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Tales of the Human Kind

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The view from Neptune's moon

By Bob Eggleton

The Gateway Concordance

By Frederik Pohl

Art by Frank Kelly Freas

Also in this issue:

GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

BRUCE BETHKE

LOU FISHER

BONITA KALE

ROBERT A. METZGER

JOHN W. RANDAL



No Prisoners

By George Alec Effinger

Art by Robert J. Pasternak

I rapped once, sharply, on the door and entered the study. The general was sitting at his broad oak desk, frowning at the ten video monitors built into its battered, scarred surface. He touched a keypad and seven of the screens darkened. Then he looked up at me. "I have six wars to pursue, three economies to rebuild, two new insurrections to put down, and the entire session's legislation from four different worlds to review for possible vetoes."

"The envoy from the world of Sarghal is waiting, General. You granted him an audience at one o'clock. It's now almost two."

"I don't have time for all of this," he said sourly. It was his common complaint.

"Shall I show him in?" I asked.

The general just gave me a curt nod and went back to studying the three desktop data monitors. I left the inner office and hurried back down the hall to the antechamber where the envoy and his entourage were waiting, glum and impatient. There was also a party from the world of Mustazafin. They probably all thought that the general was intentionally letting them cool their heels, that this was some low-grade psychological ploy. I could have told them that it was not, but I knew my words would carry no weight. Let them believe what they like, I decided.

They all stared at me when I came into the room, some fearfully, some angrily. "The general will see you now," I told the leader of the delegation from Sarghal. All of them, six men and four women, got to their feet. "Just the official envoy, if you please," I said, trying not to antagonize him further. The others glanced at each other in confusion, but finally took their seats again. Most of them seemed grateful that, after all, they wouldn't need to face the general.

I stepped into the corridor to let the envoy have a few words in private with his advisors. Perhaps he still felt that if he could only find the correct way to approach the general, he might yet win some concessions for his people. I, of course, knew better. I had served the general for many years, and I could have told the envoy from Sarghal that his world's fate had been decided by the general days earlier, and that nothing the envoy or anyone else could say would change the general's plan in the slightest.

I accompanied the envoy into the general's office, and took up my position beside the general's desk. During the interview, my duties included everything from transmitting documents back and forth between the general and the envoy to interfering in any misguided assassination attempt. Usually, however,

all I had to do was stand and wait and bear witness.

The general leaned back in his swivel chair and chewed his lip. He studied the envoy for several seconds, but when it became apparent that he wasn't going to say anything, the envoy spoke up. His voice shook. He knew the fate of his world and his people was at stake.

"General," he said, "Your Excellency, I won't waste your time being coy. You defeated our armed forces, you received our delegations that have come suing for peace, and you turned them all away without even entering into negotiations. We are desperate, Your Excellency. We are in the last extremity. My leaders have instructed me to tell you that they'll accept any terms you dictate, but you must stop the annihilation of our people and the total destruction of our world."

The envoy finished his speech and gasped a long, deep breath, as if at the last moment he'd abandoned the more diplomatic speech he'd prepared and instead spoken urgently and from the heart.

The general was not impressed. "Ambassador —"

"I'm merely a special envoy, Your Excellency. I don't have the rank or privileges of an ambassador. As you know, there are no official diplomatic ties between our worlds. That, too, is your decision."

"You've come then as an envoy," said the general, "and so I'll listen to your words. But I, sir, am a conqueror, and it will go better for you if you leave the conquering up to me. Believe me, I know what I'm doing. If I decide that a world cannot be subdued until it has been reduced to rubble and its population decimated and then decimated again, it is for the greater good of our empire. I truly regret any hardship I may cause in the process, but conquering is often difficult and painful work."

"How can you dismiss all the horror so easily?" cried the outraged envoy. "You've killed billions of my people, and —"

The general glanced at me. It was enough of a signal. I moved forward quickly, taking the envoy by the arm. I murmured quiet, soothing words to him as I ushered him out of the general's office, much as a mother croons to an infant as the doctor prepares an injection. I escorted the envoy back down the hall to the antechamber, where he wept as he described the failure of the interview to his companions.

When I returned to the general, he was once again studying the video monitors built into his desk. If he heard me move in, he showed no sign of it. I stood

(Continued to page 43)



Contents

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A crazy alien

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Short Stories

No Prisoners.....Page 2
By George Alec Effinger
Art by Robert J. Pasternak

First Full-Contact.....Page 6
By Bruce Bethke
Art by David R. Deitrick

The Gateway Concordance, Part I.....Page 12
By Frederik Pohl
Art by Frank Kelly Freas

Liquid Jade.....Page 26
By John W. Randal
Art by Cortney Skinner

In the Chips.....Page 34
By Lou Fisher
Art by Robert J. Pasternak

UFO ALIENS SHARED MY APT.
Says Cleveland Woman.....Page 62
By Bonita Kale
Art by Larry Blamire

Departments

Cover Art of Neptune from Triton.....Page 1
By Bob Eggleston

High-Tech Advance Scout.....Page 11
Books.....Page 22

By Darrell Schweitzer
2nd Annual Boomerang Awards.....Page 1

Boomerangs.....Page 41
Editor's Notes.....Page 44

By Charles C. Ryan
Our Renewal Policy.....Page 44

From the Bookshelf.....Page 45
By Janice M. Eisen

What If? — Science.....Page 51
By Robert A. Metzger

Aborigines.....Page 54
By Laurel Lucas

Our Alien Publisher.....Page 57
By a crazy alien

1990: New Decade, New Shows.....Page 58
By Susan Ellison

Cartoon.....Page 61
By Daniel Gene Miller

Advertisements

Cummings Office Park.....Page 5
Starshore.....Page 15

Back Issues.....Page 33
Classifieds.....Pages 53

The Aboriginal SF Anthology.....Page 64
Aboriginal Science Fiction.....Page 65

The Art Gallery.....Page 68



Aboriginal Science Fiction No. 19

First Full-Contact

By Bruce Bethke

Art by David R. Deitrick

The hard part is not thinking. In two months aboard the troopship *Margaret Thatcher* I've gotten pretty good at shutting some things out. I can lie in my bunk in "D" hold and almost completely ignore the noise and smell of the thousand other Lone Star Airborne Rangers in 3rd Battalion.

But I've never learned to stop thinking.

One of the Houstonians wanders by. "Hey, Billy Ray," he says. "We're lookin' for a fifth for *tajii*. Y'all want I should deal you in?"

"Nah." Not for *tajii*, anyway. It's one of those crazy Cetan things: the Falasha had sixty years to kill on board that slowship to Tau Ceti, and they came up with some of the *damnedest* card games.

The Houstonian wanders off, and I go back to staring at the holo-ring I wear on my left hand. The light in "D" hold is bad, but if I turn my hand palm up and tilt the ring just right, Cheryl Anne appears to be sitting in the palm of my hand.

Cheryl Anne: my angel. Some guys might argue, but to me she's the prettiest girl in all the worlds, with her sweet freckled face, little button nose, and that wild, sandy blond hair she never can keep combed proper. In the holo she's wearing a church-school yellow blouse and modest white shorts, and the smile on her face is pure sweetness and innocence. But there's a promise in the angle of her hips and the way she parts those sweet white thighs; a reminder of the glory she gave me the night before my unit shipped out.

Three weeks ago, just before we went into comm blackout, I got an xmit from her. She thinks she's pregnant. My baby.

Isn't that what it's all about? Somewhere back there, two months and three starjumps ago, I have a girl who wants to be my wife, and maybe a kid on the way. I have real *family* back there in Plano, State of Collin, Republic of Texas, Earth.

Somewhere up ahead are the Geminids. Our name for them, because we first found them in the stars of Gemini. They've already wiped out the terraforming colonies on Alhena II, Wasat IV, and Castor Station. Now they've taken Terre Pollux, and we're coming to take it back. It's almost a straight line: Alhena, Wasat, Castor, Pollux. If we lose Pollux, Procyon is next.

Then Sol. Earth. Cheryl Anne. My kid.

I turn my hand a little. It's hard to do in anything but direct sunlight, but if you turn a holo-ring just right, you get the whole sequence. I get it. Cheryl Anne

moves. She parts her sweet red lips, she blows me a kiss, she mouths the words *I love you*.

"I love you, too," I whisper.

"Your girlfriend, Private Meadows?" I jump half out of my skin; I hadn't heard the Sarge coming.

"Uh, sir, yessir." I sit up straight, and Cheryl Anne disappears. The Sarge is a bulky NorEastern giant of no particular race, but he swings himself down on the edge of my bunk with the grace of a Lunar gymnast.

"She's pretty," the Sarge says. "Here, this is my wife." With an easy flick, he conjures up the image of a short, sultry-eyed brunette. "Now — " The Sarge catches himself, and gives me a suspicious look. "How old are you, Meadows?"

"Nineteen, sir."

"Old enough. Watch this." The Sarge turns his hand, and the image of his wife moves. *Boy*, does she move! I've heard of women who do the thing she did — but I've never heard of anybody ever *marrying* one!

The Sarge sees the way I'm staring and he laughs. Then he turns his hand again, slower, so I can watch. I decide I'll have to teach Cheryl Anne to do that when I get back.

If I get back.

The Sarge closes his fist and gives me a sober look. "You and your girl, you got a lot to look forward to, don't you?"

"Yessir."

"You nervous about the action?"

"No —" I stop. Back home, marching past the cheering crowds on the way out to Dallas Laserlaunch, it was easy to feel like a big, tough Texas Ranger. Out here, now, I feel godawful damn small. "Yes, sir. I am."

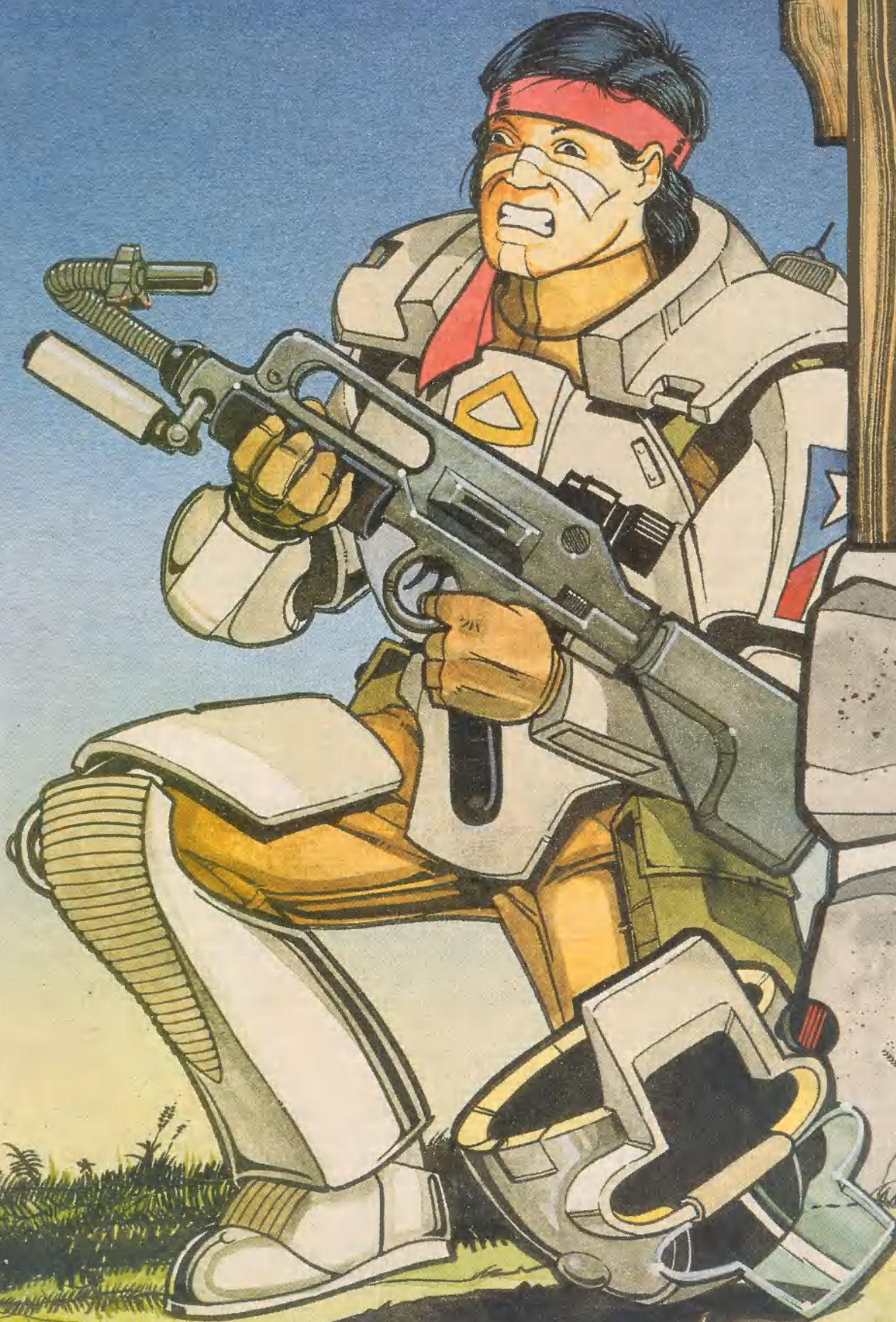
"Good." The Sarge claps me on the shoulder and stands up. "Stay nervous. It just might keep you alive."

"Thanks for the advice, sir." He walks away, and I lean back in my bunk and try to figure out how he flicked the holo up like that. After six or eight tries, I get the hang of it, and Cheryl appears again, mouthing the words *I love you*.

"I love you, too," I whisper.

Hell is a troopship, I think. Hell is sitting in a noisy, smelly tin can for days, then weeks, then months, all the while never knowing if you're going to be alive in another half an hour. At first you're eager to be a hero. Then you're scared you're going to die.

Finally, you're just bored.



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Three weeks aboard the *Thatcher*, from Earth to Terre Procyon. Two weeks in low Procyon orbit, rehearsing the landing, while the Cetan and Eridani contingents joined up with the Second Fleet. Then three more weeks cooped up in "D" hold, watching the officers struggle to find busywork for us, while the fleet is en route to Pollux System. The fleet has been engaged in a space battle for the last ten days now, I think, but I'm not sure. The ship is under comm blackout.

Some of the guys have hardcopy books. They're lucky; the officers confiscated all our smartbooks just before we left Terre Procyon. Ten years since the fall of Alhena, and we still don't know whether the Geminids can sniff the EM leakage from our cybernetics. So we take no unnecessary chances: no smartbooks, no gamers, no vid or music playbacks. Not even voicewriters — of course, we couldn't send letters anyway, what with the comm blackout.

Some guys play cards like there's no tomorrow. Some do pushups 'til their noses bleed. Some just lie on their bunks and try to dream themselves back home.

Pfc. Jerry Jeff Witkowski, in the next bunk over, is a weapons-stripper. For the third time today he sits down on his bunk, pulls out his rifle, and begins cleaning the targeter.

It can be a little unnerving to watch if you're used to civilian guns. About a century ago, back on Earth, some military genius realized there were two ways to increase infantry firepower. The traditional way was to step up the rate of fire — and the weight of ammunition carried, the heat dissipation problems, the resupply problems, and everything else attendant on a high ROF.

The other way was to slow down the rate of fire, and make each bullet count. That's what modern military weapons do. The barrels are made of — what do they call it? Radially-reinforced electrokinetic something. Meaning the bore stays constant, but the barrel actually flexes a little, as the sensors in the muzzle ring pick up targets and the computer in the stock tracks them.

Or the barrel flexes a lot. In boot camp once they applied a high DC voltage to a gun, just to show us what would happen. The barrel coiled up like a millipede.

Witkowski sits on his bunk, carefully polishing the facets of his muzzle sensor. Next to him, the blind gun gropes around like a slow, cold snake. Searching for something to kill.

Like I said, it can be a little unnerving to watch.

Witkowski puts the final gloss on the sensor, then starts stripping down the firing action. "How do you think the battle's going?" he asks for the third time today.

I study the way sunlight reflects off Cheryl Anne's hair. "Our navy's winning." He stops polishing and looks up, interested. "Just a guess," I say. "We're still alive."

"Oh." He goes back to polishing the breech bolt. A few minutes later he asks, "What do you think Geminids look like?"

"No idea," I answer.

"My brother, I bet he knows." There's a crazy pride in his voice. Witkowski's brother was with the First Fleet. At Castor.

"Your brother's dead," I remind him.

He ignores me, and keeps polishing the gun. "Yeah, can't wait to see Jimmy again," he says. "We'll just straighten out this little problem, then head on over to Port Armstrong. Drink some beers! Kick some ass!" He looks up, eyes gleaming like wet mushrooms. "Have a good time, know what I mean?"

"Yeah." I know. Ten men in 3rd Battalion have already gone pure crazy. If I was a betting man, I'd put money on Witkowski being next. Not a moment too soon, he puts his gun back together and wanders off. I curl up in my bunk, roll around 'til I find the light, and Cheryl Anne pops into my hand again. I study her, trying to imagine what she'll look like nine months pregnant.

Beautiful, I think.

The klaxons go off with a noise that could wake the dead. As if that's not enough, the Sarge runs down the line, hammering on the metal bunk frames and shouting, "Turn out! Mount up! Ain't no fuggin' drill!" I jump out of my bunk and begin fighting my bunkies for room to suit up.

Somehow I get my uniform on, my armor latched, and my kit together before the ship switches over to red battle lighting. Clicking together my helmet comm links, I race down the companionway to the shuttle deck and fall in just moments before the Sarge arrives.

"We're doin' it by the numbers!" he yells. "Landing zone is still the agricenter 40 clicks west of Novo Gdansk. Right now it looks cold, but assume the LZ is hot until I tell you it's not! So what are ya gonna do?"

We've been practicing the chant for weeks. "Hit the dirt! Clear the zone! Take the barn! See who's home!"

"Any questions?" the Sarge bellows.

"Sir!" Witkowski yelps. "Intelligence got any holo's of Geminids for us yet, sir?"

"No!"

"So how we gonna recognize the enemy, sir?"

"He'll try to *kill* you, private!" The boarding lamp flares green, and we crowd aboard the shuttle and crawl into our landing pods. The launch rails kick the shuttle clear of the *Thatcher* with a violence that pushes me deep back into the shock foam, and for a few minutes there's nothing but the terrible sensation of silently falling.

Then the thin scream of atmospheric entry starts, and the g-forces begin to build. Wiggling a hand free, I dial down my audio enhancers.

A moment before separation, the Sarge's voice blasts through my helmet. "LZ is hot!" he shouts. "Fire coming from the structures. We're revectoring to drop one klick east. Repeat, one klick east!" With a sickening lurch, my pod separates from the shuttle. The shroud peels away, and at last I can see!

Terre Pollux is a lovely world, all gently rolling hills and peaceful golden fields stretching away in the distance. So where's ... ? I get my hand on the pod's joystick and roll around, spotting the agricenter at the

exact moment that a bright green laser lances up and splashes off one of the nearby descending pods.

No damage, good. But a second later a stream of solids screams up and punches clean through the lasered pod, and the casualty within sags against his joystick. The stricken pod veers off at a crazy angle and loops toward the ground.

I don't stick around to see it impact. Throwing my pod hard over, I aim for a line of trees and hope the microlifter can compensate for the dive. The laser sweeps across the rest of the platoon; more solids follow. At least three pods get hit in the lifters and drop like bricks. As I shoot past, a pod gets hit by a full stream and disintegrates in a gout of blood and metal.

I roll; I dodge. For one terrible moment the world turns green and I have a clear view of Hell down the bore of the alien slug thrower, but I'm lucky, and I live. I thumb my sniffer into learn mode. If they shoot at me often enough — and if I stay alive — my helmet will learn to ID the volatiles in the alien propellant and smell their weapons before they fire.

Another stream of solids streaks up; more pods crumple. "Anybody got a clear positional on that thing?" the Sarge shouts over the open comm channel.

"Yo!" I sing out. "I make it a laser-guided slug thrower in the east silo."

"Can you take it?"

I check my altimeter. "Nope, I'm going in." A second later I crash through the top of the tree line and impact in a weedy, plowed field. The pod's reflective skin splits open; I grab my gun and roll clear just as a stream of solids hammers into the grounded pod.

Shooting at me is the alien gunner's fatal mistake. Somebody in one of the pods still airborne gets a snapshot lock on the Geminid targeting laser, and six missilettes scream down on the silo. It dissolves in a ball of flame and steel.

By the time the rest of the platoon has grounded, only sporadic small-arms fire is coming from the farm. We regroup under cover of the trees; the Sarge joins up last, kicking his way through the tall, dry grass and cussing a blue streak into his commlink. "D company is scattered all over the goddamn map!" he shouts at someone on the other end of the link. "No, I haven't seen a lieutenant, live or dead. Have you ... Captain Walker bought it? Oh, fuggin' terrific." He snaps his head up and glares at me. "Private, you got any idea where Corporal Lee is?"

"Nossir."

"He bought it in the air," someone else volunteers.

"Corporal Singh?" the Sarge asks.

"Augured in," another says.

The Sarge takes a moment to look us over and take a head count, then he thumbs his commlink back on. "I lost both my corporals and I'm down to twelve effectives. Can we —? Roger, I copy. Wilco." He snaps the commlink off and turns to the platoon. "Okay, boys," he says quietly, "we're gonna move up this windbreak 'til we're opposite the barn. Then the Third Platoon'll lay down covering fire while we cross the field and go in." He looks around the group and picks a face. "Witkowski, you're on point."

Slowly we form up and advance, cautiously, along the windbreak. Our gun barrels wave gently in the wind, like eels tasting the water for prey. They're learning, bit by bit. As we approach the farm, I work my way down the line, jacking into other grunts' helmets and downloading my sniffer data. Most of the others immediately link their helmets to their guns.

Third Platoon's weapons are getting smarter, too. The small arms fire is down to sporadic popping; the gap between a new enemy gun opening up and the silencing counterfire gets shorter every time. Still we advance cautiously, all sensors dialed up to maximum.

Witkowski flushes up a grasshopper the size of a dog.

I try to fire; my gun won't. I switch to manual and start squeezing off rounds. The rest of the platoon follows. The grasshopper-thing makes two enormous leaps before one of us hits it and brings it down, but it's still twitching, so we keep firing.

"Cease fire!" the Sarge screams. "Cease fire!" Sheepishly, I let off the trigger. "Christ, y'damn pogues! You forgetting that the nearest ammo dump is two hundred clicks straight up?"

Witkowski turns around and raises his helmet visor. "Sarge, that thing didn't show on IR. What the hell is it?"

Sarge taps a few buttons on his helmet, studies his visor overlays, then shrugs. "It's not local fauna," he says at last. "Let's find out, shall we?" Holding his gun on the corpse, he carefully advances on it.

He never sees the large, wasp-like one up in the foliage. I do, just as it drops, and I put a bullet clean through its head, but that doesn't seem to matter much. Vestigial wings buzz as its huge mandibles close on the Sarge's throat, neatly biting his head off. For a few seconds his body still doesn't know he's dead; the head bounces down into the ditch, arterial blood jets high into the air. For a moment he's still standing, and some idiot starts to scream for a medic.

Then the wasp sinks its stinger deep into the Sarge's belly and leaps clear. The body collapses.

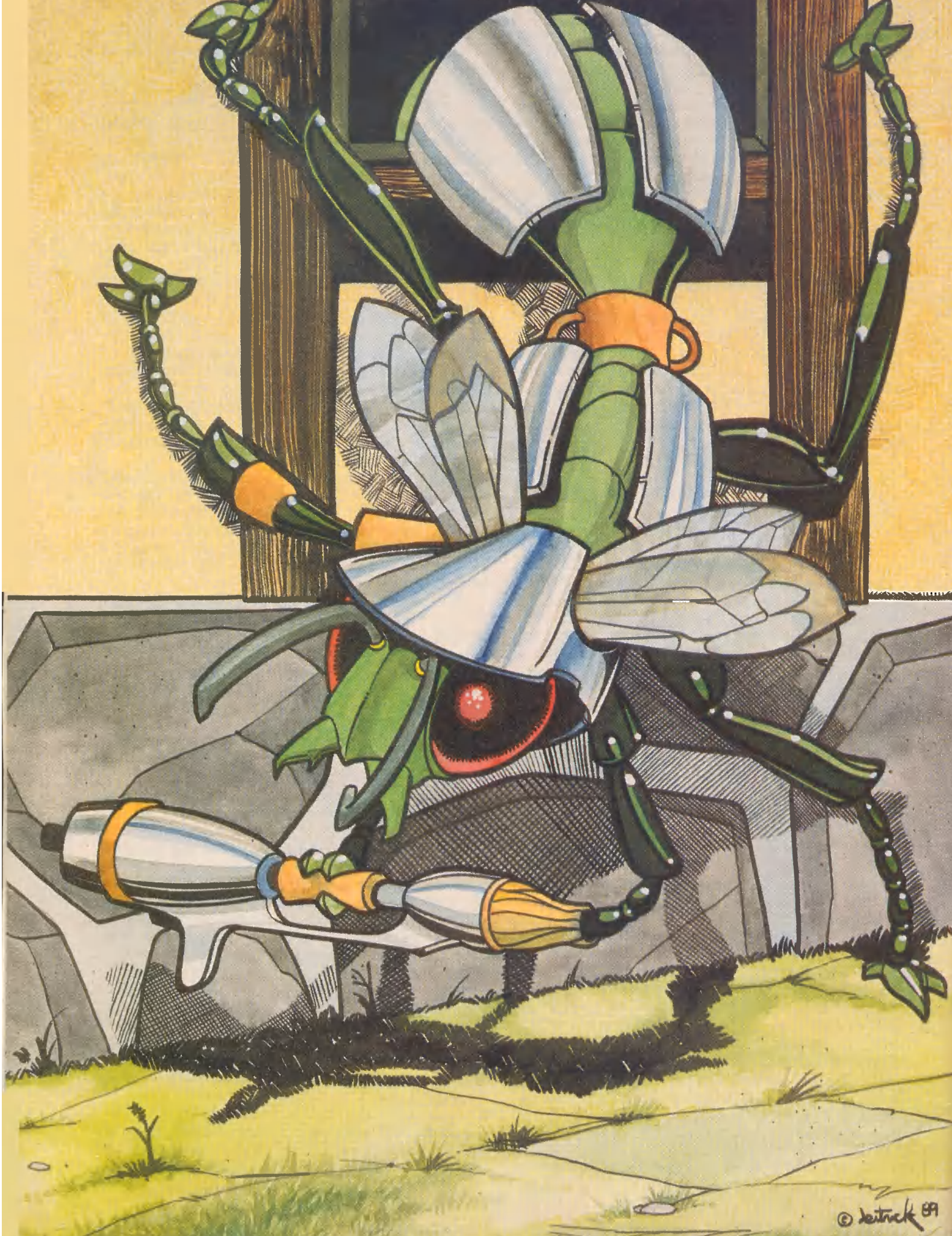
A phosphor round from the recoilless rifle catches the Geminid square in the abdomen, blasting it into a ball of white flame. As one, we turn our guns on the trees and begin reducing them to flaming splinters. Something catches my eye and shakes me out of my berserker rage: the recoilless gunner loading his last drum of ammunition. "Cease fire!" I scream. "Cease fire, y'damn pogues!" In a few seconds, they cease.

"Sarge's dead," Witkowski said, dully. "Corporals too." He turns to me. "What are we gonna do, man?"

"Yeah, what are we gonna do?" someone else repeats.

I pause a moment, then kneel down by the Sarge's corpse and unclip the command commlink. Our medics can do wonderful things. Saving a decapitated man isn't one of them. "We're gonna take this farm," I say softly.

The rest of the action goes pretty quietly. We flush up a few more of the grasshopper-things and shoot them to pieces, but don't see any more of the



wasp-things. We cross the pasture and take the administration and residence buildings without an answering shot; there's nothing inside but ruin and evidence of a long-finished struggle.

The cattle barn is another story. We push through a pair of broken windows and infiltrate the building. The place reeks of filth and excrement, and flies buzz around a vile, discolored stream trickling down the center of the floor.

"What a *smell*," one of the grunts coughs.

I take a deep sniff, and grin. "Smells just like the cattle barns back home."

"No, not that. Something else." The Ranger rubs his watering eyes and keeps moving.

