

interzone//19



£1.50

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

ALL 'NEW STAR'
SPECIAL ISSUE

NEIL FERGUSON
RICHARD KADREY
PAUL J. McAULEY
KIM NEWMAN
AND OTHERS

GWYNETH JONES INTERVIEW, NEWS AND REVIEWS

CONTENTS

- 5 **Neil Ferguson:** The Second Third of C
13 **Gwyneth Jones:** Interview by Paul Kincaid
16 **Paul J. McAuley:** A Dragon for Seyour Chan
25 **Kim Newman:** The Next-But-One Man
32 **Nick Lowe:** Film reviews
35 **Christina Lake:** Assyria
42 **Richard Kadrey:** Goodbye Houston Street,
Goodbye
47 **S.M. Baxter:** The Xeelee Flower
51 **Lee Montgomerie & John Clute:** Book reviews
55 **Letters**

Cover by Paul Rickwood

Editors: Simon Ounsley and David Pringle
Associate Editor: Lee Montgomerie
Advisory Editors: John Clute, Alan Dorey, Malcolm Edwards and Judith Hanna
Assistant Editors: Paul Annis and Andy Robertson
Typesetting and Paste-up: Bryan Williamson
Circulation Adviser: Gamma

Main Address: 124 Osborne Road, Brighton, BN1 6LU. All subscriptions, general correspondence, books for review and enquiries about advertising should be sent to this address.

Subscriptions: £6 for one year (four issues) in the UK. Cheques or postal orders should be crossed and made payable to Interzone. Overseas subscriptions are £7, payable by International Money Order. American Subscribers may pay by US dollar check — \$10 (sea mail) or \$13 (air mail). Lifetime subscriptions: £100 (UK); \$200 or equivalent (overseas); \$250 or equivalent (overseas airmail).

Back-issues are available at £1.75 each in the UK (£2 each overseas), postage included. (US dollar price: \$3 sea mail or \$4 air mail.) All issues are still in print except number 5. Order from Interzone's Back-Issue Department, 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR, England. If you buy three or more back-issues you may have them at £1.50 each (£1.75 each overseas; or \$2.50 sea, \$3.50 air, to Americans).

Submissions: unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed, but each one must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript and two International Reply Coupons. We are unable to reply to writers who do not send return postage. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Story submissions should be sent to any one of the following addresses:

Simon Ounsley, 21 The Village Street, Leeds LS4 2PR
David Pringle, 124 Osborne Road, Brighton BN1 6LU

Published quarterly. All material is © Interzone, 1987.

ISSN 0264-3596

Printed by Allanwood Press, Stanningley,
Pudsey, West Yorkshire

interzone

No 19 Spring 1987

EDITORIAL

Welcome to our "All New Star" issue, featuring the work of six emerging writers, two of them with their first published stories, the others adding the second or third story to their body of work in *Interzone*.

In our first five years, we've published the work of some thirty new or little-known writers, and in the years ahead we hope to help start and continue the publishing careers of many more. So perhaps it's timely, in this our special new writers' issue, to give a few words of advice for those of you who would like to be among them: to give you an insight into the inner workings of your editors' heads. What are we looking for, as we sit at our breakfast tables, trying to digest the latest batch of unsolicited submissions?

My own idea for an ideal *Interzone* story goes something like this. It should have an original idea behind it. It should be well written, with well drawn characters, a good plot, and a leavening of humour. It should also make some sort of comment on the human condition, or the prospects for the human condition, in the late twentieth century.

That's it then. Now all you have to do is go away and write it.

But it isn't easy, of course. And I'm not saying that every story we publish has to possess all of the above ingredients. We're happy to take lively, entertaining stories which don't give so much as a paragraph of thought to the human condition, just as we're willing to publish stories which are so dripping with ideas and insights that the lack of a plot hardly matters. But if you aim for the sort of well-rounded story I've described, then you may stand a better chance of succeeding.

To take things further, it may help to look at the sort of stories we've been receiving and our reasons for turning so many of them down. To start with the basics, short story writing requires economy of words. It is no good using the same leisurely approach as for a novel, in which the writer can get away with all manner of digressions. A short story should be sharp and to the point, both for its own sake and for that of its writer, because *IZ* is always more likely to have room for a story of 2000 or 4000 words than for one of 6000 or 8000. And if you're looking for words to cut, then the best ones are usually the adjectives. Many new writers use far too many.

This economical approach is all part of the planning of a story. Some writers boast in their covering letter that they are sending us first-draft material, as though expecting us to be impressed that they can produce so much writing with so little effort. In actual fact, little else they could say would make us so pessimistic about their material. Such stories will often read as though the writer has simply woken up after a dream or nightmare and scribbled down what he or she could remember. This may be a legitimate way to start a story, but the task of the writer is to interpret the dream (or whatever else is in his or her head), to make it comprehensible and entertaining to the reader.

