs, as they wander so intriguingly over vast territories. I may manage those three or four books month, too, but at least two will be SF/F, another these days might be a graphic novel, and there are the non-fiction. (I just read *H is for Hawk*, an amazing book, with a neat critical connection to T. H. White, mainly his *The Goshawk*, but also the falconry in *The Once and Future King*.)

Mark Plummer makes an interesting point about listening to classical music while reading because vocals would get in the way. I generally concur, although I can listen to roots music etc when reading fiction, but for serious stuff and poetry, jazz or classical is a must. But it's a must because music's kind of my drug, and if I don't put something on, I start thinking some piece of music, which takes my mind away from whatever else I should be doing.

I have bought Ruth Moody's CDs, and they're great. I would still hold up Frasey Ford's *Indian Ocean* as one of the best albums of the past few years.

I can't keep up with Patrick McGuire and his reading, but I do want to thank him, even if belatedly for saving me the trouble of finding out if I want to read all those J. D. Robb mysteries. A noble effort.

Yes, as Casey Wolf said, the CBC isn't quite what it used to be, but *Quirks & Quarks* remains very good. For various aspects of current affairs, *The Current*, if it's available as a podcast, is usually solid.

I had not myself seen the 'raft of alternate-universe novels in which the pro-German faction of the British aristocracy either concludes a dishonourable peace with Germany soon after the start of World War II, or at least credibly poses the danger of such an outcome', but I would certainly agree that Jo Walton's trilogy would be difficult to better. I should spend some time checking out places that would tell me all about the best new SF/F, but in fact I tend to browse my local library shelves or try something someone raves about, and every so often find out about a book some time after its publication.

Leigh Edmonds knows how to write a truly fannish letter of comment, and highly entertaining it is too (as were the few issues of his fanzine that I once received). I enjoyed all the ramifications.

I did read, finally, Neal Stephenson's *REAMDE* (the fact that I at first saw that as *REMADE* rather than *README* probably speaks volumes about my lack of any gamesman-

ship or even computer savvy). Any other writer should have kept such a thriller down to about 300 pages rather than the 1000 it takes up, but, at least for me, Stephenson is able to make the three or four pages describing the thoughts going through a character's mind during the two seconds of some violent event absolutely riveting. I read it with distinct pleasure.

Otherwise, we have read a number of the Phryne Fisher mysteries, after watching the third season of the TV series. The differences are a bit bothersome, and although I enjoyed the novels more than Sharon did, we both prefer the TV show. We are disappointed to hear that the producers intend to make a movie rather than a fourth season of the series. Both remain great fun, though.

**[*brg* I hadn't heard of the Phryne Fisher movie until you mentioned it in your letter. Yet on 7 May 2016 *The Australian Magazine* published a long article about Essie Davis, noting that the Phryne Fisher movie has been scripted, and only waits for Davis to find time to make it.*]**

I also enjoyed Charles Stross's *The Annihilation Score*, this time narrated by Bob Howard's wife Dominique. Despite the grand guignol comedy the series is getting darker.

Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Sword* and *Ancillary Mercy* are fascinating in their continuing cultural constructions and their working out of a limited AI's (because now in a single human body) attempts to do human politics ethically. The whole trilogy is solid SF speculation with a keen sense of characterisation that fits the invented world(s).

(16 March 2016)

# A luncheon of comment

**STEVE JEFFERY**
**44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon OX5 2XA, England**

Thanks for *SF Commentary 90*, where I find rather to my surprise that my various ramblings over a six-month period have been knitted together as a 'feature letter'.

The house is now about three crates of books lighter that it was this time last month following the last couple of weekends helping out behind the book tables at the monthly church hall Collectors' Sale. Because of Christmas bookings, the December sale was on the 5th rather than the end of the month, with November's being held the week before. Despite that, takings on both days were surprising good at around £80 (it goes to the church, not us).

Donating a couple of dozen books we know we won't read or re-read doesn't seem to have made any appreciable difference to our shelves — it'll need a skip for that, rather than a few folding plastic crates — but it's a start, and one we intend to continue though next year. And it does (nominally at least) clear some space before the inevitable influx of new books we've both bought each other for Xmas. (The ability to have multiple wish lists on Amazon has made birthday and Xmas so much less stressful if perhaps not so much fun as hunting for books in physical bookstores.)

The highlight of this issue, for me, has to be Yvonne Rousseau's discussion of Jo Walton's concept of the 'Suck Fairy' from *What Make This Book So Great*. This is brilliant and explains much. My reading tastes can't have been so naïve and unformed in the past, could they? Surely not. It must the Suck Fairy wot done it, honest.

I especially loved that passage about how we flesh out a whole episode in our imagination, adding detail and highlights and colour, and then we find that the original was barely half a line, a mere stage prompt for the scene we have staged, lit and directed in out head. I know I do do that, and I'm glad to know that I'm not alone. I used to be concerned that I read like this, and not paying as much attention to close critical reading of the 'text' as I should, but then I learned to stop worrying and love the story, even if it probably comes out rendered differently in my head than it was in the author's.

I suspect I am a visual reader rather than a textual reader. I imagine and remember images and scenes rather than sentences. I wonder, after re-reading Betty Edwards' *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* recently, whether this is more a left-handed thing. Left-handers tend to have a greater tendency to right-brain dominance, and this is the hemisphere that looks after spatial and visual processing, music, and 'back of the envelope' estimation, whereas the left brain is more dominant for speech, logic, and analytical calculation. Or so the theory goes. In practice, most people tend to process information on both sides at the same time, hence Edwards' exercises to try and deliberately disrupt the left brain critical analytical functions and push them to the background when (re-)learning how to draw.

Le Guin said the inspiration for *The Left Hand of Darkness* was an image in her head of two figures dragging a sledge across in a vast expanse of ice, so it seems to work both ways, at least for some.

As well as the Suck Fairy, there also seems to be an Edit Fairy. At least I am sure this is the reason why I can never find quotes and sentences that I remember being in a book when I pick it up and look for them. Or find that they are completely different to how I remembered them.

(7 December 2015)

***SFC* 91:** I do like the idea of having 'a luncheon of comment', which sounds so civilised. The nearest for me is, I suppose, our monthly SF group pub-meets, although we often end up talking about everything except SF while sampling the latest guest ales and choices on the menu board.

Was also greatly taken by the phrase 'combines the best elements of *Wuthering Heights* and Fritz Leiber' in your review of William Sloane's *The Edge of Running Water*: a sentence that is possibly unique in the history of SF criticism.

I keep seeing copies of Jane Harris' *Gillespie & I* in charity shops and am always reminded of you every time I see it. Perhaps I ought to try it.

**[*brg* Yes, try it. It starts as a fairly mundane historical novel, but soon changes into something else entirely.*]**

**Re films:** Yes, *Grave of the Fireflies* is absolutely heart breaking. I've only been able to watch this all the way through a couple of times.

We've seen *Ex_Machina* now. I picked up a discounted copy in a supermarket display just after Xmas, prompted by a review in an earlier *SFC*. I also have a copy of Spike Jonze's *Her*, which I've not had a chance to watch, and *Predestination*, which I put on my birthday wish list from Vikki, both also on your recommendation, and finally caught up with *Under the*

*Skin*, which is visually stunning (and sometimes more than a little confusing) and does seem to depart from Faber's original novel at several points. I ended up watching this alone, as it's another film that seems almost entirely shot in the dark or shadows (bits of it, with Johannson driving around brightly lit night-time city streets, strangely reminiscent of *Taxi Driver*) as Vikki's eye problems (she has lost most of the central vision in one eye and has to rely on peripheral fill-in) means she can't cope with this sort of 'atmospheric' lighting or make out what is going on half the time. But we did both watch *The Machine* (2013) the other night, another independent AI/consciousness film, directed on a relatively shoestring budget by Caradog W. James, which came across as an interesting cross between *Ex_Machina* and the female Terminator of the *Sarah Connor Chronicles*.

Other films seen (or seen again) in 2015 include *Moon*, *Valhalla* (weird, bloody and surreal), *Black Death*, and *Aguirre: Wrath of God*. Undoubtedly more, but these were the ones that stuck in memory. And we finally caught up to the end of Season 4 of *Game of Thrones*, and still have yet to slit the shrink wrap on the Season 5 box set.

You have never heard Jeff Lynne's *War of the Worlds*? I'm astonished. This is the only LP Vikki (who is not particularly an albums fan) has two copies of.

**[*brg* I've heard of ELO's *War of the Worlds*, did not buy a copy when it came out in the seventies. I understand there is now a new Jeff Lynne album. It's not a re-tread of *War of the Worlds*, though, although maybe something in the press made me think it would be.*]**

How do you find the time (let alone money) to watch/listen to all those DVDs, CDs and box sets? I still have films and CDs bought for me for Christmas unopened.

**[*brg* The obvious answer is: I don't. But, as my lists show, I get through a lot more watching, reading, and listening than it seems I'm doing at the time. One of my main activities, listening to ABC and community radio, is almost entirely undocumented. Elaine and I almost never watch real-time TV.*]**

*The Faces 1970–75*. Ah, the high point, when they were at their bluesy ramshackle best, before Rod turned in to a transatlantic crooner and Wood turned to Stone (sorry, couldn't resist that). The first vinyl album I remember buying with my own money was the Faces' *A Nod's as Good as a Wink*. (The second was probably Deep Purple's *Machine Head*.) I still break into a big grin when anything of theirs comes on the radio. (That bravura opening to 'Stay With Me' or 'Cindy Incidentally'.)

I looked up those R. A. Lafferty collections mentioned by Elaine on Amazon. However at £70 each, I think I may have to pass.

I can only admire Colin Steele's dedication in reading and reviewing all those *Hobbit* and *Game of Thrones* tie-ins, though I'm not sure that a reissue of Martin's and Tuttle's *Windhaven* counts as a tie-in, except by the most tenuous of marketing links.

I was grateful for Colin Steele's mention of *Clariel: The Lost Abhorsen* prequel from Garth Nix, which I added to Vikki's birthday list, only to discover that I have already bought it for her at Christmas. I honestly lose track of the various fantasy series and favourite authors she is currently following, and keep nagging her to make a list. It won't be the first time I have bought the same book twice because I couldn't work out what she has already and what she is still waiting for.

Also intrigued by the review of Brian Catling's *The Vorrh* in Steele's reviews section. This sounds like one to look out for, along with Jonathan Lethem's *Lucky Alan*, if that is in the same territory as Kelly Link's and Karen Russell's quirky, surreal and dark stories, as well as Marcel Theroux's *Strange Bodies*, mentioned in your 2014 round-up.

The *Encyclopedia of Exploration: Invented and Apocryphal Narratives* sounds fascinating and fun, but at $149 perhaps a pleasure to be deferred.

What is it with dystopias all of a sudden? Most of last year's Clarke Award list seems to be post-catastrophe dystopian novels of one form or another, and Colin reviews three in a row in the US SF books section. Is doom and gloom the new shape of SF?

(20 April 2016)

**[*brg* *The Vorrh* is one of the very few review copies I've received in the last 12 months. The style seems overdone rather than well-written, but it seems to be the only fantasy blockbuster I've received for years that might be readable.**

**The dystopias thing seems to be the result of the various YA novels series that have been turned into blockbuster films in recent years. Friends say the *Hunger Games* novels are very readable, but none of the film reviews has made me rush out to see the movies. But every YA author wants to be the next record-selling purveyor of the next post-apocalytic series.**

**I've just been reminded of how well post-catastrope themes can be written. Recently I finally caught up with Walter Tevis's *Mockingbird*. Now here's a neglected great novel of SF, although I did read it in a Gollancz SF Masterworks volume, so maybe Malcolm Edwards has kept it in print under the Gateway imprint. People know *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *The Hustler* (Tevis's best-known novels), but I never see mentions of *Mockingbird*.*]**

I've seen perhaps the first two of the *Hunger Games* series, up to *Catching Fire*, but neither inspired me to rush to watch *Mockingjay* Parts I and II at the cinema. The first two seemed to be a mash up of the Japanese *Battle Royale* and *The Running Man*, costumed out of *The Fifth Element* and the quirkier bits of early PDK novels. As for the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth — I've only seen (but not read) the books of this, but I believe they are being adapted as movies on the back of the success of *Hunger Games*.

I reviewed *Black Death* in *Prophecy* a few months back — which features Sean Bean suffering yet another grisly ending (he must get tired of flicking through scripts to where is character is killed off) and very young Eddie Redmayne as the novice monk, Edmund. Tim Illingworth (I believe) plays the 'baddie' (depending on your view) as the head of the pagan village that seems curiously free of the plague that affects everywhere else.

(20 April 2016)

# Thinking about music and fannish history

**LEIGH EDMONDS**
**Ballarat East VIC 3350**

I started reading *SFC* 90 on a platform at Central Station in Sydney and finished reading it on a platform at Southern Cross Station in Melbourne. This is a bit more travel than *SFC* is used to while being read, I expect. I'd loaded it onto my tablet a week or so back but getting prepared for the seminar in Sydney took up my time, and then the seminar was so interesting and tiring that I did not feel like reading in the evenings while I was in my little motel room. So, while I'm waiting for the train to come and pick me up to go to the airport for the trip back to civilisation I finally felt ready to embark upon the current issue. I'd just started reading the first of the 'Feature Letters' as the airport shuttle bus arrived at Ballarat and started reading them when on the train down to Melbourne yesterday for a visit to a specialist to see about some dental work that will be necessary following on for the assault all those years ago. I didn't get much reading done on the train on the way down. I had a snooze instead. I didn't have anything to read on the way home either because I got to the back page just as it was time to board the train. That was a bit startling, I came to the end of my letters and my statement that I was off to do some more research and tried to go on to the next page, and there wasn't one. Are you sure that *SFC* 90 ends at the end of my letter? This must be about the only disadvantage to reading on a 'device', as they call them these days, that I can see anyhow.

I was interested that a few of your readers don't like reading from screens. I guess this is a personal thing but I don't seem to have any trouble. I do like having the ability to carry around a pile of books and articles in one little package, rather than having to drag around lots of paper. The other thing I've been reading, on and off, it Doc Smith's *Triplanetary*, which I had, at one time, downloaded. I was finding it quite enjoyable, given when it was written and its intended readership, but, being unaccustomed to all the controls on my device I seem to have deleted it so I haven't got past the first couple of chapters yet. As well as *SFC*, *Triplanetary*, and a couple of issues of *Technology and Culture*, I've also stored about 90 albums of good oldfashioned rock and roll on the device — the latter because I haven't got around to loading them onto my iPod, which is, sad to say, in a state of organisational chaos.

This letter of comment is not going to be terribly long, mainly because there was not too much in this issue that sparked my interest. This, I think, might be the result of having so many letters and so little (nothing, actually) of meaty substance to get cranky about. I did enjoy reading snippets from so many interesting people, and finding out what many of them are up to these days, but not much inspires me on to response through your letter column.

For example, I would probably have forgotten all about Yvonne Rousseau's Suck Fairy had it not been for glancing out of the aeroplane window at the land below. Bruce, it is terrible, so dry and lifeless. I was reminded of the Suck Fairy, not so much because it had made the land suck but because it looked to me that somebody had sucked all the life out of the land. If there had to be a colour for it, the best one I could come up with was 'straw'. Even then, the yellowness of straw had been sucked out too. I recall flying over North America and Europe and looking down on what seemed to be endless fertility and green, but even the most fertile part of Australia is looking lifeless, and it's only the second week of summer. I fear that the treaty they signed in Paris this past weekend is too little and too late.

The other thing that struck me in this issue was your description of how you listen to your music. Very fastidious of you. I'm surprised that you haven't taught yourself to read music so that you could get even more involved. You don't read music, do you? The way you describe your listening experience, I gather not. Like Elaine, Valma likes her quietness so I do all my listening on wireless headphones. Top of the range, and worth every cent. I seem to recall that we've discussed this previously but apparently you haven't taken to my suggestion. Having taught myself to read music decades ago I have a shelf of scores close at hand if I feel like reading along — not that I'm very good at it. I usually get lost in presto movements and repeats often trip me up too. I find that on You Tube there are many pieces of music with the scores so you can read along. Sometimes the performances are not the best, but the scores change page at the appropriate point so even if I get lost, I catch up when the page changes.