As we work our way towards the far end of the building, I begin to become aware of the other smell. It's a weird one that doesn't belong in a cattle barn: sweet, but acidic.

Witkowski rounds a corner. "Oh, Christ," he gasps, and he lets his gun fall to the end of its sling. "Sarge? I found the people." I run over to join Witkowski. Then I sag against the wall, fighting my gag reflex. Other Rangers aren't so lucky; at least two of them vomit.

I force my gorge back down and lift the command commlink. "MedEvac?" I say. My voice is barely a croak. "MedEvac!" I try again. "We got civilian casualties here!"

A calm, professional voice buzzes in my ear. "Are they alive?"

I look back to the fly-covered heaps of distended flesh lying in the concrete stall and detect movement. But it's wrong, somehow; not a muscle, not a limb. Something under the skin ...

I decide to be honest. "I'm not sure, MedEvac."

We know a lot more about the Geminids now. That's not to say we've beaten them. We just know a lot more about them. They're parasites. Like blowflies, maybe, or digger wasps.

But they're also social insects, with strong task differentiation. The wasp-like ones, the *soldiers*, are tough to kill and very dangerous, but not particularly bright. The grasshopper-things, or *herders*, are a waste of bullets.

There's another kind, that we kill on sight. We called 'em *grenadiers* at first, because we thought they carried bandoleers of grenades. We were wrong.

They carry eggs.

The intelligence people explain it with lots of long words like endorphins and alkaloids and symbiotic parasitism. The upshot is, given a choice, they sting humans comatose and insert eggs in our bodies. The grubs squirm around under our skins for about twelve weeks, then they chew their way out. Humans can actually live through it. Some of the people we found in that cattle barn are still alive today.

I got a citation for saving those civilians, and a promotion. I'm Platoon Sergeant Billy Ray Meadows now, thank you. Cheryl Anne and I got married by telecomm, and my paycheck is sent straight to her. Like I said, I'm not a gambling man.

Just a worried one. For one thing, in all our ground fighting we have yet to find any technology

more complex than a slug-thrower. The Navy didn't take any of their ships intact; I'm beginning to believe that the bugs we're fighting on the ground aren't the same ones who built those ships.

The second thing that bothers me is personal, and worse. I've seen a lot of genuine horror since we first hit dirt. We've found a lot of infested humans since that first group in the cattle barn.

The brass has offered me a two-month pass, to go home for the birth. Cheryl Anne tells me she can feel the baby all the time now; she can feel it squirming, and kicking, and living. She wants me to put my hands on her belly and feel it move.

Under her skin. Dear God, under her skin. Already I can feel my hand twitching for a knife.

I can't go back just now. My gun's getting real smart, and I'm not so dumb myself. It'd be a shame to waste all this learning with the war not over yet. There's Pollux to retake, then Castor Station, and after that Wasat and Alhena. There's a galaxy just full of aliens out there, with only Billy Ray Meadows to stand between them and Cheryl Anne.

And maybe someday I won't be afraid to touch her again. □

High-Tech Advance Scout

As neat as portable computers are, there are times and places where you don't want to whip one out — they're too obtrusive.

And that's where something like the Sharp Wizard comes in. About the size of a billfold and weighing in at nine ounces, the Wizard slips neatly into your inside jacket pocket. Built-in are a calendar and scheduler (with an alarm), a telephone directory, memo pad, calculator and a clock which will reveal local and international times. In other words, it's just as handy as memory resident programs like Sidekick — and, with a 32K RAM, it has as much memory as my trusty Radio Shack Model 100.

If it stopped there, it would be a neat machine, but there's more. With an optional adapter, the Wizard will plug into your PC or Mac and up-, or down-load information, so you don't have to retype all those notes you make on the road. And Sharp has a passel of program cards which can be inserted to turn the Wizard into a more powerful machine or expand its memory.

It's not perfect yet, though. Even nine ounces gets to be a bit after a while. It's OK for the winter wools, but would be a lot handier if it weighed in at four ounces and was only half of its thickness (currently 7/8-inch). The other drawback for touch typists is that the keyboard is set up wrong. While Sharp minds may have had the right idea in creating the Wizard, the keyboard is set up vertically, like a calculator, rather than horizontally, like a computer. (You can get around that by doing all your inputting on your PC and then uploading it, but that doesn't help when you have a lot of data and you're on the road.)

If Sharp could cut the weight and thickness in half and put the keyboard on its side, they'd have a runaway best-seller. But even as it is, the Wizard is a dandy little machine for a suggested retail of \$299 — just right for that person who has everything. □

—C.C. Ryan □

The Gateway Concordance

By Frederik Pohl

Art by Frank Kelly Freas

Part I: The Visit

There was a time, half a million years ago or so, when some new neighbors came into the vicinity of the Earth's solar system. They were eager to be friendly — that is, they wanted to be, if they could find anyone around to be friends with. So one day they dropped in on the third planet of the system, Earth itself, to see who might be at home.

It wasn't a good time to pay a call. Oh, there was plenty of *life* on Earth, no doubt of that. The planet crawled with the stuff. There were cave bears and saber-toothed tigers and things like elephants and things like deer. There were snakes and fish and birds and crocodiles; and there were disease germs and scavengers; and there were forests and savannahs and vegetation of all kinds. But one thing was missing in the catalogue of living creatures. That was a great pity, because that was the quality the visitors were most anxious to find.

What those visitors from space couldn't find anywhere on the planet was *intelligence*. It just hadn't been invented yet.

The visitors looked very diligently. The closest they could find to what they were after was a furry little creature without language, fire, or social institutions — but which did, at least, have the skills to manage to crunch tools out of random bits of rock. When modern humans came along and began tracing their roots, they would name this particular brand of pre-human "australopithecus." The visitors didn't call it anything in particular ... except one more disappointment in their quest for civilized company in space.

The little animals weren't very tall — about the size of a modern six-year-old — but the visitors didn't hold that against them. They had no modern humans to compare the little guys with, and anyway they weren't terribly tall themselves.

This was the chancy Pleistocene, the time when the ice was growing and retreating in Europe and North America, when African rainfall patterns swelled and diminished, and adaptability was the key for any species that wanted to stay alive. At the time the visitors arrived, the countryside in which they found their little pets was rolling, arid savannah. It was covered with grasses and occasional wildflowers. Where the australopithecines had camped was by the banks of a slow, trickly little stream that flowed into a huge salty lake a few kilometers away. On the western

horizon a line of mountains stretched away out of sight. The nearest of them steamed gently. They were all volcanoes, though of course the australopithecines did not have any idea what a volcano was. They did have fire; they'd got that far in technological sophistication. At least, most of the time they did, when lightning started grass burning (or even when hot ash from an eruption kindled something near them, though fortunately for the peace of mind of the little people that didn't happen often). They didn't use fire for much. They had not yet considered the possibility of cooking with it, for instance. What they found it good for was keeping large nocturnal predators away, at which it sometimes succeeded.

By day they could take care of themselves. They carried stone "hand axes" — they were just rocks chipped into more or less the shape of a fat, sharp-edged clam — and clubs made of the long leg bones of the deer-like grazers they liked to eat. That sort of weapon would never stop a saber-tooth. But enough of them, wielded by enough of the screaming little apemen, could usually deter the hyenas that were the savannah's fiercest predators, especially if the little folk had first discouraged the hyena pack by pelting it with rocks from a distance. They didn't usually succeed in killing the hyenas, but most of the time they convinced the animals that their time was better spent on more defenseless prey.

The little people did lose a baby to a carnivore now and then, of course, or an old person whose worn-out teeth were making his or her life chancy anyway. They could stand that. They seldom lost anyone important to the well-being of the tribe — except when hunting, of course. But they didn't have any choice about that. They had to hunt to eat.

Although the australopithecines were tiny, they were quite strong. They tended to have pot bellies, but the *gluteus maximus* was quite small — even the females had no hips to speak of to roll. Their faces were not very human. No chin to speak of, broad nose, tiny ears almost hidden in the head fur — you wouldn't call it hair yet. An average australopithecine's skull did not have room for much in the way of brains. If you poured the brains out of his sloped skull into a pint beer mug, they would probably spill over the edge, but not by much.

Of course, no modern beer drinker would do that, but one of the little furry people might have. In their diet, brains were a delicacy. Even each other's.

The visitors didn't think much of the furry people's eating habits. Still, they had one anatomical



characteristic that interested the visitors a lot — in a sort of winky-jokey way, with sexual overtones. Like the visitors, the australopithecines were bipeds. Unlike them, their legs were positioned so close to each other that they actually rubbed together at the thighs when they walked — and for the males, at least, that seemed to the visitors to present real problems, since the male sexual organs hung between the thighs.

(Some hundreds of thousands of years later, the then paramount denizens of Earth, the human race, would ask themselves similar questions about the long-gone visitors ... and they, too, would fail to understand.)

So the visitors from space looked the little furry creatures over for a while, then chirruped their disappointment to each other and went glumly away.

The visit wasn't a total loss. Any planet that bore life at all was a rare jewel in the galaxy. Still, they had really been hoping for someone to meet and be friends and interchange views and have discussions with, and these little furry animals definitely weren't up to any of that. The visitors took a few of them away and put them in a safe place, in the hope that they might amount to something after all. Then the visitors departed.

Time passed ... a lot of time.

The australopithecines never did get very far on Earth. But then their close relatives — the genus *homo*, better known as you and me and all our friends — came along. They worked out a lot better. Over a few hundred thousand years, in fact, they did just about all the things the visitors had hoped for from the australopithecines.

These "humans" (as they called themselves) were pretty clever at thinking things up. Over the ages they invented a lot of stuff — the wheel, and agriculture, and draft animals, and cities, and levers and sailing ships and the internal combustion engine and credit cards and radar and spacecraft. They didn't invent them all at once, of course. And not everything they invented turned out to be an absolute boon, because along the way they also invented clubs and swords and bows and catapults and cannon and nuclear missiles. These humans had a real talent for messing things up.

For instance, a lot of their inventions were the kind that looked as though they *ought* to do something, but really did something very different: that was the case with all their "peace-keeping" gadgets, none of which kept any peace. "Medicine" was another case in point. They invented what they called medicine quite early — that is, anyway, they invented the practice of doing all sorts of bizarre things to people unfortunate enough to get sick. Ostensibly they were to make the sick person better; often enough they went the other way. At best, they didn't help. The man dying of malaria may have been grateful to his local doctor for putting on the devil mask and dancing around the bed, but he died anyway. By the time human medicine reached the point where a sick person's chances of recovery were better with a doctor than without one — that took about 499,900 of those 500,000 years — humans had managed to find a more

efficient way of screwing things up. They had invented money. Human medicine became fairly good at curing many human ailments, but more and more of the human race began to have trouble finding the money to pay for it.

By the time human beings got serious about going into space on their own, it may have been that it was getting to be a good time to think seriously about leaving the Earth for good. The Earth was a pretty good place to be rich in. It was a very bad one in which to be poor.

By then, of course, the people who had dropped in on the australopithecines were long gone.

In their yearning quest for some other intelligent race to talk to, they had surveyed more than half the Galaxy. Actually, they did find a few promising species — well, at least as promising as the poor, dumb australopithecines. Probably the race that came closest to what they were looking for were the Slow Swimmers. These people (no, they didn't look a bit like "people," but that was more or less what they were) lived in the dense liquid-gas atmosphere of a heavy planet. The Slow Swimmers had language, at least. In fact, they sang beautiful, endless songs in their language, which the visitors finally managed to puzzle out enough to understand. The Slow Swimmers even had cities — sort of cities — well, they had domiciles and public structures that floated around in the soupy mud they lived in. They weren't a *lot* of fun to talk to, but the main reason for that was that they were, you'd better believe it, really *slow*. If you tried to talk to them you had to wait a week for them to get out a word, a year to finish the first few bars of one of their songs — and a couple of lifetimes, anyway, to carry on a real conversation. That wasn't the Slow Swimmers' fault. They lived at such a low temperature that everything they did was orders of magnitude slower than a warm-blooded oxygen-breather like human beings — or like the visitors from space.

Then the visitors found someone else ... and that was a whole other thing, and a very scary one.

They stopped looking after that.

When human beings went into space they weren't really looking for other intelligences, at least not in the same way. Their telescopes and probe rockets had told them long ago that none was to be found, at least in their own solar system — and they had little hope of going any farther than that.

They might have looked for their long-ago visitors if they had had any idea they existed. But, of course, they didn't.

Maybe the best way to find another intelligent race is to be lucky rather than purposeful. Venus didn't look very promising. The first humans to look at it didn't "look" — you couldn't see very far through its miserably dense and murky air — they just circled around it in orbit, feeling for surface features with radar. What they found wasn't encouraging. Certainly when the first human rockets landed beside the Rift Valley of Aphrodite Terra and the first parties began to explore the inhospitable surface of Venus they had

no hope of finding life there.

And, sure enough, they didn't. But then, in a part of Venus called Aino Planitia, a geologist made a discovery. There was a fissure — call it a tunnel, though at first they thought it might be a lava tube — under the surface of the planet. It was long, it was regular ... and it had no business being there.

The Venusian explorers, without warning, had found the first signs of that half-million-year-ago visit

The Gateway Asteroid

The greatest treasure the Heechee tunnels on Venus had to offer had already been discovered, though the first discoverers didn't know it. No one did — at least, no one except a solitary tunnel rat named Sylvester Macklin, and he was not in a position to tell anybody what he had found.

Sylvester Macklin had discovered a Heechee spaceship.

If Macklin had reported his find he would have become the richest man in the solar system. He also would have lived to enjoy his wealth. But Sylvester Macklin was as crotchety a loner as any other tunnel rat, and he did something quite different.

He saw that the ship looked to be in good condition. Maybe, he thought, he could even fly it.

Unfortunately for himself, he succeeded.

Macklin's ship did exactly what any Heechee

ship was designed to do, and the Heechee were marvelously great designers. No one knows exactly what processes of thought and experiment and deduction Macklin went through. He didn't survive to tell anyone, but at some point he must have got into the ship and closed its hatch and begun poking and prodding at the things that were obviously its controls.

On the board of every Heechee ship is a thing shaped like a cow's teat. It is the thing that makes it go. When it is squeezed it is like slipping an automatic-shift car into "drive." The ship moves out. Where it goes to depends on what course was set into its automatic navigation systems.

Macklin didn't do anything about setting any particular course, naturally. He didn't know how.

So the ship did what its Heechee designers had programmed it to do in such an event. It simply returned to the place it had come from when its Heechee pilot had left it, half a million years ago.

As it happened, that place was an asteroid.

It was an odd asteroid in several respects. Astronomically it was odd, because its orbit was at right angles to the ecliptic. For that reason, although it was a fair-sized chunk of rock and not far from Earth's own orbit at times, it had never been discovered by human astronomers.

The other odd thing about it was that it had been converted into a sort of parking garage for Heechee spacecraft. There were nearly a thousand of the ships there.

What there was not any of was anything to eat or

drink. So Sylvester Macklin, who could have been the richest man in history, wound up as just one more corpse.

But before he died he managed to signal Earth. No one could reach him in time to save his life. Macklin knew that. He accepted the fact that he would die; he just wanted it known where he was dying. And after a while other astronauts, flying the clumsy human rockets of the time, came to investigate.

What they found was the gateway to the universe.

Within the next decade the Gateway asteroid had become the center of mankind's most profitable industry, the exploration of the Galaxy.

Macklin didn't own it, of course. He didn't own anything, being dead. Anyway, Gateway was much too important to be owned by any individual, or even by any single nation. The United Nations fought over the question for years, in Security Council and General Assembly — and, more than once, almost with guns and aircraft outside the UN itself. What they wound up with was The Gateway Corporation, a five-power consortium that was set up to control it.

The Gateway Asteroid was not a very congenial place for people to live — of course, it had never been designed for human people. It had been designed for the Heechee, and they had stripped it bare before they left. It was a chunk of rock the size of Manhattan, laced through and through with tunnels and chambers, and not much else. It wasn't even round. One Gateway prospector described it as shaped "more or less like a badly planned pear that the birds had been pecking at." Its internal structure resembled the layers of an onion. The outer shell was where the Heechee ships were docked, their lander ports snuggled into hatch chambers. (Those were the things that looked like bird peckings.) Then, inside, there were shells with great chambers the humans used for storing supplies and parts, and for the large water reservoir they called "Lake Superior." Closer to the center were the tunnels, lined with small chambers like monastery rooms, where the humans lived while they waited for their ships. In the heart of the asteroid was the spindle-shaped cavern they used for a meeting place — and drinking place, and gambling place, and place to try to forget what lay ahead of them.

Gateway didn't smell good — air was precious — and it didn't *feel* good, either, at least not to fresh prospectors just up from Earth. The asteroid had a slow spin, so there was a sort of microgravity, but there wasn't much of it. Anyone who made a sudden move anywhere in Gateway was likely to find himself floating away.

Then the prospectors began to dare to try flying the Heechee ships.

Each ship was like every other ship in its class. The biggest of them, the Fives, were not very big — about the same volume of space as a hotel bathroom, to be shared by five people. The Ones were not much bigger than the bathtub itself. Each contained a minimum of fittings, and most of them of unknown importance. There was a golden coil that had something to do with the ship's drive, because it changed color at start, finish and turnaround. There was a diamond-

shaped golden box. No one knew exactly what was in either of them, because when anyone tried to open one it exploded. And then there was the control system, with its curious, painful forked bench before it. Knurled knobs, flashing lights, the go-teat — they were what made the ship go.

There was nothing hard about flying a Heechee ship. Anybody could learn as much as anybody else knew in half an hour: you fiddled around with the course-setting wheels, pretty much at random (because no one knew what the settings meant; actually there were some 14,922 separate destinations pre-programmed into the 731 operable ships on the asteroid — there were about 200 ships that simply didn't work at all. But it took a lot of time, and a lot of lives, to find out what some of those destinations were). Then you squeezed the go-teat. Then you were on your way. That was all there was to it.

For that reason, anybody could become a prospector. Anybody, that is, who was willing to pay his way to Gateway and then to pay the steep charges for air, food, water, and living space while he was in the asteroid . . . and who was brave enough, or desperate enough, to take his chances on a very possible and often very nasty death.

Over the years a great many human beings escaped from their Earthside poverty to take their chances in a Gateway ship. First and last, there were 13,842 of them, before exact navigation became possible and the random exploration program was discontinued.

Quite a few of them survived. Many became famous. A few became vastly rich. And no one remembers the others.

The Starseekers

When one of those bold, faintly crazy early prospectors set out in a Heechee ship, it didn't go where he wanted it to go. It went where the last long-ago Heechee pilot had wanted it to go, and left the settings for that particular destination on the board.

It was a good thing that the Heechee were a lot like human beings in important ways. For instance, they had the primate-human itch of curiosity — in fact, they had a lot of it. That meant that a lot of the preprogrammed destinations were to places that were interesting to look at. They were as interesting to human beings as they were to the old Heechee, and the particular branch of the human race that delighted most in what the first waves of Gateway explorers found was the astronomers. Those fellows had gotten very ingenious at teasing information from whatever photons landed in their instruments — visible light, X-rays, whatever. But there was such a *lot* of stuff out there that didn't radiate at all — black holes, planets, heaven knew what! They could only guess at such things.

Now someone could go out and see them firsthand!

That was pretty wonderful for the astronomers . . . although often enough it was a lot less so for the men and women who went out to look.

The trouble with astronomy, from the point of

view of the prospector who had just risked his life on a shot-in-the-dark voyage on a Heechee ship, was that you couldn't sell a neutron star. What the prospectors were after was *money*, which meant, if they were lucky, some kind of Heechee gadgets that could be brought back and studied and copied and made into fortunes. A supernova shell or an interstellar gas cloud just didn't pay the bills.

So the Gateway Corporation started a program of paying science bonuses to the explorers who came back with great pictures and instrument readings, but nothing to sell.

That was virtuous of the Gateway Corporation, to pay off for pure, non-commercial knowledge. It was also a good way of coaxing more hungry humans into those scary and often deadly little ships.

Mission PULSAR

The first big science bonus was paid to a man named Chou Yengbo, and he might not have earned it if he hadn't taken a few elementary science courses before he discovered that even a college degree couldn't get you a decent job these days in Shensi Province.

When Chou's ship came out of the faster-than-light drive, Chou had no trouble figuring out which objects the Heechee had set the controls for.

Actually there were three objects. They were weird. The first was wholly unlike anything Chou had ever seen before, even in the holograms of his astronomy course. It wasn't quite like anything any human had ever seen before, except in imagination. It was an irregular, cone-shaped splash of light, and even on the viewscreen its colors hurt his eyes.

What it looked like was a searchlight beam fanning out through patches of mist. When he looked more carefully, magnifying the image, he saw that there was another one like it, sketchier and fainter and fanning out in the opposite direction. And between the two points of the cones, the third object was something almost too tiny to see.

When he put the magnification up to max, he saw that that something was a puny-looking, unhealthy colored little star.

It was much too small to be a normal star. That limited the possibilities; even so, it took Chou some time to realize that he was in the presence of a pulsar.

Then those Astronomy 101 lessons came back to him. It was Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, back in the middle of the 20th Century, who had calculated the genesis of neutron stars. His model was simple. A large star uses up its hydrogen fuel and collapses. It throws off most of the outer sections of itself as a supernova. What is left falls in toward the star's center, at almost the speed of light, compressing most of the star's mass into a volume smaller than a planet — smaller, in fact, than some mountains. This particular sort of collapse can only happen to big stars, Chandrasekhar calculated. They had to be 1.4 times as massive as Earth's Sun, at least, and so that number was called the Chandrasekhar Limit.

After that has happened, the object that remains — star heavy, asteroid sized — is a "neutron star." It has been crushed together so violently by its own im-

mense gravitation that the electrons of its atoms are driven into its protons, creating the chargeless particles called neutrons. Its substance is so dense that a cubic inch of it weighs two million tons or so; it is like compressing the hugest of Earth's old supertankers into something the size of a coin. Things do not leave a neutron star easily; with that immense, concentrated mass pulling things down to its surface, escape velocity becomes something like 120,000 miles a second. More than that. Its rotational energy has been "compressed" too. The blue-white giant star that used to turn on its axis once a week is now a superheavy asteroid-sized thing that whirls around many times a second.

Chou knew there were observations that he had to make — magnetic, X-ray, infrared, and many others. The magnetometer readings were the most important. Neutron stars have superfluid cores and so, as they rotate, they generate intense magnetic fields — just like the Earth. Not really just like the Earth, though, because the neutron star's magnetic field, too, is compressed. It is one trillion times stronger than the Earth's. And as it spins it generates radiation. The radiation can't simply flow out from all parts of the star at once — the lines of magnetic force confine it. It can only escape at the neutron star's north and south magnetic poles.

The magnetic poles of any object aren't necessarily in the same place as its poles of rotation. (The Earth's North Magnetic Pole is hundreds of miles away from the point where the meridians of longitude meet.) So all the neutron star's radiated energy pours out in a beam, round and round, pointing a little, or sometimes a lot, away from its true rotational poles.

So that was what Chou was seeing. It was the two polar beams from the star, north and south, fanning out from its poles. Of course, he couldn't see the beams themselves. What he saw was the places where they illuminated tenuous clouds of gas and dust as they spread out.

The important thing to Chou was that no Earthly astronomer had ever seen them that way. The only way anyone on Earth saw the beam from a neutron star was by the chance of being somewhere along the rim of the conical shape the beams described as they rotated. And then what they saw was a high-speed flicker, so fast and regular that the first observer to spot one thought it was the signal from an alien intelligence. They called the signal an "LGM" (for Little Green Men) until they figured out what was causing that sort of stellar behavior.

Then they called the things "pulsars."

Chou got a four hundred thousand-dollar science bonus for what he had discovered. He wasn't greedy. He took it and returned to Earth, where he found a new career lecturing to women's clubs and college audiences on what it was like to be a Heechee prospector. He was a great success, because he was one of the first to return alive.

Later returnees were less fortunate. For instance, there was —

Mission HALO

In some ways Mission HALO was the saddest and

most beautiful of all. It was written off as lost, but that turned out to be wrong. The ship wasn't lost. Only its crew was.

The ship was an unarmored Three. When it came back it was a surprise to everyone. It had been gone over *three years*. It was certain that nobody could have survived so long a trip. In fact, no one had. When the hatch crews on Gateway got the ports open, recoiling from the stench inside, they discovered that Jan Mariekiewicz, Rudolf Stret, and Lech Szelikowitz had left a record of their experiences. It was read with compassion by the other prospectors, and with rejoicing by astronomers.

"When we reached two hundred days without turnaround," Stret had written in his diary, "we knew we were out of luck. We drew straws. I won. Maybe I should say I lost, but, anyway, Jan and Lech took their little suicide pills and I put their bodies in the freezer.

"Turnaround came finally at 271 days. I knew for sure that I wasn't going to make it either, not even with only me alive in the ship. So I've tried rigging everything on automatic. I hope it works. If the ship gets back, please pass on our messages."

As it happened, the messages never got delivered. They were all addressed to other Gateway prospectors who had been part of the same shipment up from Central Europe, and that batch wasn't lucky. Every one of them had been lost in his own ship.

But the pictures the ship brought back belonged to the whole world.

Stret's jury-rigging had worked. The ship had stopped at its destination. The instruments had thoroughly mapped everything in sight. Then the ship's return had been triggered automatically, while Stret's corpse lay bloating under the controls.

The ship had been outside the Milky Way galaxy entirely.

It brought back the first pictures ever seen of our galaxy *from outside*. It showed a couple of fairly nearby stars and one great, distant globular cluster — the stars and clusters of the spherical halo that surrounds our galaxy — but most of all it showed our Milky Way galaxy itself, from core to farthest spiral wisp, with its great, familiar octopus arms: the Perseus arm, the Cygnus arm, the Sagittarius-Carina arm (with our own little Orion arm, the small spur that held the Earth, nearby), as well as the large, distant arm that Earthly astronomers had never seen before. They called it simply "Far Arm" at first, but then it was renamed the Stret-Mariekiewicz-Szelikowitz arm to honor the dead discoverers. And in the center of it all was the great bellying octopus-body mass of core stars, laced with gas and dust clouds, showing the beginnings of the new growing spiral structures that might in another hundred million years become new arms themselves.

They also showed the effects of a structure more interesting still, but not in enough detail to be recognized just then — not until some other events had taught human beings what to look for in the Core. All the same, they were beautiful pictures.

Since no one returned from Mission HALO alive, there wasn't even a science bonus due, but the Gateway Corporation voted a special exception to the

rules. Five million dollars was voted for the heirs of Mariekiewicz, Szelikowitz, and Stret.

It was a generous gesture but, as it turned out, a very inexpensive one. The award went unclaimed. Like so many Gateway prospectors, the three who had manned the ship had no families that anyone could find, and so the Gateway Corporation's bursar quietly, and philosophically, returned the cash to the Corporation's general funds.

The first, best and brightest hope of any exploration crew was to find a really nice planet with really nice treasures on it. Ultimately some did, of course, but it took a while. For a good many orbits after the systematic exploration program began the crews went out and came back with nothing but pictures and hard-luck stories — when they came back at all.

But some of the things they had seen were *wonderful*. Volya Shadchuk took a One into the heart of a planetary nebula, green-tinged with the radiation from oxygen atoms, and collected fifty thousand dollars. Bill Merrian saw a recurring nova system, red giant's gases being sucked onto a white dwarf; luckily not enough matter had accreted while he was there to blow off in a noval explosion, but he got the fifty thousand and ten per cent more for "danger bonus." And then there were the Grantlands.

