Damien Broderick

Philip K. Dick and Transrealism: Living What You Write

Transrealism means writing about your immediate perceptions in a fantastic way. The characters in a transreal book should be based on actual people [and hence] richer and more interesting. My transreal novels aren’t exactly autobiographical: I have never really left my body, climbed an infinite mountain, met a sphere from the fourth dimension, infected television with an intelligent virus, etc. But they are autobiographical in that many of the characters are modeled on family and friends—the main person of course being modeled on me. The science fictional ideas in my transreal fiction have a special role. They stand in for essential psychic events.

—Rudy Rucker

The Brain-Burned Oeuvre Issue

Damien Broderick keeps it real K. W. Jeter gets paid—and payback David Mathew on Haruki Murakami’s Mechanical Bird Brian Stableford on Kress’s Stinger: They bite! Philip E. Smith on Wil McCarthy’s Bloom: Deep Popcorn Russell Blackford takes on the Warlock, in spite of himself Plus “Slave your zee-specs to mine, please”; John Crowley tells us why (not); and NYRSF gets whacked by the saturnine Gnostic-Kombinat conspiracy

Ariel Haméon

Has Success Spoiled K. W. Jeter?

“Money is just information, a concept, infinitely replicable without generation loss. That’s the way it is in this new world.”

“Don’t be a connecting idiot,” said McNihill. “Wake up and smell the burning corpses of your dreams, pal.”

(Noir, 138)

Yeah, money changes everything—and at this point in time, it is impossible to discuss the work of K. W. Jeter without taking raw economics into account.

Review the history: Jeter came from Fullerton, a brain-dead little ‘burb in Orange County, California where he hung with other writers like Phil Dick, Tim Powers, and Jim Blaylock. Dr. Adder, written in the '70s, but not published until 1984, is usually regarded as the novel that put Jeter on the map—near where OC meets LA in the Interface, that cheap part of the town where the junkies and whores meet (a.k.a. the Interzone, Skid Row, or any mythical mean street). Ostensibly too raw to be published by the sf establishment (remember the establishment?), the work was defended in Philip K. Dick's afterward: “It’s not dirty. Mrs. Grundy is wrong.” And what have you got against amputee whores?

But Jeter had published three novels before Dr. Adder made it into print: Seeklight (1975) and The Dreamfields (1976) were both done by Laser Books, and Morlock Night (1979) came out through DAW. Jeter reportedly wrote these not because he was the drug-addled rebel-artiste you'd expect from Adder, but because he wanted to get paid. In fact, Morlock Night was part of a series of books about King Arthur in other times, other places—now there's an original idea. Note also that the setting—Morlocks and Arthur in Victorian London—gave the work a 20/20 hindsight claim to being “the first steampunk novel.” (Jeter's later Infernal Devices [1987] also falls into that variety of hyphen-punk.) Given Dr. Adder's rep as a seminal work of proto-cyberpunk, it was tempting to think of Jeter as prescient.

(Continued on page 10)
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Coming in June in Hardcover
The New York Review of Science Fiction

ISSUE #129 May 1999
Volume 11, No. 9 ISSN #1052-9438

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Kathryn Cramer, Art and Web Site Editor; Ariel Haméon, Managing Editor; David G. Hartwell, Reviews and Features Editor; Kevin J. Maroney, Managing Editor.

Special thanks to Avram Grumer, Fred Herman, and Christine Quiñones.
Amy Goldschlager, Readings Curator. Samuel R. Delany, Contributing Editor.

Published monthly by Dragon Press, P.O. Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570.
$3.50 per copy. Annual subscriptions: in U.S., $32.00; $37.00 Canada; $40.00 First Class; overseas, $45.00 (via Air Printed Matter). For overseas air mail, please inquire. Domestic institutional subscriptions $36.00. Please make checks payable to Dragon Press, and payable in U.S. funds.

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Has Success Spoiled K. W. Jeter?

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He produced three sf novels during the '80s: *The Glass Hammer* (1985), *Death Arms* (1987), and *Farewell Horizontal* (1989). All dealt in some way with the media and corporate control of reality, and all were twisted, satiric, and offered little hope for salvation. *The Glass Hammer*, known for its homage to the ultimate car chase flick *Vanishing Point*, is a sort of meta-vedio of Speed Death Productions' biopic on the father of God, who drives a race car across the desert dodging satellite weapons for the amnestation of workers in Third World factories. *Death Arms*, a fast rewrite of a novel put aside earlier, revisits *Adder's* young-man-and-the-Interzone plot, and it targets a typical Orange County villain, a military contractor. *Farewell Horizontal* concerns the life and tough times of a freelance artist, always plugging his finger into the socket to check his bank account. Though its hero fancies himself outside of society, he is still at the mercy of the charge-by-the-minute net conglomerate Ask & Receive. *Farewell* has a great setting too: Jeter takes the standard sf arcology and literally pushes it out the window. Bikers climb the walls and sell stock options on their gang's future earnings. (See James Cappio's "A Long Guide to K. W. Jeter" in *NYRSF* 4, for lots more plot summary.)

The last sf novel of this lot was *Madlands* (1991), described by Cappio as "an elaborate jape, bordering on self-parody, that cannot really be understood without reference to the rest of Jeter's science fiction." Yet at the same time he was pumping out these sf novels, Jeter also produced a string of horror novels that were so good that they led people to suspect he would abandon sf altogether: *Soul Eater* (1983), *Dark Seeker* (1987), *Mantis* (1987), and *The Night Man* (1989). *Soul Eater* was about the insane ex-wife to end all exes. *Dark Seeker* focused on Mike Tyler, former member of a Manson-like cult, and his medicated struggle to cope with lower middle class life. Tyler tells himself, "You're a tame rat now!" until the cult resurfaces. *Mantis* is an inspired bit of misogyny. "Men are social animals," says the hero, "and women want to be alone."

Most of the fourteen novels leading up to *Wolf Flow* defined a Jeter universe that was all about the wrong side of the tracks. Whether set in a dysfunctional future or a murderous twentieth century, they displayed a thoroughly bad attitude: Jeter's name on the cover guaranteed a certain kind of rough trade, nasty chemicals and bent perceptions, and a bit of the old ultraviolence, all chugging away merrily to a pulp backbeat. But what made the books especially interesting were all of Jeter's point psychological insights into the bad things people do, mostly to each other. With Jeter, you got the impression that the bad attitude was personal, and not just because he seemed to be the kind of guy who could have a lot of fun with a teratology textbook.

Above and beyond the personal, there was Jeter's politics—a total paranoia about religious or societal authority that usually wound up mapped onto some set of corporate bastards out to invade your subconscious. And just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they really aren't out to get you—I think this mindset is a natural result of coming from Orange County. (I have this theory why a lot of sf writers come from OC—American *burbubs* are that weird. I remember being in a Fullerton high school and seeing all these green-haired people turn into robots. I could hear the sit-com dialogue clicking away in their heads, with the laugh track. It was like *Martian Time-Slip*. I wish I'd been on something at the time, but I wasn't.) It gave his work a built-in appeal to a certain demographic of "burbland exiles. After all, there were fakers in the bad attitude game, who thought it was all a matter of style—or, *Gun with Occasional Music*—and then there were those who were truly out to escape their origins at any cost. Of course, there is no escape, and like a lot of us, Jeter didn't die before he got old. Nor did his attitude improve. His themes went from adolescent fascination with amputee comics to the aforementioned insane ex-wives, from ridiculing sf's optimist tropes to merely describing the horror of everyday life.

In his attempt to cash in on the booming late-'80s horror market, Jeter seemed to be searching for something that would hit, something that would burn like thunder and account for "brain-burned intensity" and "first steampunk novel." Clearly, after more than a decade on the bleeding edge, Jeter was making some changes. By 1992, Cappio could comment that *Wolf Flow* was "a smoothly machined tale of contemporary horror, so much so that the idiosyncratic features that lend Jeter's earlier horror novels such great interest have been sanded off," and several pages later: "it could have been written by half a dozen other horror writers."

I have no doubt that the drumming down of prose that could be as sharp and wonky as PKD's often actually was—or as sparse, evocative, and transparent as any classic hard-boiled writer—was a deliberate move on Jeter's part. *Dark Seeker* even contains a vicious parody of a true crime hack writer's best-seller prose; Jeter knew what was moving off the shelves. And the demographic for brain-burned intensity was just too small.

After 1992, this steady stream of original work stopped completely and Jeter published only media tie-ins: *Alien Nation #2: Dark Horizon* (1993), *Star Trek Deep Space Nine: The Siege* (1993, co-written with Peter David), *Alien Nation #8: Cross of Blood* (1995), *Star Trek Deep Space Nine: Warped* (1995), and *Star Trek Deep Space Nine: Bloodletting* (1996). *Bloodletting* is the only one of these I have read and the only thing shocking about it was the complete lack of the familiar Jeter voice—anyone could have written it.

Not so the tie-ins that Jeter seemed born to write: *Blade Runner: The Edge of Human* (1996) and *Blade Runner: Replicant Night* (1997). Given Jeter's long association with PKD—which seems to have been more of a contentious conversation than the discipleship a lot of the hype for the *Blade Runner* franchise would lead one to believe—I had hopes. I nabbed a copy of *The Edge of Human* one week weekend, and managed to read a good chunk of it while the *NYRSF* staff was sleeping. It was fast, too fast; sometimes I felt like I was reading a first draft. When I woke up, I asked David Hartwell, "How much did he get for this?"

"I hear it was a six-figure contract."

"Oh," I said.

There was really no point in asking why writers do media tie-ins. And since I don't want to pass judgment on what anyone's gotta do to make a living, I'll leave the ritual book burning to someone else. Suffice it to say that not all media tie-ins are all that bad. Once I got over its fast and loose breaks, and its regular regurgitation of the primary text, I had a lot of fun with *The Edge of Human*. First and foremost, Jeter was back: it had the *tude, the pointy bits, the evil corps, and all that self-conscious noir grunge that's been lurking 'neath Jeter's prose all these years.

But its follow-up, *Replicant Night*, was depressing and infinitely recursive. It took the tie-in trick of commenting on, and ultimately messing with, the "original text" to the nth degree. In it, Speed Death Productions—heh—hires Deckard as a consultant on a film version of, well, *Blade Runner*. Jeter deliberately chocked out any life that was left in the franchise and left me wondering at the perversity of the whole exercise. And Deckard's got this insane wife.

I hoped that this was not the future, that this growing stream of product is not the end of a writer who could be fucking with our heads in much more interesting ways. In an online interview <http://www.e-horizon.com/eventhorizon/chats/transcripts/110598.html>, Jeter spoke of how he hoped his tie-in work would spark "the crossover effect": "I talked about this with Kevin Anderson. He told me that sales for his non-*Star Wars* books went way up after his *Star Wars* books came out." I want this strategy to work for Jeter, of course, but I couldn't help thinking, *Yeah, if you can find 'em, pal.* Because if you look for Jeter in the major chains, you'll find the *Blade Runner* stuff, and *Star Wars: The Mandalorian Armor: Book I of the Bounty Hunter Wars* and *Slave Ship*, Book II, but only one original work by Jeter.

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And that’s only there because it’s new. It’s called Noir, just like half the movies I seem to see around today. And it’s kind of like Celine’s Death on the Installment Plan, but with zombie critters.

Sooner or later, everybody in this Los Angeles comes to Identi trope. We all have to deal with him, one way or another. I figured I got a better deal than most of these poor bastards. I still got to call most of my soul my own.

(Madlands, 16)

I fear for the Jeter tie-in fan who picks up Noir, because our man is slipping crank to some poor kid expecting Valium. Kevin J. Anderson he ain’t.

Those who know Jeter’s earlier work, though, will be on familiar territory. There’s tons of attitude, cynicism about a culture that deserves no better, and lots of spilled blood. Jeter’s been at these anatomy texts again. And it looks like he’s finally found something to do with all those ideas that could never make it past Paramount or Lucasfilm.

It’s interesting to note how baroque Jeter’s prose has gotten in Noir. “Mucosa stinging under the attack of microscopic drill-bits tugging bad-attitude atoms behind them” (25). Uh, he means drugs. Suffice it to say Noiris purpler than he’s ever been before. Usually Jeter’s more elaborate mode signifies sf—simplicity being reserved for horror and hard-boiled—and Noir does take place in a future. But it’s a nasty future, and I suspect Jeter is paying cyberpunk the backhanded compliment of pastiche.

In the aforementioned interview, Jeter traced the book’s genesis to a passion for film noir, copyrights, and “all my usual sort of craziness. I like to take disparate elements and see if I can crash them together in an interesting way.” And crash they do—Noir is packed. There are enough twisted little bits in this novel for a shelf load of books—the “indeadfast,” for instance: In the future the dead are resurrected so they can pay off their debts. The homeless are assigned metal carapaces instead of shelter; the streets crawl with these giant cockroaches. Professional children beg adults for stories, then demand cash for the pleasure of being told. Or the entertainment of the future: “enhanced Lucy reruns, with the Tarantino dialogue filters and the Peckinpah sloopo death scenes” (335). I could go on—on and on.

The net effect of this overload is complete fragmentation. Noir is not a book one reads for the pleasures of plot—and the only mystery here is how Jeter gets away with it, if, indeed, he does. Yet beneath this surfeit is a fairly standard hard-boiled yarn. There’s a man in a trenchcoat named McNihil, a murdered junior exec called Travelt, and a femme fatale, November, who’s only out for herself. There’s a villain, Harrisch, who connects the whole thing to a typically American bit of corruption—yeah, those French critics who invented film noir had the strange idea that somehow Hollywood was engaged in the criticism of capitalism. Like it or not, Jeter is definitely working in that tradition.

Noir’s most striking feature, in fact, is its raw, pure hatred of the corporate world. One can almost taste the venom in the ink as Jeter writes of...

...those hearty ‘spandshakes. The verifed rumor was that execs like these had the data circuits wired over to their genitalia, where the nerves were clustered thick enough for almost instantaneous readout. Stuff like that gave a whole new meaning and impetus to the old yuppie concept of networking; less reliable rumors talked about social events jammed tight with suits, all of them shaking hands and exchanging business-card data with each other until their faces shone like rain-wet stoplights ...

or, of the description of the temporary company-assigned cub-apt where murder victim Travelt lived, worked, and had his being:

the logical extension of the system of shuffling employees in and out of workplace cubicles at random ... straight out of Henry Denkman’s magnum opus, Connect ‘Em Till They Bleed: Pimp-Style ManagementTM for a New Century, which hadn’t so much revolutionized corporate life as confirmed and blessed what had already been going on. (37)

—“connect” being Noir’s way of saying “fuck.” Reach out and touch someone, indeed. Noir’s saving grace is that it is a blisteringly funny novel—funny the way Jeter’s always been funny, funny the way Jack Womack’s made a career of being funny.

With Noir, though, the line between satire and homage gets very thin. This is most apparent in the figure of McNihil, who’s had his brain wired to see everything in black and white, a reality overlay based on the classical and produced from 19th century vision. McNihil’s world features an innocent and doomed cube bunny in a plastic micromini, McNihil sees “a young Ida Lupino ... with the general air of brave vulnerability and period early-forties outfit from Raoul Walsh’s High Sierra” (34). He’s a very private eye. But he’s not a detective: finding the truth just ain’t in McNihil’s job description (though finding Verrity, the ultimate-barfy-cum-dark-goddess, sometimes is).

McNihil’s profession, revealed about halfway through the novel, is asp-head. He’s employed by an outfit called the Collection Agency. Asp-head is a Germanic backformation of ASCAP, and McNihil’s job is to make gruesome examples of copyright thieves who deny poor artists and writers their pay. The skiffy rationale for this job is provided, raw infodump style, intercut with an absolutely awesome description of the ultimate fate of future data pirates—which I dare not spoil—in the book’s central set piece.

This section highlights McNihil’s relationship with paperback writer Alex Turbiner, who from Dr. Adder and Death Arms on has appeared as one of Jeter’s many brilliant pulp hacks. The pirate has made the fatal error of trying to move a digitized version of Turbiner’s backlist, and the asp-head’s wrath is righteous. McNihil takes a Predator-like trophy from him—this scene is lovingly detailed and guaranteed to turn a stomach or two—which he then presents to Turbiner, who like many of Jeter’s writer characters has a PKD-like thing for fancy stereo equipment and classical music. And over a dirty glass of scotch or four, the man in the trenchcoat and the hack flashback to a long philosophical discussion of about, what else, noir.