It occurs to me that perhaps we listen to different things in music. It seems that a lot of people listen to texture and sound quality while I mainly listen for structure. This means I'm not put off so much by less than perfect performances.

Most of the listening I do these days is ABC Classic FM between 9 and 12 in the morning and after 10 in the evening. Most of the time I'm doing something else — such as writing at the moment — but if the music is worth listening to, I'm often distracted enough by it to stop and listen more fully. But, just like everything else, there is still a lot of dull and dreary stuff in the 'classical' music that the ABC plays today. I like listening to music from the radio because it broadens my horizons, more of less. Instead of hearing music that I already know and own, I get to hear new stuff all the time. Sometimes I'm tempted to buy it too. I was excited to hear that all Martha Argerich's DGG recordings had been released in a boxed set, at a good price too, but it seems that she hasn't recorded the Chopin Nocturnes for DGG so I didn't buy the set after all. Probably my loss.

This reminds me of my brief stay in Sydney and the music I listened to while I was there. I usually take my radio with me when I travel to see what is in the air waves in that city. (By the way, I found I was staying a block or two from the ABC head offices in Ultimo. I've never really thought of the ABC (or any radio station) as having a real physical presence, but there you are.) The motel was just behind the University of Technology Sydney, and by chance the first station I heard was 2SER which, I gather, broadcasts out of UTS. There were the usual young people talking earnestly about the same things that we used to talk about decades earlier, so some things never change. In some ways the music hasn't changed either. On Friday night a couple of people were playing down the top ten or twenty albums that the listeners had voted for 2015. I listened with fascination but, I must say, no great pleasure. There were the usual young people bleating about the problems and pains of life — I felt like ringing them up to say that it doesn't get any better and they may as well get used to it. The presenters knew their stuff and

**19 Somerset Place, the long-time home of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club (1960s), as it is today. McGills Newsagency, whose warehouse it was, no longer exists in Elizabeth Street. (Photo: Leigh Edmonds.)**

referred to all the influences that the various artists and groups had learned from, and it all seemed very erudite. The only two songs that really interested me were a bit more rock an roll than sort of ballads about the state of life. The presenters listed their influences, names of earlier groups that I'd never heard of, but to me the two songs sounded like Radio Birdman and the Saints on bad days. Am I getting old and less tolerant?

Speaking of tolerant, I thought that Patrick McGuire was a bit intolerant in his views about what is SF and what isn't. Perhaps dogmatic might be a better word. I don't see the point in spending too much time debating this topic. People will buy and read what they like, and there's not too much you can do about that. I suppose, however, that what people buy and read comes back to the business of marketing and market segmentation, which I also wrote about in this issue.

(15 December 2015)

Isn't it funny how the stars sometimes align and things come together in unexpected ways?

As some of you will already know, I've decided that my next history project is going to be a history of Australian SF fandom from 1956 to 1975 (Olympicon to Aussiecon). When it is published in three or four years from not it will be my fifteenth published history. I've chosen this date range because it covers not only a period in which Australian fandom underwent a major change but was also a period in which Australian culture and society underwent major changes, and I want this history to explore how these changes affected Australian fans. More of that later.

Today I was in Melbourne at the State Library concluding some research for my current project and had a spare half hour to kill before catching the train back to Ballarat. I was wandering along Elizabeth Street and glanced across the road. 'That's where McGills used to be', I thought to myself, so I took a photo.

McGills is where Merv Binns used to work, the only place in Melbourne where you could buy current SF. Merv also used to put little pamphlets in these books inviting readers to visit the Melbourne SF Club, which had its home in those days at 19 Somerset Place, just around behind McGills. I went there in the first weeks of 1966, a rather daunting experience for a youngster just moved down to the big city from the bush. Reflecting upon this, I wandered around to Somerset Place, which is a lot more lively than it used to be in 1966, and took a couple of photos of 19 Somerset place as it looks today. The red door is, as I recall it, the entrance to the building.

The picture of the white van in Little Bourke Street (at the end of Somerset Lane) is a reminder that there used to be a pool hall down a flight of stairs just where the red restaurant entrance now is. It was here that several of us younger fans spent some time pretending that we knew how to play snooker.

What makes all this a little more interesting is that it is now only a couple of days before Easter 2016. Fifty years ago, over Easter 1966, the first convention in Australia in ten years took place in the MSFC's clubroom upstairs at 19 Somerset Place. It was the event at which such landmarks in fannish history as *ASFR* were born, as well as my own enthusiasm for fandom. Interesting how I would not have remembered this anniversary had I not been in Melbourne and just happened to be strolling along Elizabeth Street, thinking about fannish history.

I gather that there is a convention in Brisbane this Easter weekend. I wonder if the folks there will reflect on this anniversary and perhaps mark it in some way. Perhaps not.

(3 March 2016)

# Religion, SF, and McGuires

**PATRICK MCGUIRE**
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**Columbia MD 21046, USA**

Many thanks several times over to Murray Moore for mentioning *Murdoch Mysteries*. I had not been aware of this Canadian TV series, although I had (long ago) read a few of the novels on which it is loosely based. Wikipedia tells me that one season of it was shown on US public television, but either the stations local to me did not carry it, or I simply missed it. After that, in the US it evidently moved to cable, which I do not subscribe to. Fortunately, my local library proved to have the DVDs. The novels, at least those I read, were naturalistic, but by season 7 (the place where, for no particularly good reason, I started), which is set in 1901, the TV show frankly introduces technological anachronisms, in something of the same spirit as the old TV show *Wild, Wild West*, although not taken to the same extreme. Murdoch is played so straight as to be humorous, like a toned-down version of the Mountie protagonists in the old series *Dudley Doright* or *True North*. (Murdoch is, however, a Toronto city detective, not a Mountie. Added later: nonetheless, in the

second season we learn that he has a half-brother who *is* a Mountie, and who is not toned down much at all.) I eventually performed a little research on Toronto circa 1900. It was then the second-largest city in Canada, but only had a population of around 200,000, lower at the time than that of any US city that a foreigner is likely to have heard of. The small population would seem to afford little scope for serious crime or detection; not that the show would have to be realistic in that regard. In any case, I am not sure how much of the metro area was included within city boundaries (Toronto's boundaries expanded drastically in the 1990s; perhaps before that it had 'suburbs' within walking distance of the city centre, as does Melbourne), nor if the Constabulary had jurisdiction in the surrounding area. Several shows do portray the Constabulary at work in rural areas. It would be a bit odd, although not impossible, for those to be inside city limits.

I mentioned in an earlier letter of comment that a local public television subchannel featuring British programing, WETA-UK, has concluded that Australia is part of the United Kingdom and shows several Australian detective series. Perhaps in the future it will draw the same conclusion about Canada and add *Murdoch*. In 1901, the flag official in Canada was, after all, the Union Jack, and it shows up a lot in the series. Per the Wikipedia, unofficially the Canadian Red Ensign was also commonly displayed, but I have not noticed one of those in the four episodes I've seen so far. Nor in the many episodes I've viewed since I wrote that. (Perhaps because a Union Jack can be bought off the shelf, whereas a period-accurate Canadian Red Ensign — the design was changed later — would have to be specially made up?) I've already been back to the library for more DVDs, but I suspect that I will have to space out the viewing, or else the humor and the meta-references could become cloying.

Later: I now have viewed some of the shows from the first season (although not the very first shows, since that disc was out at the library), and those are not anachronistic to the same extent as in Season 7, and Murdoch is played more naturalistically.

Murdoch is a Catholic at a time when the power structure in Toronto was overwhelmingly Protestant. I believe that in the novels this led to friction with his superiors in the Constabulary. Discrimination against him does show up occasionally in the TV series. In one show, he is denied a promotion to Inspector (basically, police-station chief) on the basis of religion. (Oddly, in another episode, the Inspector at a different Toronto station is named O'Connor — true, he could be a Protestant, even with that name.) In Season 7, the most prominent manifestation of Catholicism is Murdoch's crossing himself, using broad theatrical motions, every time he encounters a corpse. In Season 1, he already crosses himself, but more naturally, with more economical motions like a Catholic really would have used. Murdoch is also shown going to confession, but that whole process is messed up by the scriptwriters in ways too numerous to mention. Even in these days of waning church attendance, I really don't think it would have been so hard to find in Canada someone to ask about such things.

Not that in Australia *Miss Fisher* does any better. Most egregiously, one *Miss Fisher* episode revolves around a Bible that a Catholic supposedly always takes to mass. The degree of ignorance embodied in that is stupefying. Certain flavours of Protestants take Bibles to Sunday services. Catholics in the 1920s took missals to mass. Did *no one* associated with the production of the episode not know even that much? (In the TV series, Constable Collins starts out Protestant but converts to simplify his impending marriage to Dot. I don't actually recall how the books originally identified him, but in a recent novel Collins reminisces about going to Catholic school, so unless Greenwood made a continuity error, in the novels Collins was Catholic from the start.)

Later: Acorn Media distributes the DVDs in the US for many British shows, plus both *Murdoch* and *Miss Fisher*. The promotional trailers on one DVD start out with a heading of something like 'The Best of British Television', and then go on to include, along with British shows, trailers for both *Miss Fisher* and *Murdoch*. So Acorn, at least, has already decided that Canada, like Australia, is part of the UK.

Still later: I have not quite been binge-watching *Murdoch,* but I have been running through perhaps two or three episodes a week. Since the library has eight TV seasons plus the three made-for-TV movies that were produced before the series started, it will still take me several months to get caught up. (The movies are closer in tone to the books, which makes them pretty gritty and full of Victorian social horrors.) One TV episode seems to demonstrate that the Murdoch screenwriters, like the Fisher ones, think that all Christianity is *sola scriptura* Protestantism. A group of Irish–Canadians, explicitly Catholics, are Irish nationalists engaged in a conspiracy against the Crown intended to help end British domination of Ireland. Their cover for their meetings is that they are attending what is explicitly called 'Bible study'! There are various church-sponsored optional devotional, social, and educational activities that Catholics might have been attending circa 1900 and that could have served as a cover. Some of them would have involved the Bible one way or another. But I am reasonably confident that none of them was called a 'Bible study,' and that this is something that anyone with the least historical sense should have known.

Later: Similarly, one show, I think one of the movies, shows Murdoch stripped down for a boxing match, and we see that he wears around his neck under his shirt a plain cross on a chain. This might not be flatly impossible, but it is much more likely that in 1900 a Catholic layman would have been wearing, if anything, a religious medal. Possibly the producers went with a cross instead to make it more immediately obvious to viewers that the object had religious significance. In that case, you would have thought they could at least have used a small crucifix, not a plain cross, which is more characteristic of Protestants. One of the TV-show episodes does depict Murdoch receiving a gift of a St Michael's medal, so perhaps someone with a glimmering of Catholic background knowledge had something to do with one of the episodes. That person presumably left, since later we are told that a civil annulment obtained by perjury would have dispelled any Catholic reservations Murdoch might have about marrying a woman with a living husband. (Spoiler warning from here to paragraph's end.) Fortunately, the husband later is murdered. When, in a late episode Murdoch and his non-Catholic love finally do marry, they do so before the altar in a Catholic church. I doubt that this setting is accurate for Canada in the early 1900s, but I am not positive. By the time my Catholic father and Protestant mother married in the US in the 1940s, the ceremony had to be held elsewhere (as best I recall being told, it took place the parlour of the rectory). However, new steps to discourage mixed marriages had been taken after the time of the episode, in the 1918 canon law revision, and in any case the rules in Canada may have been different. Alternatively, the depiction may be been out of ignorance or conscious artistic licence. (Not all of the intentional anachronisms in the series are technologi-

cal.) Official Catholic attitudes toward mixed marriages changed drastically after Vatican II in the 1960s, of course.

A couple of Murdoch episodes deal with a posited visit to Toronto by Arthur Conan Doyle (not yet knighted). I am happy to say that everyone in the episodes understands where his surname starts, and calls him 'Mr Doyle,' not 'Mr Conan Doyle.' The show does seem to exaggerate his degree of interest in Spiritualism as this point. As I understand it, although Doyle had displayed some interest earlier, Spiritualism expanded into a life's mission only after his son was killed in the First World War. (But then again, as I said, the show is often deliberately anachronistic.) For a devout Catholic, Detective Murdoch proves implausibly eager to attend séances in his private capacity, as well as, more understandably, as part of official investigations. The Catholic Church took an exceedingly dim view of Spiritualism and séances on multiple grounds.

*Murdoch Mysteries* even has an Australian connection. I learn from the Wikipedia that Helene Joy, the actress who plays Murdoch's love interest, is an Australian who started her acting career there, but then moved to Canada. She does an impeccable Canadian accent, although it probably helps that she is playing a woman who speaks in a highly educated manner. Helen Joy still speaks in a Canadian accent when appearing in her own person in the making-of featurettes. If she isn't just staying in character, she may have adapted to the country. South of the border, I would call her accent General American, but even though one widespread Canadian accent is virtually identical, I imagine it has a different name there. There do exist accents unique to Canada, such as Constable Crabtree's Newfoundland accent. In 1900 Newfoundland was a Crown colony, not part of Canada, so Crabtree must have immigrated. Or at least he grew up in Newfoundland per late episodes, although this is contradicted by early shows ignoring his accent and showing that he was born in or near Toronto and has numerous relatives there.

Another bit of TV that I have been watching lately is the 1959–60 series *Men Into Space*. I had seen this as a pre-teen child and had read Murray Leinster's book tie-in (which as I recall consisted of story versions of several episodes plus a linking frame). To my considerable surprise, this ancient B&W series showed up (at the ridiculous hour of 7:30 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays) on a broadcast-TV subchannel (the otherwise nearly worthless Comet Network). The special effects are laughable, but the scripts often turn out to be surprisingly good. (So far, despite my loyal childhood viewing and reading, such is human memory that only one bit of one story looked familiar.) Generally (and with some glaring exceptions) the episodes either are scientifically accurate for their time, or involve only a little hand-waving. Although NASA had already been founded, evidently the extent of its responsibilities were still unclear, and the manned space program is depicted as being in the hands of the Air Force, which provided technical advice to the show. (This might have been one reason for the show's short lifetime, as it became clearer that NASA was running the real space program as a civilian enterprise, despite the predominance of Air Force and Navy pilots among the astronauts.)

Despite the Air Force management, all of the activity in space seems to be peaceful exploration and research, and many civilian scientists go along in the capacity of what NASA would later call mission specialists. For most of the season, the show seemed to have a policy of saying little about the space programs of other countries, although the implication was that several had such programs. In one early episode a representative of the British manned space program does show up, but only as the recipient of an infodump, not unlike the Australian minister of transport in Heinlein's 'The Roads Must Roll.' Policy evidently changed late in the season, since in one episode 'the Russians' have set up a Moon base and have launched a manned Mars flyby mission from it. They are consistently called Russians, not Soviets, and there is no clear indication that the Cold War is still on, so with a little stretching this portrayal could be seen as prescient. Their spaceship does have a red star on it, but real-world post-Soviet Russia still uses that insignia. The Russians also figure in a second episode, and one episode deals with the British space program. The latter episode is rather condescending toward the Brits, but at least they have a manned space program, unlike in the real world. They even somehow manage to launch from the British Isles rather than from an overseas site such as Woomera. Since they are using multistage chemical rockets and presumably do not want to drop expended stages on Europe, all I can figure is that either the flights are going into polar orbit or they are orbiting east-to-west, not only losing the speed advantage of Earth's rotation, but having it subtracted from their launch speed (and increasing the speed of any foreign-origin space junk they might run into). As I write, the series on *Comet* has finished up with a landing on Phobos but a failure to reach Mars itself, and then started over from the beginning (I evidently discovered it nearer to the end than to the beginning). I hope *Comet* keeps running it until I have seen it all! Later: I am distressed to find that, according to the episode list available online, *Comet* seems to have skipped one episode. Perhaps they will show it later out of order. However, I may have to shell out for the DVDs if I want completeness. Fortunately, the DVD set seems to be fairly cheap.