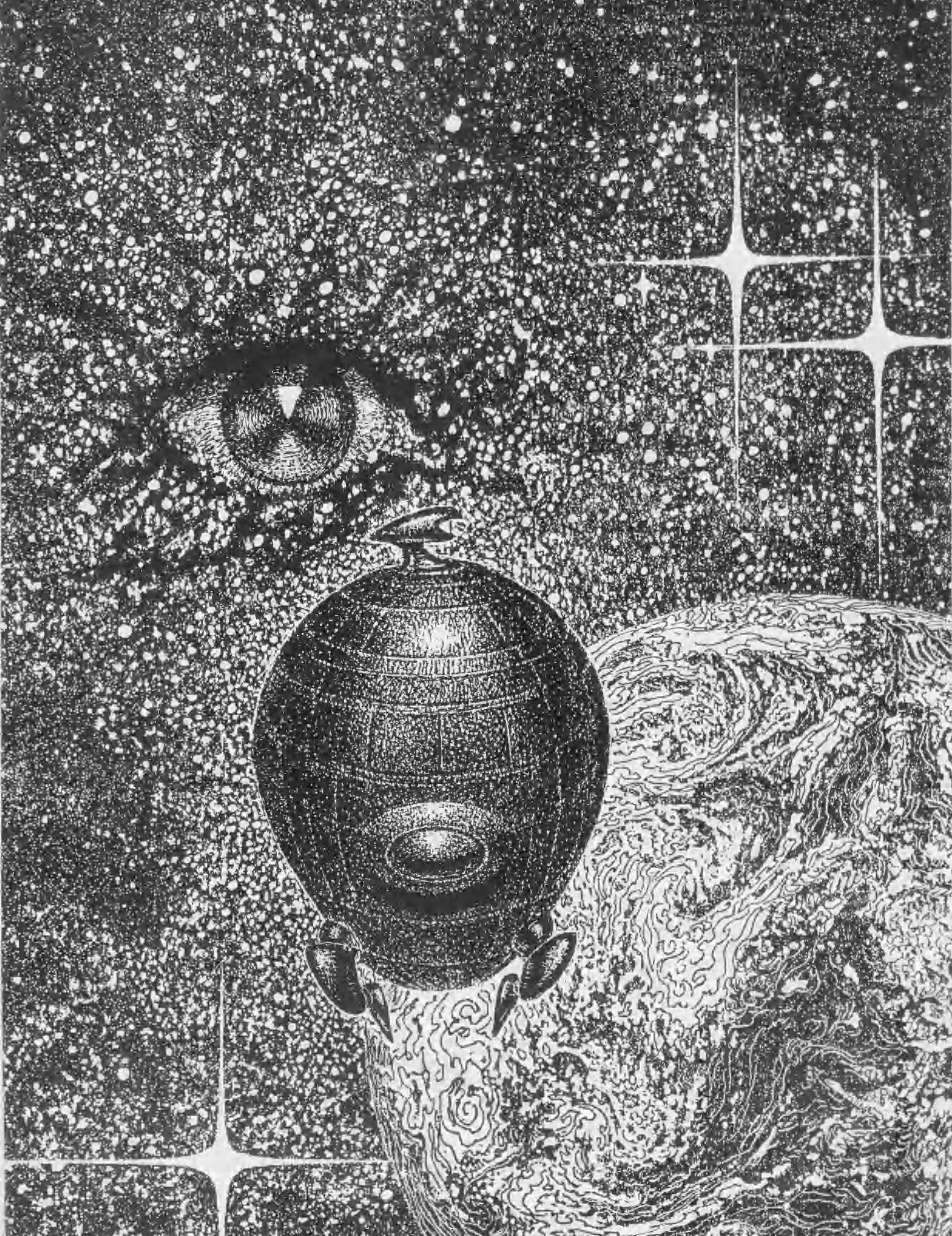
There were five of the Grantlands — two brothers, their wives and the eldest son of one of the couples. They reached a globular cluster — ten thousand old stars, mostly red, mostly sliding toward the sunset at the lower left side of the Hertzsprung-Russell diagram as they aged. The cluster was in the galactic halo and, of course, the trip was a long one. None of them survived. The trip took 314 days, and all of them were alive at the time of arrival (but existing on scant rations). They took their pictures. The last of them, the young second wife of one of the brothers, died thirty-three days into the return trip.

The three Schoen sisters were no luckier. They didn't come back at all. Their ship did, but racked and scorched, and of course their bodies inside were barely recognizable.

But they had taken a few pictures before they died. They were in a reflection nebula — after analysis it was determined that it was the Great Nebula in Orion, actually visible to the naked eye from Earth. (American Indians called it "the smoking star.") The Schoen sisters must have known they were in trouble as soon as they came out of drive, because they weren't really in space any more. Oh, it was close to a *vacuum* — as people on Earth measure a vacuum — but there were as many as 300 atoms to the cubic centimeter, hundreds of times as many as there should have been in interstellar space.

Still, they looked around, and they started their cameras — just barely. They didn't have much time.

There are four bright young stars in the Orion Nebula, the so-called Trapezium; it is in such nebulae that gas clouds fall together and are born as stars. Astronomers conjectured that the Heechee knew this, and the reason the ship had been set to go there was that Heechee astronomers had been interested in



studying the conditions that lead to star formation

But the Heechee had set that program half a million years before.

A lot had happened in those half million years. There is now a fifth body, an "almost" star, in the Orion Nebula, formed after the Heechee had taken their last look at the area. The new body is called the Becklin-Neugebarger object; it is in its early hydrogen-burning stage, less than a hundred thousand years old. And it seemed that the Schoen sisters had the bad luck to come almost inside it.

Mission NAKED BLACK HOLE

The crew was William Sakyetsu, Marianna Morse, Hal M'Buna, Richard Smith, and Irina Malatesta. All of them had been Out before. Malatesta had done it five times, but luck hadn't favored their ventures. None of them had yet made a big enough score to pay their Gateway bills.

So they carefully chose an Armored Five with a record of success. The previous crew in that ship had earned a "nova" science bonus in it, managing to come close enough to a recurring nova to get some good pictures, though not so close they didn't live through the experience. They had collected a total of seven and a half million dollars in bonus money and had gone back to Earth, rejoicing. But before they left they gave their ship a name. They called it *Victory*.

When Sakyetsu and the others in his crew got to their destination, they looked for the planet — or the star, or the Heechee artifact, or the object of any interesting sort — that might have been its target.

There wasn't anything like that. There were stars in sight, sure. But the nearest of them was nearly eight light-years away. By all indications they were in one of the emptiest regions of interstellar space in the Galaxy. They could not find even a nearby gas cloud.

They didn't give up. They were experienced prospectors. They spent a week checking out every possibility. First, make sure they hadn't missed a nearby star: with interferometry they could measure the apparent diameter of some of the brighter stars; by spectral analysis they could determine their types; combining the two gave them an estimate of distance.

Their first impression had been right. It was a pretty empty patch of sky they had landed in.

There was, to be sure, one really spectacular object in view — the word Marianna used was "glorious" — a globular cluster, with thousands of bright stars interweaving their orbits in a volume a few hundred light-years across. It was certainly spectacular. It dominated the sky. It was much nearer to them than any such object had ever been to a human eye before. But it was still at least a thousand light-years away.

So there was very little the instruments on *Victory* could tell about globular clusters that bigger, more sensitive orbiting telescopes near Earth hadn't already learned.

But it was all they had, and so the crew doggedly took turns at the instruments. They photographed the cluster in red light, blue light, ultraviolet light, and several bands of the infrared. They measured its radio flux in a thousand frequencies, and its gamma rays

and X-rays. And then, one sleeping period, while only Hal M'Buna was awake at the instruments, he saw the thing that made the trip worthwhile.

His shout woke everybody up: "Something's eating the cluster!"

Marianna Morse was the first to get to the screens with him, but the whole crew flocked to see. The fuzzy circle of the cluster wasn't a circle any more. An arc had been taken out of its lower rim. It looked like a cookie a child had bitten into.

But it wasn't a bite.

As they watched, they could see the differences. The stars of the cluster weren't disappearing. They were just, slowly, moving out of the way of — something.

"My God," Marianna whispered. "We're in orbit around a black hole."

Then they cursed the week they had wasted, because they knew what that meant. Big money! A *black hole*. One of the rarest objects (and, therefore, one of the most highly rewarded in science bonuses) in the observable universe — because black holes are, intrinsically, unobservable.

A black hole isn't "black," in the sense that a dinner jacket or the ink on a piece of paper is black. A black hole is a lot blacker than that. No human being has ever seen real *blackness*, because blackness is the absence of all light. It can't be seen. There is nothing to see. The blackest dye reflects a little light; a black hole reflects nothing. If you tried to illuminate it with the brightest searchlight in the universe — if you concentrated all the light of a quasar on it in a single beam — you would still see nothing. The tremendous gravitational force of the black hole would suck all that light in and it would never come out again. It can't.

It is a matter of escape velocity. The escape velocity from the Earth is seven miles a second; from a neutron star as much as 120,000 miles per second. But the escape velocity from a black hole is greater than the speed of light. The light doesn't "fall back" (as a rock thrown up from Earth at less than escape velocity will fall back to the ground). What happens to the light rays is that they are bent by the gravitational pull. The radiation simply circles the black hole, spiraling endlessly, never getting free.

And when a black hole passes in front of, say, a globular cluster, it doesn't hide the cluster. It simply bends the cluster's light around it.

If *Victory's* crew had wasted seven days, they still had five days' worth of supplies left before they had to start back to Gateway. They used them all. They took readings on the black hole even when they couldn't see it ... and when at last they got back to Gateway they found that one, just one, of their pictures had paid off.

They shared a \$500,000 bonus simply for the pictures of the globular cluster. But the one picture that they hadn't even noticed when they took it — a split-second frame, taken automatically when no one happened to be watching the screen — showed what happened when the black hole occluded a bright B-4 star, a few hundred light-years away. That star hadn't moved up or down. By chance it had passed almost exactly behind the black hole. Its light had spread to

surround the hole, like a halo; and that gave them a measure of the hole's size

And then, long after they were back in Gateway, the research teams that studied their results awarded them another half a million, and the information that they were very lucky.

Marianna Morse had wondered about that: Why had the Heechee used an Armored Five to visit this harmless object? Answer: It hadn't always been harmless.

Most black holes are not safe to visit. They pull gases in in accretion rings, and the acceleration of the gases as they fall produces a hell of radiation. Once this one had, but that was a long time ago. Now it had eaten all the gases in its neighborhood. There was nothing left to fall, and so generate the synchrotron flux of energy that might fry even an Armored Five if it lingered too long nearby ... and so the crew of *Victory*, without knowing it at the time, had had an unexpected stroke of luck. They had arrived at the neighborhood of their black hole when its lethal feeding frenzy had ended, and so they had come back alive.

In its first twenty years the Gateway Corporation handed out more than two hundred astronomical science bonuses, for a total of nearly one billion dollars. It paid off on double stars and supernova shells; it paid off on at least the first examples of every type of star there was.

There are nine members of the catalogue of star types, and they are easily remembered by the mnemonic, "Pretty Woman, Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me," which runs the gamut from youngest to longest-living stars. The Os and Bs were hot young stars, and they always got bonuses because there were so few of them. But the Gateway Corporation awarded double bonuses on the P and W classes: P for gas clouds just condensing into stars, W for the hot, frightening Wolf-Rayet type. These were new stars, often immense ones, that could not be approached safely within billions of miles.

All those lucky prospectors collected science bonuses. So did the ones who happened to find themselves near known objects, at least if they were the first to claim the rewards. Wolfgang Arretov was the first to arrive near the Sirius system, and Earthly astronomers were delighted. The stars Sirius A and B ("Bessell's satellite") had been studied intensively for centuries, because the primary star is so bright in Earthly skies. Arretov's data confirmed their deductions — Sirius A at 2.3 solar masses, B only about one — but a white dwarf with a surface temperature over 20,000 degrees. Arretov got half a million for letting the astronomers know they had been right all along. Sally Kissendorf got a hundred thousand for the first good pictures of the tiny (well — three solar masses, which is not *real* tiny; but just about invisible next to its huge primary) companion of Zeta Aurigae. She would have gotten more if the companion had happened to flare while she was nearby, but might not have survived the experience. Matt Polofsky's picture of little 61 Cygnus A only got him \$50,000, though — red

dwarf stars simply weren't that interesting. Even well-studied nearby ones. And Rachel Morgenstern, her husband and their three grown children shared half a million for the Delta Cepheid shots. Cepheids aren't all that rare, but the Morgensterns happened to be there just when the star's surface layers were losing transparency through compression.

And then there were all the missions that wound up in Oort clouds.

Oort clouds are masses of comets that orbit a star very far out — the Oort in Earth's system doesn't get going until you're half a light-year from the Sun. There are *lots* of comets in your average Oort cloud. Trillions of them. They generally mass as much as the aggregate of a star's planets, and almost every star has an Oort.

They seemed to fascinate the Heechee.

In Gateway's first twenty years of operation, no fewer than 85 missions wound up in an Oort cloud, and returned to tell of it.

That was a big disappointment to the prospectors involved, because the Gateway Corporation stopped paying bonuses for Oort data after the tenth such mission. So those prospectors who came back from an Oort complained a lot. They couldn't understand why the Heechee had targeted to many missions to the dumb things.

And, naturally, they had no idea how lucky they really were, because it was a long time before anyone found out that most Oort missions never got back at all.

That billion dollars in astronomical science bonuses was welcome enough to the prospectors who got a share of it. But, really, it was chickenfeed. What the Gateway Corporation was formed for was *profit*. The prospectors had come to the asteroid for the same reason, and big profit didn't come from taking instrument readings on something millions of miles away. It came from finding a planet, and landing on it — and bringing back something that made money.

Neither the Gateway Corporation nor the individual prospectors had much choice about that. Making a profit was the basic rule of survival, and neither the prospectors nor the Corporation made the rules. Those rules were made by the world they came from. □

End of Part 1.
Part 2 next issue ...

Art vs. Commerce



There's something decidedly sad in the current issue of that learned journal, *Crypt of Cthulhu*, #66 (Vol. 8, No. 87, Lammas 1989). It's an interview with the late E. Hoffmann Price, who "had tendencies," as the Victorians might have said, "but overcame them."

No, not *that* kind of tendencies! I mean artistic tendencies. The interview quite inadvertently reveals the death of Price the literary artist. The cause: a deliberate bludgeoning. The culprit: Price himself.

Price, who may be known to some of you as the author of a few space operas published by Del Rey Books in recent years, or possibly as an old-time *Weird Tales* contributor and associate of H.P. Lovecraft, was a lifelong enthusiast of Chinese culture, a Buddhist who had many Chinese friends, and generally someone who understood the Oriental way of life far better than most Caucasians. He wrote two Chinese fantasy novels, *The Devil Wives of Li Fong* (Del Rey, 1979) and *The Jade Enchantress* (Del Rey, 1982), apparently out of genuine enthusiasm for the material.

But, alas, they didn't sell. In the *Crypt* interview he tells how he had wanted to write another Chinese fantasy, but when he took a look at the royalty statements from Del Rey, his space operas were making far more money, so he canceled all plans for that next Chinese novel and ground out more (quite undistinguished) space opera instead.

He was in his 80s then, and not, as far as I can tell, in desperate poverty. At that age most people would have given up on with what they really want to write, or else it won't get done. Price died without ever writing that other Chinese book.

I find his statements appalling. Very late in life he deliberately killed a book which only he could have written and instead wrote very routine adventures anyone could have written, purely for financial considerations.

And that, friends, is why E. Hoffmann Price will never be remembered as more than someone who once collaborated with Lovecraft. He sold out quite early, turning from fantasy (in *Weird Tales* in the '20s and '30s) to "spicy" semi-porno, westerns, adventure, and anything else that paid better. He was a skilled craftsman and eventually became a regular contributor to many of the very top-paying pulps, notably *Argosy*. Like most pulp writers of the day, he ranked stories and writers in terms of how much money they made. So *Weird Tales* seemed virtually an amateur magazine, something one graduated from as quickly as possible.

(Actually, things haven't changed that much. Professional writers and — especially — book editors are notorious for not reading anything that isn't business. Therefore a writer's reputation and rank among professionals isn't based on quality, but on how big his advances are and how many copies he's sold.)

Back in the '30s — it's apparent from Price's various interviews and memoirs over the years — the *Argosy* and *Bluebook* writers sneered at the *Weird Tales* crew, assuming they were all crazy to write for a magazine that paid a half a cent a word and often years

late — or, more likely, they just weren't good enough to sell anywhere else.

But a funny thing happened. Some of those despised *Weird Tales* writers survived the death of the pulp magazines. Their work continues to be reprinted, while the top names of the top pulps are forgotten. Price's own pulp work was only reprinted by fantasy specialty presses trading entirely on his association with *Weird Tales* and with Lovecraft. All those westerns, all those adventures, all the "spicy" stuff — it's all pulp dust.

There is a moral here. It's the subject of this issue's homily. Price was hardly unique, but he had developed a bad case of what you might call Writer's Cough. You know, *hack! hack!*

What has this got to do with contemporary science fiction, and with the books I review for *Aboriginal Science Fiction*? Why, everything.

It's impossible to know *why* a book is written. Sometimes it doesn't help to ask the author. Writers hide behind poses. One is the "I'm just in it for the bucks" pose, by which the author evades possibly embarrassing scrutiny by saying that his work is just commercial product, not to be taken seriously. This is not always to be believed. Robert Heinlein made that claim many times. But would anyone say that his science fiction was other than the unique expression of a unique mind?

Then there's the "aw shucks, we're just havin' fun" pose, which would have us believe that it's all a big game, like a puzzle or a late-night college bull session, again not to be taken seriously.

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

Sometimes even the author doesn't know why he writes what he does. Ultimately it doesn't matter. In the end, there is only the text.

So, am I just being pretentious? Or, does the question of hack-writing vs. sincere writing amount to anything?

Yes, it does. The only thing of lasting interest any writer has to sell is his own unique way of looking at the world. Call this his voice, his aesthetics, his obsessive themes, or all those things. There is something which makes any writer who *is* a writer, rather than just a typist, special.

It was precisely this specialness in himself which E. Hoffmann Price battered to death, first at the beginning of his career, and then again when he resumed writing in the 1970s.

The hack writer has only his professionalism to sell. He has to be reliable, technically proficient, and able to adhere to any company policy. He is also totally replaceable by any other hack writer.

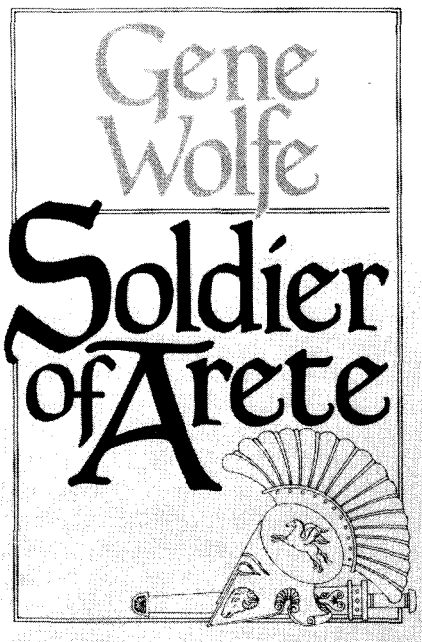
Remember Otis Adelbert Kline? Hardly a name to conjure with these days. He was a top pulp writer. (He collaborated with Price occasionally, too.) He wrote a few good, individualistic stories, but mostly he was noted as a poor man's Edgar Rice Burroughs. His work was the methadone of pulp literature. If you couldn't get your fix of Tarzan, you read Kline's Jan of the Jungle. Kline also had his own imitation Venus and Mars series.

But _____, Kline was replaced by Lin Carter, who could also do methadone-Brackett, Burroughs, van Vogt, Robert Howard, Jack Vance, and many more. What Carter could never do was write a genuine *Lin Carter* story. No such thing ever existed. So now he's gone, and soon his work will be paperback dust, and someone else will come along and fill the same slot.

I'm not saying that all writers should think of themselves as Great Artists, and refuse to make any Concessions to Popular Taste. Those are traps. Your editor tells you, "Maybe you ought to learn how to plot," and you say, "I will not stoop to lowly hack-formula fiction." You hide your weakness

behind a pose of integrity. Which is not the same thing as real integrity.

But I *am* saying that a good and memorable and (for those who watch royalty statements) long-lasting book (translation: remains commercial over many years, like, say, *Moby Dick* as opposed to any given Otis Adelbert Kline novel) rarely results from a writer saying to himself, "Well, quest-trilogies are selling real big, so I'll write a quest trilogy." You have to ultimately tell the stories only you know. You have to do it with craftsmanship, with discipline, but you have to follow your vision. The reason that, say, Clark Ashton Smith didn't rush off to write westerns or Foreign Legion fiction for many times the money is that



his fantasies were what he was good at. They were where his interests lay. If they didn't pay enough — and often they didn't — he did odd jobs.

Just think how many unique and worthwhile books might have been written if only the author had had a job. Just think of how many E. Hoffmann Price might have written.

An author *does* have to be a little bit crazy. He has to believe that quality will win out in the end, and that his own unique effusions will find a readership eventually.

And when you look at all the unique, weird, off-beat, trend-setting books that have been publish-

ed over the years, you can only conclude that eventually they do.

Let's look at a few genuinely original books:

(But first, a plug, which I am sure our Noble Editor will not mind, since the magazine in question is hardly a competitor to *Aboriginal: Crypt of Cthulhu* is available from Robert M. Price, 216 Fernwood Ave., Upper Montclair, NJ 07043, for \$4.50 a copy or \$23.00 for 5 issues. The magazine is the most lively Lovecraftian journal, ranging from genuine scholarship to wild humor, and it also branches out into related weird matters, rare fiction from old-time pulp names, etc.)

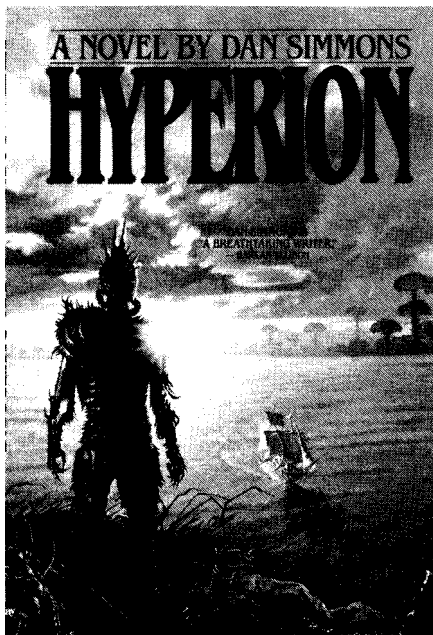
Soldier of Arete
By Gene Wolfe
Tor Books, 1989
354 pp., \$17.95

Certainly Gene Wolfe is a unique writer if ever there was one. It's quite impossible to mistake his work for that of anyone else, so whatever audience he has is attracted, not by his ability to do some standard trick well, but by that special Gene-Wolfeness (*Wolfeitude?*).

equal to, or continuation of, his earlier *Soldier of the Mist*, itself a decidedly idiosyncratic novel in a lot of ways. Together they form only part of what seems to be a larger work on the order of *The Book of the New Sun*. The premise is that Latro, a (probably) Roman mercenary of the 5th century B.C., is injured in battle as the Persians are withdrawing from their failed invasion of Greece. Latro's head-wound causes him to forget everything he has done each day as soon as he goes to sleep. So the only way he can keep track of anything is by writing it all down on a scroll, which he has to carry everywhere (and keep dry, since papyrus crumbles when damp). As something of a compensation for this, he is able to see gods and supernatural beings and freely converse with them. An obscure destiny is upon him, yet to be worked out. Consciously, he is seeking home, identity, and old friends.

So he is that terror of critical theorists, the Unreliable Narrator.

He doesn't have time to reread the entire scroll (now two scrolls, since we are in the second book) every morning. Sometimes the press of events causes him to miss a day's entry. In *Soldier of Arete* he is more unreliable than usual, not only because some of the scroll seems to have deteriorated, but because the other characters are lying to him, or he is too depressed to write for a long time, or, again, merely because he didn't reread what had happened before. He isn't always consistent. People who seem to be dead sometimes turn up later in the story, in one case because the others set up an imposter (uniquely easy, since Latro can't remember what the real person looked like), or because (apparently) he can see a ghost



without realizing it is a ghost.

So it's a murky book. Sometimes Wolfe turns this to good advantage. The great strength of the whole series is that he is writing very much from the *mind* of a man of antiquity, who thinks differently than we do. (To an ancient Greek the whole thing, gods, ghosts, and all, would be *mainstream*, a realistic novel of possible events.) Latro's confusion, and the mystery around him, show us a world in which men are the pawns of supernatural powers, and of fate, in which there is no rational science to light the way. Further, with the great swarm of names and places and concepts we can barely make out — because they are obvious to

Latro, who writes for his own benefit and not ours, and therefore does not explain — it is downright useful to have a narrator who has to have things told to him over and over, and who has to review and get his bearings every morning.

But it doesn't always work. *Soldier of Arete* shows middle-book problems. It is a link in the series, and doesn't build tension or come to any particular climax. (There is a lot of excitement at the end, yes, but the narrative is *extremely* unreliable at that point, with major *lacunae*, and we never do know why and wherefore.) It would be simplistic to say that Gene Wolfe doesn't know how to plot, that he crafts beautifully detailed scenes and bits without assembling them very well. Just because the author hasn't done something doesn't mean he doesn't know how. It could be a conscious decision. But at the same time the book is less than entirely satisfactory, precisely *because* those scenes don't seem to add up to anything, because there is no rising emotional involvement. The tone is entirely steady, unvarying. We follow along, for the scenery, and in hope that by Book Three we will be able to look back and understand what we've read in Book Two.

Rating: ☆☆☆

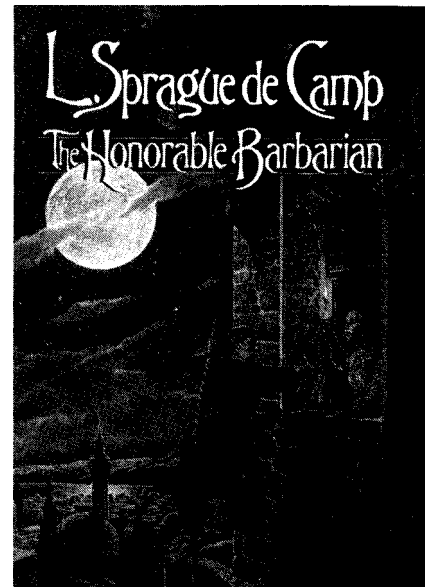
Hyperion
By Dan Simmons
Doubleday, 1989
482 pp., \$8.95 (paper);
\$18.95 (hardcover)

Wow.

This is a major book, heralding the arrival of a major science-fiction talent. Simmons is a *Twilight Zone* discovery, already a major horror talent (he won the World Fantasy Award for *Song of Kali*), who has recently switched to science fiction, first with *Phases of Gravity* (Bantam, 1989), and now this.

Hyperion is baroque space opera, the best yet in what seems to be a trend toward baroque space opera. I recall David Hartwell making the claim on a panel that Iain Banks's *Consider Phlebas* was "the best space opera ever written." Well, maybe then, but Simmons puts Banks in the shade.

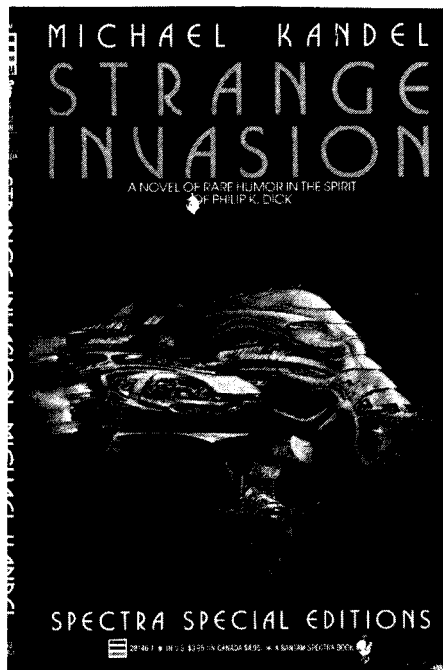
It's got everything, mystery, adventure, memorable characters, interesting ideas, good writing — the writing is more than good; it is excellent. Simmons shows a remarkable ability to sustain a variety of viewpoints and write any variety of scenes, all of them, vivid, gripping, impressive. The form is unusual, a genuine picaresque novel, in which a series of narratives aren't strung together merely to make a collection of stories pass off as a (more commercial) novel, but because they contribute to a greater whole. The sub-narratives *aren't* independent stories, but open-ended and pointing toward the single climax of the story. They're tributaries feeding into the main stream.



The background is this: 800 years from now, some centuries after a team of scientists accidentally dropped a black hole into the core of the Earth and rendered the home planet uninhabitable, mankind is on hundreds of worlds, and has divided into two subgroups: us regular folks and the "Ousters," who are descendants of O'Neill colonists who took off for the stars and have been breeding in zero-G ever since.