McNihil hadn’t cared where the word came from ultimately, and hadn’t supposed that Turbiner cared, either, French intellectuals talking about low-brow American culture, ages ago, ancient black-and-white movies filled with shadows, garish paperback cover art that seemed equally devoted to guns, lip-dangling cigarettes, and off-the-shoulder cleavage—no one cared anymore. Not about the word itself, which had gotten applied to so many things that it now meant—according to Turbiner—nothing at all.

[Says Turbiner,] “You see, that’s where the later variations, especially in the movies, that’s where they all went wrong. ... They mistook the images, the look of some old Billy Wilder masterpiece, and they thought that was the only thing that mattered. Really, it was only the people still cranking out books—like me—that had any fucking notion ... about what the essence, the soul of noir was all about. ... The look, all that darkness and shadow, all those ervice rain-slick streets—that was the least of it. ... it’s betrayal ... .” (191)

Well, yes. Jeter’s always been a bit meta about his pulp; in this age of irony, I suppose that’s unavoidable—as is guessing who it is who betrays McNihil.

But it’s not the critical theory that makes this chapter central—it’s the sheer passion with which McNihil defends the writer and the copyrights which mean money to him. The emotional force of McNihil’s interior monologues concerning the late data pirate is the same kind of powerful interior monologue that made a book like Mantis—a favorite of mine—so worthwhile. Mantis is a thoroughly heinous bit of edge-play—the narrator indulges himself fully in the kind of rant one gets into when one thinks not even God is listening. Yet Mantis is also about the act of getting that kind of whacked-out but powerful stuff—powerful because it shows a man rationalizing an extreme position—down on paper. Catching this emotional truth is the difference between being really good—and a lot of writers can do the bad-attitude number with the proper social references and be really good—and over-the-edge brilliant, which K. W. Jeter can be.

When McNihil takes on the pure evil of scumbags who would rip off the creators of the world he’s had installed behind his eyeballs, Noir...
There I was: a fly on the wall. Just like I'd always wanted to be. Every few minutes I'd get up and buzz around the deserted hallway. These damn nanotech wings tend to freeze up if you don't keep them moving. But with the air as hot and heavy as it was, I preferred crawling along the walls whenever I had a chance—even if they were the color of foaming snot.

It wasn't hard finding the right place. The words were acid-etched right onto the frosted-glass door:

Philip Kaye III
Private Eye
Ontological Investigations

Although it was after midnight, I spotted someone's shadow moving around inside the office to the distorted beat spitting from a cheap radio. I swear it was the Fine Young Cannibals singing "She Drives Me Crazy," but maybe I just imagined it. The shadow stopped moving in the middle of the office, obscuring the words on the left side of the door. The new sign read: III Eye Investigations. I buzzed closer.

The shadow sat down behind a desk. I could hear the noisy clacking of a typewriter. It sounded just like an old Underwood Model Five. Lost in the music created by the flying typewriter keys, I didn't even hear the click-clicking of her high heels until she was at the door. She rapped several times on the glass with her knuckles.

"The typing stopped.
As we waited together for the door to open, I looked her over. She was a one-two punch, the kind of dark-haired girl that hits you right in the guts and makes you go weak in the knees. She had more breathtaking curves, more death-defying drops, than a rollercoaster ride.

Kaye opened the door and I could just about hear his heart stop. I followed the dark-haired girl's swaying hips into the office. Her black-and-white dress seemed to have been airbrushed on. She carried a matching purse that looked like an oversized wallet in her ringless left hand.

"How may I help you, Miss—?"
"Tasso."

She held out her slim hand and peered at Kaye through the black veil that cascaded down from her pill-box hat. He shook it, careful not to scratch himself on her long, sharp fingernails. They were manicured to look the color and shape of blood drops.

He offered her a seat. She refused.

"This will only take a minute. I'm looking for a man who can tell what's real from what's not. One who won't be deceived by simple appearances. Does that sound like you?"

Kaye reached into his jacket pocket and handed her a small card. I buzzed in closer to get a better look. He swatted at me. I dove and he missed.

I got a good look at his business card. At the very top, I could see a logo incorporating the Ajna Eye. And there, underneath his name, address, and telephone number, I could make out the two questions that were his principle areas of investigation: "What is real? What is human?"

After she had read the card, Kaye motioned for her to flip it over. The handwritten words scrawled on the backside read: "What is real is human. What is human is real."

The dark-haired girl shuddered.

Something was about to happen. I buzzed even closer. He swatted at me again. I dove, but this time he connected. I kamikazed right into the worn hardwood floors. It took my nanotech systems a couple of minutes to repair the rather extensive damage.

By the time I was ready to fly away, I again looked up to see Kaye embracing the now hatless girl. He kissed her hard on the lips, his tongue groping the dark inside of her mouth. The girl stiffened at first but then I watched her melt. Her left foot slipped across the floor before rising into the air, tautening the single seam of her silk stocking. I must have missed something while I was out of action.

"I want you," Kaye said, breaking the embrace. "I want you but you're not real. You're nothing but an illusion—a product of my own obsessive imagination."

"But couldn't you just pretend? Who would have to know?"
"I would know."

With unfathomable sadness, Kaye opened his third eye and I watched the dark-haired girl fade away into nothingness. One moment she was there, the next, she was gone.

A single tear welled up in Kaye's extra eye. When he finally closed it, the tear slid down his forehead, rolled along the center of his nose, and disappeared somewhere in the thickness of his salt-and-pepper beard.

Kaye walked over to his file cabinet and pulled out a dirty glass and a half-empty bottle of single-malt scotch from the top drawer. He sat down in his old leather chair with a loud creak and poured himself a triple shot. He drank it down in a single swig as if it were medicine that could dull his senses and help him to forget.

He stared down at the keys of his typewriter and then over at the huge manuscript piled beside it. The slow-moving fan rustled the pages, stirring the thousands of words that covered hundreds of pieces of paper. It took Kaye several minutes to notice the pill-box hat abandoned on a corner of his desk. He picked it up, held it to his nose, and breathed in as if he could recall her by the simple power of her scent.

Kaye tossed the hat into a metal waste basket. It might have landed with a hollow thunk if the trash can hadn't been filled with several similar hats. As he sat there, I could almost hear him thinking: maybe, just maybe, the next dark-haired girl would be the real one; the right one. He sighed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and continued typing.

E. A. Johnson lives in Washington, D.C.
that a lot of Jeter’s ex-husbands fall into when they get caught making a living. It’s also one of Noir’s major disappointments that the whole theme of McNihil’s black-and-white vision is dropped—it says so much about both the character and the fantasies that sustain a person in a world grown too ugly to bear. But, do I sound like Noir is not a good read? Don’t get me wrong, it is—especially when it mocks the current capitalist phase. And remember, even a cranky, fractured, bile-spitting Jeter with tongues firmly clenched is better than . . . well, you know.

When I started in on this essay, I picked up the Star Wars tie-ins, The Mandalorian Armor and Slave Ship—which was then number one on Locus’s Media Related Bestseller list. (I checked back a couple months later; it was still number one.) Boba Fett—a major character in The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi—who has a really neat suit of dirty grey armor with lots of strap-on weapons—now has a series of books devoted to him as the biggest, baddest bounty hunter in the galaxy. What struck me about these books was that their characters were completely economically driven, as are all the characters in Noir.

The Star Wars books are the beginning of an apparently endless tale of intrigue on the part of various competing galactic organizations: office politics writ large. There’s even a character called Balancesheet, a conscious spreadsheet out to take over his organization. After 700 pages, I was firm convinced that the split of the Bounty Hunter’s Guild that drives the saga of the Bounty Hunter Wars was a metaphor for corporate downsizing. But then, I thought, isn’t Boba Fett nothing but a suit? Does it really matter who is under the Mandalorian armor, as long as he says things like, “If I take on a job, I complete it. And everyone in the galaxy knows that…” (The Mandalorian Armor, 53). Given how Jeter’s portrayed suits not owned by Lucasfilm, I also wonder about the contempt this shows for the tie-in audience.

But perhaps I’m thinking too hard about this all. Maybe I’m not supposed to take these corporate bad guys any more seriously than a complete Baron Harkonnen caricature like Harrisch. Maybe it is all about providing a little relief after a long day in the cubicle and I should be grateful for a satisfactory diversion, or just bored and a bit irritated by a failure. After all, I am a consumer, and I bought these books.

Okay, so Noir was five bucks at the Housing Works Thrift Shop—the money went to provide housing for people with AIDS. (It is easier to share the blame than share the wealth.) Here’s hoping Jeter got a fair cut of my beer money on the Star Wars stuff at least.

“Wake up and smell the—”
“Yeah, right,” interrupted the Adder clone. “I’ve heard that line already. . . .” (Noir, 305)

Dennis MacConnell, a critical theory prof at the University of California, Irvine, nailed what noir has become since the Reagan years: “Identification with noir heroes allows viewers to live passively within the order of capitalism while imagining themselves to be opposed to it” (“Democracy’s Turn: On Homeless Noir” in Shades of Noir, edited by Joan Copjec, 283–294). Expanding on that notion, he writes,

Caught in the interior space of film noir, a merely ordinary person would want to flee to the suburbs, to Levittown or Orange County, California. But as the fantasy frame for a reality that is represented as “harsh,” “cold” or “stark,” in the end its “grittiness” becomes the basis for its deeper appeal to the ego: it presents a version of everyday life in the city that is adequate to the ego’s exalted view of itself. Perpetually exposed to imaginary risk and opportunity, the noir hero proves himself mentally and physically. The groundless “nostalgia” these films provide historically disconnects us from the real sources of our suffering while catering to our sense of self-importance. As such, these films would be found high on any list of manufactured sensibilities that hold advanced capitalism together on a psychic-cultural plane. (280–281)

The urban landscape that gave birth to noir after WWII has largely disappeared. Just try finding a cheap hotel in New York—or a suitably gritty neighborhood not in the process of being turned into a theme park of its former self. Noir’s dark journey is now a purely psychic one. I promised myself I wasn’t going to go there, not with a guy who puts a list of links to Survivors of Sibling Abuse groups right next to his copyright protection propaganda, but hey, what’s a promise? Some folks, professional and otherwise, will tell you that the biggest trauma of abuse inflicted by a family—or a society—is betrayal; and that one of the more reliable ways of dealing with a betrayal, inflicted by someone or something upon whom one depends for survival, is learning to forget. Forgetting allows people to do whatever it is they’ve got to do to ensure minimal survival. There are endless ways of forgetting what’s really happening: splitting, black-and-white thinking, identifying with the aggressor. . . . check those links Jeter supplies if you really want to know more. But I think that the end result of all these machinations is to make remembering the biggest kick.

The initial suspicion, the recognition of all those clues formerly ignored, those first moments when one realizes—hey, man, that really happened and it sucked—bad enough to turn over every notion you’ve ever had of who you are, who your family is, and what kind of culture you live in. (Conspiracy theorists and other flakes are like junkies who’ve been burned, substituting any belief to get that same frisson, that “Oh, my god, it’s real!”) Yet thrilling realization inevitably turns into ritual, and if you want to make a sacrament out of repeating all the bad things anyone has ever done to you, I’m sure there’s an anonymous group in your town that will help. Or realization gets co-opted into a movie of the week and Eli Lilly sells a ton of Prozac.

In the end, though, the real pleasure is always the tale of just how bad the betrayal was. Noir is Jeter’s little ritual—if Madlands could be described as self-parody, then it can certainly be argued that Jeter’s completely bottomed out with this one. But I prefer to see it as just another version of a kind of ur-story Jeter has been mining for ages.

It’s striking, though, that the way he rips himself off is so blatant. For instance, Noir’s opening conceit, the robot prowler that young execs like Travelt send into the Wedge so they can vicariously get their kicks in places they wouldn’t be caught dead in, is right out of Manitis, where the narrator sends his doppelgänger into the Wedge to give women what they really want: sex and death. The Wedge, and its other Interzone stand-ins, is such familiar Jeter turf that I don’t even want to bother listing the examples—as is the zone’s use as a purely psychic territory. After all, it’s a commonplace that film noir turned the urban zone into the labyrinth, with all the mythological weight that word carries. Is Jeter counting on few of Noir’s readers being familiar with his out-of-print work?

The relationship of the evils that corporations do and the noble futility of resistance is a thread through the vast majority of Jeter’s work, yea, even unto the tie-ins. (Fett defeat the Empire? Forget it.) Corporations are always out to destroy your very soul—Death Arns took the image absolutely literally with a Southern California military contractor discovering a vast, active living field that somehow imbues matter with free will. They try to kill it, of course. The fan in me likes to believe that the goofy speculations on the nature of reality featured in Death Arns and other earlier works, like The Glass Hammer and Madlands, must have been the result of too many late nights arguing it out with the wily PKD. Yet, with Jeter, these speculations usually wind up describing the means by which some corporation has managed to screw the masses. The gnostic tech talk is far less important than the fact that someone’s figured out a way to use whatever knowledge is gained about the nature of reality against us.

Noir’s DynaZauber is the spitting image of “the ultimate capitalist drive…to always deliver less than what the customer believes he’s paying for” (250); they refer to their products as TIAN, Turd In A Can, in the same way that an economist labels things gadgets. But now they have discovered a way to key right into the brain’s addiction circuits in a way that allows them to activate “need” at will. As Harris explains,

. . . it’s the translation into reality of all those Foucauldian theories of self-surveillance. The brain watches itself and administers its own stimuli and rewards, with DynaZauber as the beneficiary. And really—let’s face it—money is just a crude bookkeeping device in a system like this. Money is for people who have options, and the whole point of TOAW [Turd On A Wire] is to eliminate options. (369)

Thus DynaZauber no longer has to deliver anything. The consumer does it all.

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Ah, well. Satire cuts both ways, and fools like me, of course, hope that young readers, maybe even tie-in readers, can have their eyes opened to some of the little betrayals late capitalism has inflicted by reading books like Noir—but on second thought, isn’t that just the “redeeming social value” dodge, the line that got Naked Lunch’s obscenity charge dismissed? The fact is, I enjoy Jeter’s work for its homey nastiness and familiar betrayals more than for its nonexistent social platform. Jeter’s of the school that runs on a sort of fantasy of revenge or two. Or six. How many bodies do you want?

At yet another work weekend, Hartwell and I were standing in the kitchen talking about media tie-ins. Jeter and Noir came up. I asked David, “How much did he get for this?”

“I heard it was one hundred thousand dollars,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “Are they fucking insane? I thought. Has there been an increase in the brain-burn demographic that I didn’t know about? (Ah, it’s such a pisser getting old.) Is it a nefarious plot on the part of Bantam Spectra and their corporate masters, Bertelsmann, to keep him writing Star Wars novels? (Bertelsmann—“A world of expression”—owns Random House, Doubleday Book Clubs, Arista, BMG Direct, RCA Records, UFA Film Studios—UFA’s “street” silents of the ’20s were a seminal influence on noir; some of the same directors made noir product in their Hollywood expatriate phases—half of AOL and CompuServe in France and Germany, and much, much more.) Or is Jeter simply delivering less than they thought they were paying for?

Book III of the Bounty Hunter Wars, Hard Merchandise (Jeter shares credit with Timothy Zahn), is due out any day now. Jeter’s good at splitting—she’s thoroughly sussed what two or three very disparate market segments want in their fiction—and though it’s a pity those segments rarely mix, it’s kind of obvious why. First and foremost, some folks really do prefer Orange County to the Interzone. By preaching to various choirs, Jeter’s work appeals only to those who, in a sense, have already bought it. Still, for my own peculiar psychological reasons, I’d rather read a book like Noir in all its mega-squamosity than any tale of corporate intrigue among the stars, if only for the glorious spectacle of K. W. Jeter chowing down on the hand that feeds him. 