In the show, as was all too often true in those days, non-whites are missing. Attitudes toward women are pretty cringeworthy, although not totally hopeless. Even so, the program makes me nostalgic for the extensive space program we could have had, if we had been willing and able to pay for it, and had we proceeded a little more rationally. And perhaps if nature had been a little more generous about things like materials suitable for heat shields and high-energy chemical fuels. Practically everything the show depicts are things humans have not done in space to this day, 50-plus years after it was made. Per the Wikipedia, in the UK *Men Into Space* was aired in the BBC time slot that soon thereafter was to be occupied by *Doctor Who*. Later: there turns out to be a good article on *Men Into Space* in the online *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* dated 2012, which is evidently near the time when the series DVDs appeared on the market. It says that the action in the Leinster tie-in is not closely connected to the series episodes.

On the print front, I recently read the latest Bujold novel *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen*. In my loc in *SFC* 85, I complained about the bad art on the covers of Bujold books. I am happy to report that the US hardcover of *Gentleman* has an attractive and relevant cover, featuring abstract representations of DNA molecules superimposed on a starscape. The book also, curiously, has a color frontispiece with a hideous painting. (It does depict a legitimate setting in the novel and the idea is good, but the execution is terrible, or at least so it appears in reproduction.) My personal conjecture (backed by no external evidence) is that the frontispiece was originally intended to be the cover, but that Bujold or someone at Baen vetoed that use for it, leading to the unusual existence of a color frontispiece so as not to waste


the rejected painting. (The cover painting, but not the frontispiece, is also used on the audio book.) The book seems to be relatively free of continuity errors, but I think I have found a major one. (Mild spoiler warning.) As I mentioned in a previous loc, and as Bujold herself had confirmed in an online FAQ that I located when I began to doubt myself, Miles's mother Cordelia is some sort of very liberal Christian, at least through Miles's early adulthood. By the present novel, set 20-odd years later when Miles is 43, she is a widow (as we knew by the end of the earlier *Cryoburn*), and her thoughts, which we are privy to since she is a viewpoint character, often turn to her late husband Aral. Contrary to what one might expect, however, there is not the slightest indication that she believes that Aral survives in the afterlife. Not only does she never address him directly in her thoughts, but she never otherwise indicates that she believes he lives on. Has Cordelia lost her faith somewhere along the way? This would be fairly plausible, but none of her reflections suggests this either. When someone who has believed at least into her fifties subsequently loses faith, it should leave psychic traces. In the novel, however, religion seems to be a complete non-issue. Jo Walton has written that, for some reason, writers often find it much more difficult to catch inconsistencies in their own work than they do in the work of other writers. But we know that Bujold has both beta readers and editors. I see this as one more instance of an inconsistency that a competent editor should have caught (especially since, as I previously noted, Bujold is probably Baen's most important single author) if a beta reader had not done so at an earlier stage. If publishers do not add value to books, among other things by catching continuity errors, then authors, especially ones who already possess an established readership, might as well just self-publish and retain more of the proceeds for themselves.

But let me get to the lettercol that takes up more than half the issue. My sympathies on the fiasco with Werner Koopmann, and to all the other people in the lettercol reporting either health problems or the death of loved ones. *Starost' ne radost'* ('old age is no joy'), as the Russians say. (On the other hand, I've seen surveys indicating that old people are more satisfied with life than young ones, presumably having learned some wisdom and ability to cope.)

Kim Huett reports among other things that J. M. Walsh told Walter Gillings in 1938 that he enjoyed writing sf more than mysteries. Kim finds this unlikely, since Walsh wrote so little science fiction. On the other hand, there was not much chance of getting sf published in book form by 1938, so financial necessity may have kept Walsh at his mysteries. I see from *Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers* that there were indeed British book publications of *Vandals of the Void* and *Vanguard to Neptune* in 1931 and 1932 respectively, but all of his sf later than that seemingly appeared only in magazines. (The Walsh entry was written by Walter Gillings, although Gillings had died by the time the reference work was actually published.) Walsh himself died in his fifties in 1952. If he had lived even a decade or two longer, he would have made it into the era when sf book publication was a paying proposition. True, by then he might have been too invested in his mystery novels to make sf financially attractive, and he might not have managed to adapt to then-current standards — certainly the ludicrous science of *Vandals* would not have passed muster in the sixties or seventies.

Lloyd Penny praises Clifford Simak. There is an author I feel I ought to like better than I do (a perhaps paradoxical situation that does in fact arise from time to time). I recently attempted to reread *Way Station*, but I was derailed by what struck me as the unappealing and perhaps implausible passivity of its protagonist. Maybe I will try rereading a different one of his novels. If memory serves, circa 1970 I was already struck by the spectacular anachronism in one Simak book, I imagine from the late thirties or early forties. In it, many decades in the future, in a civilisation with interstellar travel, a bored reporter sits at his desk and flicks paperclips into the mouth of his ink bottle. Heinlein never explained exactly what, in his future history, a 'stylus' was, but from context it was clearly a writing implement that was better than a banker's pen or even a fountain pen, sort of 'predicting' the ballpoint pen.

Lloyd mourns many recent deaths, but I think he is needlessly making things worse for himself by listing not only people he knows, or at least people he has seen in the flesh such as authors as at sf conventions, but actors and the like. With very few exceptions (perhaps Leonard Nimoy), I see no reason to mourn them any more (or less) than to mourn the anonymous mass of unknown ordinary people who die every day. Does it matter to Lloyd or to me whether some actor has died, or has just left show business and now lives happily as a private person? Are they any more lost to us in the one case than the other? In the same vein, I object to the way that the obituaries in *Ansible* and some other sf news sources are padded out with the deaths of actors who maybe made one or two (bad) sf movies, but whom I certainly do not count as part of the 'family'.

Lloyd further says he does not want an e-reader and cannot afford books. At least in most parts of the First World, there is always the public library. A lot of the sf people who I know make steady use of it, as do I myself. Even Jo Walton has made it clear in her Tor.com blog that she is a heavy library user. Second, at least in the US, a huge number of used sf paperbacks are available via the Internet for around four dollars each including postage, and some hardcovers (often library discards) for only a little more. Is the situation so different in Canada? Of course, by his subsequent 11 June letter Lloyd seems to have found enough reading material. At that time he was preparing to read *The Messiah of the Cylinder* (1917). (Spoiler warning.) I greatly enjoyed that novel, despite the fact that it probably embodies the worst and most quickly refuted 'prediction' in all of sf: in the novel — the pious Russians save the civilised world from totalitarian socialism!

In his comment to Milt Stevens, Bruce says that the

Australian general reader still finds sf frightening and has to be tricked into reading its more 'literary' manifestations, which are never labelled as science fiction, while at the same time the most popular movies are sf or fantasy. He finds this a paradox.

**[*brg* I must have given the wrong impression. In his talk to the Wheeler Centre audience in early 2015, author Michel Faber said that his novel *The Book of Strange New Things* was science fiction, but that his publisher would not apply such a label to the book (or to Faber's first novel *Under the Skin*) because it would 'frighten the readers'. The paradox is that the SF label does not frighten off viewers of major films. I can't believe that members of Faber's intended audience would be so pure that they would avoid all the many major SF films that are around.*]**

I think the situation is similar throughout the Anglosphere and probably far beyond it, but I see no real contradiction. SF movies today seldom have much to do with written sf. They are all about spectacle. I think the last non-spectacle but halfway successful sf film that might have satisfied a genre sf reader was *Gattaca*, which came out so long ago that I have it on VHS (although I am not sure I still own a functioning VHS player). Sometimes spectacle can be combined with sfnal values in a way that appeals to different viewers on different levels, as in *The Martian* (reportedly — I haven't seen it yet) or possibly *Ender's Game*. More frequently, the films do their best to bypass the viewer's reasoning faculties entirely. They plug directly into emotions. To recoup their costs, spectacle films have to attract a viewership so wide as to dwarf both the mainstream fiction-reading public and the sf-reading public. Accordingly, the likes and dislikes of those tiny groups are of no relevance.

Randy Byers mentions the admirable translator Michael Kandel. He had just left one university at the time I arrived there to take a job-related course, and as far as I know, our paths have never come even that close to crossing at any time since. He should be in his mid seventies now, so if his health remains good he may well still be active. I think he would have been an infinitely better choice to translate *Solaris* than the person who recently did the new direct translation from the Polish. (For rights reasons, I believe that translation has appeared only as an audiobook and an ebook.) On a podcast, Gary Wolfe characterised that translation as 'adequate'. I found it rather to be unreadable, since it 'translated' Lem into a pseudo-dialect that bore no resemblance to idiomatic English. (In that pseudo-dialect, the lower surface of a shower cabinet is the 'ground', not the 'floor' or 'bottom.' The section of an extrasolar space station housing the [FTL] radio equipment for communication with Earth is the 'radio station', not the 'radio room' or 'radio compartment'. And on and on.) I presume this resulted from being slavishly overliteral. The original English translation was made from the French translation rather than directly from the Polish and it probably has infelicities, cuts, and inaccuracies, but at least it is written in something resembling English.

**[*brg* Because it is available only as a e-book, I had not read the new translation of *Solaris* . Thanks for the warning, should it ever be issued as a regular book.*]**

Franz Rottensteiner says that *Hard to Be a God* was selling poorly until the Russian film appeared, when sales picked up. I suspect that the problem may have been the 'literary' vs genre divide. Chicago Review Press chose Hari Kunzru to write the foreword. I had to look him up, but he turns out to be a prominent British mainstream novelist (he did write a tolerably intelligent foreword). This choice suggests CRP was marketing primarily to the 'literary' readership, which I take to be that publisher's customary market anyhow. Since *HBG* is pretty much a work of genre sf (although one accessible to the general reader and important in its day within the USSR for its political subtext), I do not find it surprising that sales were slow. From what I have read about the new *HBG* film, I gather that it is an arthouse production that will hold little appeal to the genre-sf reader, but which the 'literary' readership will probably lap up. Sales may have increased among 'literary' readers from that connection. Another possibility is that what really picked sales up after a lag was not the film, but that word of the new translation finally worked its way over to the sf community, which constitutes the novel's true market. Evidently the British edition was correctly aimed at the genre-sf readership from the start, as evinced both by having Gollancz as a publisher and by getting Ken MacLeod to do the foreword for their edition.

John Hertz reports that Ray Bradbury maintained that *The Martian Chronicles* was not science fiction. If this was his consistent position, then I should have left Bradbury personally left off the hook, and, had I realised his denial, I would have rephrased the comments in my own loc. Bradbury was by no means the first or the last author to write science fantasy, and it is a genre that I myself sometimes enjoy, although not as frequently as I do actual sf. But the trouble with *The Martian Chronicles* is that so many people, both inside the sf community and, perhaps more importantly, outside of it, counted it as science fiction. Perhaps Bradbury could have done something to more blatantly flag the book as non-sf. Even John himself 'respectfully disagree[s]' with Bradbury on the point. In some ways this phenomenon is comparable to the public reaction to the later science fantasy *Star Wars*.

Replying to another point in my loc, Bruce says that the Australian Robyn Williams, the host of the Australian ABC's *Science Show*, injects *Monty-Python* style humour into it. Since I never really harmonised with *Monty Python*, perhaps the similarity explains why Williams came across to me as snide.

I mentioned being on the waiting list for the library DVD of *Predestination*. When I finally saw it, I found the film disappointing. The production values were fine, but most of the changes in the script from Heinlein's story were for the worse. I particularly detested the way the Fizzle War (in the Heinlein, an averted World War III) is turned into a personalised and depressing 'Fizzle bomber', with a new layer of what I can only take to be liberal self-hate. I did think the scriptwriter made the right choice in setting it in a sort of alternate history rather than trying to update it to take into account the actual space program and so forth.

There still is no e-book edition of Kevin S. Decker's book on *Doctor Who* and philosophy, but I did discover that Decker had made an appearance, plugging the book, on Australian ABC's *The Philosopher's Zone*. (I neglected to write down the specifics, but I think it was from November 2013. It's easily googled.) I downloaded the archived podcast and listened to it. It was interesting, and Decker gets extra points for correctly identifying *Doctor Who* as a science-fantasy show, not science fiction. I will have to see how expensive print copies of his book are. (I find myself more interested in discussions about *Doctor Who* than I am in watching the show itself.)

(4 April 2016)

***SFC* 91:** You list *Interstellar*. I chose not to see it, since I knew from reviews that its human-level plot makes no sense, even if one granted that the science was airtight. Plot incoherence afflicts many films, and it evidently bothers most people less than it does me. By coincidence, however, I was just listening to a podcast of a popular-science Russian radio show that was discussing Kip Thorne's *The Science of Interstellar*. The hosts invited a Russian astrophysicist to give his opinion, which was that, even with Thorne's explanations, the movie was 'science fantasy rather than science fiction'. He had some difficulty expressing this in Russian, and, explaining that he meant something intermediate between sf and fantasy, came up with *nauchnaya fantaziya*. (There probably is a standard way to say 'science fantasy' in Russian, but the astrophysicist did not know it and coined his own attempt.) But on your recommendation, I likely will have a try (or possibly a retry) at *Black Holes and Time Warps*. I have read other books on the subject, however. Later: one good way to find the translation of words and phrases not likely to be carried in standard dictionaries is go to the corresponding English Wikipedia page and examine the foreign-language Wikipedia cross references. According to that approach, the Russian for 'science fantasy' is a literal translation, *nauchnoye fentezi*.

You make a passing reference to a book titled *We Others*. I know nothing about the book, but the title was probably inspired by the French phrase *nous autres*, which for some bizarre reason simply means 'we', as in the French usual translation of the title of Zamyatin's novel. In French one can also say just *nous* in the same meaning, but in Spanish *nosotros* has become a single word, and is the normal way to say 'we', although *nos* survives in some other grammatical roles. I wonder how that bit of apparent illogicality came about in at least two Romance languages, and how one would say 'we others' in French if one was drawing some sort of distinction, such as, 'Some people like anarchy in their genre fiction, but we others prefer playing with the net up.' I suppose one could paraphrase easily enough.

You say you first saw *My Darling Clementine* on TV in 1968. As far as I recall, oddly enough I first saw it in 1972, dubbed into Russian in a Soviet summer camp where a bunch of us American language students had been bused for a one-day excursion. I've seen it in English since, but I remember little about it.

You repeat without challenge Farber's assertion that in writing *The Book of Strange New Things* he was seeking 'to understand the mind of a committed Christian'. But surely you know, if only from sf books such as Mary Russell's *The Sparrow*, that it is by no means established that Christianity would find it appropriate to proselytise to extraterrestrials at all, and I gather from reviews that the missionary protagonist has received virtually no training or support for his mission. Any thinking reader knows that this is not how such things work in reality. Why would any novelist think he could understand the mind of a real-world Christian by putting his character into a situation that contradicts Christian missionary practice and probably also Christian theology? Why would an experienced sf critic such as yourself swallow and repeat such an absurd assertion on the part of the author?

**[*brg* It's hard to answer your question about *The Book of Strange New Things*, since you haven't read the book. In the story, it's the aliens who request that their previous missionary, who has gone missing, should be replaced by another committed Christian preacher. The organisation that has set up the settlement on the alien planet needs a replacement quickly, for reasons revealed towards the end of the novel. The main character of the novel is one of the few people on Earth who is willing to undertake the task, despite the fact that he has to leave his wife back on Earth for what he believes will be a few months. Mysteries abound for the reader, but they are pretty much solved by the end of the book. The problems of faster-than-light travel and communications are ignored completely.*]**

Next, on what basis do you state that Michael Bishop had been unable to place a novel since 1994? The Wikipedia entry certainly suggests that his 1994 *Brittle Innings* was commercially successful, so *a priori* I would expect that his publisher would have welcomed another novel. Unless Bishop told you otherwise, which you do not state, my guess would be that Bishop moved to short fiction, not to mention to several collaborative novels, by his own choice. The Wikipedia also says he now has a solo novel forthcoming, although that probably happened since you wrote, since publication of *SFC* 91 was delayed. (Incidentally, since you say you have recently started corresponding with Bishop and admire him, you might like to know that, at least per my casual research, 'Gillespie' means 'bishop's helper' and was often anglicised as Bishop. The two of you might be distant relatives.)