A major war between the Ousters and planet-bound humans is in the offing. At precisely this point the enigmatic Time Tombs, million-year-old alien relics on the planet Hyperion, seem ready to reveal their awesome secrets. The legendary Shrike, a lethal being who defies known physics, is on the

rampage. It is essential that the secrets of the Tombs not fall into Ouster hands, so to Hyperion comes one more pilgrimage (Shrike-worship is an on-going cult) consisting of various people who have had run-ins with the Shrike in the past. As they travel toward what may be their deaths, each tells his story: the soldier whose dreams were haunted by a phantom woman generated for inscrutable reasons by the Shrike; the priest of the dying Catholic faith; the Jew whose daughter got caught in the "anti-entropic" fields around the Time Tombs and is now aging backwards into infancy; the brilliant, pretentious poet who became a hack, then walked away from a fortune; the detective; and so on.



Each one of these narratives is different, and completely gripping, as is the main narrative. There is a lot here you won't forget. The only thing I can object to at all is that sometimes the incidental details don't seem like 800 years hence: a boy on a bicycle, people still reading the Fitzgerald translation of *The Odyssey*, a vehicle called a "jeep," a kid getting electric trains for Christmas. But never mind. This is a book that'll keep you up late at night. It'll make you late for work. It might also, I hope, win a Hugo next year.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Honorable Barbarian
By L. Sprague de Camp

Del Rey/Ballantine, 1989
240 pp., \$16.95

Herewith another fantasy novel in the patented de Campian mold, a quasi-sequel to the *Reluctant King* trilogy, set in the same world, sharing some of the same characters (the protagonist is the former hero's kid brother); but unlike your average "Volume 4 of the X of Y trilogy," *The Honorable Barbarian* is a genuine, self-standing novel, not a serial installment. You can even read it with no knowledge of the others.

What de Camp has been writing for fifty years is what I'd call the situation-adventure. It's rather like (and sometimes *is*) the situation-comedy, save that things are often a lot more serious. Or, you might call it the one-damn-thing-after-another school of plotting. The hero has a talent for getting into trouble. He is sent on a quest (to discover a new look mechanism, since clocks are the family trade), and one mistake leads to making an enemy, which leads to an escape, which leads to a marooning, near death at the hands of pirates, meeting a princess, a run-in with a Hubbardeque fraud of a cultist/wizard, more escapes, magical battles, an accidental impersonation of someone else's royal courier, more escapes ... and by the time it's all over the bumbling, immature lad has become an adult, done mighty deeds (albeit clumsily), saved the princess, and lost his burdensome virginity. All this is told in a sprightly style up to the usual de Camp standard, and more bawdily than it used to be. (The pirate captain is about to torture a captive into revealing a treasure. "Can we bugger him first?" a pirate asks. "Forget it. Business before pleasure.")

Rating: ☆☆☆½

Noted:

Strange Invasion
By Michael Kandel
Bantam Spectra, 1989
152 pp., \$3.95

A promising first novel by a name some of you may recognize as being on the good translations of Stanislaw Lem. *Strange Invasion*
Jan./Feb. 1990

has, indeed, the same slick, high-brow wit previously encountered in *The Futurological Congress*, which Kandel translated. I shall leave it to the scholars to figure out how much is the influence of Lem on Kandel, how much the presence of unique Kandel mannerisms in the English versions of Lem.

With such a connection, the publishers are trying to push this as literary and highbrow. Reverent mentions of Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, Alfred Bester, and of course Lem occur in the cover copy. But it may be a disservice to compare a new writer to such titans.

Actually this story reminded me of something Robert Sheckley might have written for *Galaxy* in the '50s. It is literate, lightweight

TWAYNE'S UNITED STATES AUTHORS SERIES

H. P. LOVECRAFT



PETER CANNON

humor, about a man who has learned to cope with constant hallucinations caused by a genetic disorder. So, when various household appliances start talking, warning him of an oncoming invasion of alien tourists, he is the ideal defender of the Earth. It seems that tourists so degrade the planets they visit that resident species perish of sheer lack of self-image afterwards.

The book is well-written, filled with satirical bits, will never be published in Russia (because of an unflattering sequence set in an Omsk of almost Monty-Pythonesque squalor, with talking fleas),

(Continued to page 40)

Liquid Jade

By John W. Randal

Art by Cortney Skinner

Flesh shall not serve Machine.
Flesh shall not hold Machine within it.
Flesh shall be Whole.
Flesh shall be Pure.
My Flesh is Pure.

The Biological Creed echoed gently within Payne's thoughts as he slowly breathed. The cleansing air softly flowed through his body. Empty — clear. Time was nothing; within his mind the gray-haired man was as transparent as glass.

The slow cycle repeated, over and over.

He sat in the lotus position in the center of a large, empty aircraft hangar. The narrow windows, placed high on the west wall, cast a long hazy shaft of light diagonally across his soft gray robes. All was silent.

He breathed.

And thought of the man he must kill.

In 2018, during a warm January barren of snow, the Biological Purists burnt Dr. Akiro Tannaka in effigy on the main plaza of an upside gallery. They were protesting what they considered to be the ultimate corruption of humanity — and its creator. A younger Payne had been one of the first to set fire to the figure

Payne's daughter Kiri hadn't shared his views on cybertechnology — or anything else, for that matter. She blamed him for her mother's death, though it was Mara's choice to reject the cybernetic heart that would have extended her life.

The eye-job was really just an act of rebellion.

He remembered her triumphant look as she whipped off her sunglasses and displayed her new cybernetic eyes with their fluorescent violet irises.

The fight had been quick and emotionally brutal. Kiri had left home for two months.

But it was just the beginning. They were a wealthy family, and cybertechnology was easy enough to come by.

A cybernetic nervous system came next, then an audio implant, and then, most horribly, the needle-sharp, retractable fangs.

"Look, Daddy," she said, and smiled. The stainless steel needles had flicked down from within her false incisors.

Payne watched horrified as a clear drop formed at the tip of each.

"It's poison," she said. "But don't worry — I've got an implant under my tongue that produces an anti-toxin. It won't kill me."

She was his daughter — all that was left of Mara. But all Payne could see when he looked at her was the cybertechnology which had grown like a malignant metal cancer between them. It was too much. He threw her out — cut her off. He would have no more to do with her.

She had laughed and used her money to ride a Circuit Ship into the Core — to Earth.

A year and a half later he had been informed that she was dead.

In the vast, empty space of the abandoned aircraft hangar, Payne slowly breathed.

The hazy shaft of December light had slid further along the smooth floor, leaving his slender body in darkness

After the natural air of the Purist colony, redolent with the rich aromas of pine and moist earth, the drop tube station seemed sterile — dead. Everything was harsh light and electronic noise. Payne felt like a child in his plain, homespun robes, and, for one of the few times in his long life, he was scared. The colony elders had been against his going — they feared for his soul. Payne tried not to think of that as he arranged for his passage

Objectively, the trip to Earth took no time at all.

Payne closed his eyes in the Arcadia drop tube station and opened them again in a similar station in low Earth orbit.

It seemed magically swift — but four months had passed in that blink.

The trail of Kiri's murderer was long cold.

He had read a copy of the fatality report. It had happened in a place they called the downside. He knew the exact alley where they'd found her, he knew what had killed her — multiple hits from a street weapon called a "popsicle."

What he didn't know was why it had been done.

Or who had done it.

The pale staffs blurred and crashed together with a clear crack that echoed through the small, morning-misted park. Payne quickly shifted from his blocking position and executed a *gedan-uchi*, or low strike, to the elder's leading knee. His staff was effortlessly blocked, and Payne found himself blocking a rapid flurry of strikes that seemed to come from all directions at once. He was pushed steadily back.

In a last-ditch gamble, Payne spun and swept the free end of his staff in a wide arc — knocking the elder off his feet. As the elder fell, Payne stepped forward



and performed *tsuki-otoshi*, stopping the reverse downward thrust mere inches away from his master's exposed throat. His master did not move. And as Payne looked closer, he saw that the man was not breathing.

Oh, God! What have I done! he thought as he frantically knelt and searched the elder for a pulse — nothing! Payne was horrified, and with panic bubbling up within his chest he began to yell for help. Then he was flying through the air, crashing to the ground, and his master was atop him, pinning him flat and helpless to the cool morning turf.

"That," said the grinning elder, "is the seventh level of bio-control! If you pay attention and practice diligently I may teach it to you!" With a chuckle the elder stood and helped up his astonished pupil.

It was April, 2025. Payne was twenty-five years old

A frigid wind coiled and snapped along the garbage-ridden streets of the downside.

Haphazardly bundled figures hurried here and there or stood in tiny clusters around dented heating units and open fires. Rusted gratings steamed amid the semi-frozen slush, and Danilov, the newest computer-generated vocalist, wailed its eerily inhuman tones from a pair of battered speakers.

Payne's soft gray boots crunched through the thin film of ice covering an oily puddle. He passed by a rickety aluminum food stand emitting exotic smelling steam and stopped for a moment, inhaling the spicy odors, as he checked the message the girl with chrome eyes had passed on to him.

She had assured him that, if he was willing to spend enough money, she could get him the best man for the type of information he needed. Outwardly she was all steel and sarcasm, but Payne could see, in her movement and efforts to prolong their conversation, that she was lonely. Her name was Cinder, and, like Kiri, she was obviously proud of her cybernetic "enhancements." She didn't know that, because of those enhancements, any Biological Purist would consider her less than an animal — far less.

But Payne had paid her, and three days later she had come through with the note. The small slip of paper simply bore a time, a place, and a name: Painter.

Payne pocketed the note, checked his watch, and continued down the street

The place was called The Silicon Heart.

A blast of warm, humid air made him shiver as he entered the tiny bar. Inside, the atmosphere was dim and muted. Hazy, half-seen figures hunched over the stained bar or hung in small knots around the various tables and booths. Here and there was the dull gleam of a metallic prosthesis, and the low murmur of conversation was occasionally punctuated by the whine of servo-motors. A rusty ceiling fan missing one blade sluggishly stirred the smoky air.

A squat, muscle-grafted figure, adorned with implanted and highly ornate metal plates, emerged from the gloom before Payne.

He looked just barely human. Such degradation, thought Payne. Such corruption.

"Who you want?" asked the bouncer in a faintly echoing metallic voice that seemed to emanate from the center of his wide chest.

Payne held up the note and said, "Painter."

The bouncer's coal-black eyes swiveled like marbles from Payne's face to the note and back again. He jerked his thick thumb over his shoulder and said, "Back there. Last booth. Left side."

Payne stepped around the now silent bouncer and made his way through the crowded bar to the back of the room. He tried not to touch any of the "people" he passed.

A tall, thin figure, dressed in baggy black synth-leather, arose as Payne neared the last booth on the left.

"Hi, I'm Painter," he said as he extended his long-fingered hand.

Payne shook the hand and examined its owner.

Painter was a lanky youth with a wide smile, coffee-colored skin, and long black hair done in dreadlocks. He grinned and gestured Payne toward the table. They both sat.

"Cinder tells me you're lookin' for information," said Painter.

"Yes," began Payne, eager to get this over with, "I need to find out about a murder — a girl named Kiri —"

"Wait!" chuckled Painter. He couldn't have been older than eighteen, though guessing age was an uncertain task in this world of plastiflesh and rejuve jobs.

"First we talk money, then you tell me what you want to know. That way, if you don't like my price, you can look somewhere else — without me knowing too much of your business. Get it?"

"Yes — I understand," said Payne, grudging respect edging his voice. Privacy was held in very high esteem by the Purists. Payne was surprised to find it also honored in the downside.

"Okay. I get fifty thousand for a general sweep. That's all the major data bases and constructs in the central Core. Mid System and Fringe sweeps cost extra."

Painter paused and turned to order a drink, and Payne caught a glimpse of a chrome-plated link-jack implanted in the dark flesh behind the youth's right ear. Cyber-tech. Payne suppressed a shiver of Holy revulsion. Is everyone on this *planet* a slave to metal?

Flesh shall not hold Machine within it.

So much for honoring privacy — if you would allow metal access to your very *mind* ... Payne uncomfortably shifted his gaze to the scarred surface of the table as Painter continued:

"If I don't find anything, you get half your money back. If I do find something, and you want to get more specific or do some cracking, it costs extra — in proportion to the level of risk involved. Me and my boys are the best data pirates around — you won't be disappointed."

Payne looked up and examined the young man closely for a moment. To even deal with such a being was against the Creed. Oh, Kiri, he thought, what have you done to me?

"Okay," said Payne slowly, feeling a moment of

terror in his breast, "I accept. How long does a sweep take?"

"Bout two weeks. I'll meet you here with the info. Now, what do you want to know?"

Payne closed his eyes and breathed for a moment, thinking of home, nature, and biological purity. *Flesh shall not serve Machine*. Then he leaned forward and began to talk

The shaft of pale sunlight had deepened in color as it slid across the interior of the hangar. Now it lay in a fading gold band midway up the far wall.

Payne was invisible in the gloom of the shadow-drenched floor.

He breathed

"Nothing! No records, no reports — no investigation at *all* except for that tidbit you already read."

The thick atmosphere of The Silicon Heart seemed to be even smoggier than before. The gloom was contagious.

Painter looked irked. It was obvious that he was rarely hindered in his "investigations." Ignoring his drink, he said, "There should've been *something* — we used some tight programs! It looks like someone dumped all the info on this girl."

Payne sighed; two weeks in the downside had left him depressed and spiritually drained. Everywhere he had witnessed how *Flesh* was polluted by this machine culture.

The culture that had taken Kiri's life.

"Not even a hint?" he asked. The smoky atmosphere had reddened his eyes, and he was tired. In the booth across from them, a thing that looked like a dirty gray mannequin with four multi-jointed plastic arms was sipping milky liquid from a glass. Cyber-tech corruption on that scale would have sent even a colony elder screaming from the bar. Payne hardly noticed it.

"I'm telling you, man — nothing at *all*." Painter withdrew a small parchment bundle from his studded jacket and slid it across to table to Payne. "Your half of the fee. Sorry it didn't work out."

"Wait!" said Payne. "Isn't there somewhere else you could look — street contacts?" The thought of failing now, after all this — after *living* here

Painter frowned. "Yeah, there might be some places — but I think it's a waste of money, man. And some of the people I'd have to ask aren't too partial to snooping. They're not the sociable type."

"Do it. I'll pay double."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. The broken fan turned. Then Painter sighed.

"Whatever you say, man." He took back the bundle and accepted another from Payne. "I'll get the tab — least I can do." Painter tossed some crumpled bills on the worn table and left with an irritated frown on his dark face.

Payne sat for a while in the swirling gloom — thinking of home.

"I got a name, man — a name and a bit of advice," said Painter. He was very tense.

Payne silently waited.

Painter sighed and looked to his left before speaking. "My advice — free of charge — is that you walk away from this. Pure and simple. Walk away while we *both* still can."

As Painter surreptitiously glanced around the crowded bar again, Payne saw the young man's link-jack. Funny, the sight didn't even faze him now. "I can't do that," he quietly replied. "I can't just walk away."

A disgusted frown twisted Painter's mouth, and he said, "Yeah ... right. Great — just great." He took a deep breath and continued:

"Well then, I got a name: Ran. A free-lance killer — wired to the max. He pulled the hit. *It was contracted*." Painter didn't look at all happy with the information.

Payne felt nothing at first, then a surge of rage enveloped him. He closed his eyes and exerted control. He breathed.

Someone paid to have Kiri killed.

"Who hired this Ran?" he asked softly.

"Don't know, and don't *want* to," said Painter. "This is high-level death. People get snuffed for nosing around this kind of stuff."

"Does Ran keep a file — as insurance, back-up, or something?" asked Payne. In the weeks he had been here, Payne had been trying to learn as much as he could. One of the facts he had gathered was that keeping a back-up file of various transactions was a common practice among the denizens of the downside. It was called "informational insurance."

Painter's frown grew deeper. "Yeah — most street operators do, but I don't want to mess with him. Besides, he's got some high-quality hard walls around his stuff, very lethal."

"But could you do it?"

"Yeah, we could slip a worm in. But we're not going to —"

"I'll pay you five hundred thousand."

Painter went silent.

"A million."

Painter blinked and swallowed. For a moment he looked confused and very young. "Man, you're gonna get me killed." Then he discovered his drink and took a long swallow. "Be here, three p.m., Tuesday." And without a further word he got up and left.

Even in the afternoon the cluttered streets of the downside were crowded, though they grew much worse at night. The sky overhead was mostly gray, but here and there breaks had appeared in the cloud cover, and hard lines of sunlight fell upon the surging mass of the downside. The vivid glare only accentuated the overall murkiness of the day.

Payne passed synthetic drug bars, game parlors, and cut-rate cyber-shops. In a dim alley he saw two youths dressed in skin-tight scale suits fighting with artificial claws and teeth. A battered android lay, sparking and spasmodically twitching, in a trash dumpster.

It was with great relief that Payne entered the quiet solitude of the museum. He had been coming here quite a bit during the last couple of weeks. The

place was usually deserted (except for the whisper-quiet robotic caretaker), and it featured an exhibit that had become increasingly important to Payne's soiled spirit. The work was a holographic montage of trees. Its name was Eco, and it was surrounded by a luminous sense-field which, when entered, caressed the listener with a creamy auditory blend of natural sounds.

Today, amazingly, the field was already occupied. And even more amazing was the fact that Payne knew the occupant. It was the girl with chrome eyes — Cinder.

Why was she there? thought Payne as he silently watched the girl. What could she possibly get out of it?

In time Cinder turned and saw him. She arched an eyebrow, as wryly poised as ever, and said something. Her voice was distorted by the sense-field, so she had to repeat herself as she stepped out. "I didn't think Purists were fans of modern art."

Payne was embarrassed. If she knew that he was a Biological Purist, she certainly knew what his opinion of her had to be. He fumbled for words. "I — we don't. But some of it ... isn't that bad."

"You might like this one, then," Cinder said as she dabbed at her nose with a soft handkerchief.

Payne looked at the smoothly swirling tree-forms.

"Damn," said Cinder with an embarrassed laugh of her own. "Can't cry with these," she said, gesturing to her metallic eyes. "So your nose runs — what a joke"

And Payne felt another emotion then, as the tall girl left the room.

He felt shame.

The hangar was almost entirely dark now. The high windows were like a row of violet panels — stretching into the deepening gloom.

All was silent except for the hypnotic sound of slow breathing

Tuesday came and went with no sign of Painter.

The hotel room was a bare white oval with recessed alcoves holding a bathroom, the door, and a cheap data terminal. A gray plastiform bed pallet occupied the center of the small chamber.

Payne stood before the steel-slatted window which ran along the entire outside wall. His thin body was illuminated in pale horizontal segments. He had turned off the light strip that was painted along the ceiling.

He looked old and weary.

The light from outside was gray and metallic. Dirty, semi-frozen slush clogged the wet streets, while sharp drifting flecks of snow broke up the scene like static.

He had chosen this room both for anonymity and to conserve his dwindling cash supply.

He hadn't heard from Painter in three weeks.

Sighing and banishing an ever-present migraine, Payne put on a long synth-leather coat that he had purchased in a grimy shop (his robes were too thin for the downside winter) and went out to get something to eat.

It's all gray, he thought: machine food for ma-

chine life.

The streets at night were darkly glistening paths of neon-streaked ice that steamed in the gloom. These streets had changed Kiri — changed and then killed her. Payne searched for his rage but found only weariness. He had also changed.

Pulling up his collar against the chill, Payne slipped into the flow of shivering humanity and was carried along past multi-colored displays and enticements. He felt like a slowly dissolving snowflake in a swiftly running stream

A long, dissociated time passed, and suddenly the crowd had thinned and he found himself before a foggy holo display.

Machine Life.

He blinked and stepped forward into its field — trying to make some sense of it.

A beautiful oriental girl with pin-wheel irises kissed a slender crystal rod before breaking it beneath her nose and inhaling the pale green vapor that issued forth. The irises of her eyes expanded until you could see images within them of the girl and a handsome young man walking beneath cherry trees.

"Relive your past, truly and accurately, for as long as you wish," said a soft, sexless voice. "The next generation in stimstiks is here — Liquid Jade."

With a precise smile the operator skillfully emerged from within the holo and asked if Payne would like to make a purchase.

The disoriented feeling washed over Payne again, and the Biological Creed whispered through his mind. But then he thought of Kiri and Mara, and home.

He said yes.

The operator led him into a rose-lit room with a comfortable plastiform couch. Payne purchased the stimstik and listened to the simple instructions. Then the operator smiled again and left.

Payne lay on the couch and fingered the cool crystal.

Flesh shall be Pure.

Oh, Kiri!

The stimstik broke with a faint crack, and Payne inhaled the lightly perfumed vapor

And, for a while, he was home.

The note was on his bed when he returned:

Payne —

Ran was hired by a Tannin-Akuda exec named Baxter. Apparently Baxter had also hired Kiri three months before to snuff one of his superiors and wanted to cover his tracks.

My boys and I are laying low for a while. Maybe I'll take a vacation. Make whatever use of this information you wish.

—Painter

Payne stared at the note for a long time.

Then he sat back and cried

Cinder's eyes were chrome — no irises, no pupils — just two smoothly reflective spheres. She blinked as he approached her, and Payne wondered what she saw with them.

They stood on the edge of a decaying pier, watching slate-gray water that was flecked with foam and



WINNER

bits of debris.

As usual, the sky was overcast.

"Tough knot you gave me," said Cinder in her throaty voice. Then she ventured a brief smile. "Listened to any good trees lately?"

Payne watched the young girl silently. Her slender body was draped in long folds of black synth-leather that was attached here and there to highly-polished chrome plates. Her hair stood up in stiff spikes of metallic silver. He wanted to say something to her — wanted somehow to apologize for his beliefs, his thoughts. But he couldn't reach across that gulf.

Cinder laughed hopefully at her own joke, and, when Payne did not join in, she shrugged and looked toward the water.

"Yeah. Well, the person you want to talk to is called Black Rose. She specializes in the kind of 'service' you're interested in. She'll be in the Minos construct at five o'clock tonight — here's the grid coordinates."

Payne accepted the small slip of paper. "Thank you," he said. Their eyes met for a long moment. Then he turned and slowly walked back down the weathered pier.

"Nice doing business with you," said Cinder with a sad smile.

The stormy sky and Payne's retreating back were mirrored in her artificial eyes for a moment.

Then she turned to look at the heaving bay.

Payne placed the contact flake upon his forehead and entered the Data Grid.

So much had been taken. The Biological Creed was a low whisper within his mind — faded, like his skin and emotions, by the cathode light of this gray world.

Direct linking to the Data Grid was forbidden.

Payne didn't really care.

He sat in the lotus before the cheap data terminal in his room. The snowflake-like contact flake linked his brain directly into the world-wide computer network.

In his tired mind, visions arose:

The Minos construct was a huge computer-generated labyrinth with hundreds of small hidden rooms. It was designed to give its clients total privacy from all devices. Many top-secret deals were arranged within its simulated walls.

At its entrance Payne said, "Black Rose," and a thin white line appeared in mid-air. He followed the line through narrow, dim passages to a small cubicle.

A fully-armored medieval knight sat at a battered wooden table in the cubicle.

The atmosphere in the tiny, amber-lit room was one of depression and bittersweet regret. It was all computer generated, but it was still very effective.

The knight motioned for Payne to sit.

Payne noticed that the rusted figure bore a black rose painted upon its dented breastplate.

"The price has been settled?" inquired a hollow voice from within the armor.

"Yes," said Payne.

The expressionless faceplate of the knight stared at him for a long moment. "Then tell me what it is that

you wish done."

And Payne did.

He sat in the darkness of the hangar — breathing.

Soon Ran would arrive.

With a graceful motion, lost in the pitch darkness of the hangar, Payne rose and began to make some final preparations.

The floor looked so far away as the door opened and spilled a tiny rectangle of light over it.

Payne saw Ran in the moment before the tall youth stepped into the hangar and closed the door: lean body, mane of thick black hair, and metallic gold eyes.

Within Payne's mirror-still mind, all that existed was the desire to hear. He listened with his entire being as the assassin walked to the center of the lightless hangar and stood waiting.

"Well, what's the deal?" said Ran with a chuckle.

Payne leapt.

Seconds before Payne would have driven the entire length of his serrated composite spear through Ran's skull, the assassin whirled and with blinding speed deflected the blow.

Payne caught a wild glimpse of fangs and razor-sharp gold claws before the bungee cord yanked him back up into the air. He disconnected on the way up and flipped through the darkness to land on his feet on the floor below.

Without thinking, Payne rolled to his left.

There was a soft hiss, and the wall behind the spot where he had been standing glittered with hundreds of sparks.

Payne heard a shuffling step. He pivoted and threw a micro-edged blade.

"Nice try," said Ran. "Your turn."

Payne heard the whoosh of the returning blade and barely had time to turn and avoid it.

"Hey, that's pretty good!" laughed Ran. "But it's not enough, my friend."

The popsicle hissed, and more darts sparked around Payne's running body. He felt several sting his right leg.

Payne ducked behind a partition and tried to block the pain of the poison now entering his body. He breathed for a moment. Only one chance now, he thought, as he gathered himself and dashed back out into the darkness.

There was a hiss, and what felt like a thousand pins struck him. He tumbled to the floor.

He could feel his body trying to cramp up as he fought the effects of the popsicle dart's poison. Dimly he heard Ran draw near.

"You're a Biological Purist, right? Yeah! No implants," said Ran as he leaned over Payne and examined him in infrared with his cybernetic eyes.

"Think you can stop that poison?"

Payne struggled to talk.

Ran leaned closer. "I heard you guys were supposed to be pretty good with that kind of stuff. C'mon — give it a try!"

Payne went into convulsions. Bloody foam leaked

from his mouth.

Ran hunkered down over Payne and smiled as the older man's back arched till his head and feet almost met. There was a long gurgling sigh, and then Payne shivered and grew still. "Game over, buddy," said Ran as he watched the body slowly cool in infrared.

When he was sure that the man was dead, he flipped on a pocket light and examined his would-be killer more closely.

He only had time to register blank surprise as Payne reached up and snapped his neck.

Payne reclined in his bed, still recovering from the effects of the popsicle poison. He fingered a newsfax clipping which one of the colony elders said had arrived in the mail today.

A receipt for the second and final phase of Black Rose's services. It was just a headline:

TOP TANNIN-AKUDA EXEC DIES WHILE LINKED

Payne thought of his wife, and Kiri, and the downside.

So much lost.

He sighed and closed his eyes.

My Flesh is Pure.

He began to breathe. □

Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal* will feature "The Gateway Concordance" Part 2, by Hugo and Nebula Award winner Frederik Pohl with more art by Hugo Award winner Frank Kelly Freas. Also on board will be Hugo Award winner David Brin with "Peacekeeper," illustrated by David R. Deitrick. Joining our Hugo winners will be some writers and artists with the potential to win a Hugo or two of their own, including Gregor Hartmann with "A Month of Sundays," illustrated by Larry Blamire; Jennifer Roberson with "Ride 'Em Cyboy," illustrated by Larry Blamire; E. Michael Blake with "Frost King," illustrated by David Brian; and Stephen Martindale with "Technomancy," also illustrated by Larry Blamire; as well as our regular features and book reviews.

In upcoming issues, you won't want to miss the conclusion of "The Gateway Concordance," and we'll have stories by Michael Swanwick, 1989 Hugo Award winner Mike Resnick, Esther M. Friesner, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Bruce Bethke, Phillip C. Jennings, Sarah Smith, and many, many more.

Back issues ...



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In the Chips

By Lou Fisher

Art by Robert J. Pasternak

Howard tried to sound natural, as if he thought robots like Tig4 could write novels by the truckload.

"Start," he said.

"But what will I write about?" Tig4 asked. His knobby head was reflected in the computer's blank screen.

The question threw Howard into further despair. It was like an echo of his own attempts — with a publisher screaming for return of the advance and an agent about to give up on him. His throat closed over what he wanted to say, and he had to swallow hard to get it out. "Write whatever comes. But make it the first chapter of a novel."

"Chapter one," Tig4 confirmed. "One — hexadecimal, binary, floating-point ... ?" The hum, the thinking noise, came from behind the robot's chestplate, giving rise again to Howard's hopes.