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle by Haruki Murakami

London: Harvill Press, 1998: £12.00 hc; 609 pages reviewed by David Mathew

Even now, at the age of fifty, Haruki Murakami (1949— ) is perceived in his native Japan as a “young” author. Elsewhere in the world (and certainly in Western civilization) an author is generally regarded as “young” until he or she hits the forty mark, and “mature” thereafter. But Murakami, quite possibly, will be seen as a whippersnapper—a rebel, of sorts, or a changer—if he lives to be writing at the age of ninety. The perception has less to do with years spent on the planet than with his attitude to his own work, and to the rich formalities of the Japanese literature from which he emerged. There is nothing juvenile about his prose, but his unwillingness to bow—to tradition has made him seem petulant to various Japanese critics. Put bluntly, Murakami has less in common with Yukio Mishima or Osamu Dazai (or any of his other direct predecessors) than he has with Raymond Carver and Chandler (both of whom he has translated into Japanese), or with John Irving, Algis Budrys, or Philip K. Dick. From an early age, he read American fiction and soon grew to love it. Yet he writes about Japan; whatever thrill the reader would ordinarily get from reading fiction soaked in foreign attitudes and translated from foreign tongues (think early Kundera, think Marquez) is thus further skewed by the realization that the Japan presented in his work is not quite accurate either.

Regardless of what the critics think, in Japan, Murakami is popular with the book-buying public; he is popular to an almost mythical extent; he is rock-star popular. His career began auspiciously when his first novel, Hear the Wind Sing, was published in 1979, winning the author the Gunzou Literature Prize for budding writers. (In essence, the novel was a reminiscence on the years of being a twenty-something.) And in 1987, on returning to Japan from Italy, he discovered that Norwegian Wood (named after the Beatles song) had transformed him into a superstar, in a fashion that would not seem out of place in one of his weird-and-wonderful short stories; there were ecstatic crowds awaiting his safe arrival at Tokyo Airport. Norwegian Wood alone has sold four million copies in his country. Murakami is a best-selling author, and he has used the money that his success has given him to “buy peace. I don’t want a Mercedes,” he once said in interview. “I don’t want Armani. Money buys time to write.”

Well, now—as a multimillionaire—he has written The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle. Or rather, it has appeared in English, having been published in Japan in 1995 as three separate volumes, because the Japanese do not like big books—they want something that can be easily carried on the commuter train. The English version (translated by Jay Rubin) is over 600 pages long, frequently meandering, occasionally baffling, repetitive, or overwritten, but for sheer scale and mental muscle, it may be regarded as a masterpiece.

As with some of his previous novels—such as A Wild Sheep Chase (1982) and Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World (1985)—The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle takes a little bit of Americana, a little bit of science fiction (less than usual), a little bit of philosophy, and a good dash of detective fiction to make a mixture peculiarly the author’s own. All comparisons to other authors are rendered useless, perhaps even offensive. The record shows, on the other hand, that Murakami was not displeased on hearing A Wild Sheep Chase, which he calls a “fantasy/adventure,” referred to as “The Big Sheep,” after the Chandler novel, so maybe offense does not come into it. The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, again, has a man searching for truths, both personal and universal.
Whereas in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, for example, the protagonist must look for a war criminal, a woman with gorgeous ears, and a supernatural sheep with a star on its back, in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the quest begins as something simpler: a missing cat.

Toru is our Everyman and, for want of a better word, our hero. A thirty-year-old graduate who has left his job in law (voluntarily), he is wondering what to do next while his wife goes out to work to support them both. He idles away his days (now free, but consequently undermined in his own and in society's eyes) by cooking pasta and listening to the radio, listening to anonymous sex talk on phone calls that he receives—and listening to the cries of the curious bird which gives the volume its title. The family cat disappears, and Toru's wife insists that Toru should look for it. While searching near a neighbor's land, he meets May, a precocious sixteen-year-old, who says what she likes and likes what she says, and who regards her visitor as something of an interesting specimen. She calls him Mr. Wind-Up Bird. And at approximately the same time, Toru also meets two psychic sisters, Malta and Creta Kano (names amusing in Japanese, too), who visit him in his dreams as well as in reality. One of them even has cerebral- or brain-sex with him, many pages before indulging, as it were, in the real thing. Creta reveals to Toru that while she was a prostitute, paying off loans, she was raped by her wife's brother, a powerful politician whom Toru has always detested.

Then Kumiko, Toru's wife, also disappears, much to the delight of her politician brother, who detests Toru right back again. Because the reader has already seen some of the telltale signs of her adultery (the long hours at work, the unreliability of her phone calls, the gifts of perfumery, it is all the more heartrending when Toru learns that she has left him for a man who is better in bed. Unsurprisingly, he does not take the news very well: Toru lowers himself to the bottom of a well, the better, in the dark, to get in touch with his true feelings and to introspect. Then May takes away the ladder that will lead him back up to his freedom and leaves him there, hungry and thirsty, for three days.

Before he is rescued from the well by Creta (who then also disappears), Toru dips into a trance. In a dreamlike state, he passes through a subterranean stone wall into a darkened hotel room, where a woman seduces him. The seduction leaves behind a blue-black mark on his face that gives him healing powers. These powers, in turn, lead Toru to work with Nutmeg and Cinnamon, a mother-and-son partnership that occupied a haunted house and, under the guise of a chic boutique, operates a healing parlor for rich women. Creta, who reappeared, minus clothes, in Toru's bed, also thinks it will be a good idea to have a long mulling session at the bottom of the neighborhood well.

Things become more complicated. Characters involve themselves with the narrative and tell their stories—stories of darkness and brutality. Here is Lieutenant Mamiya, who as a prisoner of Mongolian forces during World War II, was made to watch a comrade being skinned alive. He was then left to die at the bottom of a well. (Is the reader to surmise that history might well repeat itself?) And there is a soldier in Hsinching, the capital city of Japanese-occupied Manchuria, who orders his troops to kill animals in the local zoo to prevent them from escaping.

One might argue that some of the passages which take the reader away from the main thrust of the narrative are superfluous, and possibly they could have been more diligently edited. Some readers will object to the flabbiness of this novel, and will suggest that it should have been put on a diet. Certainly there is no need for a sentence to be used as a character's thought process, and then as a sentence spoken to another character immediately afterwards, and this is a device that Murakami uses much too often. But on the other hand, the author is well known to prefer freelinking through his novels, rather than planning, and a certain cumulative force is felt during the reading, possibly as a result of this technique (or lack of technique). After all, Toru is not supposed to be a writer, or any other sort of artist; he's a white-collar *schmuck*, halfheartedly playing a game of mental footsie with the neighbor's teenage girl and trying to come to terms with life. For quite a while, the two strands of his existence seem to be of equal importance, even when they are not necessarily tangled.

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is, by and large, a walk around the lead character's brain, and some of it is disorganized, some of it is unwanted ephemera. But many readers like to know it all, right down to descriptions of how best to cook a decent spaghetti; and the "short stories"—the side-tracking vignettes—within this novel have the same deadpan dislocation as Murakami evidenced in the title story of his collection *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993); in it, a man is obsessed with the disappearance of an elephant from a local zoo, and also with the disappearance of a young mother, whose insomnia teaches her about death. So, as might be seen by the example, Murakami even repeats his themes.

There is no equivalent in Japanese for the English word "identity." When a Japanese author wishes to discuss the subject directly, he must use the English word, which suggests a great deal. Early on in his career, Haruki Murakami decided that he did not want to be an "international" novelist, but rather a Japanese novelist whose books have about them an American feel—or the slow-burning background of a boring, nowhere town. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the protagonist's life moves from "supernormal" to "unnormal," and his identity is altered by what he sees, hears, and feels—rather, to an extent, than by what he does. Although he acts and participates in the plot, Toru has a tendency to attract his own destiny—in the shape of unusual people—rather than reach for it. This is a novel which endeavors to explain what it is to be a young man with a flexible approach to his own life: will life break him or merely bend him? What happens when routine is abolished? What does it mean to be alone?

The questions that *The Wind-Up Bird* poses are a lot more serious than the surface quests, what happened to the missing cat and the adulterous wife? Toru, by turns, is both childish in his innocence (one oft-repeated word and theme in Murakami's *oeuvre* is "childishness") and cynical in his understanding of modern existence. The prose shows much of the simultaneous cool and agitation of dormant fear. Many facets of human life are represented in this book, and even with its faults it is an incredible achievement.

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**Singular Interviews:**

**John Crowley**

First in an occasional series by Michael Swanwick

If not most, then certainly many interviews suffer from bloat and bombast. It's a delicate skill, interviewing, and not all of us have the tact, wit, and swift presence of mind to lead a subject through a series of entertaining revelations about self and *oeuvre*. Certainly not me. It occurred to me, however, that I might well be capable of coming up with one good question and so I resolved to try. The first subject of this sporadic project is noted fantasist John Crowley.

**QUESTION:** You have been working on *Aegypt* for a rather long time, and you're currently years from completion of this enormous four-book project. Why are you engaged in such a large and time-consuming single work?

**ANSWER:** God knows. God help me. For having ever started this. When we are young we think that life will go on forever. When we grow older, we realize that life has shapes. It's time, it seems to me, to find out that the largest stretch of my creative years is going to be taken up with a project that will probably be the major thing that I do in life. That's scary. That's a terrifying thought. You try to preserve possibilities. You try to have a life that continues to open out, even though you know it doesn't. And the idea that it doesn't, and that life has shapes, is borne in on me as I work on this book. It's not like I will go on and write dozens of books. I don't know what they are. No, I know what they are, and I am already in the middle of writing one of them. I don't know why. I wish I knew.
trapped in difficult existential circumstances—was unwailing, and his work has a human interest absent from that of writers engaged by complexity and convolutions for their own sake. (336)

This might seem ingenious, since so much of Dick’s fiction is patently generated by the machinery of pulp sf, with its recurrences, comic-strip political reversals, and what Clute himself accurately dubs “ideative mazes” (329). Still, the key to Dick’s contribution is also caught by Clute: “he was astonishingly intimate, self-exposed, and very dangerous. He was the funniest sf writer of his time, and perhaps the most terrifying. His dreads were our own, spoken as we could not have spoken them” (330). This is the very essence of transrealism, and perhaps the condition it notates, which we might term transreality. Perhaps that merely renames the condition of postmodernity (since, following Fredric Jameson and Brian McHale, Dick is the inevitable exemplar of postmodern ontological fiction), but again perhaps it opens a window on a fresh way to compose our experience in a time when human and machine, the known and the conjectured, the richly experienced and the coolly posited start to blur and flow together, like a policeman’s tears.

Sometimes, of course—perhaps increasingly, in and out of literary fiction, slipstream, and sf alike—authors are introduced recursively into their own texts. We are no longer shocked by John Fowles’s physical intrusion into the plot of The French Lieutenant’s Woman, or even his rescinding of its course, as he steps into his character Charles’s railway coach:

But at the very last moment, a massively bearded face appeared at his window. . . . The latecomer muttered a “Pardon me, sir” and made his way to the far end of the compartment. He sat, a man of forty or so, his top hat firmly square, his hands on his knees, regaining his breath. There was something rather aggressively secure about him; he was perhaps not quite a gentleman. . . . (346)

The transition, which uncannily we might find ourselves expecting, comes via the voice of the novel itself, as it were, addressing us as readers: “In my experience there is only one profession that gives that particular look, with its bizarre blend of the inquisitive and the magistral; of the ironic and the soliciting” (348). And then the hand of the god-author is shown explicitly: “So I continue to stare at Charles and see no reason this time for fixing the fight upon which he is about to engage. . . . [The solution is] to show two versions of it. That leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the ‘real’ version” (349).

Dick’s very disturbing novel Valis, the imaginative transformation of a 1974 event he regarded as a kind of supernatural epiphany, indeed theophany, features several duplications of the author: as himself, “Philip K. Dick,” and as Horsepower Fat, a Greek-German transform of his name and a character embodying his wilder, more credulous avatar. (In a document published in 1981 in the fanzine Niekas, Dick reveals that the new savior, named Tagore, currently lives in Sri Lanka. An incarnation of the Logos, hideously burned and crippled, Tagore has taken upon his own body this torment that figures the “macrocruxtification” of the world at the hands of pollutive and careless humans. The revelation is presented as by Horsepower Fat with Dick as his rather reluctant intermediary. [Dick in Surin 314–315]) Characters named “James Ballard” are not unknown in J. G. Ballard’s own novels, especially in the pornographic non-sf novel Crash. Kurt Vonnegut has visited his own novels in his own person. Something of the same intrusion, rationalized via zany meditations on infinitely-dimensioned Hilbert space, occurs in Rucker’s Master of Space and Time (1984), which interestingly is not one of the novels he regards as transrealist. The ontological glitch takes place in a chapter entitled, flagrantly, “Rudy Rucker Is Watching You”: There was a man behind us, a run-down man with short hair and lambent eyes. He had the taut features and heavy stubble of a drifter. His lips were slightly parted to show his crooked teeth. Seeing me notice him, he gave the barest flicker of response—a twinge of gloating, a pulse of lust. His cool, hungry stare filled me with horror. (224–5)

Yet this odd demonic figure—the gloating lust is a far cry from Fowles’s magisterial if not quite-gentlemanly commanding vehicle—is not the immediate creator of narrator Joe Fletcher’s world. That is Alwin Bitter, who is literally thinking or wishing the cast of the novel into existence. (One of Rucker’s own names is Bitter; moreover, he is the author’s transrealist equivalent in The Sex Sphere.) Still, “In my mind’s eye,” Flett tells us, “I kept seeing the terrible hungry face of the man who watched. Perhaps Alwin had dreamed me, but that man had dreamed Alwin” (226). For a throwaway line, it is a wonderfully terrifying moment.

It is a postmodern commonplace to regard all as text, while dispensing of any authorial “authority” over words that have emerged out of his or her fingers and brain, organs deemed to be instruments, above all, of prevailing discursive formations. Dick and Rucker alike are haunted, oddly enough, by just such apprehensions. A highly intelligent autodidact, Dick built an explanatory system for himself from Kant, Gnosticism, existential psychoanalysis, and a melange of acid-culture theories of mind and reality. He wrote to Australian commentator Bruce Gillespie (then a young teacher not long out of university studies in English) “for each person there are two worlds, the idios kosmos, which is a unique private world, and the koinos kosmos, which literally means shared world. . . . No person can tell which part of his total worldview is [which . . .] except by the achievement of a strong empathetic rapport with other people” (Dick in Gillespie 31–32). In most of his novels, Dick declared, the protagonist’s idios kosmos is breaking down, if not the reality substrate of the shared universe itself. It is a theme manifest early: The Cosmic Puppets, written in 1958, stages a small-town conflict between embodied Zoroastrian divinities Ahram and Ormazd, who transform daily reality into symbol. In Eye in the Sky, written in 1955, a particle accelerator accident disrupts the local reality of eight characters whose shared world fluxes as they struggle for dominance; Jack Hamilton, notes Douglas A. Mackey, “is forced to realize that people live in separate worlds inside their own minds, and that a powerful mind can pull others into its version of reality” (23). Alternatively, as a Dickian protagonist’s personal construct of the world decays, the noumenon is revealed, often dreadfully. It was an account that critic George Turner found unconvincing: “The metaphor fails because it cannot stand against the weight of reality as we know it.” This sturdy declaration from the koinos kosmos located Dick’s recurrent tropes—unhinged “reality,” the dominance and manipulation of collective realities by a strong personality—in the writer’s own instability: “What personal statements Dick has published tends to confirm the obsessional nature of his preoccupation and also suggest, between the lines, some psychological reasons for it” (Turner in Gillespie 48). Such a blunt reading elides, of course, those very ideological dimensions manifested in Dick’s work which make it the preeminent staging of postmodern tropes identified by Fredric Jameson: a certain flatness, a lack of mimetic or illusory “depth”; loss or attenuation of discrete subjectivity and memory, yielding an odd blend of flattened affect and “a peculiar kind of euphoria”; the abandonment by the artist of any pretense to a unique style localized in history, in favor of pastiche, jargon, and nostalgia; schizophrenic écriture, especially jumbled collage and a radical breakdown in reality-testing; the “hysterical sublime.”