I have not read the complete 'director's cut' of *Roadside Picnic* either in the original or in the recent translation, but I did skim the Russian preferred version when I was writing my long Strugatsky essay that appeared *NYRSF*. I am virtually certain you are wrong in writing 'one of the alien Zones that just happened to pop up in Russia one day'. The novel mentions in passing that *one* of the Zones is in Russia, but the one featured in the novel is located in an English-speaking country that has a monarch. The plausible choices are Canada, Australia, or a fictional country. The original English translation apparently altered the text to point strongly to Canada. The preferred Russian text is more neutral among the above three options and I presume the new translation follows suit. I question how well-based your evaluation of the novel can be if you missed so basic a point as its setting in an English-speaking country with a monarch.

I think you also misunderstand the context of *Hard to be a God*. When it appeared, an unresolved cultural–political struggle was in progress. The Strugatskys were lining up on one side, not opposing the regime, which had already renounced Stalin and had not yet fallen into Brezhnev's clutches. From the Kindle sample of the American edition of the new translation, I read Hari Kunzru's foreword, which, as I recall, makes this situation clear enough. You perhaps read the British edition lacking that foreword. If they did include Boris Strugatsky's comments as an afterword (as with *Roadside Picnic*), that would have told you the same. (Incidentally, I would very much like to see Ken MacLeod's foreword to the British edition, which I suspect would speak more to the genre-sf readership. That might be worth reprinting in *SFC*, if you could get hold of the text and permission to reprint it.)

You mention having received, as 'a bit of a joke, perhaps?' a novel *Gillespie and I*. I recently discovered that Randall Garrett had written a story titled 'A Spaceship Named McGuire'. It was available from Gutenberg, and it turned out to be readable, but slight. There is a movie about a British officer stationed on Cyprus called *McGuire, Go Home*. (On looking it up, I find that this was the American title of a film otherwise known as *The Hot Bright Sun*.) I believe I saw it on

television once, but I remember little about it. My mother told me that after her marriage and change of surname she grew very tired of being jocularly asked if she was one of the McGuire Sisters (a popular singing group of the time). There also exist a McGuire Air Force Base and a McGuire Nuclear Power Station. As far as I know, I am not related either to John McGuire, minor sf writer of the 1950s, or to the contemporary Seanan McGuire. Meanwhile, in Ireland the spelling of the surname seems to have shifted mostly to Maguire, which is extant in the US but not especially common. Which reminds me to jump back to your Favorite Documentaries list and note that the Australian priest you refer to as Bob McGuire is, per the Wikipedia, actually Bob Maguire. Per the Wikipedia, his bishop tried to make him retire at age 75 and Maguire managed to stall him until he was 77 (which at least in the US is far beyond the usual retirement age for Catholic pastors), and since retirement Maguire has been running his own social-action-oriented foundation, evidently without ecclesiastical interference. I do not think this state of affairs is adequately reflected in your account of how he 'lost his parish', although I don't know whether the fault lies with your summary or with the documentary you were summarising.

**[*brg* I would have thought it was obvious that the format of my 'Best Of' columns led me to summarise almost everything I write about to the point of gabbling. If I had reviewed everything in the detail they deserve, the column would have taken months longer to complete and the issue would have run to 100 pages.**

**As the documentary *In Bob We Trust* shows, Father Bob Maguire, although desperate to continue his work in his parish, was retired compulsorily. The fact that his many friends and supporters have been willing to provide the finance for the inner city mission that he set up after he left South Melbourne has not compensated him for the loss of his position as a priest.*]**

I greatly enjoyed both Colin Steele's keynote address and his article on Aldiss. To my mind, both are evidence of how much more successful Colin can be when he has space to work with than he can in a capsule review. I think you should try to get him to write actual articles for *SFC*, or, failing that, at least to pass on more longish articles written for other venues. Colin mentions the Kindle Unlimited subscription e-book library as a possible sign of the future. Perhaps, but the future is not here yet. The library is significantly limited in the kinds of books it offers — mostly self-published books, books issued by Amazon's own various imprints, and some older books from conventional publishers, or at least originally so published. I subscribe and think I get my money's worth, but not by any huge margin. Were I still working I doubt that I would read enough (on top of books obtained from other sources) to justify the subscription price.

I found it interesting that C. S. Lewis had known the youngish Brian Aldiss. Aldiss has no entry in Lewis's voluminous *Collected Letters*, probably because both men lived in Oxford and had no need to communicate by letter — an example of the limitations of documents. However, something has gone wrong somewhere in Colin's account of the magazine *SF Horizons*. Aldiss co-edited it with Harry Harrison, not Lewis. Lewis did contribute one article (per online information) during the two-issue lifetime of the magazine. Since every published word of Lewis's seems to have been reprinted in one collection or another, I imagine that article has appeared elsewhere, but without more research, I do not know in which collection.

The Australian prices throughout Colin Steele's capsule reviews look daunting indeed, although things are a little better if one reflects that an Australian dollar is currently exchanged at about 77 U.S. cents, and that (I imagine) the Australian prices include VAT, whereas US sales tax, varying by state, can often add five to eight per cent over the listed price to the cost of US books. But Colin notes of *The Martian* that it can be ordered from Britain for (including shipping fees) a little over half of the Australian price, and I imagine the same must be true of many other books. If Australia wants (not unreasonably) to promote a native publishing industry, I suspect it may have to switch to pursuing this national goal more on the basis of direct subsidies than of trying to make the project self-financing on the backs of Australian book buyers.

I presume that it was Bruce rather than Colin who organised the reviews into categories. Fifty per cent of the 'Chinese science fiction' category consists of *On Such a Full Sea*, a book written by Chang-Rae Lee, an American who was brought to the US by his *Korean* parents at the age of three. Isaac Asimov had a better claim to being an author of Russian sf that Lee does of authoring Chinese sf. (True, the protagonist in Lee's novel is an immigrant to the US from China, but Asimov also wrote at least some short stories with Russian or Russian–American characters, and those still weren't Russian sf. And Asimov at least was born in Russia.)

**[*brg* Yes, I had to organise Colin's many reviews into some pattern that made sense. When giving a nationality to an author, all I could do was make a judgment on the basis of the material that Colin had supplied. For instance, there are probably several British authors I've listed as Americans, and vice versa.*]**

In my loc on *SFC* 90, I said that if, as depicted in *Men Into Space* in 1959–60, the British were launching manned multistage rockets from the British Isles, then to avoid endangering Europe they must be launching them either into polar orbit or westward over the Atlantic, against the speed of Earth's rotation. Now that I am into my second round of rewatching the series (or at least some of the better episodes), I find there seems to be precedent for both orbits, although from US craft. An episode on refuelling in orbit makes it clear that, for no obvious reason, the craft involved are in a polar orbit. In another episode, the American space station is threatened by a decaying US unmanned satellite that is approaching the space station in 'opposite orbit', so that the approach speeds of the two objects add rather than subtracting. There is no explanation of why the unmanned satellite is in the 'wrong-way' orbit. I can think of a couple of military applications such as ASAT or ABM, but we are given the impression in the series that space is weapon-free (despite the fact that the space programs of at least the US, UK, and 'Russia' are run by their militaries).

(29 April 2016)

# Widner, Campbell, Edmonds, and Aldiss

**JERRY KAUFMAN**
**PO Box 25075, Seattle WA 98165, USA**

***SFC* 90:** Splendid front cover this issue — a lovely list of names that correctly includes mine, and a great Steve Stiles drawing. I've never seen a gnobl better captured in ink. (Usually, artists make them look more like a wub.)

I really like the Jim Burns drawings inside, too. How did you happen to get them for publication?

I knew Art Widner during most of his second fannish incarnation, and was used to seeing him at conventions — Worldcons, Pacific Northwest cons, Corflus, etc. I've also seen him in more unexpected places. Looking out the window of a tour bus at the Three Sisters rock formation near Uluru (Ayers Rock) in 1983, my eye swept down from the red stone to a bald head and beard just outside the bus and below me. (He'd been at the Syncon and later was in Melbourne at the same time as me, so not quite the shock it could have been.) I think we all miss him.

To Stephen Campbell, I would say, with respect, that I think chemo and radiation do enough good to be worth undergoing, if I ever have to face the choice. Friends of mine have undergone these treatments, or are about to, and they have helped often enough, though I know it's not entirely predictable how much good they will do. It's like weather predicting that way. We're each of us a miniature climate and with so many moving parts we're all chaotic inside.

I liked Stephen's final paragraph about the strangeness of fandom and its love of fiction about alienation. I've thought for a long time that this is the appeal of such beloved stories (at various times in fan and SF history) as *Slan*, *More Than Human*, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, and others.

Leigh Edmonds has researched and written the history of many organisations and subjects that I would find quite boring. Either he is made of sterner stuff than me (canvas?) or he's able to find fascination in the act of the research itself. If the latter, then that explains why he's an historian.

**[*brg* As a professional freelance historian, he was paid (by my standards) very well for researching and writing those histories.*]**

I have a few checkmarks against his letter. On page 67, he mentions downloading a copy of *Triplanetary* by Doc Smith. Did you send this bit to Steve Stiles, or was it a happy accident that he sent you the cartoon on page 38? I don't know Smith's work except at second hand, so I don't know if the astronaut is reading *Triplanetary* or a different Smith book.

**[*brg* Nothing but coincidence.*]**

Finally, on the back page, Leigh says 'since marketing these days seems to be about market segmentation, keeping SF as a separate genre to make more money out of it is probably going to be with us for a long time'. These days? Those days, too, as far back as I can remember. SF, mysteries, romance, fiction have been shelved in bookstores and libraries separately at least since the 1960s, when I checked our local library and the biggest used book store in Cleveland, Ohio, for new reading material.

(11 January 2016)

***SFC* 91:** Thanks as always for sending us paper copies of *SFC*, which has charming covers this issue. I like the design and lighting Steve has put into the front cover, although the charm is partially dimmed by that little figure impaled on the odd pole in the lower left. Murray Moore (as seen on the back cover) is always charming in person and print, although here he's a bit obscured by the stack of zines.

I don't have enough in common with your listening, reading, and watching experiences of the past several years to say much. Except that I second your assessment of First Aid Kit. I also do not find that Colin Steele has a lot to say to me about the books he touches on, with the exception of his piece on Brian Aldiss — this reminds me that I have read very little of Brian's autobiographical stuff in the past 20 years, and should someday remedy that.

Way back in the 1980s, Don Keller and I (Serconia Press) published several small collections of Brian's nonfiction. We also had a manuscript by James Blish about music, but it had indicators for endnotes without the notes themselves. Suzle and I visited Britain twice in that decade, and managed to visit the Aldisses and Oxford. Because of Brian's connection to the Bodleian, he could recommend me as a serious searcher, and I was able to go through their James Blish collection of papers. I didn't find the endnotes, but at least I had a memorable experience and retain the pencil and eraser they gave me (no ink pens allowed in the reading room).

(25 April 2016)

# Strugatskys, late capitalism, and 10 issues of *SFC*

**JEFF HAMILL**
**4903 Fremont Ave Nth,**
**Seattle WA 98103, USA**

In the last several months I've been able to resume a lot of SF reading and film watching, and I have been making some notes as I go along, but it seems that I never have time to write proper letters — that's as usual for me, right? But I have also attended memorial meetings for three friends, and developed tendonitis in my right foot, which requires an hour of physical therapy every day to keep in check. So I can make excuses with the best of them.

Last June, while searching YouTube for 'Strugatsky' I had discovered two films uploaded there which I had known nothing about. The films are based on Strugatsky novels— *Inhabited Island* (in two parts — part one was released in 2008 and part two in 2009), and Aleksei German's 2013 *Hard To Be a God*.

As I am sure you know, *Inhabited Island* was originally published in Russian in 1971, and was published in English as *Prisoners of Power* in the US by Macmillan as part of their Best of Soviet Science Fiction series in 1977.

I watched *Inhabited Island* Part 1 directly from YouTube with a friend, without subtitles and with ordinary YouTube

resolution. My Russian is not very good, and I could follow only about 30 per cent of the dialogue, but we were intrigued enough that I found DVD copies of both movies (that is, both *Inhabited Island* and the 2013 *Hard To Be a God*. (There is also a 1989 joint German–USSR version of *Hard To Be a God* directed by Peter Fleischmann, which comes across as an old *Star Trek* episode in its production values. The acting is excellent, but that by itself can't save the film.)

I then re-watched *Inhabited Island* Part 1 on DVD by myself, with subtitles. Unfortunately, the English subtitles are terrible — ungrammatical and fragmentary (the native language of the writer was probably Russian). (Yes, ordinary dialogue is often, if not usually, ungrammatical and fragmentary, but this was far worse.) The good news is that one can follow the movie fairly easily without subtitles!

The basic question of both *Inhabited Island* and *Hard to Be a God* is how to save a world from itself, and both novels end ambiguously. The course of history — in the sense of a real change in people's lives, not just a change of names of the people on top — can only be changed for the better by the activity of millions, even though these millions may be inspired or guided by relatively smaller numbers. Can a very small number of dedicated individuals, no matter how advanced, change the course of medieval (or Stalinist, or 'totalitarian') society? Only if they are able to hook up with the great majority whose economic and social interests likewise require such changes. The world of *Inhabited Island* has such people — a modern working class, in several forms — while the planet where the action of *Hard to Be a God* takes place does not; a pre-capitalist society dominates there.

(I had wanted to send you my translation of an interview with Boris Strugatsky, about Part 2 of *Inhabited Island*, that appeared in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 12 January 2009, but it may be a long time before I can complete it; my Russian is just not that good.)

Anyhow, the new translation of *HTBG* published in the US contains an excellent introduction by Hari Kunzru. He says, 'There are always schisms, even in medieval fantasy. Weird tales are weird in more than one way. One the one hand we have a rural tradition, sentimental, conservative, and wedded to absolute notions of good and evil. This is the English school of Tolkien and Lewis, in which Christ-lions and schoolchildren fight cosmopolitan witches and wizards with suspiciously foreign names. The nasty working classes of industrial Mordor threaten the exurban tranquility of the Shire, a place full of morally centered artisans and small tradesmen, destined, once the dwarves build the railway and the elves finally get out of their hot tubs and invent the Internet, to end up as commuters. Elsewhere Anglo-Saxon Potters and Weasleys, first cousins of the hobbits, take on effete Norman-French Malfoys and Voldemorts. Fantasy of this kind is intended as comfort and consolation, which is why it's often written for and marketed to children.' Oh, yes!!

I've been re-reading *SFC*s 80 to 90, all on my iPad. I can read small print fairly easily without my glasses, despite being very nearsighted, and even though *SFC* displays at only 64 per cent of its print size on my screen, it's still readable. But it's a bit easier to enlarge a page to its text width.

Most of my reading is done this way nowadays. Part of the reason is that I mostly read at night, in bed, and I ordinarily need a very bright light source to read by, which is a nuisance for Agnes. Using the iPad solves this problem. It also makes it possible for me to cut down somewhat on the sheer mass of books we have, a consideration for when we move, as we most likely will once Agnes retires. Seattle is a very expensive town. In ten years we may move back to Tucson, Arizona, where we grew up. Maybe.

Since your top ten SF novels list (*SFC* 80, p. 79) included *Arslan*, by M. J. Engh, I thought that I should give it a try. Although the novel is beautifully written, I didn't care for it. Total economic self-sufficiency is a reactionary utopia (like Stalin's idea of socialism in one country). Engh's obsession with over-population (see her book on Amazon, *Too Many: How Population Growth Leads Us Inexorably into the GREAT FAMINE, WORLD WAR, GOING DARK, and EXTINCTION*) misses the root cause of the world's problems, the world capitalist system. There is a general trend for the birthrate to decline in the more industrially developed countries, and this suggests that the world population would stabilise with more industrial development of the underdeveloped countries; it would be all the better of this were done rationally and cooperatively. (Fat chance, without worldwide social revolutions that enable the working people of all countries to take political power, and to begin to establish a society based on relations of human solidarity and internationalism.)