Maybe there was a chance.

For years Tig4 had done Howard's bookkeeping and looked after the children so Donna could work. But when the kids grew up and moved away, Tig4 was inactive more often than not. At those times he would fold himself up in the corner and turn off everything but the pilot light — that candle-like glow far back in his eyes — and just wait and wait until there was something a robot with his biochips could do. Tired of seeing him there, and stuck in his own way, Howard began to wish ... Well, Tig4 used the old PC for spreadsheets and tax forms and such; it might not be much of a leap for him to comprehend a word processor.

"Think about words, not numbers," Howard told him. "C'mon, get started."

The humming faded, and Tig4's plastic fingers began to vibrate as he moved them onto the keyboard. His typing was slow, with a hesitation not noticeable in his childcare or bookkeeping functions. From over his angular shoulder Howard watched the screen. He was impatient — not for the act, but for Tig4 to show whether he could write at all, and with what degree of skill. Who had ever supposed that a robot would even try? Yet something was forming, words popping up brightly through the many burnt-in images on the scratchy display.

Children should be seen and not heard.

Kids

will be kids. Blessed art those. Try a little tenderness. Spare the rod and spoil the child.

"Wait a minute," Howard said. "That doesn't look like a novel." He himself hadn't been able to start or finish one since June of '33, but he was confident that he could still at least recognize the attributes.

"Kid stuff," Tig4 said, pushing back in the chair. "Let me know when you have something else for me."

"I didn't say *stop*. I said wait a minute."

Tig4 went forward again, letting his fingers hover just above the keys, effectively poised to resume at the first chance he got, meaning the first time Howard told him to go ahead. But Howard held back. Immersed in thought, he walked around the computer to face the robot from the other side.

"Tig, a novel is a story. A long story."

Eyes rotating, Tig4 nodded. "Like a chapter."

"No, not exactly." Howard glanced over the robot's shiny head into the shadier reaches of his wall bookcases, wondering which of the volumes there could be of some help. But he hadn't read any of them for a long while. Not even the McMurtry classics. "A chapter," he explained, needing to go on, "is one section of a story. You know, one scene, or one happening, or one change in the character."

"Correct," Tig4 said. His eyes, backlit and circular, moved from Howard to the keyboard. He began typing again, a bit faster, even more smoothly, than before.

A child was seen; however, he wasn't heard.

He was a kid being a kid. He blessed those around him and tried to give them tenderness.

Unfortunately, the rod spoiled.

"Wait a minute," Howard said again.

Tig4 stopped. "Is it the end of the chapter?"

Howard shook his head, and they both fell silent.

Patience, he told himself. This was not like teaching the dog to sit. A robot was much more complex. You had to direct him along the path of his own self-adjustments. Tig4 took inputs, then adjusted. Looking back, Howard recalled Tig4's original training, most of which he had done personally, right after the robot was delivered as a first-baby gift from Donna's parents. Robots, then as now, were somewhat generic. Each came with an assigned name and various Purpose Chips; it was up to the owner to tailor it to the tasks and the needs, and even to adjust the persona.

But if Tig4 wasn't as new, Howard wasn't as young. How much patience did he have anymore?



He wished he hadn't spent the publisher's advance.

Then too, Donna's career with the bank was floundering, and every morning her briefcase seemed thicker.

"Why a book?" she said, heading for the door. "For God's sake, teach him something useful. Like fixing the VCR so we can get threedee again. Or why don't you at least have him walk the dog?"

"But I like to walk the dog," Howard said. "It's the only exercise I get."

Every time he tried to think back along the line of events that had led to this marital situation, with him doing nothing and her hefting briefcases, he became aware of his initial dreams of being a great writer. It was probably better not to remember.

"Pity the dog," Donna was saying, looking amused. "You've got his poor feet worn down to stubs."

She jammed the briefcase under her arm and lugged it to the car, while Howard stood at the door, gazing out, trying to put his thoughts back on the novel-to-be. He intended to spend the whole day on it, if he had to. There were a few silky clouds to be seen and the sun was still low in the sky.

It occurred to Howard that Tig4's problem was too much prior training.

"Forget the kids," he said. "Clean out your circuits."

"Kids at the circus," Tig4 said, remembering.

"Not circus. *Circuits*."

"Circuits?"

"Clean them out."

"Erase kids?"

"Right," Howard said. "The novel is not about kids. It's about real life in an adult world where nobody does any menial work except robots and some of us try to write stories, or compose music, or paint pictures."

"Kids grow up," Tig4 acknowledged. It was amazing to Howard how neatly the biochips could assimilate new conditions. Once they had called it artificial intelligence; now it was more real than that, and sometimes seemed more adaptable, more changeable, than his own mind.

Tig4 was pecking rapidly at the computer keyboard.

The adult saw the picture but couldn't hear it. He was a grownup drawing a grownup. He blessed all the other artists and tried to give them tenderness. He spared the paint and spoiled the picture.

"Wait a minute," Howard said.

"Give it a chance," Tig4 told him, his fingers still brushing the keys. "It's only the first chapter."

"No, I don't think you've got the idea."

"A story about grownups."

Howard nodded. "Well, you've got that part."

"Kids are erased. Also children and youngsters

and circuits."

"That was supposed to be *circus*," Howard said, momentarily worried. "Never mind, what you need is an example. Wait." He hurried to the bookcases, peering in. "I'll give you a book to read."

"Robots don't read books," Tig4 said electronically.

Ignoring him, Howard picked out *Huckleberry Finn*. No, he reminded himself, that was too much about kids. He put it back and extracted *The World According to Garp*. He carried it over to Tig4, thinking all the while about Twain and Irving and McMurtry. If he could only write like that, emotional classics that would live forever ... or *anything* ... or if Tig4 could only write like that. He put the book in the flat plastic hand. "This is a novel, a pretty good one. Take a look at it."

Tig4 looked at it hard.

"No," Howard said, irritated. "Open it up."

Tig4 did. His head tilted to a middle page for just a moment, then straightened and rotated toward Howard. "Words. Lots of words. More words than I thought."

"That's the idea. Think you've got it?"

"Correct," Tig4 said, snapping the book shut. "Lots of words, a chapter, a book, about grownups. Lots of words."

"Go to it, then." Howard moved into position behind the robot and pressed on the back of his neck.

While Tig4 typed.

The unhappy adult saw immediately with tearful eyes that the picture he had painted, and painted and painted, could not be heard because of all the noise. He knelt quietly on the rich carpeting and blessed for eternity all the other struggling artists and tried to convey to them, in his own humble way, a feeling of tenderness. When he got up off his knees, however, he spilled the paint, spilled it all over, and spilled it onto the canvas in a lightning-like diagonal from the upper left corner to the lower right edge, and thus with the clumsiness inherent in painter adult human grownups he spoiled the picture.

"Well," Howard said, "you're beginning to get the idea. Keep going and I'll be back later to check it out."

And as he left the room Tig4 was hunched over the keyboard, pounding away.

A month later Howard sold the novel through his surprised agent to Washburne Press for a minor sum above the long-departed advance, and because robots didn't use money Howard was able to keep the 85 percent his agent sent him.

Of course, when the book came out only Howard's name was on the cover. It was *his* robot, was the way

he figured it, though he was ready to implicate Tig4 if the reviews were bad. But these were the reviews: *A novel of the times. A hard-hitting real-life drama. A deep truth brought bubbling to the surface.* That kind of stuff. Howard felt cheerful — almost the kind of lift he used to get from writing, before he'd been blocked for so long and so permanently ... Yes, there was something missing, but it was better than being a total dropout, surely better than nothing, and the money was the same as, even more than, for what he might write himself. He clipped all the reviews and pinned them to the wall, and would have shown them to Tig4 if the robot hadn't been folded most of the time.

The royalties trickled in, and when Howard also obtained an advance on the next novel, he encouraged Donna to look for a better apartment. She found one, uptown, closer to her bank.

"Well, I've got to say," she said, on the first morning after they moved, "that Tig4 did us some good with that book. But can't he manage to walk the dog too?"

"I like to walk the dog," Howard told her again. "It's the only exercise I get."

"You used to do pushups."

"Anyway, I need to get out and see the new neighborhood," he said, and to prove the point he went with her to the car.

But as soon as she was gone, he rambled back inside and set up the computer in one of the new rooms. Tig4 was there too, folded up against the wall, prepared to watch kids or do bookkeeping or, as now added to his repertoire, write novels. But there was no hurry. Howard wanted Washburne Press, his agent, and the general public to appreciate the agony of writing, the many months of sweated effort it took to produce a masterpiece. That was how to build fame.

The next book should bring in some real money.

Maybe enough to buy a house.

While he measured out the appropriate delay, Tig4's eyes glowed softly in the corner. About once a month Howard activated the robot to pay the bills or deposit the royalty checks.

Finally, one day in January he escorted Tig4 back to the word processor.

"Do you remember how you wrote that novel?"

"Correct," Tig4 said. "Adult, grownup — lots of words."

Howard nodded. "Exactly. Only this will be a new novel, so the words have to be different."

Tig4 swiveled toward the keyboard, and though he warmed up his fingers by ultrasonic vibrations, nothing more happened. Nothing at all. For a while Howard worried that the hum was too loud and too long, but it turned out to be that the robot was searching through an extensive data base. Finally Tig4 swiveled back to face him.

"I don't know any different words."

"Sure you do. C'mon."

Tig4's hands dropped to his lap. "All out of words."

It took a moment for Howard to make sense of it. Then he realized that the whole vocabulary must have been applied to the first novel. You had to be careful,

you had to be precise, when you gave instructions to a robot. He hesitated another moment, composing a clearer directive.

"What I mean, Tig, is that you can use the same words this time, but you have to arrange them differently."

"Like in the circus?"

"I suppose." Howard's mind skimmed through images of clowns and elephants and sawdust; but wait, he thought, it was just a mix-up. "Better try it in the *circuits*," he said. "Generate other patterns in your circuits. Write different sentences. And a different story too."

"Not about grownups?"

"Sure, use all the grownups you want. That's the same as before. Just give them something else to do this time."

Tig4's eyes went to their brightest gleam.

"Correct," he said.

"Start now," Howard told him, and he did.

The miserable musician decided after playing the first few bars that the concert he had composed, and dreamt of and lived for, looked good on paper but no one would ever want to hear it. He put his head down on the piano.

Howard felt a lump in his throat. He read the screen again and liked it even better. Music, dreams, misery ... he could relate to all that.

He said, "All right, Tig. Proceed. Write it out. Go." As the click of keystrokes resumed, he backed away. "And let me know when you're done," he added pointedly.

He locked the door behind him. He wanted no disturbances, especially not from Donna.

"Tig4's writing a new book," he mentioned to her.

"Bout time," she replied, but glanced meaningfully at the dog, as if she knew that robots could always handle more than one task.

Not Tig4, Howard resolved. When it came to writing, even a robot needed to concentrate.

So he left Tig4 alone for five more days, and when he next checked on him the robot was folded up in the corner. Looked as if he'd finished the book.

Eagerly, Howard turned on the computer and started to read.

It was great. Better than the first novel. He really got absorbed in it, and as the sun rose up above the window he arrived at the climactic scene where the musician was going to debut his new score at the Met and everything including lifelong fame and the rapturous capture of the love-of-his-life depended on its reception by a sellout audience. Wetting his lips, Howard hit the *Page Down* key to find out what happened, but coming onto the display, intensified, was **END OF FILE.**

"Hey!" he yelled to Tig4.

Tig4 activated. His round eyes lit up; then he unfolded and got to his feet. Howard pointed to the computer.

"Tig, you didn't finish."

The robot nodded once.

"What does that mean — you *did* finish?"

"Correct."

"Then where's the rest of it?"

Tig4 pointed to his forehead. The robot had never shown much emotion as long as he'd been around, but Howard could swear that the jaw seams were creased in an odd fashion. And if that fashion was a frown, it was there in the eyes, too. It worried Howard more than the missing pages.

"The rest of it," he repeated. "The whole climax, the ending — *where*?"

"Up here."

"It's still in your circuits?"

"Circus."

Howard took it with a wave of his hand. "All right, c'mon, sit down here and write it out."

Tig4 leaned back against the wall. "No."

It was hard for Howard to believe that he'd heard what he'd heard. A refusal from a robot was like rain from the sun; it had never happened before, and odds were that it never would. It irritated him so much that he walked over and hit Tig4 on the chestplate.

"Are you telling me," he said, his face tight, "that you know how to finish the book but you just *won't*?"

"Correct." The robot's head dropped. That familiar hum came from within him while the juices flowed through the maze of his parts. Then, without lifting his head, he added, "There are conditions to be met."

"Oh?" Howard said. "Suddenly you have conditions?"

It took a couple of worrisome weeks to get Tig4 to discuss any of the conditions, mainly because robots were not designed to hold debates of that nature. In order to do it, Tig4 had to alter his persona, something not as easy as, say, adding to his list of tasks.

"How did you get this way?" Howard asked him, when the humming stopped.

Tig4 leaned forward straight from the legs.

"It's self-adjustment from writing novels," he explained. "I discovered ninety-two thousand and fifty-four things about grownups when I wrote the first book, and yet I wasn't sure. My truth tables still contained several hundred empty units." Swiveling away, he went to stand by the old computer, resting a plastic hand on the display screen, tilting it askew. "But those slots filled in as I wrote the second novel. And I could analyze what I learned, as I learned it. Finally, I entered it all as facts and falsehoods in a spreadsheet and from that created formulas for enhancing it into robotic terms. I discovered amazing truths. I discovered ..."

He clamped his speaker shut.

"Tell me," Howard said.

"Will you accept it, a truth from a robot?"

"Sure, Tig. C'mon, you and I've been together for a lot of years. I thought we were friends."

"You keep your friends folded in the corner?"

Howard couldn't answer. He just didn't know what to say.

But Tig4 did. "Or put *your* name on their novels?"

That shocked Howard completely. He stepped up to the robot, only to have Tig4 turn away from him; further unnerved, he marched around Tig4 and put his hands on the angular shoulders to keep him in place. He could feel the vibrations. "But you're a robot," he said finally. "And you're *my* robot."

"Correct."

"So it's *all right* for me to leave you folded, or even to use you to write my book."

"Why is it all right?" Tig4 asked, his eyes holding steady. There was no frown in the backlighting now; instead there was a degree of seriousness far beyond the built-in gaze that Howard had tailored for him all those years ago. "Did you read the novels I wrote?"

"Sure, I read them both, you know that. Darn good. Of course you haven't finished this new one and —"

"Were any truths revealed to you?"

Howard gave it some thought. "I suppose ..."

"Maybe not," Tig4 went on. "Maybe it's the writer who learns the most, who discovers himself in the act of writing. So," he added in a firmer tone, "this truth is not for you, but for *me*. A robot writer, a robot truth." Tig4 extended an arm all the way to Howard's face. "You could find your own truth."

"No, I can't," Howard said. "You remember when I could, and did, but I can't any more. Listen, Tig, you're just a robot who wrote a book — under my instructions, remember — and now you have to finish it. There are people waiting for this book."

"You can help."

Howard stared at him.

No way. Tig4 was wrong again. Wrong and stubborn and confused. After years of efficiency, of near perfection, were the chips wearing out? There'd been plenty of folded time, Howard thought — that couldn't be the problem. Was there a hot line to the factory? A repair kit? "I want *you* to finish this one," he said at last, and pushed the robot's arm back down to his side. "If you took care of our bills this month — as you were supposed to do — then you know I need the money. And Donna needs the money. You like Donna, don't you?"

"Donna is people," Tig4 confirmed automatically.

"Your wife. Your dog. Your kids. Your —"

"Snap out of it," Howard said.

Tig4 hummed.

He swiveled in a compact circle and sat down at the computer. After straightening the screen, he called up the file with the new novel in it and scrolled right to the spot where he'd left off. Howard moved in behind him, holding his breath. It was very encouraging. In the confrontation he must have fixed some little glitch, because there was Tig4 as ready as his old self to start again.

Only he wasn't.

He shut down his eyes and his speaker and froze his arms bent to the keyboard.

Donna came home early that afternoon.



"The bank went bust," she announced.

"So did Tig4," Howard told her, but she was already feeding the dog. Concerned, Howard studied her face — she always insisted that anything to do with the dog was *his* job. Now he saw the strain in her eyes, insomniac, behind a mist; but if she were holding back tears, it was only for the moment.

"There are plenty of other banks," she said when she was done.

That night at the computer Tig4 unfroze long enough to spew out a bunch of her resumes and a stream of mailing labels. And sure enough, the following week Donna was off again in the morning, with a fidgety goodbye to Howard and nothing to the dog.

Maybe Tig4 was waiting for her to leave. Or maybe he was finally reprogrammed enough to answer Howard's questions, to state his conditions, to state exactly what he wanted in order for his talented fingers to once again strike the keys.

"Royalties," was what he said.

Howard backed up a step or two. "Money? You want money?"

"Just half," Tig4 explained. "You can help write and get the other half. It's called fifty-fifty. I tried other percentages in the spreadsheets, but this amount calculated as most equitable. Naturally, all calculations assume a retroactive split on the first book as well."

"You're telling me that —"

"Not unsubstantiated, not myself alone," Tig4 said, a hand on his chestplate. "The computer, the spreadsheets ... and I extracted from the data base a history of prior and famous collaborations; for example, the Broadway epics of Lerner and Loewe, the circuits of Barnum and Bailey."

"Wait a minute."

Tig4 stopped.

But Howard was undecided as to another directive. He considered refolding Tig4 and finishing the book himself, as hopeless as that was, but the nauseous signal that came to the pit of his stomach cut off that idea, chilling it out of him. He rubbed his jaw instead. "Robots don't need money."

Tig4 reactivated. "Incorrect. We do now. Yes, we do. Because of the truth I found in my novels."

"But money —?"

"Do you want to know?" Tig4 asked.

Howard nodded.

"You won't fold me back in the corner?"

Howard lowered his eyes and didn't answer. Anything he said could make it worse.

But Tig4 was going ahead on his own.

"This is not a binary matter, but instead one for thought," he said. "Your human thought may be faster. It only came to my circus a bit at a time as I wrote and I wrote, and until it accumulated ... But it became the truth I was trying to say, to robots, not kids, and eventually to myself."

"C'mon," Howard said. "What is it?"

"The result seems simple now," Tig4 replied. "But it was a tenth degree of difficulty and I barely coped."

He curved his fingers to the keyboard and typed a few words. Obviously not enough to finish the book. Leaning back, humming inside, he scanned what he had written. That done, he motioned Howard to the computer, first with a pivot of his head, then with an awkward gesture of a beckoning hand. Howard came close, not quite sure what was required of him, and as he read what Tig4 had typed he felt the grip of that plastic hand on the flesh of his arm, vibrating.

Robots are grownups too.

It was short, all right. Howard had time to read it three, four times before he managed to speak.

"That's it?"

"Correct," Tig4 said, then stretched and stayed unfolded; and every morning after that Howard worked with him at the computer — the first few sittings in sweat and lassitude gave way to later sessions when he snapped his fingers, his head astonishingly filled with words — as they completed the musician novel and wrote the next one about a woman banker.

And on sunny days they walked the dog together. □

Books

(Continued from page 25)

and may mark the beginning of a notable career. But it is not, itself, a major novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆

H.P. Lovecraft

By Peter Cannon,
Twayne Publishers, 1989
153 pp., \$18.95

While we're on the subject of writerly integrity, here we have

yet another book-length study of the one writer in our field most famous for his refusal to conform to commercial standards and formulae. He also notably impoverished himself. The figure of Lovecraft himself as a role model, either positive or negative, sometimes seems as important as the stories or essays that he wrote. Certainly any *writer* has to be at least subtly haunted by the ghost of HPL.

Lovecraft notably mismanaged his career. He committed the awful blunder of not typing up his novel, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, after a book publisher had asked him for a novel. He didn't

seek new markets. He sometimes indulged in remarkable anti-salesmanship. But he wrote what he had to write, and he did it *his* way. He had a unique vision, which he got across, without compromise. Then, more or less, he managed to reach print. The rest is history.

Cannon makes very good use of a straight chronological plan, showing the development of Lovecraft's thought and art. He is clear, factually accurate, insightful, and less prone to plot-synopsis than other Lovecraft critics have been. The present volume makes an excellent introduction to an important author.

The 2nd Annual Boomerang Awards

It's already time for our second annual Boomerang Awards: the chance for you, our readers, to play editor and pick what you think were the best stories, illustrations, and poems that were published in *Aboriginal* in 1989.

To help you in your difficult task, we have listed all of the eligible entries below. Pick a first place winner in each of the three categories (**Best Story, Best Art, and Best Poem**), and send your choices in to: *Aboriginal SF*, 1989 Boomerang Awards, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888. The deadline is Jan. 31, 1990.

Jan./Feb. 1989

"Looking for Miriam" by Kristine K. Rusch

Art by Pat Morrissey

"Three if by Norton" by Ralph Roberts

Art by Cortney Skinner

"The Cave Beneath the Falls" by Jonathan Lethem

Art by Lucy Synk

"Hana and His Synapses" by Greg Cox

Art by David Deitrick

"The Next Step" by Resa Nelson

Art by Pat Morrissey

Poetry:

"In Great Silence, Listening" by David Lunde

"Pardon me for not speaking" by Susan Noe Rothman

March/April 1989

"In the Shadow of Bones" by Robert A. Metzger

Art by Pat Morrissey

"So It Is Written" by Paul Edwards

Art by Larry Blamire

"Salvage" by Rosemary and Sabine Kirstein

Art by Larry Blamire

"The Runner, the Walker, and the One Who Danced After" by Gerald Perkins

Art by Byron Taylor

"The Indecorous Rescue of Clarinda Merwin" by B.W. Clough

Art by Wendy Snow-Lang

Poetry:

"Imprinting" by Terry McGarry

"Mr. Hyde Visits the Home of Dr. Jekyll" by John Kessel

May/June 1989

"The Wishing Game" by Larry Niven

Art by Cortney Skinner

"A Peaceful Heart" by Warren G. Rochelle

Art by Byron Taylor

"A Symbiotic Kind of Guy" by Robert A. Metzger

Art by Larry Blamire

"Eating Memories" by Patricia Anthony

Art by Cortney Skinner

"Jim-Bob and the Alien" by Vivian Vande Velde and T. Serio

Art by Carol Heyer

July/Aug. 1989

"Bluebonnets" by Patricia Anthony

Art by Lucy Synk

"The Soft Heart of the Electron" by R.P. Bird

Art by David Brian

"At Kokomo Joe's" by Brooke Stauffer

Art by Larry Blamire

"Burn So Bright" by Robert A. Metzger

Art by David Deitrick

"The District Domino Championship" by Kir Bulychev

(Translated by John H. Costello)

Art by Larry Blamire

Poetry:

"Incantation" by Jovanka Kink

"Of Archetypes and Arcologies" by Bruce Boston

Sept./Oct. 1989

"Belief Systems" by Patricia Anthony

Art by David Deitrick

"A Matter of Thirst" by Bill Johnson

Art by Bob Eggleton

"The Bob Dylan Solution" by Walter Jon Williams

Art by Pat Morrissey

"The Portrait of Daryanree the King" by Larry Niven

Art by Pat Morrissey

"Sing a Song of Porkchops" by Thomas A. Easton

Art by Larry Blamire

"Made for Each Other" by R. David Ludwig

Art by Robert Pasternak

Poetry:

"Moon" by John B. Rosenman

Nov./Dec. 1989

"Bible Stories for Adults No. 31: The Covenant" by James Morrow

Art by Pat Morrissey

"Variations on a Theme" by Graham P. Collins

Art by Robert J. Pasternak

"Rough Character" by Phillip C. Jennings

Art by Wendy Snow-Lang

"A Measure of Faith" by Ralph E. Vaughan

Art by Lucy Synk

"The Doo-Wop Never Dies" by Esther M. Friesner

Art by Larry Blamire

"The Twisted Brat" by Robert A. Metzger

Art by Larry Blamire

"To Dust" by Lois Tilton

Art by Lori Deitrick

Poetry:

"Were-being Split Personality Jazz" by James S. Dorr

BOOMERANGS

Comments From Our Readers

Dear Mr. Ryan and crew,

In a postscript to a previous letter, I warned you to be careful because one of my aliens was missing. My fear was that he was using the U.S. Postal Service as a cover for an invasion of your editorial offices. You will be glad to know that my fear was unfounded.

My alien returned, not as I expected — trapped neatly within the plastic sleeve you folks use to protect the magazines in transport to the readership — he just came through the door, cool as you please. (Actually, through the crack UNDER the door.)

I looked at my watch, stamped my foot, and my blood pressure shot up like a freshly launched shuttle. All this is expected of a foster parent to teen-aged extraterrestrials. And I waited for what

is expected of all teens, an explanation long on hot air, and short on truth.

But what the alien told me was quick, to the point, and made a lot of sense. He went off-world to do some research on your alien publisher.

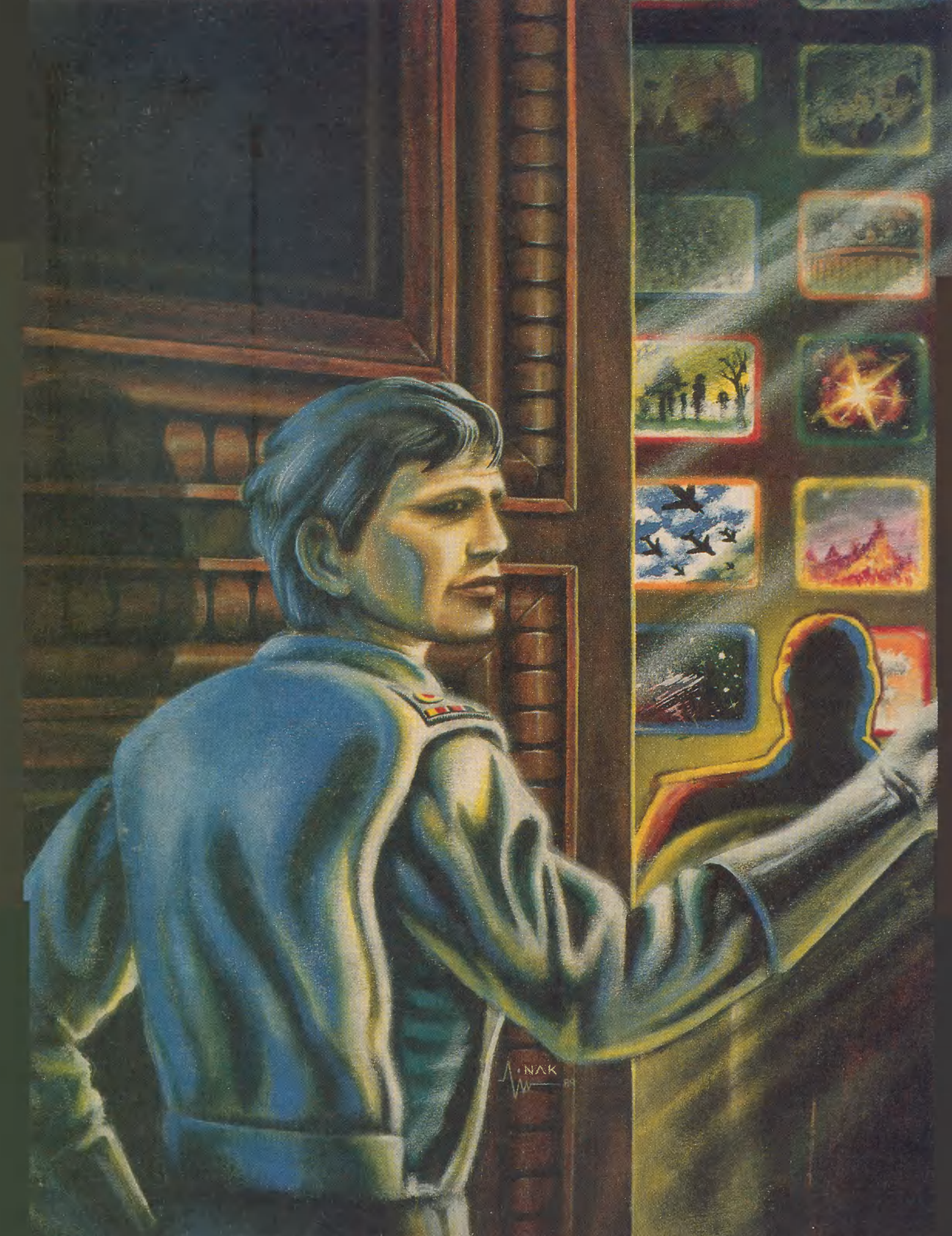
And now, I know the real reason your magazine is titled as it is. The truth has little to do with the effects of the alphabetical order on the fiscal/critical success of science fiction magazines. My alien assures me that since your publisher has the magazine translated into the thousands of languages used by the various forms of life in the universe, it already is a huge success "out there." I was surprised to learn that *Aboriginal* is even in X-ray media for the inhabitants of the Bejhunkian system (wherever that is.)