Dick’s own grasp on his transrealist methods was insecure. Despite his fondness for antihumanist and reality-disrupting literary mechanisms, he repeatedly made every effort to construct himself as a classic humanist. In 1970, writing to Gillespie’s fanzine SF Commentary, he stated:

The Universe disintegrates further and further in each of my novels, but the possibility of faith in one given human being or several . . . can be found—usually—in the novel somewhere, at the center of the stage or at the very edge. . . . Basically, he is found at the heart of human life itself. He is, in
fact, the heart of human life. . . . Perhaps [some critics] are bothered by the fact that what I trust is so very small. They want something vaster. I have news for them: there is nothing vaster. (Dick in Gillespie 1975, 45)

It is strikingly revealing, then, that some four years later, following his delusional theophany, he began the ever more obsessional search for meaning traced hilariously in his immense million-word, 8,000-page Experior notebooks, extracts from which are now in print. This hunt for the nomonemon culminated, perhaps, in his parodically titled “The Ultra Hidden (Cryptic) Doctrine: The Secret Meaning of the Great System of Theosophy of the World, Openly Revealed for the First Time,” of March 2, 1980 (Dick in Sutin 337). There is nothing vaster. The eponymous Valis, first in his finale bizarre thematic trilogy, stands for “Vast Artificial Living Intelligent System,” the cosmic computer mentality or perhaps deity that Dick came to believe (at least some of the time) to be directing the course of his life.

Given this chimerical bent in Dick’s private and public persona, how better to read his texts than as transrealism: fantastical transformations of his daily, if unusually eccentric, life-world. He was a writer drenched in sf imagery; even in his bleakest and most intensely lyrical moments (sometimes the same moments), he found the perfect correlative to his inner states in just that kind of fanciful mutation of external reality he and his colleagues had formulated as science-fiction idioms, as diegetic counters in the mighty metaethical game. He wrote a typical inflated, subby bullying yet surely sufficiently honest letter to his prospective lover Linda (one of the very young “foxy chicks” he found himself obsessively and mostly ruinously drawn to in later life):

The fear of losing you, the anguish, dreadful, haunting, bitter terror at suddenly finding you gone—this aches through our bones. . . . [I]f something happened to you intrinsically . . . everyone would wither away at the heart and sicken and perish, varying from person to person, in different degrees and at different rates. My books would become more weird, more tired, more empty. . . . Like in Bester’s The Demolished Man I would look up into the sky at night and see the stars flickering off one by one, and I’d fucking be indifferent. I’d walk through the side of a building and it’d collapse into dust. Wheels would fall off cars, like in an old W. C. Fields movie. Finally my foot would sink through the sidewalk. Do you see what you mean to us, Linda? (Dick 1988, 60–61)³

W. C. Fields and Alfred Bester at play in the decaying kibbly-landscapes of the philhickian nowhere! It is this interpenetration of suicidally sad reality and preposterously exuberant apocalyptic landscape that is one hallmark of the transrealist.

Some critics, however, will resist this temptation to peer into biography, if only on the quite prudent grounds that usually we lack access to it, and that even when we do have access, it is never to be trusted, being no less a construction than the fictional texts themselves. Bruce Gillespie has commented of Dick’s revealing posthumous publications that “on the one hand it was fascinating to learn how much of his novels, even and especially his sf novels, are based on autobiographical detail; but on the other hand, the books seem so much bigger than the man. As,” he added, “do all the great books, I suppose” (Gillespie 1999).

Yes and no. Phil, as his many admirers (most of whom never met him except in his writings) know him, contained multitudes without ever quite moving sideways into psychosis. A great deal is now known about his sometimes bleak, much-married life. It does indeed call echoes from the refrains in his life’s work: the doppelgängers, simulacra, apparent humans who turn out to be “electric ants,” programmed constructs. Philip Kindred Dick (the middle name is his mother Dorothy’s surname) was a twin born in Chicago on December 16, 1928. His sister Jane Charlotte died six weeks later; it might be that Phil never recovered from this loss, or its consequences. When he was four his parents divorced after two years living in Berkeley, California, and in 1935 his mother took him to Washington, returning to Berkeley when he was 10. Evidently he was popular at school, although his relationship with Dorothy swung between coldness and ardor. Attracted early to science fiction, at 14 he wrote a novel influenced by "Swift, now lost, and between 1944 and 1946 had psychiatric and drug treatment for agoraphobia; this kind of marginalizing childhood is common among sf writers (perhaps all writers). In the California of his adulthood, it led almost inevitably into what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. aptly names “a therapy-universe” (330), one he shared with many of his wives and lovers, co-extensive with the banality of daily life.

Unusually, he left his mother’s custody before finishing high school, sharing digs with several gay poets, including Robert Duncan, whom he then moved to an attic by himself. He’d once had an implicit dream of having sex with his mother, he declared to his third wife’s astonishment (Anne Dick, 17); at 18, Dorothy would visit him at work, and people took her for his girlfriend: “she had long dark hair, and was thin, and Garboesque” (323). Physical complaints afflicted him, including tachycardia. A long dependence on various medications began. Working in the sort of small TV repair and record store that figures in many of his sf and mainstream books, he studied philosophy and German briefly at Berkeley, marrying and very quickly divorcing Jeannette Marlin, whom he met while serving in the shop, in 1948. A fellow Berkeley student, Kleo Apostolides, married Phil in June 1950. He was already writing, and published his first short story, “Beyond Lies the Wub,” in Planet Stories (July 1952), “the most lurid of all pulp magazines” (Dick 1988, 403). By 1958, he had sold more than 80 stories. In roughly the same decade or so, he also wrote eleven mainstream novels and failed to sell any; by a bitter irony, all were published after he had made his name as an extraordinary fantasist, mostly after his untimely death at 53.

The Burning of the Brain

The rest of Dick’s productive if largely unremunerative life is amply documented: the increasing, frenetic pace of sf novel production, fueled by scotch, amphetamines, and industrial quantities of other uppers and downers, the domestic instability.³

Moving with Kleo to Marin County, he met recently widowed Anne Williams Rubenstei, who already had three daughters, Hatte, Jayne, and Tandy; he quickly divorced Kleo and married Anne. In 1960, Anne and Phil had a daughter, Laura Archer, whom he regarded as a link with his dead twin Jane (who was a lesbian, he solemnly told Anne). As the ’60’s began, Dick created astonishingly if confused and often unfocused novels of psychic powers, machine doubles, conspiracy, cheeky robots and appliances, run-down interplanetary locales, at a dizzying rate, 60 pages a day, on the wings of amphetamines; not surprisingly, he had breakdowns. In 1965, his brilliance was recognized by a Hugo Award for his science fiction short story. For his superb, artistically successful novel The Man in the High Castle portraying a counterfactual world where Germany and Japan had won the Second World War. By the following year, his marriage with Anne was in bad trouble, and his visions had begun with a glimpse of “the hollow eyeslot, the mechanical metal arm and hand, the stainless-steel teeth, which are the dread stigma of evil . . . in the overhead sky at noon” in 1963 (Dick in Sutin 213). That imagery would find its place in his well-regarded 1965 novel The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, although a decade later he would reverse its sting, perhaps because he had come to see its origins in infant memories of the father donning a First World War gas mask: “under the anger, under the metal and helmet, there is . . . the face of a man. A kind and loving man” (Dick in Sutin 127). It is almost a prefigurement of the climax of George Lucas’s Star Wars trilogy, with the sinister black-helmeted Darth Vader redeemed and curiously redemptive.

Dick, however, was not yet close to any kind of succor. The 36-year-old Phil turned to Nancy Hackett, a 21-year-old with psychiatric problems of her own. They married in 1966, and the following year had a daughter, Isolde. In 1970, after a bout of pancreatitis caused by accelerated street speed took Dick to hospital, Nancy left with baby Isa. Depressed, Phil sank further into abundant and inventive drug use, taking up with Kathy Demuelle, then 17 and still at school, and hung out with dope dealers, adds, and small-time criminals. Phil was using a thousand methadone “beans” a week, balanced by 40 mg of Stelazine a day plus other prescription tranquilizers. When his San Venitia residence was trashed on November 17, 1971, Phil blamed the CIA, and his paranoia increased. Perhaps he was a thermometer of the times. Christopher Palmer observes: “As Dick went zanier, so did the culture around him. In his reflections on the break-in he suffered, he makes

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himself a kind of node of all the craziness of the times—or a sump?—CIA, Black Panthers, Minutemen, drug dealers” (personal communication). Indeed, Istvan Csicsery-Ronai, Jr. remarks: “One could use Dick as a pretext for a whole history of postwar America” (325). Yet, like that history, by no means all is hysteria, anxiety, and excitement; Csicsery-Ronai also notes acutely the “fascinating banality” typical of his work (“ibid.”).

In 1972, invited to Vancouver, Canada, to give a speech (the notable “The Android and the Human”), he was deserted in turn by Kathy and tried to take his life, not for the first nor last time. A ferocious Synanon-style rehabilitation program, X-Kalay, straightened him out, and after another hopeless affair with a young woman, Jamis, he returned to the USA, to Fullerton, at the invitation of an academic enthusiastic for his work. Now he met the Linda extolled in the passage quoted earlier, yet within months announced that she had treated him with “the most cruel contempt possible” (Dick 1988, 197). Luckily, he swiftly met Tessa (Leslie Bushy), “the kindest girl in the world . . . the sort of girl who would take a cricket to the vet’s to get it stitched back up so that it could go cricket again” (“ibid.”), marrying her on April 18, 1973. Their son Christopher was born that year. And then in February and March of 1974, Phil was visited by a series of shattering theopehanies.

His work had fallen away during these bad years, but in 1975, Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said won a prestigious jury prize, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. Those strange works of his last years, starting with Valis and concluding with The Transmigration of Timothy Archer (and the Exegesis itself, surely not meant for publication), are the classic last examples—although artistically compromised—of his transclastist methods in writing. Everything of his tormented, self-damaging life flooded through all his work: the wives; the ruinous and self-deluding, rather heartless, manipulative, pathetic affairs with “foxy young chicks” barely out of high school; the mystical visions; the zany humor; the transformations of dread and illumination into scatty tales built, as always, from the detritus of pulp sf and his own marginal, somewhat streetwise life.

Disclosures from the noumenon increasingly energized, distracted and goaded Phil, taking ambiguous expression in his late novels. One key event is allegorized, barely changed in detail, in Valis, where God “fired a beam of pink light directly at him [the Dick figure], at his head, his eyes . . . exactly what you get as a phosphene after-image when a flashlight has gone off in your face” (12).

Another appears in his 1977 novel A Scanner Darkly. After experiments with “disinheriting substances affecting neural tissue,” a Bell Labs tech named Powers experienced “a disastrous drop in the GABA fluid [the neurotransmitter Gamma aminobutyrate] of his brain,” and

witnessed lurid phosphene activity projected on the far wall of his bedroom, a frantically progressing montage of what, at the time, he imagined to be modern-day abstract painting.

For about six hours, S. A. Powers had watched thousands of Picasso paintings replace one another at flash-cut speed, and then he had been treated to Paul Klee, more than the painter had painted during his entire lifetime. (20)

The sequence flexes across his gaze, now Modiglianis, now Kandinskis. A typical Dickianphantasmagoria? In Valis, four years later, this event is ascribed to his alter ego Horseover Fat, not in a fascist future but in March 1974. “The month before that, Fat had had an impacted wisdom tooth removed. For this the oral surgeon administered a hit of IV sodium pentothal!” (97). Again, everything blurs; ontology reeks more than ordinarily. Like Powers, like Fat, like “Dick” in the late novel, the actual view is “a vivid dreams” about mute, telepathic, clawed alien invaders with three eyes that “manifested themselves as cyborg entities: wrapped up in glass bubbles staggering under masses of technological gear” (93). Perhaps these are minerals or aspects of the supernatural Zebra entity from the Sirius star-system, which (with astounding, risky bastos) “had overthrown the Nixon tyrann in August 1974, and would eventually set up a just and peaceful kingdom on Earth where there would be no sickness, no pain, no loneliness, and the animals would all dance with joy“ (91).

Why Zebra? “Because it blended. . . . What if a high form of sentient mimicry existed—such a high form that no human (or few humans) had detected it?” (60). Except in a theophany of grace. That was Phil’s best guess. Indeed, perhaps Zebra or Valis dwelt in the future, a kind of superior intelligence that repeatedly altered the events in its own history to bring closer to perfection the many superposed universes familiar from sf and Dick’s loony cosmologies in particular. (Dick would come to see certain core volumes—usually ten in number, although the list was subject to change—in his corpus as comprising a vast coded testimony, mysteriously written in advance of his illumination, awaiting a suitable exegesis.) This notion of parallel or superposed realities is, too, a reputable image from the frontiers of quantum science and cosmology—developed subsequently, and with the greatest seriousness, by relativist Frank Tipler and quantum theorist David Deutsch— as well as a palpable figuration of each artist’s own shaping work of memory regained, text within text upon text imbricated, prepared for readers who can never know for certain which universe is authentic and which is playful or bogus.

When he died in 1982 in hospital of heart failure, some years after separating from his fifth wife and third child, needy affairs with several other women, and increasing reputation, he left an unfinished novel, The Owl in Daylight, and a growing semi-cult of personality. Had he lived, might he have become a full-blown mountebank? Could he have found wealth and followers by inventing his own exotheological religion, as L. Ron Hubbard and Dick’s early favorite A. E. van Vogt had done with Dianetics and Scientology? Or convinced himself of an absurd transcendent reality, as “UFO abductee” Whitley Strieber seems to have done, to his great profit? Perhaps not. Phil’s sense of the ridiculous always saved him, even as he plunged into despair and hallucination. Arguably it was exactly his mastery of transreality that spared him the final banal temptation of guruhood. Our world, Phil assured himself, was already a collage, a superposition of all possible worlds, or perhaps a gradually revised, achingly redemptive sequence of histories, a recovery from the Black Iron Prison, the unended Roman Empire masked by our collective delusion of modernity, or the entropic Tomb World of his oracular revelations and minatory fiction.

What can be surmised from this necessarily slipped précis of a writer’s life? Can we probe with any hope of insight into the causes of his fermenting imagination, his endlessly bungled personal life, his manipulations and culpable gullibility, above all his sense of the nunnous breaking through, for good or ill? One approach, rather clinical, is to ask bluntly: what kind of mind generates such imagery, entertains such preposterous explanations of the world, suffers so much (while laughing so loudly, and bringing others to tears of laughter in turn)? Conceivably, a mind running like a slightly damaged mechanism inside a brain with some of its wiring gone wrong: a kind of gifted neuro-electric ant.

The secondary literature on Philip K. Dick is not lacking in attempted explanations for his disarray, which he turned so uncannily into art, if a confused and confusing art. Laura Campbell documents the uses and abuses of the oracular I Ching, Jay Kinney compares and contrasts shamanistic trance and schizophrenia, Gregg Rickman speculates on childhood molestation at the hands of his grandfather, Everettus Kindred (Rickman 1989, 58–59). As Rickman notes, despite Dick’s own claims to schizophrenia and his muddled use of this diagnosis in various novels,

Other, better theories exist to explain his experiences, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative identity disorder (DID) (in earlier psychiatric literature, multiple personality disorder [MPD]), or temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). He suffered none of the key symptoms of schizophrenia. . . .

(Rickman 1995, 146)

Granted, the idioms of depersonalization are a characteristic trope of twentieth-century writing, no doubt reflecting a heightened agony of consciousness in its artists and a wider psychic malaise in anonymous, rootless communities impacted by the double blows of modernity and postmodernity. Seeking a single intrapsychic explanation for this widespread anxiety is an ideological gambit serving to distract attention from the genuine failings and oppressions of a world where people are often
In his *Phantoms of the Brain* (1998), Ramachandran details two somewhat related and extremely rare disorders that hint at something of Dick’s inner condition (although he does not, of course, make any reference to Dick). One is Capgras’s delusion: that those dearest to you have been replaced by identical imposters, or even androids. One patient “was convinced that his stepfather was a robot, proceeded to decapitate him and opened his skull to look for microchips” (166). This affliction sounds eerily and terrifyingly like the plots of so many Dick stories and novels. A striking instance afflicts Jack Bohlen, in *Martian Time-Slip* (1964): He saw the personnel manager in a new light. The man was dead.