**[*brg* This assumes that M. J. Engh fully supports the viewpoint of Arslan, intriguing though it is. To me, *Arslan* is ironic in all its aspects. We read the viewpoint of a group of small-town Americans who are oppressed by becoming the centre of Arslan's empire in America, and we discover the viewpoint of Arslan through the eyes of his very literate young lover/captive, who has equal reasons for admiring and hating his lover/captor. From the beginning of the novel we ask ourselves: are the actions of Arslan and his army (a) possible? (b) probable? (c) supportable? (d) insupportable? Engh shows herself to be such a deft modern Jonathan Swift that it is a great pity she has never produced another novel of equivalent depth and power.*]**

I enjoyed the *SFC* 81 article on Terry Pratchett. The Discworld novels sound like good entertainment. I will start reading the first two sometime soon.

In *SFC* 81, p. 27, there was a review of *Yellow Blue Tibia* by Adam Roberts. The subject matter of the novel intrigued me, and so I read it a couple of months ago. Fun it was, and it merits re-reading; but it is a complex fantasy-satire, with many levels of meaning and intention. While its setting is the Soviet Union, it is not a real Soviet Union, but rather a parody of what Westerners thought that the Soviet Union was. (Even the Russian language usage and references appear to be parody.)

I skipped all the horror/zombie reviews; I don't find that genre appealing.

Doug Barbour's letter (*SFC* 81, pp. 84–5) I found very interesting. I can't remember whether I credited him properly with kindling an interest in Iain M. Banks, Ken MacLeod, and Charlie Stross. (I think that my brain smashed his letter together with Steve Jeffery's, whose comments I also tried to take to heart.) But one point I have to answer (better late than never!) — I never meant to *absolutely* contrast SF with literature; I don't think that such an absolute approach is even possible.

Who noticed that in my January 2004 letter I explicitly said that I thought that Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* is literature? And it is also undeniably SF.

In a very general way, genre fiction (of any genre, not just SF) is driven by market forces, and the writer dances to that

tune, usually at the command of their publisher. Literature is primarily driven by other considerations. As Marx wrote, 'The writer must earn money in order to be able to live and to write, but he must by no means live and write for the purpose of making money.'

Other articles that I re-read with interest:

- ***SFC* 82, pp. 4–15:** Bruce Gillespie, 'The golden age of fanzines is now'
- ***SFC* 83, pp. 7–33:** Guy Salvidge, 'Discovering Philip K. Dick'
- ***SFC* 84, pp. 13–14:** David Boutland ('David Rome') — I bought his *Return to New Worlds* (as a Kindle book) and will read it all eventually
- ***SFC* 84, pp. 43–8:** Tim Marion's article '*The Prisoner* Recaptured: A Review of the 40th Anniversary Collector's Edition DVD set' was also interesting, as I am (or at least used to be — the emphasis on individualism has outlasted its welcome for me) a big *Prisoner* fan from way back. (In 1994, I fulfilled a lifelong dream when Agnes and I took the ferry from Ireland to Wales, and we stayed at Portmeirion for two days. And almost all our crockery is Portmeirion as well!)
- ***SFC* 85, p. 58:** Joseph Nicholas's letter I found very intriguing. 'Benford's view of science fiction as having some sort of blueprint function for addressing the future is a particularly US one. Science fiction, just like any other artistic endeavour, is primarily addressed to the present.' Both ideas I agree with wholeheartedly. Also, he is certainly right that 'the US is not the global power it once was, and it has begun to lose its preeminence — and thus its cultural dominance.' Speed the day!

***SFC* 86:** Your article on Johanna Russ inspired me to find as many of her books as I could about a month ago. The only ones that I had read before were *The Female Man* and *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, but I've always wanted to go back for more, even though I found *Female Man* almost incomprehensible. I will start in on *Extra(Ordinary) People* in the next day or two.

That's as far as my re-reading *SFC* has taken me, although I have also started *SFC* 90 as well. To take up a point earlier in my letter, I re-read *Hard to Be a God* (is it re-reading if the translation is new?) shortly after I saw the 2013 film. As beautifully filmed and directed as it is, German's movie is not easy to watch. One of my favourite reviews was by Glenn Kenny on the RogerEbert.com website, and he says, 'There's no getting around it: *Hard To Be A God* is one of the most consistently disgusting films ever made. On completion of some explanatory opening titles, the movie depicts a dank, grim, perpetually chilly and humid medieval world. A couple of extras are seen, splattered in mud, but on consideration, the viewer can't be sure it's mud. What came to mind for me was the immortal exchange from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, as two characters watch a spotless Arthur pass: 'Must be a king.' 'Why?' 'Because he hasn't got shit all over him.')

***SFC* 90, p. 31,** also mentions a film which I knew nothing about, *The Congress*. I found a copy through Amazon for only $0.50, so I ordered it and should receive it in a few days. Bruce, you wrote, commenting on the letter from Randy Byers — who lives about a mile from me! — 'I couldn't remember any resemblances with Lem's novel *The Futurological Congress*.' But since it was one of your favourite films of the last 12 months I figured that it to be worth a watch. (According to an interview with Ari Folman, posted on his website, 'During film school I wanted to do something cinematic with the text. It took me a whole year to write the script and I went far away from the original text, but always came back to it when getting lost during the writing process. I think the spirit of the novel is a huge part of the final picture and for sure, it is very present in the animated section.' Well, I will soon see for myself.) Randy's letter I also found of interest because of his interest in Joanna Russ.

(16 January 2016)

# A garland of letters

**GUY SALVIDGE**
**7 Jessup Terrace, Northam WA 6401**
**(change of address)**

Here is my new address. Northam is a pretty rough place but I'm lucky enough to be living in a bit of an oasis — down by the river, with no neighbours at all on any side. Literally the only traffic are ducks, spoonbills, and swans down on the water. Very serene.

(1 April 2016)

**[*brg* Your new location sounds great. But why do you need to keep moving house so often? It must be a nightmare, since I assume you have a decent book collection.*]**

It's because of the breakup of my marriage, basically. First I moved out of the house my wife and I owned together — to my mother's for a few weeks. Then I found a rental close by, so I moved into that. Then after four months I was told that the owner wanted the house back, so I had to move into *another* rental, and then a year later, when the lease expired, I've moved here — which is my girlfriend Naomi's family's house. That's how you end up moving four times in 18 months! Fingers crossed, Naomi and I will last the journey from here.

Moving certainly takes its toll on the books. I have nowhere near as many as you but it still occupies a lot of my attention moving all those books and bookcases. This time, Thomas Pynchon's *V* didn't survive the move, nor did my copy of the *I Ching*. I've ordered a replacement *I Ching*, but I can't be bothered with the Pynchon.

(2 April 2016)

I'm not sure if I really mentioned this in any of my Philip K. Dick reviews (maybe in the review of *Man in the High Castle*), but PKD, and especially *High Castle*, inspired me to try to use

the *I Ching* back in 2000 or so. Now, 15-plus years later, I'm a long-time user of the Oracle, even if I'm not fully committed to the Jungian synchronicity angle (i.e. that the magic actually works!) Somehow I managed to snap the spine of my second copy during this move. The first copy (always the Wilhelm translation with a foreword by Jung) fell apart from overuse after 5–10 years. So I've taken the opportunity to order a nice new copy of the same translation in hardcover.

Thomas Pynchon? Well, *The Crying of Lot 49* is the only book of his I ever actually read, as it's only 150 pages or so, and even that was when I had to study it for uni. I've tried *Gravity's Rainbow* at least three times, but I can't get further than about 50 pages, even on audiobook, so I've given up on him. Likewise Joyce and, frankly, likewise anyone who is long and ponderous. I'm 34 now. and there are only so many more years and so many more books, so I'm not wasting my time on the canon unless it's something I actually find interesting.

(3 April 2016)

**[*brg* I have the first Penguin edition of *V*. I kept looking at the first page for 50 years and never read past that, so I suspect I should have sent it to a secondhand store many years ago. Now it's too late (almost no secondhand stores left). I've kept *The Crying of Lot 49* for umpteen years because James Blish once recommended it as one of the great American novels (along with William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, which I enjoyed greatly in 1971, but have never re-read).*]**

## MIKE BOLDEN,
## 15 Autumn Street, Orange, NSW 2088

Thanks for your letter and the three copies of *SFC*, though I haven't had a chance to read any of them yet. Here is *Busswarble* 87, a whole two months after 86, although I had it almost ready for printing when I sent 86 off. You wouldn't believe all the hassles I have with printing: the huge amount of paper and ink I waste. Not to mention time as well.

So you have diabetes too. Join the club, though I'm not sure how bad yours is. A friend of mine was diagnosed with it some years ago but was later undiagnosed, if such a thing is possible.

**[*brg* I would say that my symptoms had disappeared, except for the beginnings of macular degeneration. However, those initial stages have been reversed by being prescribed Fenofibrate.*]**

Thanks for the offer of names and addresses. I've lost contact with fandom over the last ten years or so.

(20 May 2014)

Recently I found and read the Wilson Tucker issue of *SFC*. I got the impression that there was another issue, which I so far haven't seen, that dealt with him.


**[*brg* Yes, the first edition of the Tucker issue, which I published in the middle 1970s.*]**

Sorry to read about Ned Brooks; he was one of the friendlier fans I was in contact with.

At first I thought Art Widner had made the ton, but not quite, his 101st birthday. All I can find now is that he didn't quite make the ton but died at 97. Apparently he was into spelling reform. You sed something about the New Spelling, but that he had devised his own system. Since I collect reformed spelling systems rather as others collect stamps, I am wondering if you have a sample of his spelling and could send me a copy. I'm wondering whether he's the same fellow whose letter Harry Lindgren printed in *Spelling Action*. I thought it was terrible, and agreed with Harry's description of it as amateurish. I have an 85,000-word document, about the same length as my unpublished novel, full of examples of such systems, including one by the late Roger Weddall and three by me: from the phonetics I learnt in first class in infants' school in 1949 and two I thought up in 1966 and 1987. I may have possibly published some examples of this, but I no longer remember, because my despicable sister and brother-in-law stole and threw out such stuff when I was in hospital for three months in 2009. Even a former minister in the Whitlam government, Doug Everingham, contributed to *Spelling Action*.

These sundry systems were products of a creative age, which died when economic rationalism took over the scene in 1979–80.

**[*brg* Art's personal fanzine for FAPA was *YHOS*, in which he used his spelling system. Sometimes I found some of his versions of English words nearly incomprehensible, because he was expressing the phonetics of his own American accent. When a copy surfaces in the collection, I'll send you copies of a few pages.*]**

Harry Lindgren and I didn't see eye to eye on everything. I couldn't stand his ideas on how English should ultimately be spelt. But then I guess we'll never reform English spelling, because we'll never find any two people who'll agree on how

we should spell. Hell, I'm not even 100 per cent happy with my own system.

Just to touch on a minor point, I noticed at the time that you always capitalised global warming as the 'Greenhouse Effect'. Do you now likewise capitalise 'Climate Change'?

(28 December 2015)

**RAY WOOD**
**PO Box 188, Quorn SA 5433**

**[*brg* Collected Works is one of the last great old-fashioned bookshops, at least as far as I'm aware. There could be equivalents in Adelaide and Sydney.**

**Owned by Kris Hemensley and his wife for about 40 years, it has moved all over Melbourne and the inner suburbs. Nominally a poetry bookshop, it also features a lot of other literary works that you won't find on a shelf elsewhere. These days it is the only retail space offering copies of the main books by Australia's main poets — where they are still available from very small publishers and distributors. Kris is very friendly, likes to natter. The bookshelf has a wonderful olde-worlde look, especially as it is on the first floor of one of Melbourne's oldest still-used buildings, the Nicholas Building, just near Flinders Street station. I hadn't been there for 30 years until the launch of Tim Jones' book of Australian speculative poetry in 2014. Treasure upon treasure — if only I had had the money to buy the books that met my eye! I went back a few weeks ago, but several of the books I had seen in June had been sold.*]**

Sounds a delicious kind of place, one that I'd treasure too.

But would you believe that we have a beautiful old-fashioned bookshop here in this small town of Quorn? Tourists are amazed to find it here. A nurse at the Quorn Hospital runs it and has it open on weekends. Kind of a hobby for her, I suppose. Her young son, who has chronic fatigue syndrome, opens it one day during the week too — you never know which day. Crammed mostly with old and second-hand books, but new books too. Even puts a table out on the footpath with books on it in the oooold-fashioned way.

When a little old bookshop goes bust in Adelaide she seems to buy all its stock wholesale.

What I miss most about the old bookshops that were around when I was young are the people who ran them, and truly *knew* books. We had a bookshop near Adelaide Uni, the Beck Book Company, run by a bloke called Frank Muir. He had tables of threepenny books, sixpenny books, and shilling books that I used to hover over, and buy books from when I was still at school.

I'm sure that he'd read every book on his shelves, too. Any of his books I'd ask him about, he *knew*. And most of all, while I majored in English Lit at Uni there, if there were a question about lit. that my lecturers couldn't answer, I'd pop over to see Frank, certain that *he* would answer it.

Today bookshops are merely businesses.

At least thank all the gods for ABEBooks.com!

I was hunting down a rare book for Suzanne Falkiner's biography of Randolph Stow recently, a Swedish translation of some of Stow's poetry, *Tystnadens Landskap*. She'd been unable to get a copy anywhere. And I found one in a Swedish bookshop called Tomelillabok. The proprietor, Göran Pehrson, sent it to me with an old-fashioned invoice, not asking for payment in advance, which these days is hard to


believe — putting his trust in someone the other side of the world.

He had the rather strange idea that the book would reach me in two days. It took over two weeks. We wondered if he'd confused Australia with Austria!

I fondly remember — was it Robertson & Mullens? — magnificent bookshop in, I think, Swanston Street, in the later 1960s and early 1970s. Each time I came to Melbourne from Mildura on weekends I'd be certain to visit them. Each floor as you went higher had books more wonderful than the floors below. I'd return from there with two or three boxes full of books every time.

In the pic of me I'm on top of the Dutchman's Stern in the Conservation Park of that name near Quorn. I'm an SA Parks' Volunteer, and look after the hiking trail there. That park exists because of the rare Quorn Wattle and also the equally rare White Spotted Skipper Butterfly found there.

(1 September 2014)

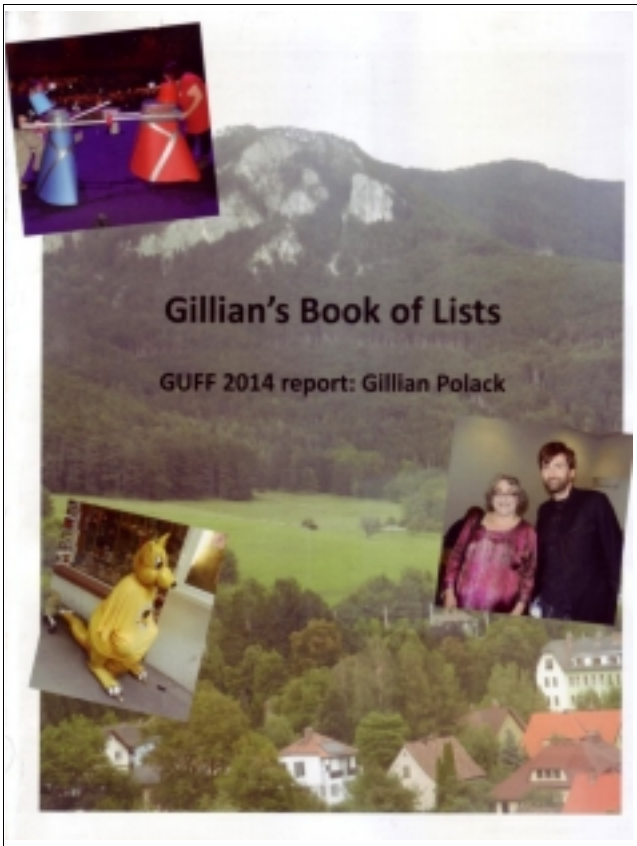
**[*brg* That photo of Ray is on the first page of his article in this issue of *SFC*.*]**

**DALE SPEIRS**
**Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta T2P 2E7, Canada**

You mentioned a GUFF winner [Gillian Polack] who is only going to publish her trip report as an e-book. Since it was 45,000 words and photos, I can understand why a print edition wouldn't be feasible. However, e-book formats are not readable on all computers the way that PDF files are. I would hope that the report will appear as a PDF, which seems to have been established as the archival format.