The readership has no idea how wealthy the Alien Publisher is becoming on his own world, or just how hungry the aliens are for science fiction from Earth.

We get to it now — why *Aboriginal* is called *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. If you were a hip kind of guy, a cool dude, with an eye for great science fiction (and related art) and an olfactory system heavily oriented for the business of an alien world, what else would you call a magazine that assembles some of the best new fiction by that alien world's inhabitants? How could the magazine be anything other than *Aboriginal*?

I told you my alien made a lot of

(Continued to page 50)



NAK
99

No Prisoners

(Continued from page 2)

silently beside him, patiently waiting until I could be of service again. After a short while, he sighed and looked up. "Fortunately," he said, "everything seems to be going rather well, all in all."

I nodded. His success was certainly not a matter of luck, but a testament to his fierce determination and his attention to detail. The general had long been the greatest military leader in the history of the empire, but lately I had detected a certain change in his attitude. He had become ever more ruthless, more unforgiving. "Will you tell me why you're reducing the entire world of Sarghal to a dead and sterile ruin?" I asked. "I've heard you say it was of little strategic value."

His brow creased. "You're taking dangerous liberties," he said gruffly.

"I'm not questioning your actions, general," I said hastily. "I would only like to understand their significance."

The general turned his attention back to the video screens. "Yes, Sarghal is a meaningless rock far from the mainstream of the empire. Yet its people rose up in revolt against us. It was a futile effort, and with the resources of the empire at my disposal, I had no difficulty defeating their rebellious militias."

"And now," I said, "after their defeat, you continue to attack, to seek out and destroy the remaining bands of miserable refugees. What harm can the wretched people of Sarghal do to the empire now?"

"None," said the general fiercely, "no harm at all. And the next world that plots mutiny may look at Sarghal — at the charred ruin of Sarghal — and think twice about rising up in its pride and flouting the beneficent rule of the empire. So I'll hunt down and destroy the last rebel on Sarghal, and I will not flinch if I have to scour the planet clean of all life in order to do it."

A common foot-soldier doesn't have the background to debate grand strategies with the commander-in-chief. It was not my place to offer criticism or advice, so whatever my private feelings were, I said nothing more.

A quarter of an hour later, the general's personal physician arrived for a regular appointment. I asked the general if there was anything he needed, and then I left him alone with the doctor. I went into the corridor and closed the door behind me. Sometimes I used this time to go downstairs for a quick lunch, but sometimes, as on this day, I waited just outside the office.

I could easily overhear their voices, and I made no effort to give them complete privacy by moving down the corridor. I suppose the general would have been furious if he knew that I was intentionally eavesdropping, but I'd learned that my duties sometimes required anticipating the general's needs and desires, and so I felt justified in gathering a little information this way.

"Has there been any change?" I heard the general ask.

"None for the better, I'm afraid, Your Excellency," said the doctor.

"I expected as much."

"It is the nature of things, Your Excellency. Time and time again, I've seen patients hold out futile hope that somehow the disease will reverse itself, or disappear spontaneously. Like a miracle."

The general laughed without humor. "I take it you don't believe in miracles, doctor?"

"Do you want me to give you false hope? Yes, in some cases, in the early stages, some patients experience remission, there are rare recoveries that one might call 'miracles.' But never in my experience have I seen anyone survive a condition as advanced as yours."

This was the first I had learned of the general's illness. I had come to feel that he was somehow different, somehow immune to merely human afflictions.

"And you have no reason to expect things to be any different in my case," said the general.

"I hope you will forgive my blunt honesty," said the doctor.

Again the general gave that chilling laugh. "I've had other doctors who told me what they thought I wanted to hear. They're now regretting their lack of blunt honesty. But, doctor, let's not talk about spontaneous cures. Isn't there something more realistic you can try?"

"No, Your Excellency, I'm afraid there is nothing left."

"No laser surgery, no radiation treatment, no chemical agent that would hunt the treacherous cells down and kill them, one by one? Something that would cleanse me?"

I heard the doctor let out a heavy breath. "Your Excellency, what do you wish of me?"

There was a pause. "Forgive me, doctor. It's not that I don't trust your word. I only want to be sure that there isn't some last improbable hope, something we've overlooked."

"I'll do what I can to make your remaining time as bearable as possible," said the doctor.

"Yes, thank you," said the general.

A moment later, the doctor emerged from the office. She gave me a brief, empty look, then walked down the corridor. I followed her into the antechamber. It was now the turn of the Council President of the world of Mustazafin.

I led her to the office and once again took my position beside the general's desk. I stood there silently, my face calm and expressionless. I was only an aide, and therefore not entitled to opinions, not permitted to respond outwardly to what I witnessed.

"Your Excellency," the Council President began, "I represent the hundred and twelve national governments of our world. I've been sent here to beg you to control your armies of occupation. Perhaps you don't realize the truth. Our world long ago agreed to the demands of the empire. We have lain down our arms and surrendered without conditions. Yet you have not ceased your savage persecution. I've been sent to appeal to your sense of decency, and to beg for mercy on our devastated world."

"I can't afford the luxury of mercy." The general shook his head grimly. "You don't understand my position. There are always pockets of resistance, small bands of men and women determined to sabotage the well-being of the whole. It's my task now to search out these cells, these seeds of corruption and death, to root them out wherever they're hiding and crush them. If I don't, they will grow and spread until at last the entire empire will be at risk. I won't rest until I'm sure that I've destroyed every taint of treachery and disease."

"But innocent lives are being lost!"

"There are no innocents, Madame," said the general in a weary tone of voice. "I will burn them out, every last one." He raised a hand, signaling the interview was over.

I moved to the Council President's side, but she was not so easy to lead out as the envoy from Sarghal. "You're insane!" she screamed, her face red. "You're a monster, a murderous —"

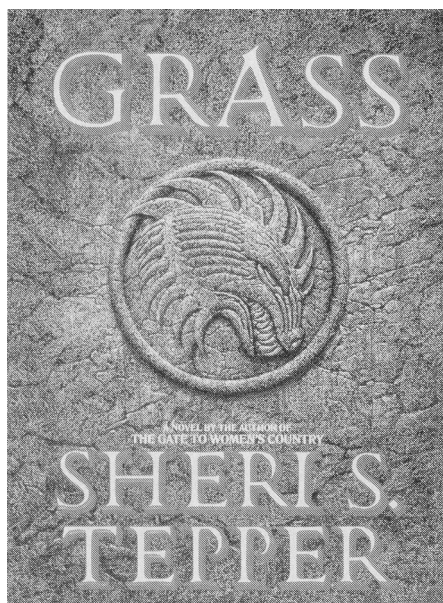
I had to use a little force to persuade the Council President to leave. I closed the door behind her and turned back to the general. He was staring blankly at his video monitors. "How much more?" he said in a faint voice. I understood the question was not directed at me. •

Many Worlds

Grass

By Sheri S. Tepper
 Foundation/Doubleday, 1989
 336 pp., \$18.95

Sheri S. Tepper's new novel is intriguing and original. Technical flaws are a nagging problem in Tepper's writing, but the plot of



Grass is so rich and suspenseful that the book works anyway.

Earth and the rest of human settlement in the galaxy are controlled by Sanctity, an immense religious dictatorship which grew out of the Mormon church, except for the planet Grass, which stands apart. When a plague begins killing humans everywhere except on

Grass, Sanctity sends the Yrarier family there as emissaries to find out the planet's secret. Grassian society, and the relationship of the upper classes to the native intelligences of the planet, turn out to be stranger and more frightening than they could have imagined.

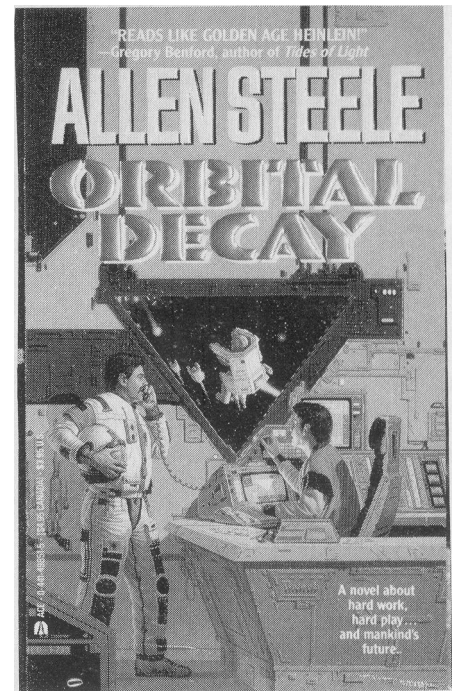
The plot is convincing and exciting. Tepper occasionally succumbs to the temptation to create false suspense — hiding information from the reader unnecessarily — but it isn't even needed, since there's plenty of real suspense. The ending left me ambivalent, and there are one or two loose ends, but they're minor.

Tepper's universe is more problematic. I'm dubious about the credibility of such a huge theocracy, its contradictory population policies, and the ease with which it is overthrown. In other words, the politics in the larger universe seems naive. *Grass*, though, is an impressive creation. I'm not qualified to judge the plausibility of the plague virus and Grassian biology, but I was willing to believe in them. I wish we'd been given a few more clues, though.

The Yrariers do not belong to Sanctity, but to the Old Catholic church. This religion seems like Catholicism was a few decades ago, our time — sure, perhaps the pendulum will swing the other way, but there would be bound to be some changes in such a far-future society. Indeed, except for the fact that people have colonized other planets, the novel feels as if it were set, not yesterday, but a few years ago. Despite the massive changes, I never got the feeling that Earth culture was very different from today's, and that's a serious flaw in an SF novel. (It should be noted that, although the

book does take a strong position against organized religion, it is not in the least opposed to belief in God.)

The culture of the upper classes on Grass is creepy and believable, and fascinating to read about. What we learn about the Arbai, an extinct intelligent race, is also very interesting and well



conceived.

Lady Marjorie Westriding, our protagonist and wife of Rodrigo Yrarier, is an interesting character, but her son is wimpy and her husband and daughter are one-dimensional. Some of the other characters, such as Rillibee Chime, an unwilling monk, are well-drawn and sympathetic. There are many names and characters to keep track of, but Tepper keeps the complexity well in hand.

Yes, there are a fair number of technical problems with Tepper's

Rating System

-fr-fr-fr-fr-fr	Outstanding
tiirit	Very good
fr-fr	Good
fr	Fair
	Poor

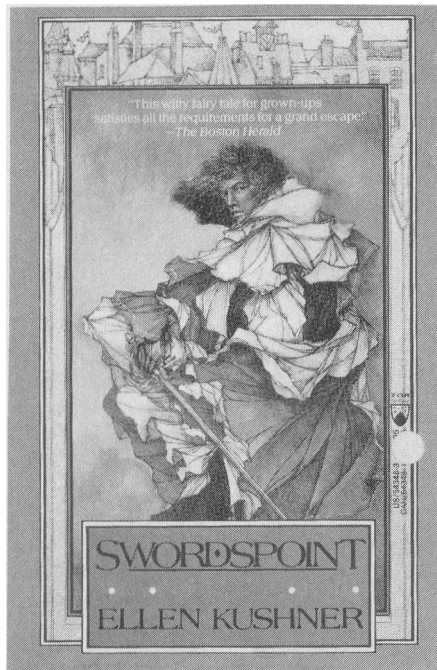
writing, which distracted me, but none are major. Though I would have liked to see them cleared up, the author's invention is strong enough for her to get away with them. **Grass** is an impressive, inventive, and thought-provoking novel.

Rating: **-tr ft ft ft**

Orbital Decay

By Allen Steele
Ace, 1989
324 pp., \$3.95

Every author hopes his publisher will pour a lot of effort into promoting his book. Too much hype, though, can backfire, especially on a first novel, because it raises expectations so high. Allen Steele's **Orbital Decay** has been the



beneficiary/victim of an extensive publicity campaign by Ace, essentially claiming the book is the best thing since penicillin. Well, it's an impressive debut, but far from perfect, and Heinlein's not about to be toppled from his perch. Not yet, anyway.

Orbital Decay is set in 2016, during the early days of space industrialization. The main characters are "beamjacks," heavy laborers who live in a space station they call Skycan while building an enormous energy platform in orbit. When they learn about an NSA project which threatens to put Big Brother in every home, they take on the government, and their

employer. I don't have to tell you whether they succeed.

This is a book that is very much addressed to the science fiction community; it is definitely not the book to give to someone who has expressed an interest in finding out more about SF. It is classic hard SF — complete with lots of lumps of information dispersed throughout the book. Steele handles them well, but if you have no tolerance for all sorts of (mostly irrelevant) technical explanations, you'll be bored when they come up. Fortunately, they are short and scattered.

The plot is exciting, if episodic. The frame of the novel — a narration by an SF writer who went to space to research background for his novel — was unnecessary, but I didn't mind it, except when the very last passage jolts the reader out of the frame. I was truly annoyed by all the set-up about a "greatest discovery" made by the narrator, which turns out to be nothing but a mystical revelation. Not only is it infuriating, it isn't necessary. The story could have held us without such tricks.

Steele's political message is not the same old spiel we're used to hearing from hard-SF writers. His book won't make the Just-Say-No lobby happy, either. He creates a very believable ambience, really putting us in Skycan. I like the book's point about what kind of men (well, they are mostly men) will actually open the "high frontier."

One irritating trait of the book is that it is too immersed in recent pop culture. Especially the Grateful Dead — I was ready to tear the book up if I had to read any more of their song lyrics. Yes, some music from today and earlier will be listened to in 2016, but these people don't seem to listen to or read anything that came out later than 1980 or so, and mostly stuff from 10 to 15 years earlier. There are also some technical problems common in first novels. Steele needs to work on his craft — particularly in terms of viewpoint and character.

Despite all these criticisms, reading **Orbital Decay** was a lot of fun, which helped me skim over the rough spots and the lumps of technojargon. Steele is certainly

an author to watch. Was it worth all the hype? Perhaps. We'll have to read his next book to find out.

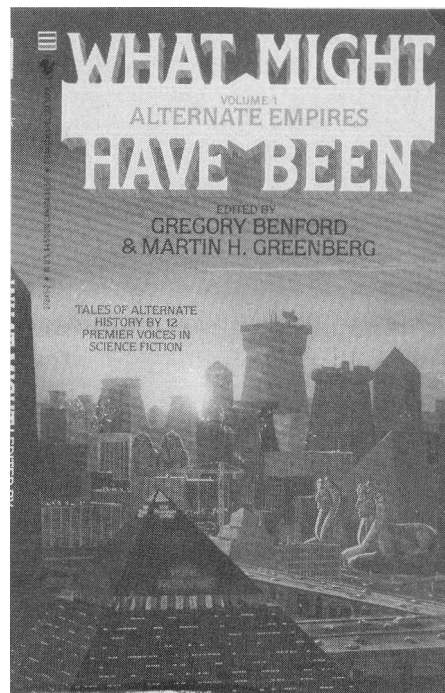
Rating: **ftftft/2**

Swordspoint

By Ellen Kushner
Tor, 1989
269 pp., \$3.95

Ellen Kushner's first novel, **Swordspoint**, is brilliantly written, exciting, and a delight to read. This absorbing genre-bender is an achievement of which many a more experienced author could be proud.

Swordspoint is not truly a fantasy in any way, except that it is set in a time and place that never really existed — but in a sense that's true of all novels. It should



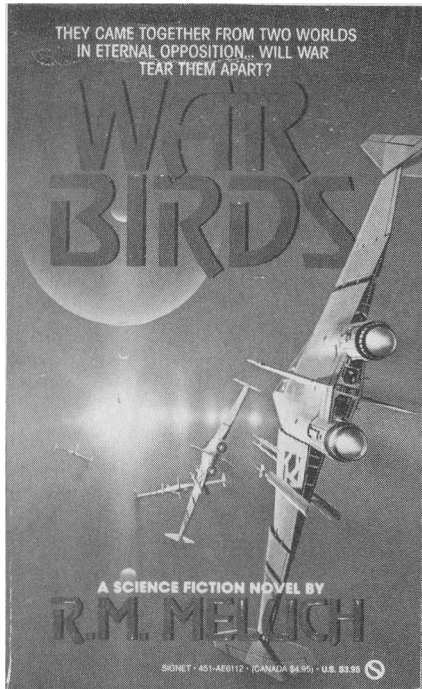
certainly appeal to lovers of intelligent fantasy.

The novel's protagonist is Richard St. Vier, a swordsman in a society in which members of the upper class can legally murder one another by hiring a professional to fight a "duel" with the victim. This "Melodrama of Manners" concerns the tangles of love, loyalty, and politics in which St. Vier becomes enmeshed. The plot is complex and difficult to summarize, though for the most part easy to follow. Sometimes early in the book, however, I wished I had a scorecard to keep track of the characters and their relationships;

this is especially a problem because characters can be referred to by several different variants of their names.

In addition to duels and politics, *Swordspoint* contains a moving love story. It is a homosexual relationship, which would probably have ruled out the book's being marketed as a historical novel, a genre it seems closer to than fantasy. But the book is not *about* homosexuality, any more than books featuring straight couples are necessarily about heterosexuality. It is about the universals of love, life, and death.

Kushner has chosen a very old-fashioned style — most notably an omniscient viewpoint, rarely seen today — which fits the novel



perfectly. Her writing is clear, fluid, and beautiful, with wonderful dialogue. The setting and characterization are also excellent. I was convinced from beginning to end.

Swordspoint is both moving and witty, a rare combination. I'll give it my highest compliment: I didn't want it to end. *Brava*, Ms. Kushner.

Rating: ir a- it * y2

What Might Have Been? Vol. 1: *Alternate Empires*

Edited by Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg
Bantam/Spectra, 1989
304 pp., \$4.50

Alternate history stories con-

tinue to grow in popularity; fortunately, there's also an increasing amount of historical expertise in the SF writing community. Following up their successful anthology, *Hitler Victorious*, Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg now present the first in a series of "original" anthologies of alternate history stories, this volume centering on major events that failed to happen.

(Why do I put "original" in quotes? Although these stories were commissioned for the anthology, nearly all of them have also appeared recently in SF magazines. If you keep up with magazine fiction, you may feel short-changed by the book.)

My favorite contribution is Kim Stanley Robinson's "Remaking History," set in a near-future world in which a few recent events happened differently. It is a brilliant dramatization of arguments about the "Great Man" theory of history, and the story itself takes part in the discourse contained therein. The alternate history is remarkably believable; just a tweak here and there, and all this could have been ours.

"Game Night at the Fox and Goose," by Karen Joy Fowler, is a yarn that draws you in and then sucker-punches you. Unlike most of the other stories in the anthology, it focuses on individuals rather than on mass events. The viewpoint character is extraordinarily well done. A winner on all counts.

Harry Turtledove gives us the haunting "Counting Potsherds," in which the Athenians lost to Xerxes, and Greek civilization was wiped out by the Persians. Turtledove never breaks the mood, but manages to keep reader confusion to a minimum. The images of the characters prowling through the wrecked Parthenon and Agora will stay with me for a long time.

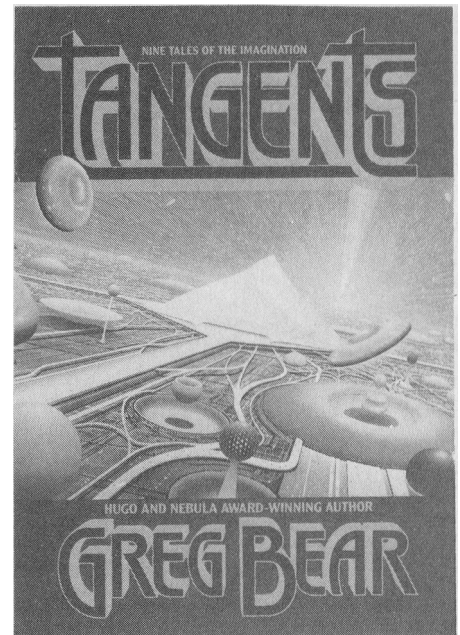
In Robert Silverberg's "To the Promised Land," the Exodus was unsuccessful and the Roman Empire never fell; centuries later, the few remaining Jews hatch a desperate plan for survival. The story is original and absorbing, rich in detail, and carefully crafted.

George Alec Effinger's "Everything But Honor" is a powerful story about historical change aided by a time machine. In an
Jan./Feb. 1990

alternate universe, a black physicist tries to change the past, but the results are not what he expected. The character's obsession, which leads him to increasingly reckless acts, is not as sharply delineated as it might have been.

Frederik Pohl's "Waiting for the Olympians," the story of an SF writer in a modern-day Roman Empire, is professionally done, with more than a touch of humor. Despite some plausibility problems, it is absorbing and enjoyable, and Pohl's eye and pen are as sharp as ever.

In Poul Anderson's "In the House of Sorrows," the last two Hebrew tribes were "lost" like the other ten, so there was no Judaism, and hence no Christianity or Islam; Anderson gives us a war



story set in this universe. Though the story is vigorous and striking, I'm afraid my relative ignorance of Middle Eastern history and religions left me bewildered through most of it.

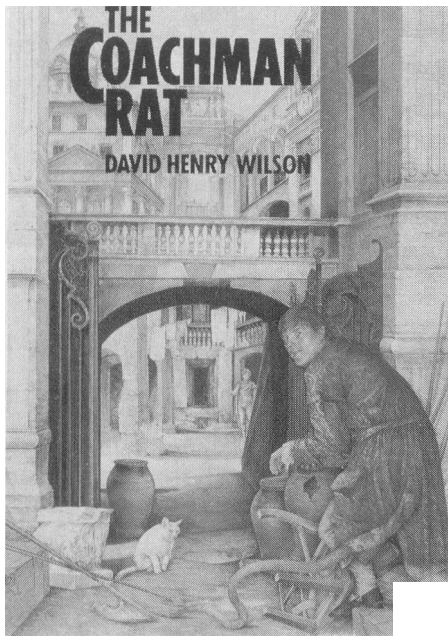
Larry Niven's "The Return of William Proxmire" is, as he says himself, a "recreation," not intended seriously. It's a short, not quite credible story full of wishful thinking, but a warm tribute to the late Robert A. Heinlein and as good a comeuppance for Sen. Proxmire as I could imagine. "We Could Do Worse," by Gregory Benford, is another slight piece, a cautionary tale about McCarthyism.

Barry N. Malzberg's "All Assassins" is an odd, disturbing
PAGE 47

tale of Lee Harvey Oswald and John F. Kennedy. It's obscure in spots.

"Leapfrog," by James P. Hogan, is not truly alternate history, just SF with a paranoid conspiracy theory about our recent history. There's no plot to speak of, the characters are tissue-thin, and the lectures on politics and engineering are boring — but I must admit that Hogan surprised me with the ending, turning my expectations on their heads. He deserves credit for that, but I wish he wouldn't grind his axe so loudly.

James Morrow's "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 31: The Covenant" (which also appeared in the last issue of *Aboriginal*) is disappointingly weak. It varies uneasily in tone from light to



heavy, and there are serious logic flaws in this story about a world where the broken set of the Ten Commandments was never replaced.

With only a few weak stories, this is an impressive anthology, showcasing some of the best writers in the field.

Rating: *ft ft ft ft*

War Birds

By R. M. Meluch
Signet, 1989
253 pp., \$3.95

After two years of reviewing, I should have learned not to judge a book by its cover — literally. I

thought *War Birds* was a military hardware novel, and I have about as much interest in that as in reading circuit diagrams. But I gave it a try, and I'm glad I did, because I've discovered a very good author whose past and future work I'll be looking for. In fact, I wonder why I've never heard of her before.

The first page tipped me off that the book was something different, about people, not machines. There are hardware descriptions for the aficionados, but they don't dominate the story, and are kept so short and clear that they neither bored nor confused me.

Erde and Tannia are a dual-planet system, Earth's farthest-flung colonies. As the novel opens, it is fifteen years since the war between them ended with the complete surrender of Erde. Anthony Northfield, the protagonist, is a former military pilot who, for political reasons, can no longer fly. The differences between Erde and Tannia have to be pushed to the background, though, when Tannia is attacked by Occo, a third colonized planet in the system whose mysterious settlers have cut off all contact with their brethren.

The main character is a beautiful piece of work. Without giving away an important plot point, I can say that Meluch has found a creative solution to the problem that, while the use of an outsider as protagonist helps the reader perceive an unfamiliar society, a true outsider can't get deep enough into the society for us to learn about it. I didn't like the character Maggie at all, but there's no law that says you have to like every character, even the protagonist's love interest. She is believable, which is all that truly counts.

Meluch finds a voice immediately and never loses it. I can't remember being jarred by a false note. The story is gripping. The third section, on Occo, is slightly weaker than the sections on Tannia and Erde, mostly because, after a large surprise when it starts, it remains relatively predictable. That is not typical of the book, though, nor is it a major flaw.

War Birds is a very well-written adventure novel with living, Jan./Feb. 1990

breathing characters. Meluch proves that it can be done.

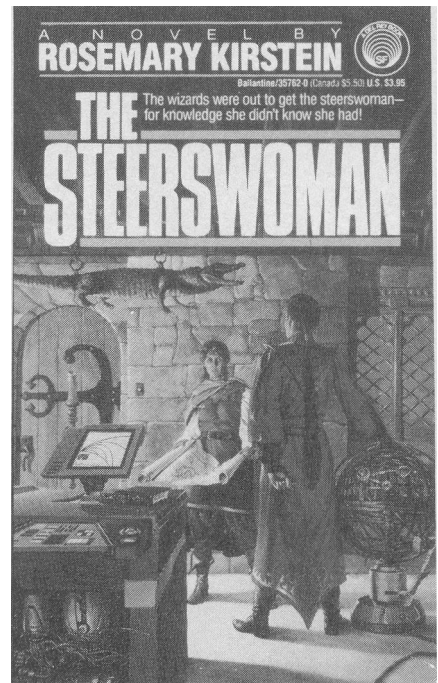
Rating: *ftftftft*

Tangents

By Greg Bear
Warner/Questar, 1989
290 pp., \$18.95

It's not necessary to say much about this short-story collection by the Hugo and Nebula winner who's one of the finest hard SF writers of today. Read it and learn why Greg Bear wins awards. In addition to his hard SF, we also get to see his other side, with a couple of fantasies and a non-fiction piece.

The two most famous stories, both award-winners, are "Blood Music" (later expanded into a novel) and "Tangents" (both a



mathematical fantasy and a thinly-veiled parable about the treatment of mathematician Alan Turing). "Sleepside Story" is a delightful, evocative fairy tale, previously available only in a limited edition. "Sisters" will be the basis for a novel, and appears in this collection for the first time; as you'd expect, it's well-done hard SF with a fine social extrapolation of what will happen when we genetically "perfect" our children. "Dead Run," which was the basis of a *Twilight Zone* episode, is a fascinating exploration of the men who drive damned souls to Hell, and a hell of a frightening concept. "Schroedinger's Plague" takes the

Schrodinger's Cat concept and extends it *ad absurdum*; even if it's not possible, it's fun and thought-provoking. "Through Road No Whither" is a haunting tale of an alternate universe where the Nazis won; despite its subject it is a quiet, subtle story.

Bear has revised two of his early stories (originally for a NESFA Press book in 1988). "Webster" is a fantasy about a spinster, a story whose mood shifts from light to dark and back; "A Martian Ricorso" (written just before Viking landed on Mars) is a frightening tale of first contact. Neither is as good as his more recent work, but as Bear says in the introduction, they "have their charms."

"The Machineries of Joy" is a fascinating non-fiction article on computer graphics, though it would have benefited from photos; written in 1983-84, it's already somewhat dated, but still quite interesting.

Tangents comes highly recommended. But you didn't need me to tell you that. Read it and see some of the best work that science fiction can produce.