He saw, through the man’s skin, his skeleton. It had been wired together, the bones connected, with fine copper wire. The organs, which had withered away, were replaced by artificial components, kidney, heart, lungs—everything was made of plastic and stainless steel, all working in unison but entirely without authentic life. (69)

Bohlen attributes this to a schizophrenic episode, yet the key identity disorder in the novel is autism, almost certainly a by-product of developmental damage. In any event, the explanation for such errors as Capgras’s now seems likely to be neurological rather than psychiatric. Specialized face-recognition neural modules, located in the temporal lobes on both sides of the head, normally send messages to the limbic system deep in the center of the brain (specifically, to the amygdala), where processed data gets charged with emotional color, marking its salience. Ramachandran argues that this link is broken or impaired in victims of Capgras’s, so that the customary “warm glow” we feel on seeing someone close to us (or perhaps “hateful glower” in the case of enemies) is not activated. So the patient sees an expected figure, but one without any hint of an answering emotional tone. Who else can it be but a fake? When we construct the world around us, we largely project outward the tags and mental categories we have imposed on its actors. Hence, the Capgras’s victim (mis)reads this emotional absence as a failure on the part of the other person—even, I suspect, as active malevolence. I do not for a moment suggest that Philip K. Dick suffered from anything as severe as Capgras’s; he had no obvious empathic defects, and Anne said of their early time together: “Phil was the perfect husband . . . a wonderful companion, lover . . . helped with the children and comforted them when they had problems . . . the most considerate, most lovable person I ever met” (Anne Dick, 38–9). But might it not be that his various illnesses and preposterous doses of drugs gradually interfered with his temporal-limbic circuits (a rather Dickian way of putting it, admittedly), so that he, like so many of his characters, sometimes experienced these profound confusions of identity and affect in those he loved best?

A related disorder of the temporal lobes, mentioned by Rickman, sounds even more like Dick’s later life story: epileptiform seizures that trigger visual images of immense intensity, powerful feelings of awe and transcendence, a sense of unity with the All and even a conviction of direct communion with God. Phil fits this description closely—but not altogether, which might have been his partial saving (or might simply falsify my suggestion). Ramachandran notes that temporal-lobe disorders are marked by heightened emotion, a tendency to see cosmic significance in the trivial, to be humorless, full of self-importance, and to maintain elaborate diaries that record quotidian events in elaborate detail—a trait called hypergraphia. Patients have on occasion given me hundreds of pages of written text filled with mystical symbols and notations . . . and they are obsessively preoccupied with philosophical and theological issues. (180)

Dick fits this profile with alarming neatness—except that his self-importance was usually well in hand, and he was the very opposite of humorless. Philip K. Dick, in his writing at least, and by repute in person, was quite remarkably amusing. Here is an extended passage, later recycled very closely into his pre-*Valis* draft novel published posthumously as *Radio Free Albemuth*. It is treated as cyphers and slowly perceive themselves as such. Even so, the degree to which Philip K. Dick figured his world as a treacherous site of masks, labels, imposters, simulacra, and literally crumbling or dissolving realities goes far beyond existential nausea or “literary” hall-of-mirrors disorientation. I would like to suggest a neurological parallel, perhaps supplementing these cultural diagnoses, found in the work of Professor V. S. Ramachandran, who has worked with victims of several extraordinary diseases of the limbic and temporal systems of the brain.

Michael Swanwick

*S is for Smiley Face*

“‘That was the terrible part of the Blitz,’ Albert said. He was an East Ender by birth, and he still remembered. ‘You couldn’t hear the bombs coming.’

I nodded, though I doubt he saw me. We were standing in our back yards, looking up at the moon, talking quietly across the low fence that divided our properties. He went on talking, in that soft, lovely accent of his.

‘There’d be an explosion, right out of nowhere. Buildings destroyed, people dying. And then you’d hear the scream of the V-2 rocket engines. Because they flew faster than sound, you see. First it hit, and then you heard it coming in.’ He shuddered. ‘Terrible.’

He fell silent.

The moon was new, and waning. It looked like a silver letter C turned backwards. Or else a slim Cheshire-cat smile flipped over on its side. In the dark seas were two bright sparks of light, like eyes.

‘Tell me something,’ Albert said. ‘I couldn’t quite follow the explanation on the TV. If there’s only one reaction or explosion or whatever you-call-it, then how come there’re two lights there? It doesn’t seem to make any sense.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘You followed what they said about that being an uncontrolled nuclear reaction, the result of the process they used to create and launch the hypermassive ballistic—’

‘Yes, yes, all of that. But why should there be two lights when there’s only one reaction?’

‘All that mass acts as a gravitational lens—any light coming from directly behind it is going to be bent passing near, and since it’s coming directly at us . . .’

Albert sighed. ‘Well, it hardly matters, eh? Still, it’s good to see it coming, inmit? When you consider the alternative.’

‘I’ll have to think about that for a bit.’ I turned away from the moon, put my hand on the door. ‘Good night, Albert.’

‘Good night, Michael.’

Good night, moon.
necessary to give it at length, as Phil’s anecdotal humor is quiet, sly, insinuating; it builds, paying off not in a belly-laugh (although that is always lurking in Dick’s work and zany nomenclature) but in a warm, smiling sense of ditzy insight. As Michael Andre-Driussi notes, you can come away shaking your head, muttering for reasons more than one, “That Phil!”

In 1968, Anthony Boucher (William Anthony Parker White), the shy, literate editor of the Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, where many of Dick’s best early stories appeared, died at 57 of cancer. Boucher was a Catholic, devoted to opera, poker, sf, and mystery fiction. Phil learned that Tony had survived death in an unusual way, especially for a Catholic:

My cat had begun to behave in an odd way, keeping watch over me in a quiet fashion, and I saw that he had changed. This was after he ran away and returned wild and dirty, crapping on the rug in fear; we took him to the vet and the vet calmed him down and healed him. After that, Pinky had what I call a spiritual quality, except that he wouldn’t eat meat. . . . he wouldn’t do anything cruel. Yet I knew Pinky was afraid, because once I almost shut the refrigerator door on him and he did a three-cushion bank shot of himself off the walls to escape, and cocked a velocity unique for a pink sheeplike thing that usually just sat and gazed ahead. . . . Pinky died of cancer suddenly; he was three years old, very young for a cat. . . .

I hadn’t realized Pinky was Tony Boucher, out of love served up by the universe again, until I had this dream about Tony the Tiger, the cereal box character who offers you Sugar Frosted Flakes. In my dream I stood at one end of a light-struck glade, and at the other end a great tiger came out slowly, with delight, and I knew we were together again. Tony the Tiger and me. My joy was unbounded. When I woke up I tried to think who I knew named Tony. I had other strange

Read This

Recently read and recommended by Michael Andre-Driussi:

Little Proust on the Prairie, or Take a Walk on the Wilder Side:

The “Little House” series of books for children (age 12+) forms a large chunk of contemporary American cultural heritage (primarily among females—Tiresias says, “Check it out”). Based upon the first hand experience of a girl growing up in the Great Plains during the American migrations, it has been shaped, softened, tinted into a near mythic mode, and constitutes a search for lost time.

Little House in the Big Woods (1932)

The epic begins in Wisconsin. Laura Ingalls (born in 1867) is a little girl, maybe three or four years old. Many tales within the tale—the magic of early childhood. Laura expresses herself openly, unguardedly. We smile at her innocence of towns (buildings in proximity, simple shops as full of wonder as Ali Baba’s treasure cave), we are surprised by her knowledge of the wilds (she knows what every forest animal tastes like—and she prefers bear! O Arduina, O Callisto!).

Little House on the Prairie (1935)

The Ingalls family moves into Indian Territory (which will later become Kansas). In the semi-fairy tale landscape of this epic, the American Indians have the place of the fairies: mysterious, alien, wise, rude, virile, and doomed. At one point Laura is deeply moved by the sight of an Indian woman riding a pony with a baby on her back. She wants both—but mainly the pony.

After about a year the government makes the settlers move out and away.

Farmer Boy (1933)

Meanwhile, Almanzo Wilder (Laura’s future husband) is growing up on a farm in New York. Hard-working farmers, but quite prosperous—practically princes in their town, certainly wealthy compared to the Ingallses. (That Almanzo’s brother’s name is “Royal” adds to the sense that the family is “noble.”) We see Almanzo begin the training in animal handling that will make his own character as horseman.

On the Banks of Plum Creek (1937)
The seemingly cursed Ingalls family try living in Minnesota. The sod house, like a hobbit hole, followed by a house of fresh planks. With school days and Nellie Oleson, social class is introduced into the Epic: Good Lord, the Ingallses are a bunch of Snopes!

Laura has become more oblique, submerging and obscuring her passions, yet she still lures her enemy Nellie into the leech pool.

A plague of locusts, then a prairie fire, wipe out everything—time to move again.

By the Shores of Silver Lake (1939)

As if the locusts weren’t enough, Laura’s elder sister Mary is blinded by disease between books. The Ingalls family follows the railroad camp, making good money and avoiding trouble. Things are looking up! Laura rides a pony bareback. The Ingalls family arrives at De Smet (in what will become South Dakota), the brand new town that they will finally settle in. At her first glimpse of her future husband, she has eyes only for his beautiful horses.

The Long Winter (1940)
The grim volume. Almanzo and Laura are living in the same town now, though how and why Almanzo’s family left “York State” where they were so prosperous remains unstated.

Basically the winter comes early, stays late, and the town comes close to starving. But Almanzo has the seed grain necessary to stake his land claim in the spring, and he grudgingly doles some out to Pa Ingalls when cagy Pa finds where it is hidden. (If this were a movie set in China of the same time period, the movie would be A Thousand Pieces of Gold where the one daughter is sold to provide food for the rest of the family. Did Pa Ingalls make a similar bargain?) Then Almanzo becomes the hero who saves the town by riding his horse out and back through a blizzard with more grain.

Little Town on the Prairie (1941)

In 1881 Laura is fourteen years old and working hard, sewing for money. Miss Wilder (Laura’s future sister-in-law) briefly teaches her class before she’s run out for being too nice. Almanzo begins to visit Laura, who has turned into a top student. And how did he get such a name as Almanzo? Well, an ancestor brought it back from the Crusades (!), from helping an Arab, and since then there has always been an “Almanzo” in the family. (See, the prince has pedigree, stretching back seven or eight hundred years.) Almanzo being such a long name, his nickname is “Manly”; and manly he is.

Laura’s hard work in school pays off and she gets her teaching certificate at the age of fifteen.

These Happy Golden Years (1943)

Laura teaches school in the next town, far from home and boarding in a house where the wife is wiggling out over the stresses of frontier living. But then Laura goes back home to finish her own education (i.e., graduate) and things slow down into a golden stasis. Senior year as a bug in amber. Ending with her long anticipated marriage to Manly, with just a hint of Cinderella and
experiences after Pinky died. . . .

Tony or Pinky, I guess names don’t count, was a lousy hunter all his life. One time he caught a gopher and ran up our apartment stairs with it. He placed it in his dish, where he was fed, because that was orderly, and of course the gopher got up at once and ran off. Tony felt that things belonged in their places, being an obsessively tidy person, his enormous collection of books and records was arranged in the same way—each object in its proper place, and a proper place for each object. He should have tolerated more chaos in the universe. However, he caught the gopher and ate it all, except the teeth.

(Dick in Sutin, 26–7)

When Dick became ill with pneumonia in 1972 and 1973, Pinky attended him in bed. “When the pain was really bad, Pinky used to lie on my body until I realized that he was trying to figure out which part of me was sick. He knew it was just one part, around the middle of my body. He did his best and I recovered but he did not. That was my friend” (ibid., 27). Like vonnegut’s, this is humor so piercing that it can bring tears to the eyes. Around this time, Phil had a vision of death’s arrival in his apartment that terrified him into repeated prayerful Latin ejaculations, to his wife Tessa’s irritation. Of course death had not come for Phil, not that time. He transforms this recollection (if that is what it is; if he has not invented it wholesale), in chapter 26 of Radio Free Albemuth.

Lying in my place on the bed I realized that no one could see the pale light but me; Pinky dozed, Rachel dozed, Johnny snored in his sleep . . . it filled all spaces equally and made every object strikingly clear. What is this? I wondered, and a deep fear filled me. It was as if the presence of death had entered the room.

The light became so bright that I could make out every detail around me. The slumbering woman, the little boy, the

Prince Charming. Here’s their new dream house, here are the beautiful horses they rode for pleasure on the long summer days.

“She’s leaving home, bye-bye.” Bittersweet, we realize only now at the end that these eight volumes were of her childhood. End of original series.

When Marcel Proust (1871–1922) died, he left the last three sections of his massive work In Search of Lost Time in a comparatively raw, unvarnished state. By coincidence, the original Little House series is followed by three slim volumes, published after the death of Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867–1957).

The First Four Years (1968)

This was to be the sequel to These Happy Golden Years. Wilder wrote the first draft in the late 1940s but lost interest in it after Almanzo died.

Our revision of Laura’s world begins with a different version of the events leading to the marriage between Laura and Almanzo. For starters, Laura refuses him at first, saying that she never wanted to marry a farmer. She only agrees when he promises to quit farming if she says to quit trying it for three years.

Remember their beautiful little house described in These Happy Golden Years? They only get to live in it for a year. And the government mandated tree farm! It fails.

Laura has baby Rose. There is a creepy scene when the Wilders visit the Boasts, a family known by Laura since the days of By the Shores of Silver Lake, with many happy episodes; yet now Mr. Boast tries to buy Rose in exchange for the best horse in the stable.

Then in the third year comes the diphtheria which basically cripples Almanzo for the rest of his life.

The fourth year sees the birth and death of their second baby, as well as the impending farming failure, and the destruction of their homestead by fire. Laura becomes a housekeeper to provide shelter for her family.

On the Way Home (1962)

Our next stage of unvarnishing is the diary of Laura on their trip in 1894 from De Smet (the Little Town) to their final homestead in the Ozarks. This short text is more akin to The Travels of Marco Polo—strange towns, foreigners, and everywhere catalogs of crops and prices. And people on the move, in all directions, looking for a better place. Even people from the Ozarks heading to De Smet.

Added to the travelogue is a prologue and an epilogue by Laura’s daughter Rose. Rose, a new voice emerging from the text, perhaps even the ghost writer of all the books, at the very least a strong influence on them. To set the context she tells of the Panic of 1893, the marauding Coxeys’ Armies of Unemployed who were hijacking trains to travel from California to Washington, D.C., the Federal troops guarding government buildings. The Old West of the epic gets a little bit “wilder.”

More revision: we see sides of Laura we haven’t seen before. The fierce temper of her childhood might not have been so entirely smoothed away into “ladylike” behavior as we were led to believe. And there are some sharp moments between the husband and wife that alter our perception of this couple.

West from Home (1974)

Laura leaves the nineteenth century, comes to visit her grown and married daughter Rose Wilder Lane in San Francisco, 1915—this book is her letters to Almanzo who stayed behind to tend the farm. For me suddenly the barriers broke down—worlds in collision—Laura stepped out of the past, slipped out of the books and was ranging freely about in the region I live in (Callisto roaming in the Bear State!). Reminding us again that time continues flowing on, that the pioneer girl grew up, that the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth.

Another veil rendered—this person we call Laura was known by her husband and daughter as “Mama Bessie” (!), because of the fact that Manly has a sister named “Laura” (!), and she cannot be known by her middle name “Elizabeth” because Manly has another sister named “Elizabeth” (this was the sister who briefly taught school in Little Town on the Prairie) (!). Again—“Laura” was her pre-marriage name. “Laura” was the girl, the maiden, the Cinderella. In writing about “Laura,” Mama Bessie and/or Rose Wilder Lane is/are looking back at a time, a place, and a person who is gone. And there, in San Francisco, with her only child who is all-but-divorced (another secret you’ll find out somewhere else), Mama Bessie sees the statue of Pioneer Woman that we know so well, and even though it will be another fifteen years before she writes Little House in the Big Woods. I want her to say, “That is where it began, the idea for Pioneer Girl. Seeing that statue.”

This then is the distillation of eleven books that are a significant part of American cultural heritage, as learned by generations of children:

Life is hard. But upon reflection, the hardships suffered in childhood were endured with a child’s natural faith in her parents and the belief of growing into a wonderful potential that the future seemed to offer—one is strengthened by the blows, and she will emerge triumphant; whereas the hardships faced as an adult prove crippling—one cannot match the humble standards of living achieved by her parents, let alone do better. And in the end, we can only look back and marvel, recapturing the bittersweet essences of lost time.
sleeping cat—they seemed etched or painted, unable to move, pitilessly revealed by the light. And in addition something looked down at us as we lay as if on a purely two-dimensional surface; something which traveled and made use of three dimensions studied us creatures limited to two. . . .