Perhaps the most common reason for rejecting stories which are otherwise well written is that they are without plot - they are static, "mood" pieces. Typically, the main character will wander aimlessly round some chaotic near-future landscape, gazing miserably at cans of baked beans in decaying supermarkets or moping about some ill-fated

and vaguely explained romance. He will worry about unemployment and nuclear holocaust. In the course of the story, nothing will happen to him. Plotting, and planning in general, will be minimal or non-existent. The reader will be presented with a murky, deciphered vision of the future which is little but an exaggerated version of the present day. Such visions are as common as concrete and dole queues. They may well turn out to be true predictions, but they aren't anything new.

Disillusionment with the future which technology might provide took over during the sixties, when *sf* writers were able to warn a relatively affluent and carefree population of such matters as pollution, over-population, and nuclear holocaust. In the eighties, these problems have risen high in the public consciousness. They are still not taken as seriously as they should be, perhaps, and the solutions are far from apparent, but people are aware that the problems exist. Muttering vaguely about them in *sf* stories has really become a pointless exercise.

I'm not advocating that *IZ* writers should ignore such problems, just pointing out that to deal with them in fiction in 1987 requires a lot of thought and effort - more than a mere awareness of the problems and a murky vision of the awfulness of it all. What is needed is to cast new perspectives on the problems, causing people to see them in a new light and perhaps with greater insight. Ideal examples of this approach can be found back in *IZ* 4, with Malcolm Edwards on nuclear weapons and John Sladek on unemployment. It is possible to write effectively about the problems of the world, or even about a man who stares at baked beans in a supermarket. It's just not as easy as many people seem to think.

In the past, *IZ* has been accused of undue pessimism. Call me morbid if you will, but I have to confess that I usually find downbeat stories more realistic than upbeat ones. But if we've pushed our pessimistic visions of the future almost as far as we can take them, producing little but grey, identikit versions of each others' nightmares, then perhaps it is time for a little optimism.

Interviewed in *IZ* 13, William Gibson remarked that we'll be "phenomenally lucky to emerge from this century into a world like *Neuromancer*." And perhaps Gibson, who has made such an impact on the *sf* world in recent years, is showing the way ahead. Prospective *IZ* writers might take heed, not by copying "cyberpunk," but by thinking for themselves about what might happen if we do "get lucky" and emerge into the next century reasonably intact. What might life be like then? What if we forget the tired ideas of past decades of science fiction? What if we look to recent developments and speculations in the field of technology to conjure up new visions of the future? Or go beyond such extrapolations altogether, to the point where fantasy and *sf* meet?

We at *Interzone* are interested in well planned, well crafted short stories, and in ideas and visions so extraordinary that the grey landscape around us will seem to dissolve into the chaos from which it came. This can be more than mere escapism. Searching deep into the human imagination, far beyond the here and now, perhaps new insights into our present terrible problems will emerge, just when we least expect them.

Simon Ounsley



UNWIN HYMAN
**THE BEST IN SCIENCE
 AND FANTASY
 FICTION**

DREAM WALL

Graham Dunstan Martin

In the nightmare world of the 22nd century, Britain has become a communist state after the Glorious Revolution of 2009.

People's Friends line the street, cradling their machine guns; the dead of night is shattered by cries, and in the morning, another apartment lies empty. Yet Our Beloved Leader still strives towards a perfect world in which all citizens conform. For still men are neither equal nor happy!

Our Beloved Leader has the solution: to eliminate the last inner refuge of the individual – his dreams.

Sue and John Mathieson dream of a world very different from their own. But soon it becomes impossible to tell the two worlds apart. The jack-boots begin to approach the Dream Wall.

Available May £8.95 hardback £2.95 paperback

THE PASTEL CITY

Mike John Harrison

A classic of the fantasy genre, this is a delightfully entertaining, witty and exciting novel, the first Viriconium book.

"Harrison is the best writer of heroic fantasy work today." *Daily Express*.

"If you like elegantly crafted, elegantly written sword-and-sorcery, this book is all you could ask for."

Michael Bishop, *Fantasy & Science Fiction Review*.

£2.50 paperback

**THE MASTER
 THE TIME MASTER
 TRILOGY BOOK 3**

Louise Cooper

The final volume of Louise Cooper's best-selling trilogy. Tarod had won his freedom – but the cold white jewel that contained the key to his sorcerous power had been lost, with the girl he loved, in a supernatural storm. With a price on their heads, he had to find her before the Circle did.

Only then could he hope to fulfil his self-imposed pledge to confront the gods themselves – for they alone could destroy the stone and the evil that dwelt in it.

But if that evil once touched him, Tarod would be forced to face the truth of his own heritage. A heritage that could trigger a titanic conflict of occult forces, and set him on the ultimate quest for vengeance...

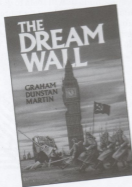
£2.95 paperback

**THE WANDERING FIRE
 THE FIONAVAR TAPESTRY BOOK 2**

Guy Gavriel Kay

THE WANDERING FIRE takes the five young adventurers from *The Summer Tree* back into the land of Fionavar, there to join forces with the legendary Warrior in the struggle to save the Weaver's worlds from the evil might of the Unraveller.

£2.95 paperback



Neil Ferguson

The Second Third of C

Someone was going to kill Roger Morse.

Kill. Deprive of life. Mark for omission. Destroy the vital and essential quality of. Check the flow of current through.