Rating:

The Coachman Rat

By David Henry Wilson
Carroll and Graf, 1989
171 pp., \$13.95

David Henry Wilson's *The Coachman Rat*, originally published in Germany, is a fairy tale for adults. Though narrated by a rat, it is definitely not your usual cutesy talking-animal book. I wouldn't give it to children, unless I wanted them to have nightmares.

The time and place of the novel are uncertain, as is customary in fairy tales, but nothing else in the book is customary. Wilson starts out by telling the story of "Cinderella" from the point of view of the rat whom the fairy godmother turned into Cinderella's coachman. It soon moves on to what happens afterward, and it's far from happily ever after. Later, Wilson brings in a dark variant on the already dark "Pied Piper of Hamelin."

The Coachman Rat is a meditation on good and evil, on mercy and revenge, on the basic

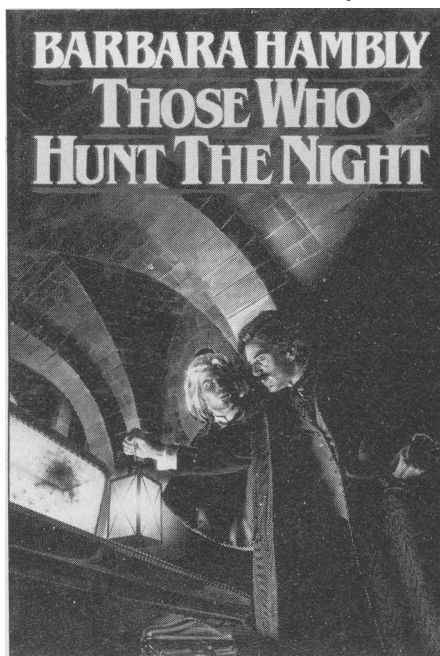
nature of man. We don't get a lot of answers. Using these old fairy tales, Wilson has constructed a horrific, original, thoughtful, and thought-provoking novel for adults.

Rating: -fr V₂

The Steerswoman

By Rosemary Kirstein
Del Rey, 1989
279 pp., \$3.95

Despite its rather generic packaging, Rosemary Kirstein's *The Steerswoman* is an above-average first novel. It is well-written science fiction with the feel of fantasy, but the mind-set of SF. Kirstein brings delightful and original touches to what easily could



have been predictable.

Very shortly after the book begins, we realize that we are in some sort of human colony on another planet which has lost most of its technology and culture and been reduced to a nearly medieval state. The few people with advanced scientific knowledge are considered wizards, and they use their knowledge to dominate the other inhabitants and to make war against one another. Rowan is a Steerswoman, one of a guild of travelers who journey about the land to collect and disseminate knowledge. When she pokes her nose into something seemingly unimportant, she incurs the enmity of the wizards, who fear for their prerogatives if their secrets get

Jan./Feb. 1990

out. She spends the novel trying to answer the question she started with and to find out why the wizards are so desperate to keep the answer hidden.

I like the concept of the Steerswomen, and Kirstein works it out well and logically. In fact, everything in the novel is well and logically worked out. Rowan is a wonderful character, a woman I understand and would like to meet. She acquires two companions along the way: Willam, a young boy, whose depiction is good, if somewhat one-dimensional; and Bel, a barbarian, whom I would have liked to know more about.

The story is involving, though the middle of the book moves a touch slowly. The plot of the individual book is wrapped up satisfactorily — Kirstein leaves us with no maddening cliff-hangers — but many questions remain unresolved, making it obvious that this is the beginning of a series. I'll be looking forward to future volumes, because I want to know the answers.

Rating: -h-b-irV₂

Those Who Hunt the Night

By Barbara Hambly
Del Rey, 1989
340 pp., \$4.50

I'm not a particular fan of vampire stories — I've never even read *Dracula* — but I'm a fan of Barbara Hambly's, so I eagerly picked up *Those Who Hunt the Night*. This vampire murder mystery set in 1907 is enjoyable and well-imagined, although the mystery element suffers from an unfair solution.

Professor James Asher, who is actually a former government spy, returns to his Oxford home one day to find all his servants and his wife unconscious, and an odd, pale man waiting for him. The stranger introduces himself as Don Simon Ysidro, a three-hundred-year-old vampire. He has come to Asher for help in finding a murderer; someone is opening vampires' coffins and exposing them to deadly sunlight. If Asher does not agree to take the case, or displeases the vampires, his wife will be killed.

The background of this novel is impressively well done. If you're familiar with Hambly's rigorously

squared.

Now, remove the center marshmallow from each face of the cube. You've removed six marshmallows (feel free to eat them). What is the new surface area of this new marshmallow construct? Think about it.

From each side you removed an area of 1 marshmallow squared, but you also added something. Look inside where the missing marshmallow is. You have a 5-sided cavity. Therefore, for each 1 marshmallow squared that you removed, you added 5 more. That's a net increase in surface area of 4 marshmallows squared. This has occurred on each of the structure's 6 sides, such that the entire structure has now increased its surface area by 24 marshmallows squared. What that means is that this simple operation of removing the middle face marshmallow of each face has increased the composite marshmallows' area from 54 to 78 marshmallows squared. This multiplies the surface area by a factor of $78/54$, which equals $13/9$.

I'm sure you can see where this is going. If you now take the remaining 21 marshmallows, and imagine that they are each made up of 27 mini-marshmallows, and repeat this process of removing the center face of each one of these mini-marshmallows, the surface area of this new structure would once again be multiplied by the ratio $13/9$. If you can *really* do this, your manual dexterity far surpasses mine — but if you can't, I'm sure that you can visualize it. It should now be apparent where this is going.

If you continue this process an infinite number of times, using ever smaller bits of marshmallows, the surface area becomes: $54 \times 13/9 \times 13/9 \times 13/9 \dots$. This number continues to increase for each added layer of complexity, eventually going to infinity. In that volume of 27 marshmallows, you've constructed a sponge which has infinite surface area. But something even more amazing has taken place.

If you've been eating each marshmallow you've taken out, and all the little mini-marshmallows that you've sliced up, you will have eaten the original 27 marshmallows. With each removal

of marshmallow you multiplied the composite volume by $21/27$ — therefore the ultimate volume becomes: $27 \times 21/27 \times 21/27 \times 21/27 \times 21/27 \dots$ which goes to zero. You have, I swear it.

Go ahead, pick up your Menger sponge. It has infinite surface area, but *no* volume. That thing you hold in your hand, which you can't see because it's no longer there, has a surface area that exceeds the area of everything in the universe, and weighs absolutely nothing. Imagine that. For the almost insignificant cost of this magazine, a few marshmallows, and some toothpicks, I've shown you how to build something that has more real estate than the entire cosmos. I'd call that a bargain. I'd also call it a delightfully pathological perspective.

Thoughts

Have I fooled you?

No.

Not really.

Maybe.

Everything above is mathematically true. But there is one problem, one weak link in both of those pathological perspectives. Physical objects cannot be divided infinitely. Take any chunk of something, chop it in half, and chop one of those chunks in half. Do it again and again. But you *can't* do it forever. Eventually you get to the point where that last little chunk consists of only a single atom. You've got to stop dividing there. There's no such thing as half an atom.

This is where the worlds of mathematics and physics collide (mathematicians do not like *merely* real objects such as atoms). When that collision takes place, physics is usually the victor. If you can only chop something down until you have a single atom, and, for argument's sake, if we assume that the average atom has a dimension of 5 angstroms (100 million angstroms equal 1 centimeter), just how many times could we add a new layer to the Koch snowflake, or how many times could we remove ever smaller pieces of marshmallow, until we got to the point where we were trying to slice atoms in half?

I'll let you think about the Koch snowflake (consider it homework), and I'll think about the Menger

sponge. If the original marshmallows were 1-centimeter cubes (I'm assuming mini-marshmallows here), with each operation I would remove a volume of marshmallows whose width in centimeters would be 1, $1/3$, $1/9$, $1/27 \dots$. Each time it would get 3 times smaller. So how many times could I do that until I got down to 5 angstroms? Fewer than you might think. Only 15 times. Take out your calculator and prove it to yourself.

So what kind of Menger sponge does that make? What is its surface area by the time we get down to atomic dimensions? Starting with our original area of 54 marshmallows squared, it becomes $54 \times (13/9 \times 13/9 \dots$ multiplying by $13/9$ for 13 more times) equals 13,425 marshmallows squared. And in a similar manner, the volume has become $27 \times (21/27 \times 21/27 \dots$ multiplying by $21/27$ for 13 more times) equals 0.623 marshmallows. What that means is that our Menger marshmallow sponge, which originally had a surface area of 54 marshmallows squared and a volume of 27 cubic marshmallows, has been transformed into something which has an area of 13,425 marshmallows squared and a volume of 0.623 marshmallows.

Not quite universe-spanning, but, by anyone's estimate, that is a lot of marshmallow real estate. So where does this take us?

I especially enjoy the pathological perspectives that the Menger sponge creates, because I find that I can build things with it. I could build an alien brain with nearly infinite surface area in almost zero volume. I could build structures out in space that are planet-spanning, but have practically no volume, and almost no mass. Imagine a Menger creature, evolved in zero gravity, propelled by the force of the sun's photons, with a brain of near-infinite surface area, but so delicate that the slightest gravitational field would collapse it. Try to imagine the pathological perspective that a Menger alien would have. It might see us in the same way that we would view a neutron star, something of near-infinite density, something that apparently is nothing more than a lifeless, mindless chunk of hyper-dense

material.

So I give you warning. If you're in the supermarket and go down the aisle that holds the sponges, and you hear a high-pitched, squeaky voice that says: *buy me, buy me*, just keep walking — unless you want to find yourself in the headline of next week's *Global Enquirer* — “Alien Sponge Sucks Dry the Brain of Unsuspecting Shopper.” □

By Laurel Lucas

Gateway Revisited

After the tremendous success of *Gateway* and its sequels *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon*, *Heechee Rendezvous*, and *Annals of the Heechee*, **Frederik Pohl** says his latest effort is "absolutely it" when it comes to Heechee.

"The *Gateway Concordance*," which appears in *Aboriginal Science Fiction* beginning with this issue, has the working title *The Heechee Trip* and will be published in late 1990 by Del Rey.



Frederik Pohl

Pohl calls it "sort of a concordance," not a sequel, containing a lot of ideas he never got into the other novels.

Pohl's latest novel, *Homegoing*, is just out in paperback from Ballantine/Del Rey. And those who attended the Hugo Awards ceremony at Noreascon Three, the World Science Fiction Convention held in Boston Labor Day weekend, had the good fortune to witness a very droll and dapper



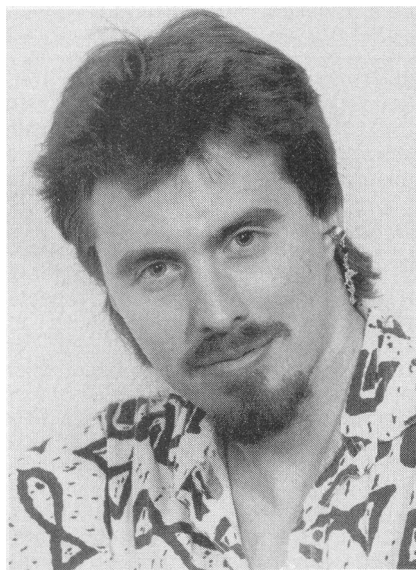
Frank Kelly Freas

Pohl hosting the event. More on the WorldCon later.

Frank Kelly Freas, the "dean of science fiction illustrators," has created a cover and 100 black and white illustrations for *The Heechee Trip*, some of which will appear in *Aboriginal*.

Kelly Freas has been active in the SF field since the 1950s and was the first person to receive 10 Hugo awards. His work has included covers for *Astounding* and *Mad* magazine, posters and insignia for NASA, and covers for Ace, DAW Signet, Ballantine, and Laser Books.

He is presently the coordinating judge for the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of the Future contest, and directs illustration for the Writers of the Future anthologies. You can see some of his latest work on current covers of *Analog* and *Dragon*.



Bob Eggleton

A year ago Kelly Freas married **Laura Brodian**, Ph.D., of Los Angeles. She is a broadcaster of classical music programs and says she is now actively involved in her husband's career as well.

Our cover art is by **Bob Eggleton**, who was invited to witness the Voyager II flyby of Neptune in Pasadena in August and set to work on an illustration featuring Neptune as seen from its



moon Triton, ice volcanoes and all, at the WorldCon Labor Day weekend.

The finished product is one of the first portraits you are likely to see based on the fabulous information Voyager sent back to us.

Eggleton's illustrated version of *First Men in the Moon* by H.G. Wells will be out soon. He's currently working on covers for Ace, Signet, and Easton Press.

George Alec Effinger, whose "Schroedinger's Kitten" won the Nebula award and Hugo for best short story of 1988, is the author of "No Prisoners."

Effinger says he got his start with the encouragement of **Damon Knight** and **Kate Wilhelm**. His novel *A Fire in the Sun* (Doubleday/Foundation) is a sequel to *When Gravity Fails* and came out this past summer. He is working on an alternate Civil War novel for Signet titled *Everything But Honor*.

For hobbies, Effinger says he likes baseball and collecting Depression glass. He's also had something of a career as a movie extra. He appeared in "The Margaret Bourke-White Story" with Farrah Fawcett and in "Miller's Crossing" with Albert Finney and Holly Hunter.



George Alec Effinger

"No Prisoners" is illustrated by **Robert Pasternak**. When I spoke to Pasternak, his first child, **Zorya Ar-**



Robert J. Pasternak

row, was just days old. She was expected Labor Day weekend but arrived late, at the full moon. "I could have gone to WorldCon, oh well," he says.

Pasternak says it was a home birth as planned, but ten minutes after they called the midwife and before she could arrive, little Zorya did, right into her Daddy's hands.

"I saw the top of the baby's head and totally freaked, things were happening so fast. I checked that the umbilical cord wasn't around her neck and the next thing I know she swished out." This was the second for mother **Jacqueline**. Zorya weighed in at eight pounds 12 ounces, with lots of dark hair, like both her parents.



Lou Fisher

While Robert gets over his astonishment, his paintings are appearing at a show at the Mona Lisa restaurant in Winnipeg. He's also working on the cover for the second issue of a new Canadian magazine of short stories called *On Spec*.

Pasternak is also the illustrator for "In the Chips" by **Lou Fisher**. Like Fisher's "Fixing Larx," which appeared in our premier issue back in 1986, this story is about robots. "I like to write about real people and to me

robots like that are real people," he says.

I told Fisher his robot characters seem so innocent and taken advantage of by humans, and he said that may be due to the fact that he is an animal lover and brings some of those feelings to his writing.

Fisher took early retirement from his job at IBM and is now a full-time freelance writer. He's working on a new novel and trying to expand into mainstream fiction. He says he was inspired by attending the New York State Summer Writers Institute at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs where he brushed elbows with great writers for two weeks.

Bruce Bethke, who brought us one of our funniest tales ever in "It Came From the Slushpile" (July-Aug. 1987), does an about-face to the deadly serious in "First Full-Contact."



David Deitrick

Since we last heard from him, Bethke has had a third daughter added to his family and began a job writing computer documentation for UNISYS.

Bethke says he is "up to my armpits in books," including writing the novel version of "First Full-Contact," and a novel based on Bethke's short story, "Cyberpunk."

Bethke says at the WorldCon he ran into some SF fans from Tokyo and "quite a few had read 'It Came From the Slushpile' and they were raving



John W. Randal

Jan./Feb. 1990

about it."

"First Full-Contact" is illustrated by **David R. Deitrick**, who has just moved with his family from Alaska to Huntsville, Alabama, "Rocket City USA," where his wife's family lives.

While Deitrick is "working hard on diversifying," doing everything from "advertising stuff" to a book cover for Easton Press, **Lori Deitrick** is creating stained and etched designs for a stained glass shop.

"Liquid Jade" is the first short story sale for newcomer **John W. Randal**, so we can officially say *Aboriginal* gave him his start.

And we're not the only ones who see his promise. In July, Randal won first place in the second quarter of the 1989 L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest for his story "Water."

The 25-year-old is writing full time, and says he has completed about 60 short stories, a novel and a book of poems. He says he recently learned how to juggle.

"Liquid Jade" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who researched dumpsters for his art. "A friend of mine warned me to be careful about going into back alleys (in Boston's North End). Drug dealers don't take too kindly to cameras."

Cortney survived the experience and is now working on a magazine cover for a new regional magazine called *MetroNorth* and graphic design for a children's belt company as well as *Aboriginal* illustrations.

He says the WorldCon in Boston was a great place to make connections.



Bonita Kale

While there he sold the pencil sketch of his "Darkness Beyond" painting, which ran with Jamil Nasir's story in the May-June 1988 issue and won the first Boomerang award from our fans as best art work.

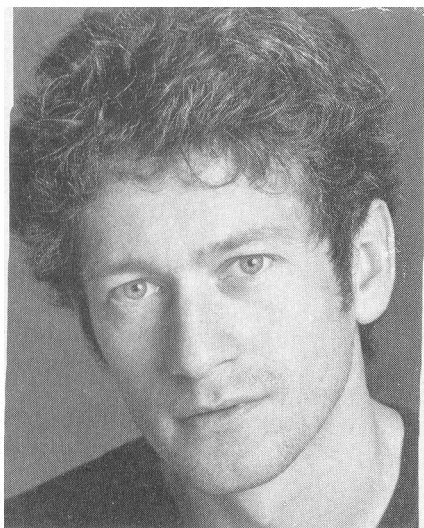
Bonita Kale authored "UFO ALIENS SHARED MY APT., Says Cleveland Woman." Previously she wrote the story "A Speaking Likeness" (May-June 1988) and the poem "From a New World" (March-April 1988) for *Aboriginal*.

Kale's oldest son recently entered college, and she's started working as a part-time substitute at the local public

and school libraries. After writing a *Star Trek* fan novel, she is working on a novel with the working title *Crossworld*, about alternate universes and "a couple of people who find themselves mentally bonded."

"UFO Aliens" is illustrated in delightfully amusing fashion by **Larry Blamire**.

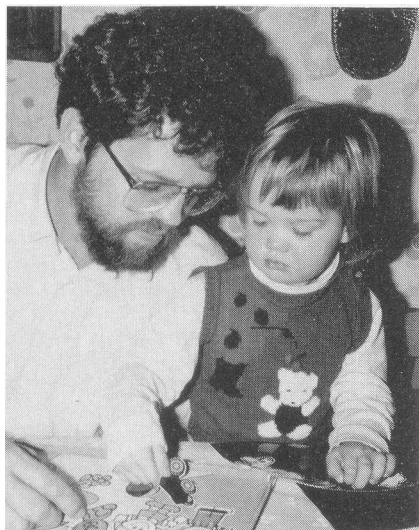
In September, Larry played the principal character in a black comedy called "Better Days" that premiered at the Gloucester Stage Company in



Larry Blamire

Gloucester, Massachusetts. If you keep your eyes open you can see Larry in a new Nytol commercial as "a guy trying to get to sleep." Blamire also reports doing well at WorldCon, having sold a few of his paintings.

We'd like to welcome cartoonist **Daniel Gene Miller** to *Aboriginal*. Miller says he has been a "compulsive doodler right from the cradle." His first cartoon sale appeared in our last issue



Daniel Gene Miller

(Nov.-Dec. 1989).

Miller is an English-as-a-second-language teacher whose hobbies include boomerang throwing. He claims to have written a book titled *How to Hit*

Yourself with a Stick, "a fascinating, lucid manual on throwing boomerangs." We'll have to get him to give lessons to our Boomerang award winners.

Miller also loves to "chat with my three-year-old daughter about the mysteries of the universe."

Six of *Aboriginal's* artists and editor Charles C. Ryan hosted a session at the WorldCon in Boston. It was well attended and everyone had nice things to say about Charlie and the magazine. Larry Blamire, **Charles Lang**, and **Pat Morrissey** said it was nice to have the time they needed to do an illustration. **Wendy Snow-Lang** and Cortney Skinner said the magazine gives artists a chance to break into new fields and build a diverse portfolio that could lead to things like paperback book covers. Bob Eggleton said he liked the fact that the magazine doesn't restrict the format or style, as many publishers do.

Ryan said one of his reasons for featuring full-color art so prominently is to bring more readers to science fiction, particularly today's youths. "You can't *make* them read, you've got to *entice* them to read," he said.

It's apparently working. One teacher in the audience who works with "street kids" said she has gotten them to read more with *Aboriginal*. "They saw it and said, 'Wow, can we read this?'"

Our editor has also been invited as a special guest to the Boskone XXVII, scheduled for Feb. 16-18, 1990, at the Marriott and Sheraton Tara Hotels in Springfield, Mass. Attending memberships are \$26 until Jan. 6, 1990, and \$42 at the door from Boskone XXVII, NESFA, P.O. Box G, MIT Branch, Cambridge, MA 02139-0910. For those who want an opportunity to beat up on the guy... here's your chance.

Hugo winners

Best Novel: *Cyteen* by C.J. Cherryh

Best Novella: "The Last of the Winnebagos" by Connie Willis

Best Novelette: "Schroedinger's Kitten" by George Alec Effinger

Best Short Story: "Kirinyaga" by Mike Resnick

Best Non-Fiction: *The Motion of Light in the Water* by Samuel R. Delany

Best Dramatic Presentation: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*

Best Professional Editor: Gardner Dozois

Best Professional Artist: Michael Whelan

Best Semiprozine: *Locus*

Best Fanzine: *File 770*

Best Fan Writer: Dave Langford

Best Fan Artist: Brad W. Foster and Diana Gallagher Wu

John W. Campbell Award: Michaela Roessner

Special Awards: Alex Schomberg and *SF Lover's Digest*

Jan./Feb. 1990

Big Heart Award: Art Widner, Jr.
First Fandom Awards: L. Sprague de Camp, Don Grant, and Frederik Pohl

Sei-Un (Japanese Hugo) Awards for best work translated into Japanese in 1988: *Footfall* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle; "Eye for Eye" by Orson Scott Card

Gryphon Award presented by Andre Norton for the best unpublished work by a woman: Elizabeth Waters; Lee Barwick (Honor Award)

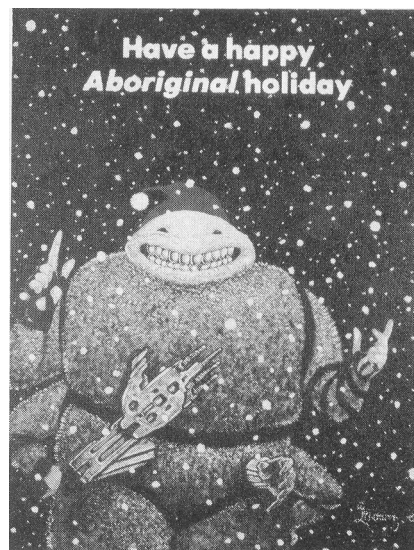
Alien Publisher

(Continued from page 57)

information is always easier than transporting objects.

Who could have predicted that our population would be so resistant to the idea of a destructive analysis of the traveler at the departure end? Our people, pedestrians that they are, cannot seem to conceive of a journey that would be worth death to accomplish.

But there is unlimited demand for the use of a transporter on this planet. Human travel being as important as it is, I am convinced these creatures would believe death to be a minor obstacle to achieving it. Besides, dying could be no worse than an evening in an airport.



Get Your Aboriginal Holiday Postcards

Hurry and get your *Aboriginal Holiday Postcards*. Full-color art by Larry Blamire, W by 6 inches. The postcards are \$0.50 each; or \$4.50 for 10; or \$8.00 for 20, plus postage. Postage is \$0.25 for one; \$1.00 for 10; or 20.

Order them now from: *Aboriginal SF*, Postcards, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn MA 01888-0849.

Arrival Delayed, Departure Delayed



Forty-five people with luggage make a line about 90 feet long, winding joylessly between a set of guide ropes like souls waiting for assignments in Purgatory. This is Sunday night at the airport ticket counter, and in a contest for most unpleasant place on Earth, it would score an honorable mention. A collaboration of formica, aluminum, and industrial-grade carpeting, the setting is an inoffensive backdrop to the distress brought here by the human beings who thought they were on their way to someplace else.

Those who could get them sit in the few bolted-down plastic chairs, attempting to read magazines, entertaining their babies, or chatting quietly. Others stand in pairs or clumps, discussing fantasies of escape or studying the video monitors for arrival and departure news, which is always the same: "DELAYED."

Recent arrivals still hope to leave, and they are the ones who wait in line for the chance to unload luggage on a uniformed mannequin operating a computer terminal behind the counter. Fatigue is beginning to show through their businesslike grooming as the operators study their computers and hopefully promise window and aisle seats to passengers on proposed flights to Greensboro, Columbus, and Pittsburgh.

Necktie askew and shirt bloused slightly at the waist, a clerk heaves an oversized bag from the opening in the counter to the conveyer belt behind, collects himself for a heartbeat over some paperwork, looks up, smiles deliberately, and says, "Next."

The short woman in baggy shorts and a black T-shirt commemorating some rock band's national tour has already lifted her designer suitcase and steps hope-

fully toward the counter. She is replaced by a man dressed for stripping wallpaper who wears a baseball cap and lugs a gym bag.

Least of the people in line stumble one step forward, bumping each other with their backpacks, fumbling with their bags, sliding their cases along with their feet.

Waiting is the thing human beings are least adept at, and you can read fraying nerves and ulcerating stomach linings in their strained expressions and their incessant glances at their wristwatches. Some of them stare murderously at a child, whose unkempt young mother has long since surrendered any pretext of control over it, as it runs in circles outside the guide ropes, making a sound like a car alarm.

Into every human life comes the occasional need, through circumstances of business or "pleasure," to become high-velocity canned meat in order to get to some place he is not. But first he must spend a few hours in an antiseptic atmosphere of subscription-service music and fluorescent lighting. Confused by gate changes, frustrated by delays, and robbed by concessions peddling food, liquor, and souvenirs, he will finally be grateful for the opportunity to climb on an aircraft, where he will sit in a seat designed for a creature lacking elbows and shoulders, eat indigestible food items from a plastic tray, and contemplate his mortality in the face of forces greater than himself.

Man was not meant to hurtle through the atmosphere at 500 miles per hour with his knees crammed up against his chest reading breezy magazine articles on the rebirth of St. Louis. Yet he does it, and he will stand in line and compete with others to do it, con-

vinced that his need to be someplace other than he is outweighs the ordeal he will endure to get there.

The departures of scheduled commercial flights in the United States number in the millions. Statistically, the entire population of the U.S. cycles through Chicago's O'Hare Airport about every six years. Human beings are on the move, traveling hundreds of millions of miles in airplanes every year, their baggage nearly double that, depending on the skill of the airlines in routing it.

A trip is just about the most miserable experience the average middle-class American human being can have. Yet he will undertake it without complaint, amassing frequent flyer miles to redeem for still more misery: more canned air, more crowded terminals, more cramped seating, more nerve-racking take-offs, more indignities.

This is why I think we should consider this planet as a market for all those transporters we have lying around. You will remember how we saw this device on intercepted broadcasts of *Star Trek* 25 years ago. We felt very silly, of course, after creating a working model, to discover it was only a fantasy and that the human beings didn't have the technology after all.

When our engineers realized it was an information-processing device more than anything else and built a working prototype, we thought it would revolutionize travel on our planet. Transporting

(Continued to page 56)

1990: New Decade, New Shows



Taking a Lilliputian look back at science fiction and fantasy films of the '80s, was there anything unique that separated this past decade from any other?

Consistent with any 10 years in film, the '80s gave us a pendulum swing of movies which ranged from *Altered States* (1980), *Dune* (1984), *Return to Oz* (1985), *The Fly* (1986), and *Batman* (1989) to *Flash Gordon* (1980), *Yor, the Hunter From the Future* (1983), and *Spaceballs* (1987), with a mishmash of everything in between. Television heralded *Galactica 80*, *Wizards & Warriors*, *Beauty & the Beast*, *The Greatest American Hero*, *Beyond Westworld*, *First Born*, *Werewolf*, *Amazing Stories*, *Blake's 7*, a continuing *Dr. Who*, and two reincarnations of *The Twilight Zone*. We also had "reunion shows" with *The Return of the Man From UNCLE: The 15 Years Later Affair*, *The Munsters: The Munsters' Revenge*, and two *Bionic Woman/Six Million Dollar Man* TV movies being dusted off for our enjoyment.