I'm not sure I understood your closing remark on the convention Continuum 12 excluding print media. Did they specifically state that, or was it a case of benign neglect?

**[*brg* I realise now that I was assuming an implied prejudice expressed as an offhand remark by the person who was, this time last year, the Chair of Continuum 12. She was speaking while accepting the**




**handover at the closing ceremony of Continuum 11. I have no idea whether she is still Chair of Continuum 12. In the event, no such prejudice has emerged, because the convention has been calling for volunteers for panelists and panel organisers. I assume that most convention panels will be about whatever particular volunteers want to talk about.*]**

Here in Canada the trend is towards a binary distribution of comic cons and readercons but nothing in between. My hometown of Calgary, for example, has a Comic Expo with 100,000 ticket buyers (they're not members, just passive consumers), which I do not attend. There is also a readercon, When Words Collide, which is capped at 650 members and is exclusively for them that has read a book. The Calgary Comic Expo is a mob scene. Costumers stand in line for hours to get into a panel where an actor who played the third Klingon from the left in a *Star Trek* movie will charge $25 per autograph. WWC, by contrast, has authors, editors, and publishers galore in each panel, with no lineups, although you have to get there ten minutes early if you want to sit in the front row. General conventions are extinct in Calgary; few are interested anymore in big-tent conventions. The success of a convention is not determined by its size but by its quality.

No one in my family is interested in my SF collection, and secondhand bookstores are gone from Calgary. I have been re-reading everything in my library, jotting down notes for reviews in my zine *Opuntia* (available at efanzines.com or fanac.org), and then leaving the books or magazines in the myriad of Little Free Library boxes (leave a book, take a book) that have sprung up all over the city. Some have suggested to sell them on eBay, but that is no way to spend retirement, hunched over a computer screen and packing books one by one. The next generation reads on tablets, and will not accumulate much in the way of material goods. To be honest, if I were twenty-something and just starting out, I would not be buying printed books either.

Canada Post is converting to a parcel and advertising flyer business. Postage rates are ruinous, which is why I had to stop paper publication of *Opuntia* in March 2014 and go to PDF format only. Postage to Australia is now C$2.50 for the first increment, and it goes up exponentially from there.

(7 November 2015)

**[*brg* Ours is now $A2.75 for the first increment, about 3 times what it was only a few years ago. No wonder I'm nearly biting the bullet of going all-electronic.**

**I recommend *Opuntia* as one of the very best fanzines that can be downloaded as a PDF file from http://efanzines.com.)**

## GREGORY BENFORD
## 84 Harvey Court, Irvine CA 92612-4070, USA

Jerry Kaufman asks of my saying of Joanna Russ, 'I knew her well (she was not a lesbian)' — 'Is he hinting at something? A secret intimate relationship, perhaps? Or am I reading into his remark more than he meant to suggest?'

Indeed, I did mean to so suggest, though rather wish I hadn't. Joanna was very confused, angry, anxious, but when I knew her well, very well, quite straight. She once referred to the female genitalia as 'ugly, hideous' — yet became a (mostly theoretical, methinks) lesbian, publicly. Much later I checked this with Chip Delany, who agreed. She was one of the most brilliant women I've ever known (quite aside from the two I married). Her strange pain removed her from so many who loved, liked and treasured her, alas.

(8 November 2015)

## DICK JENSSEN
## PO Box 432, Carnegie VIC 3163

Should you let those who saw 'hidden meanings' in my cover for *SFC* 88 know that there *were* no such 'easter eggs'? I would dearly love to take credit for such arcane allusions, but I can't — the comments must, sadly, be classed as eisegetical.

And is just my filthy mind, or is there a flying, ejaculating penis in the sky of the illustration on page 41?

I really liked the illustration on page 62: 'Fyrdraca' by Jim Burns.

(14 November 2015)

## JENNIFER BRYCE
## Box 1215, Elwood VIC 3184

It's such a pleasure to receive a beautifully produced magazine. When *SF Commentary* 89 arrived I marvelled at it. Skimmed some of it. Put it on the pile next to the bed. Went overseas for six weeks and wrote another draft of my novel. And now it's mid November.

I've read only two Graham Joyce novels — recommended by you. The first was *The Silent Land* (2011), and for me, someone who seldom reads fantasy, the ending didn't seem a 'clunky cliché', as you suggest. Throughout the story I wondered whether both Jake and Zoe were alive or dead, and the ending seemed to me to make the story quite plausible; that Jake had been killed in the avalanche but Zoe, floating in and out of consciousness, survived. In fact, I found the ending quite ingenious.

I then turned to *Some Kind of Fairy Tale* (2012), and there the fantasy world was sometimes a bit too fantastic for me, although I was pleased that the fantasy boyfriend could remove the real-life boyfriend's brain tumour when he loses Tara to the delights of the fairy world, and if I read more of Joyce's books I hope I might agree that Joyce looks existence 'straight in the eye'.

(15 November 2015)

**[*brg* Admirers of Jenny's writing will be pleased to know that she has written for me an account of her European trip from last year, and it will appear in *Treasure* just as soon as I can find the time to produce it.*]**

## BRAD FOSTER
## PO Box 165246, Irving, TX 75016 USA

To keep the subscription up: see you used two fillos, means you've still got one left there ('It's Science!'). To fatten out that file to pick from, attached here should be three new ones. Use as many as you like net time. (And, as always, if any of these don't give a grin and not something you'd really want to use, just let me know, I'll send something different.)

**[*brg* Thanks very much for the fillos you sent me. You'll find them throughout this issue of *SFC*.*]**

'...where optimistic diets go to die.' Ha!

I always feel a bit lost to send comments on zines so strong with letters of comment and personal comments from folks on what they are up to. My life is boring, the usual stuff, broken up with drawing pictures, going to art fests, and trying to sell enough pictures to pay the bills, so I can get back to drawing more pictures. I enjoy it all, but not something that makes for gripping narration!

Have been fighting the elements recently. This house is built and set on the lot in such a way that the backyard traps and collects water when it rains. Previous owners had installed a couple of small sump pumps out there to try to plump it out, and have had on-and-off success with those through the years we have been here. Usually worked fine, occasionally overwhelmed by large storms, and water leaking into the house. This past spring a huge storm came in, pounding rain for hours, and the pumps evidently decided that night to stop working at all. The studio floor was half flooded. Since then I've been digging new pits, getting new pumps and hoses, trying to re-figure how to make it work better. Storms again last night. I look out and, while nothing coming into the house, pools of water — what the heck, why the pumps not working? Find more problems, spending next few days again working to fix. Starting to think I should just move everything out of the studio to another room, leave it empty, and just call it a temporary indoor-pool anytime it floods. Sigh. I just want to draw pictures. Why all the interruptions of regular life?

Water has not been our friend this year. Flooding while up in Oklahoma City last spring killed our old van, therefore new expenses of having to get a replacement vehicle. And now just heard on the local newscast that this is now the third wettest year ever in Texas since they started keeping records. We still have six more weeks to go to reach #1. Please rain, go away ...

I think what I need to do is change my password on my Facebook account, then hide it somewhere so I have to go out of my way to get it. That will give me time to think, 'Do I *really* need to go online for the next six hours to correct all of the people who are wrong on the internet, or shouldn't I be finishing up that piece of art?' FB is a time sink, so easy to just keep clicking along. Got to break that addiction!

There are a couple of small press covers, several interesting commission pieces, and the usual pile of my own projects I want to get to piling up on the drawing board, so, I'd better get back to work!

(18 November 2015)

## LARRY BIGMAN
## 21 Bel Air Drive, Orinda CA 94563, USA

I am also about to send off my talk proposal for the upcoming Philip K. Dick conference at Cal State Fullerton: *PKD and Psychiatry*, both from the literary as well as the personal perspectives. And will then roll it into the grander piece I've promised you over years.

I did retire just over a year ago. The time has been taken up with family and fun travel, some milder illness, and just breathing. After almost 40 years in the medical life, it's interesting to have few timed expectations. Also great to be back to my night owlish nature, within limits. I can't be confused with a vampire yet!

I had a flurry of excitement in September when, shortly before the deadline for proposals, I found out about the Le Guin Feminist SF Research Fellowship at the University of Oregon. I had been greatly involved over previous weeks in rereading and thinking about Joanna Russ, spurred in large part by my acquisition of a 30-year letter archive between Russ and an old college friend. So I did get off a proposal for a paper looking at Russ's 'Alyx' stories in *Orbit*, how she came to write them, and Damon Knight's role in bringing the 'Alyx' stories to publication. Stan Robinson, an old friend, even agreed to write me a reference letter. Sadly I got turned down yesterday, so now will focus on Philip Dick. But I am still intrigued by Russ.

(26 November 2016)

**[*brg* If you don't find another place to publish your article, I would certainly be interested in it. In fact, what's needed is an analysis of what Damon Knight did achieve in his *Orbit* collections. It seems to me better remembered than the other anthology series of the period, except *New Dimensions* and *New Worlds*, but readers would now find it hard to track down copies.*]**

## LLOYD PENNEY
## 1706-24 Eva Rd., Etobicoke, ON M9C 2B2, Canada

I think the world's faneds have decided to put out one last issue before Christmas, so my IN box for zines is quite full. So, here's a loc on *SF Commentary* 90.

Great art from Steve Stiles on the front cover. (Never old hat!) Some of the creatures I see in fan art reminds me of one microscopic creature I've seen a lot of in social media, the tardigrade. They can stand freezing and roasting temperatures, plus the vacuum of space, and if they weren't so tiny, they could easily threaten anything and anyone around them. Take your inspiration where you can get it, I guess.

Your comments on Continuum 11 so many hotels and convention centres put all the chairs, couches, and benches away when a large convention comes in, and I wish they wouldn't. Perhaps this is just a function of age, but I'd like a place to sit as much as anyone else, probably more.

Angus Taylor — was he the early Toronto fan who went under the nickname Beak? Murray Moore will know better about that. There's still lots of early fans around, but they've gone their own ways, and in all honesty, Yvonne and I are thinking the same thing. We've found other fandoms that are much more positive and interesting than what's happening locally, which is not much. (I lived in Victoria, BC for a few years myself, and that's where I discovered fandom.)

Yes, we all thought Art Widner would live forever, and I am sure Art would have wondered himself. 97 years is a long time to live, and he seemed quite active and healthy. And Ned Brooks' passing and manner of doing so was a shock to all. Quite depressing, and if I want to be depressed, all I need to do is look at the regular RIP section of *Ansible*. Our fandom is crumbling away, one valued life after another.

I am job hunting again. Three months at TC Media, followed by 13 months at MSR eCustoms. Near the beginning of October, I was let go without being given a reason or cause, which is quite illegal here. I am receiving my employment insurance, and I am hoping to find out soon if there is some action that can be taken against that employer. This is a bad time of year to be unemployed because of Christmas approaching, but it is also a great time of year, as many fiscal years begin in January, and with some luck, a job will come up for me. Also, the Fan Publication Auroras were indeed restored with this year's awards, and while we were both nominees, we did poorly in voting. I shall be surprised if either of us appear on the ballot again.

I have said so online, but I will say it again here greetings to Randy Byers, and all of us are behind you as you battle a brain tumour. I hate to bear such bad news here, but here it is.

I have met few Australian fans, and perhaps the last ones I did meet were Roger Weddall and Jean Weber. However, as I receive Australian fanzines over the decades, I see so many familiar names. I wish there was a real transporter so I could meet you all at Continuum, or at a Nova Mob meeting, but I hope my contributions to your zines over the years, such as they are, have been of some value to you in your time in Australian fandom.

Nalini Haynes did try a more recent fanzine-version of *Dark Matter*, and she got a loc from me. Haven't heard more from her, except for her university giving her troubles for her handicaps.

Doug Barbour's loc reminds me that Guy Gavriel Kay was awarded the Order of Canada this year for services to fantastic literature. Patrick MacGuire should know that with the change in government here, the CBC should be receiving much more support from the government. Whether that might mean a return of Radio Canada International to the shortwave frequencies, I don't know. The radio show *Quirks & Quarks* is still on CBC Radio 1.

One New Year's resolution I do plan to keep get reading SF again. I admit to not reading anything over the past year and a half; not sure how I fell out of the habit. The only certainty I seem to have is a strong marriage with Yvonne, and with that security, I am secure as I yet again search for employment. You can imagine, I feel quite disposable right now.

(9 December 2015)

## MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
## P.O. Box 8093, Silver Spring, Maryland 20907, USA

***SFC* 90:** I agree with you that more e-books should be available as PDFs. As Patrick McGuire notes, I don't own an e-book reader. That's because I spend too much time staring at screens, and I get all my reading done on public transportation. I wish the collected volume of A. Vincent Clarke's fan writings had appeared as a PDF, or perhaps posted on eFanzines. But it won't be, because I gather converting an e-book into a PDF is a great deal of painful and boring work.

I can't really add much to the obituary for Art Widner. Others knew him better than I did, but he deserves credit for being energetic and productive to an incredibly advanced age. As for Ned Brooks**,** I knew him first from Don Miller's fanzines of the 1970s. They aren't indexed in the Internet Speculative Fiction Database, and the index of the *WSFA Journal* on the Washington Science Fiction Association website only begins in 1974. But what I remember was that Brooks was an expert in the works of Thomas Burnett Swann.

I knew Brooks from the Fictionmags Yahoo e-list. What I remember was that he was quite knowledgeable and quite nice. One should note that he was a major collector of typewriters. There were rumours that he had a house just for his typewriter collection! I don't know if this is true, but the last email exchange I had with him was in July, when I sent him an article about Millennials who decided to have their wedding vows typewritten. He enjoyed that, and eventually revealed that his first typewriter was a Royal portable that he got in 1955 after he was graduated from high school and 'it has never needed repair'.

Finally, I think it's clear that Brooks didn't die falling off the roof. He apparently died because of an accident on the ladder he was using to get to the roof.

You mention Karen Russell. I am a dutiful reader of *New Yorker* short stories, on the ground that since I pay for the magazine, I should read everything in it. The *New Yorker* has been buying more short stories with SF and fantasy content. I'm pretty sure that all of the issues in June had a story with fantastic content. Most of these stories reinvent the wheel. George Saunders, for example, isn't doing anything that satirists in *Galaxy* weren't doing in 1957. Ben Marcus comes across as 'school of George Saunders', and imitation Saunders is even more irritating than Saunders. Karen Russell, however, writes very enjoyable and quirky stories. I'm not sure how to categorise her work — non-scary dark fantasy? — but she's a good writer and very entertaining.

Mark Plummer asks how you listen to music. Well, here's what I do. I spend most of my music-listening time when I

am at home writing and editing. I grew up listening to classical music, and most of the time the local classical music station, WETA, is on. It does a pretty good job, except that its programmers don't like much music after 1900 except for Rachmaninoff and Richard Strauss. These programmers also seem to like nineteenth-century neo-Romantic composers (such as Arthur Foote). The programmer also thinks that Johann Wilhelm Wilms, a Dutch composer whose symphonies sound somewhat like Schubert, and Wilms's sixth and seventh symphonies are played once a month. But I've never heard Wilms's first through fifth symphonies — and have no idea what they sound like!