We were being judged, I realized. (177–78)

That perspectival shift, that top-down view of himself and his loved ones, is commonly reported in near-death experiences. Psychologists such as Susan Blackmore explain it as unusual access to a partial perceptual construct of self and surrounds, perhaps related to the celebrated two-and-a-half-dimension model of vision proposed by cognitive scientist David Marr. We form, in inaccessible and hence normally unconscious parts of our visual imaging systems, a kind of wire-frame portrait or composition of our immediate universe, and orient ourselves in it by reference to other sensory inputs: the kinesthetic cues from the muscles, the balance mechanism of the inner ear, the depth cues and inferences of the eyes, differential access to the sounds around us. Lying near sleep or dazed by injury, motionless, it is possible to become momentarily aware of this interior sketch, to find oneself decoupled from the constructed sense of immersion in solidity. The out-of-body illusion tells us we are gazing down from the ceiling, or wafting about the room. In the absence of feedback from the empirical world, fantasy and confabulation start to create their illusive narratives. For a mind primed for Gnostic wonders and terrors, it is not altogether surprising, perhaps, to see death enter the room, or perhaps even an eye-slotted, steel-toothed visage glaring from the heavens.

Most interesting to us as readers of fiction, of course, is what Philip K. Dick did with these perceptual aberrations. Their causation is intriguing, and the more we know about it the better placed we are to evaluate their oracular significance (unless mystical truth is delivered from a higher power via a malfunctioning temporal lobe), but finally what is important, as always, is the text, the writing, the reading, and rereading. Phil Dick had privileged access to the transreal condition, probably due to a damaged but brilliantly inventive and comic brain; it is through his imaginary worlds, and the often charmingly winsome words he used to note them for us—flapjacks, police officers, apteryx-shaped buildings—that we can recover what is most valuable in his work: its transrealist transform of his pain, his witty strange running commentary on experience quotidian and bizarre, his heart. Which failed him in so many ways, and finally killed him.

Easy Travel to Other Planets

It might seem that choosing god-dazzled crypto-theologians like Dick and Rucker as the prime exemplars of transrealism is simply shooting fish in a barrel. On the other hand, both are patent writers with unusual access to the inner cartoons and constructional apparatus of the mind, so their quotidian routine, transcribed, already possesses a joltingly odd-ball character. On the other hand, both make no bones about drawing almost nakedly on their biographies. Certain in Dick’s case, this becomes clearer with every memoir and published study of his half century of life. In *The Search for Philip K. Dick, 1928–1982*, Phil’s third wife (who still calls herself Anne R. Dick) acknowledges her own astonishment when she grasped just how undisguised his fictional versions could be. “I re-read all his novels and stories through twice in chronological order—sometimes laughing out loud with delight as they took me back in time to the late ’50s and early ’60s. I realized those books were autobiographical—unbelievably revealing—and packed with the everyday detail of our lives.” Nor were these moments of recognition found only in the mainstream novels; close and emotionally charged observation of his own life and that of the people he loved and hurt are exactly what energizes Phil Dick’s imaginative trash-boilers, enabling them to speak to us as only transrealist writing can do.

Still, the question remains: is this claim so startling? What else would you expect? Anne Dick’s memoir is introduced by Benjamin Gross, M.D., a retired psychiatrist and Fromm Professor of Literature and Psychology at the University of San Francisco. He offers the rather tiresome observation that the people, places, and incidents in Phil’s life were “filtered through his creative imagination” to be transformed into fiction, unsurprisingly since “all fiction writing is, of course, autobiographical. It is simply a matter of how much disguise the author, consciously or otherwise, introduces into the work” (vii). Quite, but work produced within the straitjacket of commercial genre requirements needs no great effort of disguise; the pieces are at hand, the main features of the narrative landscape are laid out in advance; the game can proceed with no greater intimate revelation than a game of Monopoly—a trope borrowed ingeniously, but without great depth, in Dick’s own 1962 novel *The Game Players of Titan*. Both Rucker and Dick break free of rote, to the extent that they do, exactly by insinuating the fractal chatter of Real Reality™, its skirrishing and inconsistencies and multiple self-similar levels, into the often constrained and formulaic inventions of their chosen mode.

Dick’s use of his own life-world and its inhabitants, both faithfully

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Use This

Recently acquired and put to work by David G. Hartwell:

I have just examined a copy of the *Science Fiction Magazine Story Index, 1926–1995* by Terry A. Murray (Scarecrow Press, $65.00, 637 pages). This attractively typeset reference volume is an impressive and (not surprisingly for a project growing out of fannish obsession) odd volume, that is nevertheless a required book for any literary historian of sf or literary historical sf collection, utterly essential for any magazine collector, and a pleasure for fannish reading.

All that being said, this book is most useful only in the company of two or three other major reference works: the Contenko Index of short fiction, the MIT and Day indexes of sf magazines, and the Ashley volume on the sf magazines. This book lists only the fiction contents of the magazine issues (no poetry, non-fiction, letters, etc.) and is organized alphabetically by magazine title, then issue-by-issue listings in order of contents within. Each issue has a code number (4943 in all), and the author and title indices list these numbers only. To make up, in part, for the frustration of finding only a name and a string of numbers for each entry in the author index, there is in addition an index of prolific authors, with titles (but no numbers—you then have to go to the title index to find the number to find the magazine issue). Some things are easier to look up in Contenko, others easier in Day or in the MIT or NESFA indices. In a departure from other indices, it treats paperback and hardback serial volumes (*Destinies, Orbit*) as magazines, and this makes it more useful, but Murray only included those titles he owned. His apologies in the Introduction for leaving out some relatively common series anthologies, and many British magazine titles, are pleasant and the mark of dedicated amateurism, not professional bibliography.

This book could have superseded some or all of the magazine indices, but does not in its present form. And the indexing is harebrained—the editor should be shot for allowing it. Or perhaps the decision was imposed from above by a cost-cutting publisher, in which case the publisher seriously underestimated the profitability of a slightly larger, slightly more expensive, but more easily used and more definitive volume.

Most of all this volume whets the appetite for that utopian CD that really does index all the magazines and all the original anthologies. Now wouldn’t that be something!
transcribed and warped or shaped to his artistic purposes, has become increasingly and painfully clear with Anne Dick’s interviews, conducted after Phil’s death, among his school friends, some of the Scannor Darkly survivors (including Kathy and Linda), other wives, former lovers, adult male friends. The parallels are abundant, and while allowance needs to be made for Anne’s own grinding axes and defensiveness, the shadings are patently colored to Dick’s advantage. Introducing the first of his mainstream novels to achieve publication, Confessions of a Crap Artist, Paul Williams observed: “The reality of Philip Dick’s characters stems quite simply from the fact that they are real to him; he hears them talking, in his mind, and records their conversations and thought—his dialogue, in almost all his novels, is excellent” (Williams vii). And the reason they are real to him is that quite often they are real: Keo readily identified in several novels people she and Phil had known, such as “Mary” in The Broken Bubble, who “really existed . . . she taught Philip about sex. Philip was in love with her for a short time” (Anne Dick 342), not a particular distinguishing feature. His boss Herb Hollis and workmates at University Radio are represented in many of the sf novels, as is Anne’s father-in-law, who appears as Leo Bulero in Palmer Eldritch and other confident businessmen and wheeler-dealers. Still, what is it that motivates this transform into science fiction rather than some other mode, or mimetic realism simpler? It is insufficient to point to Dick’s many failed efforts to gain mainstream publication and success. He himself knew the sui generis value for his work of sf. Toward the end of his truncated life, he wrote in a free-form and rather self-mythologizing introduction to a short story collection, The Golden Man (1980), that his incentive might be rage against the heedless cruelty of a God that had permitted so many of his friends to die, and horribly:

I want to write about people I love, and put them in a fictional world spun out of my own mind, not the world we actually have because the world we actually have does not meet my standards. Okay, so I should revise my standards; I’m out of step. I should yield to reality. I have never yielded to reality. That’s what is all about. If you wish to yield to reality, go read Philip Roth; read the New York literary establishment mainstream best-selling writers. But you are reading sf and I am writing it for you. I want to show you, in my writing, what I love (my friends) and what I savagely hate (what happens to them). (Dick in Sutin 86)

More than personnel are lifted from reality; the drag of entropy that assails the typical Philidick landscape tore repeatedly at his own domestic situation. (As it does, too, by the way, in the fiction of Philip Roth; plainly it is uncharitable and perhaps imperceptive of Dick to deny Roth’s work its powerful challenge to status quo reality.) When his marriage to Anne was in its final crisis, “everything in the house was breaking. The dishwasher broke, the oven broke, one of the burners on the range broke, the washer-drier broke (although it was always breaking), the couch springs suddenly sagged to the floor—the whole house was falling to pieces” (Anne Dick, 126). The Tomb World was no longer just a category fromBinswanger’s existential psychiatry; it was the dismal tenor of their decaying lives. As his life deteriorated over the next decades, the disarray of his own sexual and emotional being took odd turns. Talking to Joan Simpson, a mid-30s psychiatric social worker he took up with in 1977, Phil remarked “that, of the older girls, he’d always loved Jayne the best. It was Jayne he should’ve married, not Hatte. When Joan told me this in 1983, we both looked at each other with a kind of amazed horror” (252). The unusual codependency relationships and loathingly endured marriages of his fiction are all too plainly reworkings and pleas for mitigation, or perhaps simply self-centered reconstructions, based quite closely on his complex lived reality. That provides the latter half of his transrealist project; it is his, wryly, endlessly playful and inventive imagination that does the work of fantastical transformation, making his universe very much more than a coded case history.

That provides the key to the obverse side of transrealism, the need for, and preeminent value of, just those gaudy, trashy science-fictional tropes and gadgets, all the narrative devices and opportunities of the sf megatext that are excluded from mundane fiction. Dick is the classic instance demonstrating how denuded his textuality became—however gratifying, in its own terms, it remains—when he attempted traditional or literary forms. His numerous mainstream novels, almost all of them now in print, possess a reduced reality, oddly enough. Mackey comments:

His style is still economical and distinctive, and his characters are beset by the same kinds of unhappy marriages and restless questioning for meaning . . . we find in his science fiction . . . . His characteristic humor and irony remain, if in somewhat mutated form, but one has the feeling he has had to rein in his normally uninhibited and outrageous imagination in order to adapt his vision to the mainstream’s conception of ordinary reality.

(Mackey 31)

Perhaps Dick had been spoiled (in both senses) by his early free access to the demented and excessive stage sets and narrative tool box of sf. Other, later writers—Vonnegut, Pynchon, Barth, all the slipstreamers—found ways to enrich their literary heritage without falling headlong into the genre’s candid phantasmatogoria. Those writers with the sheer ability to move and release sophisticated readers beyond sf’s inevitably somewhat childish half-world, wordsmiths as talented as Theodore Sturgeon, Damon Knight, Algis Budrys, Dick himself, seem to have found themselves trapped (to borrow a metaphor from current evolutionary theory) on a suboptimal peak in the fitness landscape of narrative space. Species often evolve certain adaptations which cannot be abandoned without cost, blocking superior moves in a kind of noxious “fitness space,” insects, for instance, cannot grow very large without throttling themselves, such is their basic design. Stuart Kaufman, investigating the origins of order and novelty in evolution, makes the very general point that “Boolean network space is full of local optima which trap adaptive walks. . . . Adaptation via fitter variants in network space becomes grossly hindered by the rugged structur of the landscape. Walks become frozen into small regions of the space” (214). Perhaps sf writers tend to doom themselves to a kind of pinned-off narrative spacetime, almost by definition unavailable to most readers who fear its singularity and isolation. It is a rather Dickian conceit.

Bruce Gillespie, one of the first commentators to understand the richness and value of Philip K. Dick’s fiction, finds his non-sf at once thinner and too painful. Discussing The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike, Gillespie remarks that without sf’s metaphors to transform its “intensely detailed account of the battle between two families” it seems “too painful to read. One feels that there should be a filter between such emotional reportage and the reader . . . . no general truth can be derived from such painful separate truths.” Still, of Mary and the Giant, Gillespie asserts: “Even Flaubert could not give a more accurate portrait of small-time people trying to be big-time . . . . Phil Dick committed himself to putting on paper the life of his own time—and nobody wanted to publish him” (ibid.). He was a dirty realist avant le lettre, although lacking, as Gillespie notes, the lyrical gifts of an Anne Tyler or Raymond Carver.

The merit of Dick’s non-sf, then, is that all action springs from character, rather than from externalized menace (precognitive doom, robotic simulacra, slime molds from outer space, the crushing pressure of entropy itself). Against Kim Stanley Robinson’s claim that the non-sf novels lack Dick’s saving and wonderful humor, Gillespie asserts the contrary: this is “the humor of incongruity” which “springs from the inconsistence between the way people see themselves and the way they seem to other people and, of course, the much-amused author.” One might add that Dick’s special gift is a portrayal of transactional lapse, the sort of effect that made Harold Pinter’s name around the same time: the syncope, gaps, evasions between uttered sentences, the decisions taken after agencies of doubt only to be rescinded in an afterthought, to a background dirge of shruggingly humorous despair.

Yet, as Gillespie notes acutely, drawing upon biographical detail in Sutin, the deep, strange truth of Dick’s perception of the world is better located in his apparently fanciful sf than in the meticulous mimetic renderings of his small-town or suburban non-sf. “Behind ordinary life in an ordinary American town lies something else altogether . . . . What we find in Time Out of Joint is that the bits and pieces of a science fiction superstructure, which gradually invade Ragel Gunn’s consciousness,
are actually more autobiographical, more real to the author than the accurately drawn worlds he presents in the non-sf novels." This is precisely the effect of transrealism, and perhaps implies why it is not the narrative tool for all writers. A certain dislocation from consensus reality in the originating experience is needed, a detachment and even a somewhat delirious reworking that cannot be willed but needs to be known autonomously, from within. Transrealism is, after all, as Rucker suggests, a species of transcendental biography.

How can this recipe be distinguished from surrealism, or from the random or archetypal world-re-writings of the drug addictions and the insane? By its ironic and playful devotion to the consensus (if glacially or catastrophically mutable) realities of science. Again, we face a kind of paradox. Why did Dick's mainstream novels fail to sell, let alone make his literary name? Because, Gillespie claims, "in them Dick was constantly pulling back from what he really wanted to say. This constraint improved his formal style, and the non-sf novels have little of the melodramatic flourishes that threaten to destroy so many of the sf novels. But having learned his craft, of showing the underlying reality of things through surface appearances, Dick had trained himself to write the sf novels, in which he could tell his own truth" (ibid.). The downside, the failure, of Dick's own oeuvre is perhaps that in the end he lost transrealist touch with any respect for the consensus world beyond his own idiosyncratic truth, which after all is not true—there is no cosmic artificial intelligence governing our lives, the Roman Empire actually has ended (even if new perfidies have replaced it), the antitropes of a mind under extreme stress—exactly the material of the surrealists—do not best account for the profound machineries of the world.

Damien Broderick transcends reality in Melbourne, Australia. This article will appear as part of the forthcoming study Transrealist Fiction: Writing in the Slipstream of Science, Greenwood Press (2000).

Endnotes

1. For more on Jameson and postmodernism as it relates to sf, see my entry "Postmodernism and SF" in Clute and Nicholls 1993, page 50, and the more extensive discussion, with notes and sources, in my Reading by Starlight, 1995.

2. This quotation is from Dick's The Dark-Haired Girl, a posthumous collection of letters and dreams by Dick from about 1972, plus two lengthy speeches he prepared on the topics of androids versus humans and the problem of authenticity.


—“Introduction to The Golden Man,” reprinted in Sutin, 86.


—VALIS. New York, Bantam, 1981.


Gillespie, Bruce. The Non-Science Fiction Novels of Philip K. Dick (1928–82), *bryg* [fanzine], No. 1, October 1990.

—Personal communication with the author, 26 January 1999.


Palmer, Christopher, personal communication with the author, 5 February 1999.


Turner, George, in Gillespie 1995.

"Stinger is advertised on the front flap as a "biomedical thriller," which description places it within the same literary subgenre as most of Robin Cook's novels and some of Michael Crichton's (the species of which it is a subdivision being the "technothriller" sector of the thriller genre). The fact that technothrillers are defined by their use of innovative technological motifs brings them close to the edge of the science-fiction genre, overlapping the activities of sf writers who borrow elements of the narrative structure of the thriller in order to capitalize on the dramatic suspense innate within the relevant generic formula.