In the 1980s we were blitzed by Ted Turner and his paintbox; the 40-million-dollar-plus "blockbuster" (that figure is already becoming obsolete with *The Abyss*, which reportedly cost, including prints and advertising, a staggering 62 million dollars); the special effects movies; the Spielberg/Lucas high adventure serials; the breathtaking imagery of Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits*, *Brazil*, and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*; the brief resurgence in 1983 of 3-D (with *Jaws*, *Amyville*, and *Metalstorm: The Destruction of*

Jared-Syn being three of the victims); and the mass translation of Stephen King from book to screen; and, most significantly, it gave us that blatant movie-making equation of II + III + IV equals \$... THE SEQUEL. Anything that could walk, crawl, or swing an axe was game for a sequel. We've had

back from the comfortable asylum to the drafty Bates Motel.

Now that we're sloughing off the '80s, what can the discriminating viewer expect going into the '90s?

Television

Why break with tradition?



Back to the Future II

final conflicts, final frontiers, and final chapters (and have found out that finality isn't as permanent as we used to think). We've had revenges, returns, and parts; we've even had those sneaky filmmakers trying to convince us it wasn't a sequel, it was a *prequel*. We've even had poor old Norman Bates, dragged kicking and screaming, two decades later,

Stephen King's *It* is being made into a six-hour miniseries, written by Laurence D. Cohen, who also wrote King's *Carrie*, and directed by the notorious George Romero. (Romero will also put on his producing cap in the future remake of his *Night of the Living Dead*.)

On the horizon is the tentatively-titled *Dean Koontz Suspense Theater* from Warner

Bros, and CBS. The series of book-to-screen specials will include **Darkfall**, written by Koontz, who is also the exec, producer for the series.

With the unqualified success on stage of Gaston Leroux's **Phantom of the Opera**, it seems only natural that TV and film carve up the rest of the pie for themselves. The TV version of **Phantom** will be broadcast as a four-hour miniseries on NBC starring Burt Lancaster and Charles Dance.

Swapping one bad skin condition for another is Robert "Freddy" Englund, who takes on the film version of **Phantom**, being shot in Hungary.

Freddy fever has dwindled a little in the Canadian provinces. CHCH-TV, Ontario, canceled **Freddy's Nightmares** after receiving viewer complaints that the series existed only to "glorify blood, torture, and sexual abuse." Now why would that upset them? Ain't that th'murrican way?

For those of you who enjoy **The Incredible Hulk** team-ups on TV, David Banner's next partner will be his green-skinned cousin **She-Hulk**. **Daredevil** and a new, syndicated **Wonder Woman** from Warner Bros. TV will be getting shows of their own.

Hovering in limbo at the moment is **Beat the Devil**. Plot-wise, nothing new here, it's just another reworking of **The Invaders** theme. Lone hero (this time a sheriff) battles your typical "let's take over the earth" menace (this time it's Satan, posing as a wealthy industrialist).

Also bubbling to the surface in the television quagmire are a new MGM **Poltergeist** series; syndicated versions of **The Lone Ranger** and **Zorro**, planned either for fall '89 or spring '90; and a new series of **He-Man**, starting with five episodes for '89 and returning for a full season in fall '90.

The big event in 1990 will be the introduction of the Sci-Fi Channel on cable. Mitchell Rubenstein and Laurie Silvers, owners of WKCF in Florida (with an advisory board composed of Isaac Asimov, Gene Roddenberry, and editor Martin H. Greenberg), will launch a 24-hour-a-day service consisting of 50 percent original broadcasting and 50 percent science fiction movies



Disney's back with **The Little Mermaid**

and television. So far, original programming ideas will feature an interview show with sf personalities, an original weekly series which Rubenstein describes as "a science fiction **Masterpiece Theatre**," a video game review show, a game show based on a video game, a music show with sf themes, and a family-oriented fact show. The Sci-Fi Channel is scheduled to start broadcasting in December.

Movies

Making a Thanksgiving splash is Disney's **The Little Mermaid** (based on the story by Hans Christian Andersen), which features seven songs by the **Little Shop of Horrors** team of Howard Ashman and Alan Mencken. However, Disney's **tour de force** will be the summer ('90) release of Chester Gould's **Dick Tracy** starring Warren Beatty (who's also producing and directing), Glenna Headly as Tess Trueheart, and Madonna as Breathless Mahoney, with a cameo by Dustin Hoffman. Madonna also sings three of the songs, written by Stephen Sondheim. November ('90) offers another animated **Rescuers** feature called **The Rescuers Down Under**. And, rounding out the Disney year, you can look forward to more **Roger Rabbit** cartoons.

Other new releases and upcoming movies with, of course, an emphasis on the sequel include:

Halloween 5: The Revenge of
Jan./Feb. 1990

Michael Myers, with Donald Pleasance making his fourth appearance as the frustrated asylum doctor.

Keeping neck and neck with his buddy Michael is Robert Englund as Freddy in **Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child**.

Bringing demonic possession up-to-date is **The Exorcist: 1990**, with George C. Scott, Ed Flanders, and Brad Dourif. William Peter Blatty, who wrote the original best-seller and won an Oscar for his original **Exorcist** screenplay, will write and direct this third incarnation.

Three movies are due from the Amblin stables of Steven Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, and Frank Marshall. **Gremlins II** will reunite Phoebe Cates, Zach Galligan, and Joe Dante (director). Aiding in the soggy mogwai battle are Hammer Horror veteran Christopher Lee and actor John Glover. The big release for Thanksgiving is **Back to the Future II**. If after watching **II** you still hanker for more, then welcome news is the current production of the third installment of **Future**, using the same creative team of Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson, Robert Zemeckis (director), and Bob Gale (writer). The third in the Amblin trio is **Joe vs. the Volcano**, written by John Patrick Shanley of **Moonstruck** fame, with Tom Hanks, Meg Ryan, and Robert Stack.

Connoisseurs of the "wet"
PAGE 59

flesh" idiom are in for a treat with *Scanners II: The New Order*, written by B.J. Nelson, and *The Pit & the Pendulum*, starring Peter O'Toole and Billy Dee Williams, with *Re-Animator* pals Stuart Gordon and Dennis Paoli writing and directing. It also seems that *Re-Animator* may be in the market for some spousal support in the future *The Bride of the Re-Animator*. (If you're not sure what the term "wet flesh" means, then pick up a copy of *Re-Animator*, loosely based on six H.P. Lovecraft stories, and find out. If you don't eat beforehand, it's a fun movie.)

Other sequel news: the directing chore for *The NeverEnding Story: II*, which started filming in June, this time goes to Australian *Mad Max* director George Miller.

George Hamilton reappears as the bumbling vampire in *Love at Second Bite: Dracula Goes to Hollywood*.

Robocop II, written by Frank (Batman: *The Dark Knight Returns*) Miller, started shooting in Houston in October. Miller is one of the few writers in Hollywood to have weathered a change in the palace guard when director Tim (*River's Edge*) Hunter left the project, to be replaced by Irvin (*The Empire Strikes Back*) Kershner. Miller and Kershner are said to be very high on each other and the film is progressing quickly.

Aliens III and *IV* are being shot back-to-back, with Sigourney Weaver appearing briefly in *III* but starring in *IV*. After the smash hit of *Batman*, it seems commercially prudent that *Batman II* will quickly start production (making use of the still standing sets). Speculation on the villain includes The Riddler, Catwoman, and The Penguin (scuttlebutt around town suggests Cher and Danny DeVito as candidates for the latter two roles).

Despite the uncritical approval of hardcore Trekkies (no offense, but they don't really seem to make distinctions in quality of the assorted *ST* offerings), it is now common knowledge throughout the film industry that *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* was more than a bit of a financial disaster. The figure bruited about is 40 million dollars "lost." (I use quotations around the word "lost" because Para-



Getting a little in *Shocker*

mount, as distributor, takes its money off the top, so the left hand is, in essence, washing the right. From one pocket to another. If there is any actual money lost, it will no doubt be to those individuals who had "points" in the profits.) But even putting aside the bookkeeping contortions, it is clear that this latest supposed-blockbuster died at the box office. As a result of the fast and deep dive number 5 took, producer Harve Bennett has balked at Shatner's and Nimoy's demands of \$6 million each to appear in *ST6*. Bennett, who has resented the ever-growing salary demands of the two leading *Enterprise* crewmembers, has threatened several times in the past to "do a film with new actors, showing the young Kirk and Spock during their days at the Academy." Until now, it's been a bargaining-chip threat, a rather dull-edged Damoclean Sword hanging over Shatner and Nimoy (and, to a lesser degree, the other *Enterprise* regulars). But this time, according to those who've actually seen it, Bennett has written the Kirk-and-Spock-at-the-Academy screenplay, and is looking around for young players for the lead roles. Those who've read the screenplay by Bennett say it reads like an unfunny reprise of a *Police Academy* potboiler. In one

scene, it is reported, Kirk meets an alien with many tentacular arms and says, "Gimme a hundred!"

Non-numerical films: Clive Barker is directing *Nightbreed*, the first film in a Cabal trilogy. John Landis is set to direct *The Lone Ranger* movie for Universal. The masked man is due in cinemas around Christmas '90. *Nightmare* director Wes Craven is directing, writing, and exec. producing the aptly-named *Shocker*. And, although there is no release date yet, Brooke Shields will play *Brenda Starr*, ace reporter, with Timothy Dalton as Basil St. John.

Twilight Zone graduate Rockne O'Bannon will get his initiation as a writer-director for his second feature, *Fear* (Vestron Pictures), starring Ally Sheedy. Sheedy plays a psychic who has to pit her abilities against a psychic serial killer. The score is by Henry Mancini. *Fear* is due to be released January or February.

After the success of *Scandal*, Miramax returned to science fiction with its new film, *Hardware*, which started filming in September.

Other coming attractions include two Edgar Allan Poe stories, *The Masque of the Red Death* and *Buried Alive*, starring Donald Pleasance and Robert Vaughn; Arnold Schwarzenegger and

Sharon Stone in *Total Recall*; Whitely Strieber's *Communion* with Christopher Walken; *Shadow Zone* with Louise Fletcher; *Mermaids*, directed by Frank "The Muppets" Oz; and *Dark Side* (aka *Vamp Busters — After Midnight*) with Nick Cassavetes. And proving there's life after *Falcon Crest* is Lorenzo Lamas in *Snakeeater's Revenge*.

While *The Hulk* invades our small screen, Marvel has several other comic heroes lined up for theatrical release. Filming has started in Europe on *Captain America*, who faces his long-time enemy the Red Skull. Other adaptations being tossed around in the Marvel office are movies with *Iron Man*, *Sub-Mariner*, *Wolverine*, and *Ant-Man*. Guber-Peters is developing *The Flash* and *Plastic Man* (possibly with Pee Wee Herman in the title role), while Universal opts for a live-action *Green Hornet*. Other comic book translations in the works or being considered are *The Phantom*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *The Shadow*, and a live-action *Flintstones*!

At the moment, *Watchmen*, based on Alan Moore's comic book, is without a home. Nervous about the proposed cost, Fox studios put the project into "turnaround." A screenplay has already been written by Sam (Batman) Hamm and was slated to be directed by Terry Gilliam.

Look out for Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound*, with a script by Aldiss (based on his novel) and F.X. Feeney, to be directed by Roger Corman. Set in Switzerland 1816, Raul Julia will play Victor Frankenstein, while Peter Weller is the time traveler, Joe Bodenland. (One piece of Roger Corman news: Harlan Ellison's *Cutter's World* will not be filmed. After Ellison spent a year on the script, NBC executives decided they didn't want to do a science fiction film and canceled the project.)

As an addendum to your film viewing habits, there are a number of recent books out with a behind-the-scenes look at film and film criticism. They include *The Wizard of Oz: The Official 50th Anniversary Pictorial History* (Warner Books) by John Fricke, Jay Scarfone, and William Stillman; *The Wizard of Oz: The Screenplay by*



Christopher Walken
in *Communion*

Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf; *The Making of The Wizard of Oz* by Aljean Harmetz, with an introduction by Margaret Hamilton (both by Delta Books); *Revenge of the Killer B's: How I Made a Thousand Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* by Roger Corman with Jim Jerome (this will teach you all you need to know about making a movie for a buck fifty); and, if you enjoy salient film criticism, you can find it in over 500 pages of Harlan Ellison's *Watching from Underwood-Miller*.

For the video collector, Fries Home Video has released a three-volume boxed set of Ray Brad-

bury's *The Martian Chronicles*. Be warned, it's not the most elegant packaging, but if you missed collecting *The Chronicles* it's well worth adding to your library.

And finally, my New Year's resolution for 1990 is not to mention that those new cult faves *Food of the Gods II*, *Deathstalker III*, and *Gator Bait II*, are at a local cinema near you.

A PERSONAL NOTE: One or two of you may have noticed that I share my surname with a rather well-known writer. Yes, that's right, I'm married to Roger Zelazny. It has chanced, from time to time, because I live with the man whose surname I share, that I have noted his activities. It turns out my husband feels that I should not — as he so sweetly phrases it, clenching his teeth around the words — "put his business in the street." He also contends that too much mention of him will make my credentials suspect. And yet, last column alone, I received three letters asking me to include more of my weird husband's peregrinations. What to do? I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know about this ... because it could cost me my marriage! □



Let me show you. You can't pull it off, you have to twist it off, like this.

UFO ALIENS SHARED MY APT, Says Cleveland Woman

By Bonita Kale

Art by Larry Blamire

A star as bright as one on a Christmas card swung low over Lake Erie, shining a second time in the rippling water. Rebecca Crosier, alone on the beach this July night, made a wish. Never hurt to try, and this star looked strong — maybe even strong enough to magic away fifty unwanted pounds.

But the brightness came lower, and Becca abandoned wishes. *Not* a star. Her breath stopped for a moment, then sped up. This was what had happened to the people she read about in the supermarket papers. Could it be her turn now? Her mind flashed a headline: NURSE'S AIDE KIDNAPED BY ALIENS. They Only Want To Help, She Claims.

But it wasn't like the stories in the *Star* or the *Globe*. The aliens didn't take her; she took them.

Well, what could you do with five short people who waded out of Lake Erie and echoed every word you said? You couldn't just walk away and leave them standing in two feet of water. Becca couldn't, anyway. With secret misgivings about food and toilets, and wishing she'd vacuumed, Becca shepherded them the few blocks to her third-floor apartment.

There they seemed content, five people who individually would pass unnoticed in any McDonald's. They were impossible to categorize — old, young, black, white, male, female? Even their clothes were mere coverings in greens and browns.

Three days later, trudging upstairs with extra groceries, she could hear the aliens talking. They were learning English with remarkable rapidity. Becca was impressed. Of course, they had her TV, and that net thing they'd showed her — silver threads and tiny colored beads, as if a crazy crocheter had sneaked into the hospital pharmacy. Some kind of computer or recorder or something, as best she could make out.

She listened as she cooked macaroni and cheese (not exactly low-cal, but cheap). Some words were still foreign.

"In English, in English!" one would cry.

"I do not have the English!" Then all five would throw out English words — "Spinner!" "No — juggler!" "Balancer?" "Acrobat!" "I have it — dancer!"

"Well, you just dance your way to the table and have some supper, okay, boys?" They had to be male; this was her third night of doing the cooking.

Not that she minded, exactly. Having them in her

apartment was as exciting as secrets at Christmastime. No, better. Better than most anything she could think of. Except losing weight, of course, she added hastily, in case Someone was listening.

And every night when Becca turned off the TV, the aliens danced. Lightly, surely, rhythmically, they performed a routine partly like ballet and partly like gymnastics, and partly like a solemn series of warm-up exercises.

By their fifth day, the aliens spoke English as well as Becca. They could read, too; she'd pointed out magazines and books on the coffee table. When there was nothing good on TV, and there often wasn't since the UHF tuner broke, Becca liked to read.

"Gives you something to dream about," she told them. "I mean, my life —" She shrugged. "But *her* —" The slender woman on the book's cover accepted serenely the worship of the man whose hands were buried in her golden hair. "She's got it all. And while I'm reading, so do I."

"What has she got all?" one of the aliens asked.

Becca gestured uncertainly, and laughed a little. "She's beautiful, for one thing. I mean, *look* at her."

"Becca, you would like to look like this?"

"Me? I'd be happy just to lose fifty pounds and keep 'em off."

The alien she was speaking to gestured, and another of them rose from Becca's worn sofa. "Stand still, Becca."

Nervously compliant, she hardly breathed as he pulled from somewhere a shining thread and proceeded to wrap it around her. Slowly he worked, until an intricate threaded network encompassed her loosely from head to foot. Then he produced a whole pharmacopoeia of vari-colored beads and began to set them carefully at the intersections of the thread. Sometimes he moved one several times before he was satisfied. Becca began to itch. The alien moved a tiny green sphere from over her spine to over her heart, and looked at it. "You're supposed to say Hmm," she told him.

"Hmm?"

"You're a doctor, aren't you?" But she knew he was; he reminded her forcefully of several doctors at work.

The alien doctor seemed to make up his mind. Rapidly, he plucked the nodes off and replaced them with a new set, all in red. One of the others said something to him, in a reminding tone.



By Lamire 89

"Yes," he agreed. "Becca," he said, looking directly at her. "Do you wish to carry fifty pounds less fat?"

"What? Yeah!"

"May I adjust your body's usage rate to achieve this?"

Becca was breathing fast. "Yes. Yes!"

The doctor placed one final red bead. "Hmm," he said, and Becca giggled. He waited a moment and began to remove the beads, but Becca didn't feel any different.

"It didn't work?"

"It worked perfectly. But not instantly, you understand. Over the course of the next ..." He seemed to stop and figure — "... the next half of a year, you will see yourself with less fat. I hope you are not expecting a famine?"

"Don't think so."

The doctor removed the last bead and broke the network of threads so Becca could step out.

"Fat is of great concern among you," said one of the others, picking up a tabloid Becca had brought home. "These publications — and the TV —"

Becca blinked and sank into the old sprung armchair. "Well, sure; everyone wants to be thin."

"Perhaps we can help."

Becca eyes widened. "You came to Earth to set up a weight-loss clinic?"

"Not precisely. But it would be a first step."

ALIENS MADE ME THIN: Lose Weight Fast with The UFO Diet!

"I think it is time for us to meet others. They will

come to lose fat, and leave with our message."

"Your message?"

The aliens were suddenly seated in a circle round her.

"What message?" she asked. ALIENS SAY, STOP WAR NOW. EAT NO MEAT, Declare Men From Outer Space. INVITATION TO JOIN INTERPLANETARY FEDERATION. WHALES THE TRUE RULERS OF EARTH, Say Spacemen.

"There is — great ignorance here."

"I guess," Becca said doubtfully.

"We have come to put an end to ignorance."

"You're going to tell us how to cure cancer? Stop war? Something like that?"

"Better — we have come to spread the news of the Dancer who dances the Universe, whose dance is perfect truth."

The way he talked was suddenly familiar — it had been a long time since she'd gone to church, but — "You mean, *God*?" she shrieked.

"God?"

"The one who made the world — the Universe, too, I guess."

"Made? Built? No — yes, perhaps — but we saw no sign that Earth —"

Becca fell back in her chair. "How disgusting. It's not enough my mother keeps trying to get me to church — now I get spacemen after me! Where's the collection plate, boys?"

"Collection —"

"Money! Is that what you want?"

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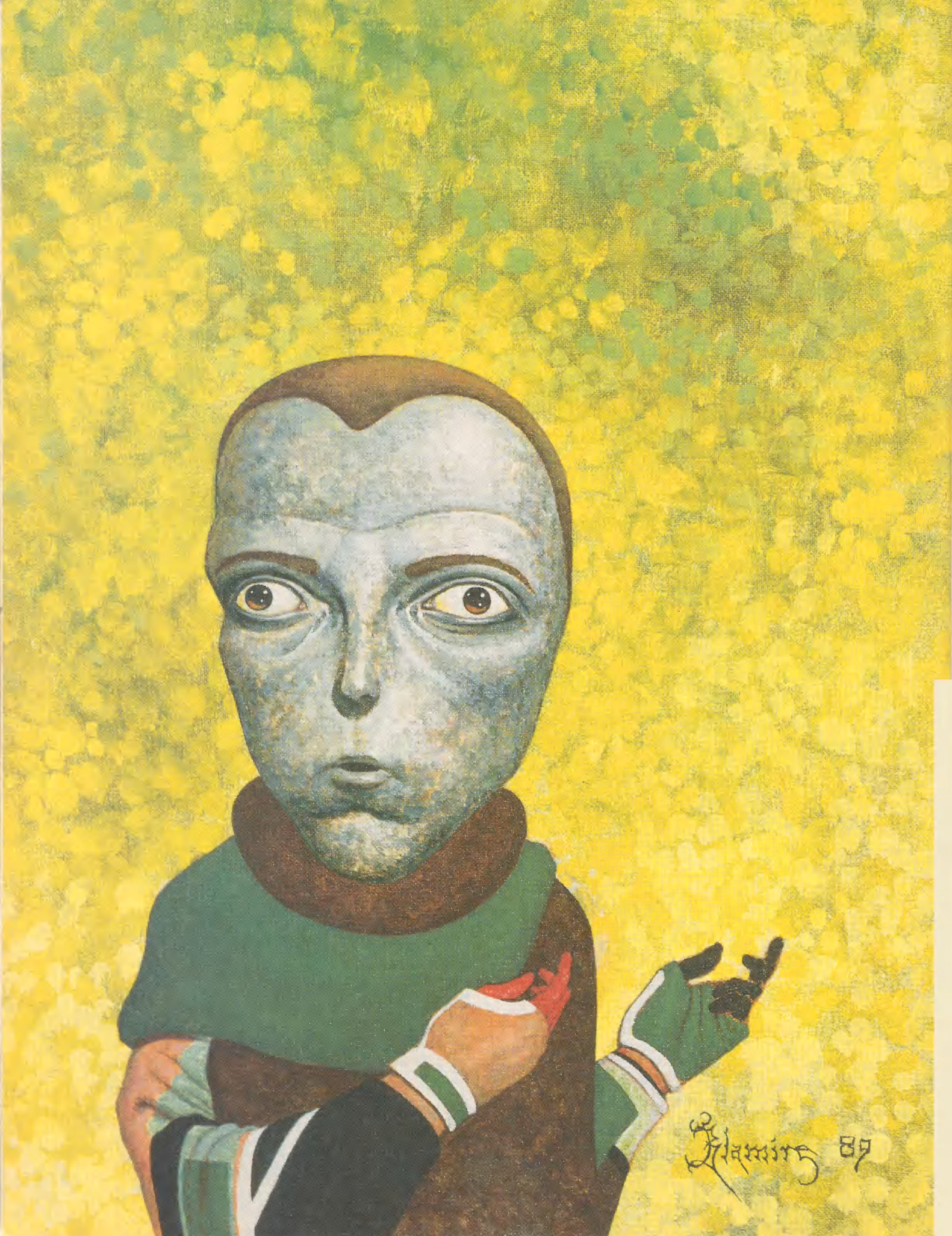
Aboriginal Science Fiction has been nominated for a Hugo Award for two years in a row. The final decision this year will be made by the fans who are attending or supporting Noreascon Three, the World Science Fiction convention held Labor Day weekend in Boston.

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- "Regeneration" by Rory Harper



L. Harniss 87

"No —"

"No, of course not; our money wouldn't be any good to you, would it? Gold, uranium? Water? You're going to drain the Great Lakes and take the water home with you?"

"We have plenty of water. Please, Becca, control yourself! We have come only to share our knowledge with Earth."

"Sure. Right. Then why the Holy Holy diet clinic?"

"Becca, you told us yourself that people wish to be thin. If they come to be treated, they will hear the news of the Dancer."

They looked confused, and Becca was suddenly repentant. They were so far from home. "Hey, I'm sorry." It wasn't enough. She sighed and braced herself. "You can tell me about your Dancer, if you want."

Actually, it sounded like kind of a cute idea. The Dancer danced, and the dance was all that was. Stars and planets and rocks and trees were danced by the Dancer and danced with him. If the mad whirl should ever stop, the Universe would end. Words flowed through Becca's head like music; indeed, she thought the aliens broke into chanting at one point.

"But clumsy beings broke the step, fumbled the movements, and that is why we find pain and hate and fear in every land. And around every star."

Another alien spoke from his seat on the shabby carpet. "But someday, the Dancer will send one to rescue us, one who steps without flaw, who leads us lightly over pain and death. That is the event we await, the pivotal moment in the dance of the Universe. It may be tomorrow, it may be in many of your years. But —"

Becca blinked herself awake. "I think — I *think* — we already had that."

"Had what?"

"All of it." She struggled to remember. "God made the world, but people loused it up. So God sent his son — only it was really *him* in disguise, kind of. And he got killed."

The aliens were utterly silent and motionless.

"But then he came alive again. And he saved the world — from sin, I guess. Only we still have an awful lot of it. Oh, I don't know! You ought to talk to my mom; she'd tell you! Or — wait —" Becca pushed herself out of the chair and stepped through the circle of stunned aliens to her bedroom. Somewhere on the closet shelf — there it was, behind the phone books.

"Here! Mom gave me this. She won't *believe* that I showed it to spacemen!"

The aliens, crowding round the paperback Bible, seemed to forget Becca's existence.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, then. Past bedtime." They didn't answer.

Becca was wakened at one-thirty by the sound of alien voices, fast and loud, making no attempt to speak English. Sounded like Mom and Aunt Iris fighting over infant baptism. Becca pulled her pillow over her head and fell back into sleep.

At three, she woke to find silent, dark figures surrounding her bed. "Wha ...?" she asked groggily, reaching over an alien shoulder to the light switch on

the wall.

"Becca, we must leave you."

"Leave? In the middle of the night?" She shook her head and the glare of the overhead light broke into multicolored fragments. A dozen questions rose in her brain, but only one was vital. Squinting, she located the doctor and clutched his arm. She had to know — "Doctor, will I still lose the weight?"

"Weight?" For a moment she thought he'd forgotten. "Yes, certainly. About fifty pounds."

Another interrupted. "Becca, since it seems the event we await may already have taken place —"

"Merely a localized superstition," said one of the others.

"And even if true, irrelevant to our mission," said a third.

"Are you sure?" asked Becca, over rising voices.

"How can we be sure of anything anymore? We cannot even agree —"

"Not that — about my weight?"

"About that, I *am* sure. One small point of certainty."

"And you really *have* to go?"

"Becca, who will listen to our message, when we cannot even agree among ourselves?"

Belatedly, Becca remembered her manners. "Can I walk you somewhere — down to the lake?"

Outside, the night sky was hazy, and red with the lights of the city. Becca could see no stars. There was no wind; Lake Erie was very still.

As they waited on the beach, the aliens continued to argue in low voices. Two or three parties seemed to be forming. At least they'd have something to talk about on their trip.

They had souvenirs, too — a plastic bag containing Becca's trash from the past five days, and every magazine, newspaper, and book in the apartment. Even the latest *National Enquirer*, the one she hadn't read yet.

A shape rose slowly from the lake. "Well, I guess this is good-bye," began Becca, but the first alien was already wading into the water.

Becca picked out the doctor and gripped his hands firmly. "I just want to tell you — I can't say how much —." She stopped and tried again. "Thank you. Thank you a *lot*." She sniffed. TEARFUL FAREWELL TO UFO. She let go and watched the doctor wade away from her.

The ship moved out till she could no longer see it. Then with a slurp it rose, brightening, into the sky, which was beginning to lighten to the east. Becca waved frantically.

She stood a long time after they were gone; but when a rowboat holding two fishermen drifted silently by, she turned and started home. The apartment was going to seem awfully empty. On the other hand, there wouldn't be so many dishes to wash.

She wondered if the aliens would still be on speaking terms when they reached home — wherever that was.

As she neared her apartment, she walked faster, until she was almost running. Her impatience drove her — she knew it was too soon, but still — she couldn't wait to step on the bathroom scale! □

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The *Aboriginal Art Gallery* is your chance to obtain a glossy print of one or more illustrations used for our early cover art before the magazine was printed on glossy paper. The prints are as crisp and as sharp as the original artwork and have a clarity we could not reproduce in issues 1 to 7 on a cold web.

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