**[*brg* I've never heard of Johann Wilhelm Wilms or heard his music. But I have heard a lot of John Field and Hummel, because 3MBS programmers have promoted their music almost from when the station began 40 years ago.*]**

In 2007 Pete Seeger was playing at a church two miles from my house, and I thought I should hear him. He played with his half-brother and sister, and at one point introduced one song by saying, 'Woody Guthrie introduced me to this song 70 — no, 80 — years ago.' At another point, Seeger asked people in the audience to say 'Hello' in their native language. I think the audience knew 30 different languages.

The Seeger 'concert ticket' turned out to be a year's membership in the Folklore Society of Greater Washington, and I decided I like folk music. I've also become interested in the blues, but the non-acoustic kind (such as Delta blues). So at 4 every day, I put on a CD and listen to it while I work. Right now I'm listening to a Naxos boxed set of the Shostakovich symphonies with Vassily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic.

Some theatre notes: the two major stages in Washington have been putting on money-making holiday musicals. Arena Stage did *Oliver!* They tried to make it moderately edgy by setting it in the present and having some characters look like they had wandered in to the coldly metallic set from *The Threepenny Opera* and a couple from *The Addams Family*. The singers were quite good and the female lead, Eleasha Gamble, was fabulous. The Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Kiss Me, Kate* was immensely entertaining, because they offered the play straight without any efforts to 'update' it. So we had all the Cole Porter songs, including one where he rhymed 'Portland, Ore.' and 'bore'. There was also a cast of 27. The only peculiar thing about the play was that the male lead, Douglas Sills, said he learned how to bicker with the female lead, Christine Sherrill, by watching Jed Bush and Marco Rubio in Republican presidential debates.

Another treat was the *Apple Family Plays* at the Studio Theatre. This is a sequence of four (so far) plays by Richard Nelson, set in 2010–13 and detailing the lives of five Baby Boomers living in the Hudson Valley. They're all liberals, and one of them works for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. There's some political talk, and a great deal of disappointment with President Obama. Someone called Nelson 'the American Chekhov', which is ridiculous, but he's a skilled playwright, and I wallowed in all the gourmet acting, led by veteran Ted von Griethuysen as an increasingly senile great actor.

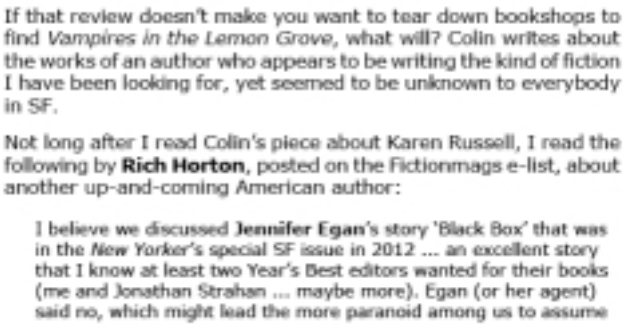
(28 December 2015)

## ROMAN ORSZANSKI
## PO Box 3231, Rundle Mall, Adelaide SA 5000

I was just looking at, on eFanzines.com, the wide version of *SFC* (I normally read the tall version), and three things struck me:

(i) it looks as if the wide was the primary layout;
(ii) your fonts differ between the wide and tall versions;
(iii) the leading in the tall is much nicer on the eyes: the wide seems too cramped.

I don't know if the third point is because Verdana has a taller x-height, so it just seems more crammed. The quoted sections, which are in a smaller point size, seem to have more breathing room, relatively speaking (screenshot from the end of p. 13 to illustrate):



If that review doesn't make you want to tear down bookshops to find *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, what will? Colin writes about the works of an author who appears to be writing the kind of fiction I have been looking for, yet seemed to be unknown to everybody in SF.

Not long after I read Colin's piece about Karen Russell, I read the following by **Rich Horton**, posted on the Fictionmags e-list, about another up-and-coming American author:

> I believe we discussed **Jennifer Egan**'s story 'Black Box' that was in the *New Yorker*'s special SF issue in 2012 ... an excellent story that I know at least two Year's Best editors wanted for their books (me and Jonathan Strahan ... maybe more). Egan (or her agent) said no, which might lead the more paranoid among us to assume

So, just curious why the font difference between the two versions? Did you go for Verdana as a screen font, then leave the leading at a minimum so the comparative page size wouldn't blow out too much? I'm assuming that you do separate layouts for the two versions, being the meticulous fan-ed you are. Did a wide version in Goudy Old style turn out too hard to read on screen, or too large?

Just curious, is all.

(5 January 2016)

**[*brg* The styles for the portrait (magazine) and landscape (widescreen) versions evolved by accident and instinct. The main font for the print/portrait version is 8.5 pt Baskerville, with interpolated bits — such as mine, here — in Officiana. The leading is 10.5 pt. I assume people can read pages column by column and blow up the size of the type of it is too small.**

**However, the landscape/widescreen version must fit across the width the screen of one's device, so the text needs to be larger — 11 pt Verdana, 13 pt leading. Perhaps I should add another point of leading.*]**

## JOHN PURCELL
## 3744 Marielene Circle, College Station, TX 77845, USA

I have not seen the movie version of *The Martian* starring Matt Damon, but everybody tells me it was about 90 per cent faithful to the novel, which I thoroughly enjoyed reading. Without giving me spoilers, they all said Hollywood changed the ending just a bit to give it more 'human interest' and to make it more 'dramatic', but I thought the ending in the book was dramatic enough. I believe the film is now out on DVD so that Valerie and I can rent/buy a copy and watch.

The crazy thing about this issue is that it must have taken

you a long time — a year and a half, apparently, judging by your opening salvo — to compile all these lists. In my personalzine *Askew* I like to list the books and stories I've read in the past couple months, and even that little effort takes a fair amount of time. What you do is nothing short of a Herculean effort. Do you start these lists at the beginning of each year, and maintain them as you go, day by day? Just asking because otherwise I cannot see how you could possibly recall of this information a year or two after the fact.

(25 April 2015)

**[*brg* I rarely make Herculean efforts, so obviously I make my lists easy to do. It doesn't take much effort to note the details of every book read. I've been doing that since 1960 or 1961. I note every film watched or TV series finished in my pocket diary, and CDs listened to in a separate notebook that also lists every bit of (paper) mail received, and every CD, DVD, or Blu-ray bought or received. Since the lists are sitting there, it doesn't take too much effort at the end of the year to collate them. Good fun.*]**

## IOLA MATHEWS
## South Yarra VIC 3141

Race and I have just received *SF Commentary* 91 — thanks so much for sending it. As always, it's a good read, and I was particularly touched by your piece about *Chequered Lives*, and the kind words you said about our Movie Nights.

We are still busy — Race has been commissioned by Monash University Press to write a memoir, so is deep into that, and they are also publishing his latest thesis as a book. I am half way through my memoir about my time in the women's movement and how it changed our lives, and looking after Glenfern Writers' Centre, when not busy with [grandson] Caleb, soon to turn 14.

We hope you and Elaine are also well and busy, and that we catch up some time at the Rosstown Hotel.

(9 April 2016)

## JOHN LITCHEN
## PO Box 3503, Robina Town Centre QLD 4230

I saw a downloaded copy last week of the first episode of *The Man in the High Castle*, an Amazon production. It is still unavailable in this country, but I think eventually it will appear like their production of *Bosch* did. First impression from the opening episode is that it has set up all kinds of threads to be followed as the story develops. To be honest, I can't remember much about the original novel, which I read too many years ago. I will have to re-read it.

I think the feeling of the early 1960s is spot on, with its opening scenes in New York showing Times Square dominated by Nazi emblems and dour-looking people going about their business. It alternates with scenes in a San Francisco occupied by the Japanese, equally well done, with kanji signs and familiar buildings having a very Japanese look. I particularly liked that the main female character in San Francisco is shown first being tested for her black belt in Aikido, while the instructor talks about harmony and blending, in absolute contrast to a scene in the street where a young woman is being hunted by a squad of Japanese soldiers because she has something they want. It turns out that the hunted woman is the sister of the Aikido-practising woman, and they meet after having not seen each other for a long time. The young girl gives her sister something, and asks her to take it to a place somewhere in 'no-man's-land', a part of the USA that is neither held by German nor Japanese forces — a buffer zone between the two occupying peoples. She runs off, and a moment later is shot by the Japanese soldiers.

A young man in New York is looking to work in with a suspected rebel group. He is accepted by them, and asked to deliver something to the very same place in no-man's-land. He is to achieve this by driving a goods truck across German-occupied US territory. The person who contacted him is taken and tortured by the Nazi Secret Service to find out about the truck delivery. The tortured man dies without revealing anything, but the officer in charge (Rufus Sewell) says it doesn't matter, because he already knows what the delivery is and where it is going.

Background: Hitler is sick and dying somewhere in Germany. Senior Nazis are poised to take over the Reich and all its possessions. They don't like the Japanese, and are quite ready to drop an atomic bomb on San Francisco to get rid of the Japanese so they can take over the whole of the US. (They have already done this, wiping out Washington and one other major city.) The items to be delivered are copies of newsreel films which show an Allied victory and the defeat of the Germans in Europe and the Japanese in the Pacific. Neither the Germans nor the Japanese want these film clips to be seen by anyone. Where do these film clips come from? Are they real? Is the occupation of America (there is no mention of Canada, but presumably it is also part of the occupied territory) real? What is going on in no-man's land between the two occupied territories? How can films exist if what they depict (and they are newsreel films) supposedly never happened?

The episode ends with a cliff-hanger, and leaves you wanting to see more.

From my recollection there is no mention of newsreel films in the original book ... just an SF writer writing a book about an alternate USA in which the Allies won and the Germans and Japanese were defeated.

This looks to be a really interesting series, of 12 or 13 episodes, directed or produced by Ridley Scott.

I can't wait to get this on DVD or record it from SBS whenever it appears here. In the meantime I will have to be content with another look at the original book.

(11 April 2016)

**[*brg* Still no sign of *Man in the High Castle* on any platform in Australia. There has also been no sign of the movie made several years ago of Philip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth*.*]**

## PAUL COLLINS
## Ford Street Publishing,
## 2 Ford Street, Clifton Hill VIC 3068

Those of you who know Jack Wodhams' work will be interested to know that his book *The Vanilla Slice Kid*, in collaboration with Adam Wallace (illustrated by Tom Gittus), has been short-listed for the REAL awards (national children's choice awards). Great to see Jack still getting attention in his eighties! See: http://yabba. org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2016-Shortlist.pdf in the Younger Reader category.

(17 April 2016)

**[*brg* Great to hear that Jack is still active and writing, and being nominated for awards. Please send on my best wishes to him. I still have great memories of nattering to him at my first convention, the 1968 Easter Melbourne SF Conference, held at the Melbourne SF Club's premises behind McGill's Newsagency in the middle of the city.*]**

## JACK WODHAMS,
## Jacaranda Bethesda, 29 Grace Street, Corinda, QLD 4075

I was greatly flattered to be remembered by you, in a missive you sent to Paul Collins. Yes, it was back in the sixties that I had my 15 minutes of fame as guest of honour at that SF convention. I was briefly world famous in Melbourne on that occasion. SF conventions have changed somewhat since those glorious informal times. As I recall, sea captain Bert Chandler and I were just about the only couple of Aussie SF writers available.

I remember your name but not what we nattered about. Anyway, it could not have been important. I gave up writing SF for a living, it was too great a strain on my brain, and I was no Isaac Asimov, so the reward was not great. I got a regular job in a local caravan factory as a welder. I have not given up writing, but regarding it as a profession, no. Paul Collins would have to be my biggest fan, I suppose. He badgered me for some SF yarns when he brought out his *Void* magazine, and later, with some government aid, he published my novel *Looking For Blucher*, which largely dealt with a form of virtual reality long before such became known. Also another novel, *Ryn*, about an adult reincarnated as a baby. I don't know if this inspired the later *Look Who's Talking* T V series or not. My other novels have not found publishers.

These days I do not submit much at all. Most require submissions through the Web, which I am not on. My computer is used purely as a word processor and that provides me problems enough. So if you are looking to e-mail me you will look in vain.

I had aided my totally deaf older sister to move from Tascott in NSW when her husband for 39 years carked it in 2000, after a short illness. She bought a villa in Caboolture to maintain her independence, but after some years she passed it on to Neil, a son of my brother and Elizabeth, and moved in with them on the property. The property was our 12-acre block that my brother and his wife lived on for over 50 years. He tried market gardening without success, that we steadily planted trees and whatnot, and the place ended up looking like a park. My brother passed away through Parkinson's in 2009, and the place got even harder to keep tidy on the weekends I spent up there.

The upshot has been that some time thereafter I sold my unit in West End, and joined the two old women on the property: The property was still too much for we oldies to manage, so we sold it and moved to 6 Garden Avenue, Camira, for little Elizabeth to be near to her eldest son, Roger, a grandpa and a pensioner now himself. He is a good lad, he keeps an eye on us all. My sister and I got to be too much for little Elizabeth to cope with, so we opted to live in this home Jacaranda. We learn. We arrive with nothing, and we go out with nothing. So now we have ended up here. Not a bad place. The food is passable to good, and the staff keep an eye on me to prevent me falling. Parkinson's a bastard. My recent writings are of my despair, but if you'd like a copy of the 5000 words or so just ask.

(26 April 2016)

**[*brg* I found it amazing that I'm publishing a letter from Jack Wodhams, about 50 years since I first read his stories in *Analog*, and 47 years after we first met at the 1968 Easter Conference in Melbourne. Jack and I corresponded in the pages of *SF Commentary* during the late sixties and early seventies, and he sent me several cartoons. You'll see another one of them on this page. We lost contact, but we did speak briefly at Aussiecon 2 in 1985, the last time we met. But Paul Collins keeps in touch with many people who have otherwise disappeared from view, such as Keith Taylor. (Keith is still writing, but seems not to have published anything for some years.). Sorry to hear that you have Parkinson's disease, Jack, but I am glad you've been able to lead a long and interesting life.*]**

## CHARLOTTE BROWN
## Subject Librarian, English Literature, University of Otago Library, Otago, New Zealand

I have been contacted by a student who found the attached clipping in a book. As it is one of your articles, I am hoping that you could help us to identify where and when it was published, so that it can be cited and attributed to you correctly? Of course I do appreciate that this may be quite difficult, given that you a prolific writer, and have produced such a substantial body of work.

It may have been published in *SF Commentary* in the 1970s, but as we don't hold this magazine in our collection, and your website doesn't seem to include issues that go back this far, I can't verify this. *SF Commentary* does seem to be held by the State Library of Victoria, though, so I may get in touch with them http://trove.nla. gov.au/version/43958486 and also at the University of Sydney, so they may be able to help. http://trove.nla. gov.au/version/211114243 .

It may also have been published in *The Secondary Teacher*, as you mention when the same article seems to have been re-published in *Scratch Pad* in 2005, with additional introductory commentary. Unfortunately, we don't hold this journal, either! But it does seem to be held by a few libraries: http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/ 32242158 so again, I can also contact one of them to check.