The thriller formula is not very far removed from the standard "law enforcement" formula which dominates the various kinds of crime fiction and the various kinds of TV series drama. It requires that the plot's central motif—a technological innovation in the technothriller variant—should be presented to the virtuous characters as a puzzle and a threat. Although the heroes of thrillers are often policemen, secret agents, or civil servants, the conventional thinking of contemporary plot strategy frequently place them in the junior ranks of the relevant hierarchies. This facilitates a "double jeopardy" tactic whereby their attempts to meet the challenges presented to them can be frustrated or blocked by their superiors, often to the extent that they suffer exclusion and isolation. In many modern thrillers, therefore, the bureaucratic apparatus of a supposedly virtuous organization is mobilized against its own heroic operatives, thus amplifying the insidiousness and apparent irresistibility of the threats which provide the suspense element of the plot. The thriller formula demands, however, that the puzzle must eventually be solved, the threat neutralized, and the challenge overcome; normalizing endings are compulsory.

The application of this formula to hypothetical technologies requires that the relevant innovations should serve a sinister function within the story. They have to be deployed as instruments of menace, and in the conclusion of each story they must be carefully tidied away. Although some popular writers within the genre (e.g. Michael Crichton) really do seem to think that all technology is inherently sinister and that most scientists are dangerous morons who neither know nor care what they do, those with more than half a brain recognize that because knowledge itself is morally neutral, the invocation of technologies as a plot device designed to serve malign ends requires the further invention of malign manufacturers, who must serve as the overt or covert villains of the piece.

In the first phase of the technothriller's evolution—which extended from the espionage and world blackmail stories of the 1920s to the 1970s—international politics laid on a ready supply of villains for English-language writers. Throughout this period there were incipiently hostile nations with evident technological clout, and anxieties about the implicit xenophobia of the genre were relatively muted. Writers who felt that Germans and Russians were inherently dull could always invent international crime syndicates to serve their steed. For good or ill, the entire mythos of that kind of thriller fiction died with the end of the Cold War.

Modern thriller writers have to work much harder to find serviceable villains than their forebears, and technothriller writers have to work even harder than the rest. The evident technical superiority of the U.S.A., coupled with the awesome success of cultural coca-colonization, has forced the American thriller writer in search of suitable villains to look much closer to home. Unfortunately, making villains of the CIA, Big Business, and insurance companies tends to impart a political spin to thrillers which can easily prejudice popularity, and hence profitability. The result of this uneasy situation is that the notion of a "Secret Government" operating independently of formal democratic, corporate, and military structures has inevitably been elevated, if only for a while, to the status of Champion Cliché, maintaining a comfortable lead over the silver medal-winning Psycho Terrorist—cum—Mad Genius. (The fact that the bronze medal position is still securely held by the Nazis is ample testimony to the poverty of real competition.) Any writer wishing to avoid or ameliorate these clichés has his or her work cut out.

Stinger tells the story of an outbreak of a genetic engineered version of the malarial parasite in the southern states of the U.S.A. Unlike the natural version, which cannot invade "sickled" blood cells—an incapacity which gave individuals heterozygous for the sickle-cell gene a selective advantage in malaria-infested countries for thousands of years—the engineered Plasmodium actually selects out sickled cells for attack, and does so with such alacrity as to produce stroke-inducing clots. The story's two protagonists are minor operatives in the FBI and the World Health Organization, both of whom are turfed out of the official investigation because they will not meet the standards of diplomacy required by their careful superiors—standards made ticklish by the fact that the vast majority of American residents carrying the sickle-cell gene are of African descent, most of the remainder being from the Indian subcontinent.

The trail followed by these two renegade investigators, as they doggedly pursue the evidence of the aborted plague's origins that their superiors seem determined to discount, leads them inexorably towards Fort Detrick and the CIA, although WHO also seems to be implicated. This process might have been a little more suspenseful and disquieting had the reader not been afforded—by courtesy of the initial "teaser" chapter with which all thrillers nowadays come equipped—the privilege of knowing that the initial release of infected mosquitoes in Maryland was accidental, and cannot therefore be calculated at attempt at what is nowadays called "ethnic cleansing" (although Kress refuses to use that particular euphemism, presumably on the grounds that it is guiltily hypocritical). In consequence, the "surprise" which reveals the actual guilty party inevitably falls a bit flat.

If it is considered as a whole, the technothriller subgenre cannot help giving the impression that all technological innovations are bad, if only because most of the people interested in their deployment are malevolent. It nourishes and sustains the paranoid delusion that the world is chock full of conscienceless scientists engaged in the manufacture of malevolent technology on behalf of evil masters. The problem for technothriller writers who want to retain some semblance of political sanity, faith in the possibility of progress, and narrative plausibility is that this tacit technophobia makes it terribly difficult to discover an adequate lever with which to move the plot and provide it with a satisfactory conclusion. Kress does try, but cannot succeed.

It would be unfair to give away the crucial plot twist of Stinger, even though it is a mere face-saving device rather than an authentically ingenious solution to the hypothetical mystery, but I have to admit that I thought it frankly preposterous as well as inept. Perhaps this is an unimportant criticism, given that I have never read a technothriller whose ultimate revelation seemed anything but preposterous and inept, but I shall cling stubbornly to my conviction that this sort of fault is worth mentioning even if it has no apparent effect on the enjoyment which readers who like this sort of thing obtain from it. To complain that in spite of its attempts to put on a dutiful show of political correctness the implicit technophobia of the subgenre is here supplemented, just as it is in most other examples, by a tacit xenophobia, would probably be equally redundant—after all, nine out of every ten movies in this subgenre are carefully equipped with villains played by European actors in order to avoid blackening the image and reputation of American ham.

"All You Movers—"

. . . please remember to send us a change of address card, lest we lose you forever.
If science fiction has any merits as a genre (i.e., over and above idiosyncratic literary merits which individual examples might display), they must surely include the fact that science fiction, seen as a collective entity, cannot help insisting that the future is a limitless spectrum of competing possibilities, whose Utopian potential must at least take account of technological progress, and might in fact be entirely dependent on technological progress. Science fiction which serves the cause of the genre as a whole is fundamentally technophilic and xenophilic even when it is cautionary or alarmist, and that fundamental technophilia and xenophilia is the genre’s main claim to social usefulness.

If, however, recent patterns in British publishing are to be duplicated in America, the cause in question may well be on the brink of being lost, and it may well be that those sf writers who feel that they must live (an imperative which Voltaire would not necessarily have recognized) might be wise to take up writing techthrillers instead. They may do so in the secure confidence that no red-blooded, red-necked, and red-skinning American would ever dream of accusing them of intellectual treason.

As Nancy Kress and everyone else in the world knows perfectly well, mosquitoes are not equipped with stings—but if a title sounds okay, who the hell cares what’s true and what’s not?

Brian Stableford lives in Reading, England.

**Bloom by Wil McCarthy**

*New York: Ballantine/Del Rey, 1998; $23.95 hc, 320 pages*

Reviewed by Philip E. Smith

Wil McCarthy’s *Bloom*, his fifth and best novel, is a narrative of high adventure—a first-person account of a risky space expedition threatened by human treachery and an encounter with a dangerous, multifarious nanotech life-form—written with a commitment to intelligent, hard sf manifested in the details of setting, language, and imagined technologies.

McCarthy has published a sizable body of fiction since the mid-1990s. His first and fourth novels, *Aggressor Six* (1994) and *The Fall of Sirius* (1996), are set in a single fictional universe. *Aggressor Six* imagines how humanity might defend against an overwhelming alien invasion by imitating the enemy’s social structure and patterns of warfare. In *The Fall of Sirius*, when the aliens come again, McCarthy turns the tables by having the aliens reject their human imitators and focus instead on learning from the human culture they almost obliterated. His third novel, *Flies from the Amber*, features some even more inscrutable aliens who emerge from the event horizon of a black hole and return without explaining themselves. McCarthy, like the Strugatsky brothers in *Roadside Picnic* (1972; tr. 1977), focuses on the variety of human hopes, fears, and curiosities stirred up by the aliens and their artifacts. There are continuities among all three novels, for example, McCarthy’s interest in languages (How might English evolve over the centuries? What would happen in a space colony founded by Esperanto speakers?), his focus on the astronomical locations and the astrophysics of space travel, and his increasing sophistication with characterization, especially in attributing actions to motivations which are complicatedly human rather than simply melodramatic. The one ringer in the bunch is his third novel, *Murder in the Solid State* (1996), which unconvincingly imagines a near-future nanopunk setting as the site of a comic mystery-adventure-caper story with a scientist/nerd as hero. To this point in his career, McCarthy had established himself as a solid midlist writer focused on plausible settings and capable characters. With *Bloom*, he moves towards a more complex consideration of theme and, with a believable first-person narrator, he improves his handling and integration of action, setting, and characterization.

*Bloom* is set early in the twenty-second century after a world-absorbing profusion of mycorum, a deadly, man-made, all-consuming technogenic organism, has driven the remnants of humanity off the earth. They have resettled in the refuge of the Immunity, a handful of habitats built among the outer asteroids and the moons of Jupiter. Even at such a distance from what has become the inner Mycosystem, there is no safety; spores of mycorum are blown outward by the solar wind, penetrating the defenses of the Immunity and causing sudden panic when a bloom proliferates. The novel begins with a disastrous incident of mycorum contamination which causes hundreds of deaths inside the city of Innensburg on Ganymede.

The Immunity, torn by internal debates over whether to build a starship to save humanity by leaving the solar system, or to study and even worship the Mycosystem, or to stand and fight by nuking the contagion, must find out just how evolved the Mycosystem has become. The disastrous Innensburg bloom sets the stage for the introduction of McCarthy’s central character, John Straheim, a writer assigned as mission historian and reporter on the first expedition back to the inner planets in the newly developed and “theoretically bloomproof”* ship, Louis Pasteur.*

By using a reporter rather than a scientist or pilot as the point-of-view character, McCarthy adopts a proven and useful technique for presenting information without lecturing and for leading readers suspensefully through a set of mysteries and revelations. There are mysteries aplenty (and even some romance) for John Straheim on his journey into the Mycosystem, beginning with the possibility that a group in the Immunity, perhaps the Temples of Transcendent Evolution, may be responsible for sabotaging the expedition as it prepares to depart. Later in the voyage, Straheim confronts a new and unfamiliar society when he reports back on how humans have adapted to their habitats in the Gladholds of the asteroid belt. On the final leg of the trip, he discovers how to model and understand self-replication, proliferation, and evolutionary growth in the Mycosystem itself. But even this understanding doesn’t sufficiently prepare Straheim and the rest of the crew for what they find when they enter the orbit of Mars and encounter the elaborate realm of the Mycosystem. There they must deal with a final set of problems and mysteries leading them to a shocking revaluation of themselves and their enemies. The novel’s narrative structure builds carefully and satisfyingly towards the concluding revelations of plot and theme; Straheim appropriately focuses on the ways in which the Immunity is presented with a salvation from which it may never recover.

McCarthy, who works as an aerospace engineer when he’s not writing sf, attends carefully to the plausibility of the science and technology he adapts into his fiction. In his short online essay, “On Writing SF,” he observes: “SF, and most particularly ‘hard’ SF, is the exploration of the possible. It illuminates our own world and culture and circumstances by showing us how very different things could be. This is a broad umbrella, with lots of room underneath, but I’ll narrow my definition by saying that SF, when done properly, violates the known laws of physics and human behavior only in carefully controlled ways.” Therefore, McCarthy is careful to provide necessary background information about science or technology; he’s also particularly adept at coining colloquial language to show his characters’ use of technological innovations: “‘Slave your zee-specs to mine, please,’ she said, whipping into a graphical presentation that cast colored lines all over the forward Mars display” (207).

His “overall storytelling philosophy,” as stated in his online essay “Deep Popcorn,” calls for speculative fiction that combines the light plotting and sense of wonder characteristic of Golden Age “popcorn entertainment” with some of the depth of character, theme, and environments achieved in the best “Humanist” science fiction, like *Red Mars, Dune, and The Dispossessed.* What would count for McCarthy as “Deep Popcorn”—a novel like Hal Clement’s *Mission of Gravity,* television like *Star Trek,* or films like *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Groundhog Day?* As he remarks, “Far moreo [sic] than Golden Age wonder tales and Humanist slogs through the quagmires of the human
psyche, these ‘deep popcorn’ fables of speculative fiction have a unique and powerful ability to communicate ideas not merely to the old and young, the brilliant or the slow, the naive or the jaded, but to everyone who cares to listen.”

McCarthys agenda for including ideas in speculative fiction is manifested in Bloom. For example, to prepare readers for the size and scope of the Mycosystem, he spends a couple of chapters having John Strasheim learn some ’popcorn science’ about how John Connors Game of Life models the cycle of replication for a cellular automaton. Conways Game of Life, first described in a Scientific American article in April 1970, is available in several demonstration versions on websites which can easily be found by searching with engines such as Lycos, Excite, or Alta Vista. McCarty’s writing effectively describes the game; I had never known of it and learned something (even if only a popcorn something) by reading Bloom.

McCarthys fiction credibly accomplishes several of the purposes that distinguish the best writers of ”hard” sf. His work puts him in the company of other writers, such as David Brin, Gregory Benford, and Stephen Baxter, who were trained in science or engineering and who bring their expertise into their fiction. Though McCarthy lacks some of Benfords thoughtful reflectiveness about the process of doing science, he does not have and does not need Brins no-fear enthusiasm for imagining over-the-top, Uplift War space-opera aliens. McCarthy’s writing about the science in science fiction perhaps most resembles the carefully prepared prose of Stephen Baxter, but without the fey British indulgence for allusive intertextual nudges in the reader's ribs.

Though Bloom may satisfy McCarty’s conditions for “deep popcorn,” it should be considered as a credible and entertaining addition to a set of distinguished sf novels, from Arthur C. Clarke’s Childhood’s End (1953) and Theodore Sturgeon’s More Than Human (1953) to more recent variations like Greg Bear’s Blood Music (1985) and Ian McDonald’s Evolution’s Shore (1995), which share a thematic concern with transcendence of the limits of human evolution.

Philip E. Smith lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Warlock in Spite of Himself by Christopher Stasheff

New York: Ace Books, 1998; $13.00 tpb; 374 pages

reviewed by Russell Blackford

This book originally appeared thirty years ago, it has spawned numerous sequels, spin-offs and imitators, and I am somewhat ashamed to have just read it for the first time. I wish I could have liked it more.

The Warlock in Spite of Himself is the first of a lengthy and ongoing series of Warlock books by Christopher Stasheff, though (according to my handy Clute/Nicholls Encyclopedia of Science Fiction) not the first in narrative chronology. This new edition is presented as a “special collector’s edition with a new introduction by the author.” Stasheff’s introduction gives a fair bit of useful information about the other books in the series, enough to give an overview to someone who has read only part of the author’s considerable output or who is approaching it for the first time.

However, the new introduction does not provide a good enough reason to buy the book if you already own an earlier edition, not unless you are such a Stasheff fan that you hang on his every word. It offers little in the way of insight. Stasheff comes across as a nice, family-oriented guy and, thankfully, there’s no real hype.

The publicity material accompanying the review copy makes much of the fact that it was one of the first sf books to combine elements of science and magic. There were earlier novels and stories (the whole of Unknown Worlds, for a start) that managed to pay lip service to the scientific worldview while presenting a magical-seeming technology, but The Warlock is a clear and rather extreme example. Combining this with its immense popularity and relatively early appearance (the Unknown tradition had died down by the late 1960s), together with its continuing influence on the work of other writers, it is an important book of its kind.

As the book opens, we meet Rodney d’Armand, who soon takes the name Rod Gallowglass, and his partner, a robot horse called Fess. Rod is an agent of SCENT, the Society for the Conversion of Extraterrestrial Nascent Totalitarianisms, which is described as “the organization whose mission it was to snuff out the backward planets and put them on the road to democracy.” These events are set far in the future after the collapse of the Galactic Union and other large-scale political upheavals.

Rod and Fess land on the planet Gramarye, where magic works, though it is sufficiently rationalized to make The Warlock technically a work of sf, rather than fantasy. When he finds himself with a bunch of youthful “witches,” Rod interprets the situation in terms of his previous knowledge of extrasensory perception: “What he had on his hands was a budding colony of espress—levitative, precognitive, and telepathic.” He has experienced telepaths in the wider galaxy, but very few of them, so all that’s going on is a concentration of “espress” talent on one planet with an explanation of sorts provided at the very end.

Despite all this, we may as well be reading a high fantasy work for much of the time, so ubiquitous is the appearance of elves, witches, ghosts, and various dramatic manifestations of magic. For example, Rod’s love interest, Gwendolyn, has no trouble transforming herself into a properly sized mouse, spider, and various birds. No attempt is made to establish any particular rules or limits to this except seemingly irrational ones, such as the traditional aversion of magic users to cold iron. Because the frame story involves travel through space (and, as it turns out, through time), it is possible to introduce high-tech devices such as laser weapons at points in the book, but there is no serious limitation on the use of what might as well be pure-and-simple magic.

The storyline is a tale of court intrigue surrounding the actions of the beautiful young Queen Catharine of Gramarye, who is intent on social and political reform. With her dreadful pride and her impatience for sweeping change, Catharine manages to alienate almost all of her supporters and soon has not one, but two rebellions on her hands, one from her great nobles, the other from a sort of lumpenproletarian movement led by her erstwhile lover. This story is framed quite cleverly by plot elements from the larger universe and the narration occasionally employs an image appropriate to Rod’s viewpoint as the representative of a more technologically based society. Unfortunately, the explanatory imagery that gives content to the book, and all of which is supposedly filtered through Rod’s consciousness as the viewpoint character, does not seem to come from Rod’s experience so much as the reader’s. Too often Stasheff goes for the cheap laugh by using expressions such as “like a bulldozer in idle” or “like four simultaneous strikes in a bowling

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alley.” At one stage, Rod even says to Fess: “Who do you think you are, Pinocchio’s Cricket?”

The narrative is handled with comic effect, and the charm of the book is presumably to be found in the way it enables Stasheff to play whimsical games with a whole range of familiar fantasy and science-fiction devices. I have to confess that I was seldom charmed by this, though I must surely be in the minority. Much of the comedy struck me as heavy-handed. Too many of the laughs depend on ridiculous acronyms. Then there’s the literalistic computer that wipes part of its memory when told colloquially, “Oh, forget it!” That, and the knowing use of parodic tricks, such as what would be horrible said-bookisms in a more “serious” work: “No, he grated.”

In 1969 all this might have been a fresh and attractive mix for an audience that was moderately sophisticated about genre writing and happy to see its idiosyncrasies sent up in loving detail. I have no objection to any of the devices, taken one at a time, but the combination now seems rather tame and dated.

Though I found the book’s early exposition clumsy and so much of the humor tiresome, I can see why many fans of science fiction and fantasy swear by *The Warlock* as a sort of comedy classic. To my taste, it seemed too much like an extended fannish in-joke, but it takes more than that to sell the million copies claimed by the publisher. So what are the book’s strengths? It benefits from being clearly written and told in a fast, no-nonsense style. It becomes far more compelling as it goes on and takes its own plot a bit more seriously. Once the intrigues and conspiracy reach the point of actual war, which somehow has to be averted or won, the characters need to be shown as possessing some human worth and dignity. Stasheff rises to the occasion, and the book becomes less whimsical, improving greatly as a result. Also, Stasheff has the ability to create set pieces, especially the various political debates between the characters, that are surprisingly swift-paced and extremely detailed. Once we get to know them, many of the characters are well-rounded and engaging.

All the same, I can live without reading the endless sequels and spin-offs that Stasheff has produced. With his evident skills in plotting, characterization, and dialogue, he has the tools to attempt something very different and more challenging. I’d like to see him break out of this universe and surprise us.

A couple of last gripes on matters that are hardly Stasheff’s fault. Given that this book is from a major sf publisher and is supposed to be a “special collector’s edition,” we might have expected special care to be lavished on the production. The packaging is handsome enough, but the book is marred by typographical errors to an extent that becomes distracting. Even in the accompanying publicity material, there is a reference to a world called “Graymanye,” rather than “Gramanye,” and to “Queen Catherine,” rather than “Catharine.” By themselves, these would be trivial points, but they suggest a general lack of care.

More irritating, the back cover blurb and the publicity release both begin thus: “For three decades Christopher Stasheff’s Warlock series has captivated readers nationwide.” This seems to say that the popularity of the series is confined to only one nation, presumably the U.S.A., though the book bears a Canadian price as well as one in U.S. dollars. Actually, I take it that the implication is not that Stasheff is an author of merely national significance and popularity, but that the rest of the world doesn’t matter. Even if this is what the publisher thinks, it’s no fun being told it.

*Russell Blackford lives in Melbourne, Australia.*

**Screed**

*letters of comment*

**Gregory Benford, Laguna Beach, California**

Your remarks on the rise of “alternate history” (though I prefer “alternative”) in *NYRSF 127* remind me of my own puzzlement, when after Marty Greenberg and I did the four-volume *What Might Have Been*, the field grew enormously. Of course having a major talent like Turtledove doing it helps, and there were other first-rate writers who turned that way in the late ‘80s.

Perhaps this became a significant subgenre because history is factual but not “hard” scientifically, so a normally educated person can both appreciate and write it. Further, while alternate history was common among Europeans for the last century, in the U.S. its currency is post-1950. Are Americans inspecting the truths of their own history more now? Just as our system rose to sole superpower status, we began questioning how we got there?

Such easy social analysis lends plausibility to a view that our multi-culti postures conceal an uncertainty about our prospects. Or maybe not. Certainly this brand of soft sf, which always fascinated me, seems to have fresh power among our readership. Its ability to cross into mainstream audiences may mean it’s another SF Lite the way the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* phenomena were.

**Darrell Schweitzer, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

Re your editorial in *NYRSF 127*, I’m surprised to read that *Bring the Jubilee* occasioned questions as to whether it was really sf. There is, after all, a time machine in it. Its innovation was merely to start in a “present” after history had been changed, and only at the end go back and set things back to “normal.”

But let me speculate that if Counterfactual History truly breaks off and becomes a new genre, and becomes academically respectable, we will have professors explain to us that cf is superior to sf because it at least is “serious” and maybe even Real Literature. You will then find cf writers trying to disagree any connection to sf as a marketing ploy. Mark my words. . . .

On the further subject of A. E. van Vogt, I happened to be reading the original novelet of “The Mixed Men” (*Astounding*, January 1945), and came across this passage:

> . . . the Mixed Men also had an Earth battleship, and a marvelously new model at that, a ship whose type had been in the design stage for 800 years.

> . . . its nine hundred billion separate parts had gone into mass production seventy-five years before, with the expectation that the first ship would be completed at the end of seventy years, and additional ones every minute thereafter for five years.

> . . . What were Hunston’s intentions? How did he intend to get around the fact that Imperial Earth had more warships than there were men, women, and children in the Fifty Suns? (23)

This is the realism, and logic, of a small boy playing with toy soldiers in a sandbox. I’m tougher than you. I’ve got a *billion* spaceships! They’re brand-new. They only took 800 years to develop.

And this in a story in which most of the cast either have two brains or are really robots (“Delian” or “non-Delian”) and even the emotions of the human characters are programmed or deprogrammed as part of plots within plots within counterplots. Next to this, Doc Smith was an icy realist. There is no intersection with adult reality at any point. For all van Vogt was able to write was that small boy’s sandbox game with an adult level of intensity. This is, I think, the secret for van Vogt’s bizarre fascination, as awful as his actual writing might be, and why he appealed so strongly to Philip K. Dick, who managed to put more adult characters and emotions into equally crazy situations. It’s ultimately very strange to find this sort of writing so prominently sponsored by the supposedly rational and scientifically minded John
W. Campbell, when on the surface it seems to contravene everything the Golden Age stood for.

Dennis K. Lien, Minneapolis, Minnesota
In the February issue (NYRSF 126), Brian Stableford notes that "there was once a joke in common circulation which proposed that the shortest short story in the world read as follows: 'The last man in the world sat alone in his room. There was a knock on the door.' How old the joke is I do not know. . . ."
I don't know for certain either, but I can provide some boundaries:
In 1903, Thomas Bailey Aldrich published his Ponkapog Papers, a collection of miscellaneous, mostly brief "commonplace book-type" essays and musings. One of them reads as follows (the text is from page 7 of volume 9 of The Writings of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, published by Houghton Mifflin starting in 1907):

Imagine all human beings swept off the face of the earth except one man. Imagine this man in some vast city, New York or London. Imagine him on the third or fourth day of his solitude sitting in a house and hearing a ring at the doorbell!

Aldrich was once very popular, and many people at the time may have read the idea germ there. One who apparently did was Dashiel Hammett, who in the Introduction to his 1931 anthology Creeps by Night relates it from memory, improving it somewhat (and giving the protagonist a sex change):

One of my own favorites is that attributed, I believe, to Thomas Bailey Aldrich: A woman is sitting alone in a house. She knows she is alone in the whole world; every other living thing is dead. The doorbell rings. That has, particularly, the restraint that is almost invariably the mark of the effective weird tale.

Hammett's version was apparently reprinted in The Book of Fantasy edited by Jorge Luis Borges and others under the title "A Woman Alone With Her Soul"; I don't have a copy handy and don't recall offhand if this is word for word the same as Hammett's (it clearly cannot be Aldrich's) version, or if it was retranslated into English after being translated into Spanish for the original edition of that anthology, Antologia de la Literatura Fantastica (First ed. 1940; Second 1966).

Seventeen years after Hammett's recasting, Fredric Brown used the basic idea, and the now-standard wording, as the opening of his short story "Knock," first published in the December 1948 issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories:

There is a sweet little horror story that is only two sentences long: The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door. . . . Two sentences and an ellipse of three dots.

In Brown's story, aliens have landed on earth and killed off almost all life, saving only one breeding pair of each species, humans included. Ingenuity (and the amount of luck heroes had in 1948 pulps) defeat them; when the knock at the door finally comes in this story, it's made by the last woman on earth.

Brown's version seems to be the one people remember; for instance, I recall F&SF at some time in (I think) the early sixties publishing a bottom-of-the-page fill-in called something like "The Horror Story Shorter By One Letter Than The Shortest Horror Story in The World;" in this one, the word "knock" had been replaced with "lock."

And other people since 1948 have competed to "write" even shorter horror or sf "stories." I use ironic emphasis since most such are stunts relying on things that "don't count," like titles or graphic tricks. A sign reputedly found at the end of the universe reading (upside down) "This Side Up," as a forgotten author in one of David Gerrold's anthologies offered, or a report card on the human race, in a "story" by Forrest J. Ackerman in Vertex in which the text consists of a huge scrawled "F."

Meanwhile, the Perry Rhodan team heroically continue in their quest to write the world's longest sf/horror story. But that's a whole different joke.

David Drake, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
I was a little startled to read in NYRSF 128 the following comment by Mr. Broderick:

Nowadays, of course, everyone can write that well—every one except the bentighted machines turning out hexalogies and war-in-space series and routine fantasies, all the detritus of market success.

I know that Mr. Broderick, a fan of the Man-Kzin war-in-space series, didn't mean his comment the way it sounded, an intramural echo of the sneering, "Oh, you read science fiction?" we've all heard from outsiders. Still, I hope in the future he'll be more careful to use the wonderful subtlety of the English language. Otherwise he risks being unfairly classed with those of his countrymen who make similarly sweeping generalizations of the worth of Aborigines, women, and bloody poofers.

Dick Dart, Spotswood, New Jersey
An addendum to "The Plot Against NYRSF" (NYRSF 126):

1. #127's front cover featured articles by A. Iwanow and E. A. Johnson.

2. Now of course "Iwanow" is the Russian linguistic and cultural equivalent to "Johnson," meaning "Ivan's Son."

3. Both authors offer sympathetic though satirical analyses of certain schizoid fringe cultures, whether the "religion-mad precincts of the Graeco-Roman world" or "the Kazinoizatsiya of the former Soviet Union."

4. But perhaps most suspiciously, they're the only contributors to #127 who refuse to divulge their Christian names! If and when NYRSF gets whacked by this saturnine Gnostic-Kombinat conspiracy, I'll be the first to say, "I told you so."

Ray Davis, Berkeley, California
At one point, I wrote a "General Statement on Exploring Gender" to go along with the other "Tiptree judges' fine efforts along those lines—but then chickened out because of the widely varying contexts the jury report might find itself in. But I'd be pleased and proud for it to appear in NYRSF:

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines "gender" as "a French royal cavalry corps, as variously organized at different times between the fifteenth century and 1789." And it defines "exploring" as . . . well, there doesn't seem to be any definition for "exploring."

Thus we see that our language changes more quickly than even dictionaries can keep up with. Which is why reading science fiction is so important.

Henry Wessells, Upper Montclair, New Jersey
Most gratified by publication of my letter to you folks (NYRSF 123), and am especially pleased by the eighteenth-century title with which you graced it: "Thoughts Occasioned by the Publication of The Avram Davidson Treasury." Thank you.

I do want to set the record straight on two erroneous statements I made in the course of that letter. Not that I expect you will find many people fulminating at these minor slips—oh, demon Hastel! that impelled me to send the letter off unscrutiniz'd.

The first is regarding the Ellery Queen Awards: Davidson won the 12th annual Ellery Queen Award in 1957 for "The Necessity of His Condition"; the award was apparently discontinued after the 13th and the original series of award-winning stories reprinted in Ellery Queen's The Golden 13 (1970); more recently, I think during the early 1980s, the award was revived.

The second concerns the Edgar Award winner, "The Affair at Lahore Cantonment": this story was in fact reprinted once in Ellery Queen's to Be Read Before Midnight (Random House, 1962).
Old Thoughts and New

We haven’t repeated some of our editorial stances in several years and so it seems time once again to do so. This thought is occasioned by leafing through a recent purchase, a copy of The Modern Novel by Elizabeth Drew, published in 1926. Drew opens her introduction by referring to James Branch Cabell’s remark that intelligent persons do not attempt to keep abreast of modern fiction, and that this is probably ascribable to the fact that they enjoy being intelligent, and wish to remain so. It seems to us that Cabell’s remark is as possible even more appropriate today, when we are constantly under bombardment by marketers who attempt to control significant portions of our lives. They want us to read this month’s, and this year’s, fiction now, first: it is better because it is newest. This is the logic of marketing and it affects us all. It requires conscious effort to resist it if you are a genre reader by habit and preference. After all, if you have read the last ten books by a writer, you most likely want to read her next book, and not make the effort to find a book by another writer that might not be as reliable.

But our position has always been that you should spend half your reading time reading the good books of the past—because there have been enough good books written in past years to last you the rest of your life, never mind all the bad ones. And this would almost certainly improve your reading pleasure, because there is not necessarily progress in literature in any given year—this year’s books may really be worse than last year’s. If that happens to be so, you could wind up feeling that the genre is declining and maybe not worth reading any more. Secondhand fantasy and sf books are plentiful and inexpensive, and we feel we stand for more pleasure. Doing so might also improve your perspective on current stuff, and lead to surprising discoveries about the past, but that comes along with the primary pleasure for free.

On the other hand, Drew points out that anyone not interested in the literature of their own day can hardly be very intelligently interested in literature at all. And that intelligent persons are usually curious as to the human, social, moral, and intellectual conundrums and conditions in whose midst they live. And so we also feel that, without contradiction, we stand for discovering new talent and reading new writers and new works this year. Because sf is also about the new, the newly baked ideas of the present, and cutting-edge science. And it’s about changing moral, social, political, and human attitudes; surprise and discovery.

We stand for discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of good books. To readers who use fiction as a kind of drug, there is no discussion necessary: Drew says, “writer and reader might be summed up as two minds without a single thought.” And on some days most of us read that way, and live in the abode of feeling, not thought. I did that often as a teenager, I recall, and have no regrets. Such reading can have powerful intellectual aftereffects, often subconsciously, so that your attitudes change without thought. But I don’t like to read even the same books in the same way now.

And finally Drew says, “criticism does not spring from any obscure necessity to make solemn laws for literature or life, but rather from a sociable and urbane liking to provoke great argument about it.”

—David G. Hartwell & the editors