Gillespie, Bruce. 'Previously unpublished Gillespie article Inner stars: The novels of Alan Garner.' Scratchpad, 59 (April 2005), pp. 5–8 http://efanzines.com/SFC/ScratchPad/scrat059.pdf

(19 April 2016)

**[*brg* I wrote this article while I was the assistant editor of *The Secondary Teacher* (the weekly magazine of the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association) in 1977. It was written for that journal, but I can't remember whether it appeared there or was quietly spiked. It's based on the Nova Mob talk I gave about Alan Garner in 1977. I can't remember writing it, but when I was packing to move from Collingwood to Greensborough, it suddenly appeared there in the files. It hasn't dated much, since Garner hasn't published a whole lot since 1977: just *The Stone Book Quartet*, *Strandloper*, and a few other titles.*]**

Thanks so much for getting back to me! Just in case you are interested, a kind staff member at the State Library of Victoria shelf-checked their holdings of the journal *Bottom Line* for me, and found the source of the clipping: 'The Inner Stars of Alan Garner' by Bruce Gillespie appeared in *Bottom Line*, March/April 1978 (pages 23–4). Identifier(s): ISSN 0314-8321 http://search.slv.vic. gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER999848

(22 April 2016)

**[*brg* Thanks very much to the resurrection of that reference to *Bottom Line*. It was one of those many counter-culture magazines that sprouted all over Melbourne in the early to mid 1970s. It was edited by Jules Lawicki, who ran a bookshop where Lee Harding worked. Jules and his wife separated. Jules published a few issues of *Bottom Line*, then disappeared to London. I had heard that he'd done well there, and doesn't seem to have returned to Melbourne.*]**

## JOY WINDOW
## PO Box 1377, Lismore NSW 2480

**[*brg*How are things going your way, Joy? Any chance of visiting Melbourne again soon? And how is Andrew's 3D copying going? Built a time machine with it yet?*]**

Nay to the time machine. Andrew [my partner] is a bit stymied with progress, as he needs to learn the software to create the programs for instructing the machine to build the models, and it's hard even for someone with his programming experience.

Would love to visit Melbourne this year, but it depends on work — as you know, it's a pain planning anything when you are a freelancer as you inevitably lose money by being away when something is due to arrive and you have to give up the job. Snarl.

I'd like to go to the 'History of the World in 100 Objects' exhibition that is travelling from the British Museum, but it's in Perth or Canberra from September. I've not been to Perth for years, so that's appealing, but Canberra is closer.

I did have a great week in Tassie last month, though, helping out with Tasmanian devil research — you can read it on my blog, arovingiwillgo.wordpress.com — scroll back a few posts. I did about four on Tassie.

(26 April 2016)

**[*brg* Elaine and I still haven't been to Tasmania. Can't afford it, because of the freelancing lifestyle. A freelance editor friend said to me, just before I went on the 2005 trip to America, 'Don't ever go overseas, Bruce! They forget all about you!' And he was right. I had little money before the trip, had lots of spending money during the trip (it was a special fan fund to send me to two conventions in California), and then again had little money when I returned. There were no editing jobs for several months after I returned in March 2005.**

**I also haven't been to Perth, but did get to Canberra a few years ago, when I was Fan Guest of Honour at Conflux, their annual convention. I trotted around Canberra, seeing as much touristy stuff as possible, and vowed to return, but haven't been able to afford to do so.*]**

My record is 10 weeks before a freelance job turned up. Sigh.

Andrew has reminded me that he *did* 3D-print a time machine — a small TARDIS! It's about 3 inches tall, as is the small Dalek he did.

(27 April 2016)

## MICHAEL BISHOP
## PO Box 646, Pine Mountain GA 31822, USA

Forgive me for not writing sooner to let you know that I had received this issue of *SFC*. It came several days ago, maybe even as long as a week, but visitors and doctor appointments kept me from getting much reading done, and, also, I was working pretty diligently on revisions of the mostly non-SF stories that will appear in my Fairwood Press/Kudzu Planet Productions volume this coming November, perhaps in time for my 71st birthday. We'll see.

In any case, Bruce, thank you so much not only for this jam-packed issue, which I finally got to read a little in my doctor's office this morning awaiting a routine 'wellness examination' with good-guy Dr James McGowan, to whom, coincidentally, I gave a signed copy of *Brittle Innings*, because he had not, of course, read it before.

In any event, I came across your mention of *Brittle Innings* on page 26, a pleasant surprise that became even more pleasant after I read your comments about both it and *Count Geiger's Blues*. And I greatly appreciate your concluding comment about the latter book: 'It is inconceivable that Michael Bishop has not been able to place another novel with a publisher since 1994.'

That's a very kind assessment/judgment, but to cut the publishers a degree of slack, the solo stuff that I presented them after 1994 included an ambitious mainstream novel with innumerable flaws and an unorthodox novel for young people, 'whatever their age', and my previous published work, despite good reviews (for the most part), had never outsold tickets to a Prince concert, to put it less than self-effacingly (seen in one light) but altogether truthfully (seen in any light).

I was still writing short fiction, and published a couple of oddball detective-style collaborations with Paul Di Filippo, *Would It Kill You to Smile?* and *Muskrat Courage*, but my agent must have felt that I wasn't as focused on salable production as I could have been. And I undoubtedly wasn't, given my teaching, etc.

(27 April 2016)

**[*brg* In this letter, Mike does not mention the Nebula Award nomination for his novelette 'Rattlesnakes and Men'. His illustrated young person's book *Joel-Brock the Brave and the Valorous Smalls*, which will be published in June.*]**

## ROBIN JOHNSON
## Unit 104, 29 Stawell St. Sth, Ballarat East VIC 3350

**[*brg* I trust everything is going well since your triple bypass surgery and the move into your new unit. I haven't heard anything since Leigh Edmonds posted photos on Facebook of your new (filled) bookshelves.*]**

Filled, yes. Sorted, no. That room now contains about 75 per cent of my paperback novel collection — then there is my

paperback anthology collection. Then we get on to the hardcovers, which filled my front room in Hobart. Then I also collect aviation stuff, largely hardcover, and about 600 volumes. As for my other collection, which I am trying to sort: I have ordered another roomful of shelving from the same people, meanwhile I have to work out where my pictures get hung: I have way too many for this five-room place.

I see Leigh and Valma most days: he spends a lot of time doing his book about civil aviation, and a lot making plastic aircraft models. Valma spends a lot of time on the computer. Their house is similar to mine, but larger (and he has less stuff), so there is rather a contrast!

I'm planning to be in Melbourne for the next Melbourne Science Fiction Club monthly meeting and the next Australian SF Foundation committee meeting, then in June for Continuum 12 (though rather uninspired by the program), so I expect to catch up with you there.

It was very kind of you to come and visit me when I was in hospital — very much appreciated. I'm still coming out from under the pile of bills from everyone at the hospitals — I was in Cabrini, as you know, and was then moved to the St John of God here in Ballarat, for a total of 45 days.

Enjoying your lists in *SFC* 91!

(27 April 2016)

## TOM FELLER
## PO Box 140937, Nashville TN 37214, USA

*Interstellar* was one of my favourite movies of 2014. Unlike you, I had no trouble hearing the dialogue in the movie theatre. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* was fun.

I read *Fatherland* several years ago. I liked it, but did not consider it any better than the average Harry Turtledove novel. I read *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* a couple years ago for a book group that generally avoids science fiction and fantasy. I recall that most of us liked it, but I think it was marketed to a different audience than the typical vampire or fantasy short story collection, which is why it is not well known in the SF community.

*Stalag 17* is one of my favourite movies of all time, and I can watch it over and over again. Were you aware that Kirk Douglas turned down the Holden role? Douglas had seen the stage version, but did not like it. He regretted it, because he did not anticipate how good a film Billy Wilder was going to make from it.

I am really sorry that *Predestination* did not have a wider release. Anita and I saw it on Pay-per-View and really liked it.

Anita and I watch *Elementary* on a regular basis, and enjoy *Sherlock* whenever they get around to producing new episodes. We watched *Mr Holmes* in the movie theatre with a group of Holmes fans and the overall consensus was that we liked it.

Both *Ex_Machina* and *The Martian* were films I nominated for the Hugo, and obviously I wasn't alone in liking them, because they both made the final ballot.

(1 May 2016)

## MILT STEVENS
## 6325 Keystone St., Simi Valley, CA 93063

In *SF Commentary* 90, you mention somebody at Continuum 11 proposing to dropping printed SF from the Continuum 12 program. I'm afraid I find that disappointing, but not surprising. There seems to be a train of thought that starts with the observation that fandom is getting older. These old folks like science fiction. If we want to attract younger people we need to concentrate on something other than science fiction.

There is a local convention this weekend, but I'm not bothering with it. The convention in question has been looking for other topics to attract a younger audience. The last one of these conventions I attended had one third (21 out of 63) of the program items devoted to costuming. I know that there has always been some interest in costuming, but 21 hours in a weekend seems like it should produce topic overload.

I've tried to suggest to the concom that I was utterly fascinated with SF when I was a teenager. They seem doubtful about the idea. I think they may doubt I was ever a teenager.

I am very much in favour of your idea of a list of SF conventions that actually have anything to do with SF anymore. There is Readercon, but it's on the east coast. Other areas could use a Readercon as well. Maybe Readercon would be willing to franchise itself.

**[*brg* Potlatch was the convention about SF books that I attended in 2005. Surely that would fit the bill (annual literary SF convention) for West Coast fans?*]**

Fan charities have really expanded over the years. Much of that has come from the profits of conventions. I guess Ackerman's Fantasy Foundation was about the earliest example of a fan charity. The idea of preserving Ackerman's collection seemed like a good one. By now, just about every college has a large SF collection. That always seemed like a reasonable idea. What really surprised me is when college libraries started collecting comic books.

The idea of people collecting funds to start a convention impresses me as a strange one. For one thing, there are already too many conventions. Traditional cons were started by a couple of guys with a shoestring. If you pulled really hard on the shoestring, you might eventually produce a larger convention. Now if we could remember why we wanted the larger convention.

(1 May 2016)

There is a whole bunch of stuff in *SF Commentary* 91. It's overwhelming. I never get around to thinking about that much material. I guess I have to follow the old rule by starting somewhere and proceeding to somewhere else.

Music: I don't consciously listen to music, so I don't have any opinions.

Movies: I went to movie theatres twice last year; once for *The Martian* and once for *The Force Awakens*. On the Hugo ballot, I plan on voting for *The Martian* as best long form dramatic presentation. I thought *The Force Awakens* was good, but not worth as much hype as it received. I saw *Fury Road* on television. My most positive comment on the film was that it exercised my eyeballs.

The night before last I saw another 2015 movie, *Minions*. Had I seen it before I sent in my nominating ballot, I might have nominated it for the Hugo. It is one of the funniest movies I've ever seen. I can't exactly explain why I find the minions so funny. Everything they do is funny.

Television: There is *Game of Thrones*. It is wildly popular, and deserves it. Reconciling the TV series and the books appears to be an impossible task. I'll bet George R. R. Martin can pull it off. I hadn't thought about there being as many tie-in books as you listed. Now that you mention it, it seems

inevitable.

I've enjoyed *The Expanse*. I've enjoyed the books, and I've enjoyed the first season of the TV series. *Humans* is a series about the problems of androids achieving sentience. I've enjoyed the first season. *Magicians* has been described as college level Hogwarts, where students deal with magic, sex, and liquor. That's true, but it's more interesting than it sounds.

Books: I thought *The Dark Forest* was the best novel of the year. It didn't make the Hugo ballot. I discovered Alastair Reynolds this year, and read his *Poseidon's Children* series. *Poseidon's Wake* was eligible for a Hugo, but didn't make the ballot. None of the five novels I nominated for the Hugo made it to the ballot. Bummer.

As far as new novels are concerned, I commonly get ideas from the NESFA list. I figure most NESFANs are about as jaded as I am. If it impresses them, it may impress me as well. I then try to catch up on books I didn't get around to in previous years. There are a surprising number of those.

(2 May 2016)

# We also heard from ...

**JOHN HERTZ** (Los Angeles, USA), who was so dismayed to discover that not only had I not read Don Marquis's *archy & mehitabel*, but I didn't have a copy in the house, that he sent me a copy. Thanks very much.

**WERNER KOOPMANN** (Stuttgart, Germany), who, like me, is still very puzzled by the peculiar actions of the hotel he was staying in that meant he and Ulla did not meet Elaine and me when he visited in August last year.

**JIM BURNS** (Trowbridge, England), who had allowed me to use in *SFC* 90 two brilliant pieces of art that he had posted on Facebook: 'My two contributions are a bit blurry but I imagine that's the PDF format . I'll be doing more of these pencil beasts of mythology.'

**STEVE HOLLAND** (NSW), who downloads *SFC* from efanzines.com: 'James Doig made a very nice job of his tribute [to Graeme Flanagan] and I was glad to help in my own tiny way.'

**ROB GERRAND** (St Kilda VIC), who 'liked that fact that both Gerald Murnane and Brian Aldiss had letters — two such completely different but fascinating writers. I bought *Jocasta* in the Friday Project edition; it is absolutely superb. The late works of BWA are wonderful, and I hope he continues to be productive till at least he hits the century — and beyond.'

**LEANNE FRAHM** (Altona VIC), who moved from Queensland to Victoria well over a year ago, but has only recently caught up with fans in Melbourne: 'I was just bouncing off the walls after my visit [to the Friday night group]. It was just so great to see old friends and meet new people.' Fans around Melbourne or visiting from interstate or overseas are always welcome to join us on a table in the David Jones basement Food Hall (6 p.m., Fridays) and/or as we go for dinner at Ciao restaurant in Hardware Lane (a bit after 7 p.m.).

**COLIN STEELE** (Canberra ACT), our main book reviewer, who thanks Leigh Edmonds in *SFC* 90 for his nice words about his book reviews.

**CASEY WOLF** (Vancouver, Canada), who 'wanted to let you know that although I was avoiding my letterbox for some while after Sparky [my cat] died, I finally opened it and found to my delight your wonderful fanzine, which I am reading with pleasure and relief. I'm very grateful ... I read *The Facts of Life* (Graham Joyce) on your say-so and enjoyed it very much.'

**TEDDY HARVIA** (Dallas, USA), who was 'delighted to see that at least one Aussie fanzine in a form that I recognise is still alive and doing well. The artwork in the latest issue is fantastic. Were you in Spokane? We saw only a fraction of my friends there.' Travelling to last year's world convention in Spokane, Washington, would have wiped out my meagre savings. I won't be attending another world convention, except in the unlikely event that it returns to Melbourne or some other Australian city.

**ROBERT ELORDIETA** (Traralgon VIC), who was pleased to receive a packet of surplus-to-requirement DVDs and Blu-rays I sent him in March: 'I really do appreciate you giving me the DVDs of the Ken Burns documentary series on the American Civil War. Burns does great documentaries. ... I haven't seen the Jacques Tati films that you gave me. I have heard that the film-maker is very well known in France. I look forward to seeing them.' I hope Jacques Tati's comedy films is not too different from any you've seen before. My guess is that you'll enjoy *Mon Oncle* and *M. Hulot's Holiday* even if you don't enjoy the others.

**MATS LINDER** (Norrtälje, Sweden), who sent me some welcome Euros, not for a print copy subscription, but to pay me for copies I had sent him in the past in the hope he might take the hint and subscribe. 'And as for the current and future issues, getting them in digital form is fine for me.'

And it was also great to hear from **GRAHAM CHARNOCK** (London, England); **RON SHELDON** (Ferntree Gully, VIC); **YVONNE ROUSSEAU** (Adelaide, SA); **CAROL KEWLEY** (Albion, VIC); **JOE MOUDRY** (USA); **CAT SPARKS** (Wollongong, NSW); **LESLIE TUREK** (USA); **SPIKE** (California, USA) ('I love that Stiles cover art!'); **PETER B. GRANT**; and **TESSA DICK** (California, USA);

and many other generous people, such as **KIM HUETT**, **DICK JENSSEN**, **ALEX SKOVRON**, **CHARLES TAYLOR**, **JEANETTE GILLESPIE** and **DUNCAN BROWN**, **STEVE SNEYD**, **ANDY ROBSON**, **THOMAS BULL**, **MURRAY MacLACHLAN**, **ROBYN WHITELEY** and **JOHN COLLINS**, **GILLIAN POLACK**, **JENNIFER BRYCE**, **VAN IKIN** and **DAMIEN BRODERICK**, **DAVID RUSSELL**, **STEPHEN CAMPBELL**, and **DENNY LIEN**, who have sent me artwork, subscriptions, books, notices about fanzines posted on efanzines.com, and much else besides.

**A special thanks to quite a few people who have kept me on their paper-fanzines trade lists. I hope to talk about their fanzines next issue.**

**— Bruce Gillespie, 14 May 2016**

# SF COMMENTARY 92

**July 2016** **72 pages**

VINTAGE DITMAR: 'Island' by Ditmar (Dick Jenssen).