Morse knew this because someone had entered his apartment and whoever it had been left without disturbing it or removing anything of value. No ransacking had taken place. There were no splintered locks or signs of violent entry. Morse might never have become apprised of the intrusion had it not been for the fact that his old, battered, practically worthless copy of *Skeat's Dictionary of Etymology* was not where he always kept it on the right-hand corner of his writing desk. His 1982 facsimile reprint of the original 1882 edition.

Well, so what? It was only a book. It wasn't irreplaceable. Morse knew he could call up the Library and have Rita send round a copy. He could probably even scrounge one from a colleague if he set his mind to it. *Skeat's Etymology* was – or had once been – a standard work, not some rare tome. (Only superstition had kept him from filing it on his computer.) But it wouldn't be the same, a new copy. It wouldn't be his *Skeat*, the one he had been awarded as a prize at school, which had directed him onto the path that led in the direction of his vocation. It wouldn't be his *Skeat*, thumbled, travelled, cherished. A talisman he had carried through life. His *juju*.

The fact that the book was no longer in the room with him, at hand, to be picked up and put down as he pleased, filled Morse's heart with sadness just as if an old friend had died. Suddenly and for no obvious reason he had lost something he loved. And Morse could not help recalling that the meaning of love – an affection based on admiration, a warm attachment and devotion – appeared on the opposite page of *Skeat's Etymology* as that given for *lost* – no longer possessed, taken away beyond reach or attainment. The two words embraced each other every time he closed the book.

A *closed book*: something beyond comprehension. An enigma.

So poignant was the loss to Morse – and so pointless to anybody else – that he knew it was meant to be significant. It was inconceivable that the intruder had taken the book out of a desire to possess it. The theft was almost certainly some kind of message. A sign. Like the shot dog of the corrupt politician.

In his bathrobe, wide-awake, Morse fractionally modified the smoked-glass louvres of the electronic *jalousie* in order to see what was going on outside, beyond the electrified barbed-wire perimetering. He could see nothing. It made no difference that he was wearing his glasses. There was nothing to see. If it wasn't strictly night out there it was still quite dark. Only fractionally less so, in fact, than it was inside Morse's apartment.

The light-synchronous personal climate unit was not strictly a *jalousie* either – which in Morse's book was a blind with adjustable horizontal slats for admitting light and air while excluding sun and rain – but it was the name the manufacturer had chosen for the purpose of marketing the system, skilfully leaching from the old term a hint of Mediterranean romance. The small shift in usage did not bother Morse one way or the other. But he would have to take account of it in the next edition of his book.

While Morse squinted out of the darkened window the small crimson light on the phonebank continued to flash silently behind him – a call had been banked – dully illuminating the room at regular intervals. Morse deliberately ignored the signal, keeping his back to the machine, although to do so gave him mixed feelings of cowardice and valour.

When eventually the darkness began to thin he focused on the colourless rectilinear constructions on the far side of his view of the park which comprised the apartment-hotel compound. He watched the orthogonal sections of the ugly grey structures – the

organized desolation of public buildings – slowly became adumbrated against the marginally less grey dawn, the two shades of greyness edging apart like a pair of nefarious characters before daylight caught them in each other's company.

Morse knew how bad the situation was in those old mass-concept buildings. He had been inside them. This was more than could be said for most of the people he rubbed shoulders with in his expensive residential apartment block or at the Library. Public housing estates were not a no-go area for high-income academics and professionals with tech access; few of them had any reason to roam far outside the secure keep of electric light and stable climate they had paid the service-management to provide. It wasn't worth the risk. The fieldwork necessary for Morse's research, on the other hand, took him into zones that were turbid, dysphasic, chthonic. In his pursuit of the meaning of words familiar and arcane he had climbed the urine-soaked open stair-shafts of the deck-stacked buildings; had hurried past the savage graffiti he couldn't decipher, however tempted he might have been to try; had encountered the old woman in bedroom slippers on the broken-glass-strewn walkway, face frozen with fear – an unpleasant emotion caused by anticipation of danger. First-hand knowledge of such a degree of unpleasantness Morse considered part of his job. He liked his definitions to be concordant with his experience.

But Morse had another, more pressing motive for surveying the dismal prospect. Somewhere out there – not in this particular estate but one pretty much like it in another part of the city – there was someone, a young woman he liked, who liked him – well enough, at least, to want to talk to, laugh at, sleep with. Something, until he met her, he had not thought possible. Morse had made the woman's acquaintance some months previous while engaged on the second third of C, from CAT to COZ. In between cat's paws – a light air that ruffles the surface of water in irregular patches during a calm – and cozen – to gain something by coaxing, wheedling or shrewd trickery – he had climbed the stairs of what were still called council estates, characterless housing units built at a time when there had been councils: bodies of people meeting to talk over local questions or laws. Now, of course, these dinosaur barracks abandoned by the authorities belonged to whoever lived inside them, which meant that the secondary meaning of the word – owned and maintained by such local bodies – was more or less archaic.

In the course of his fieldwork Morse had knocked on doors, peered through letterboxes – another quaint archaism – and sat before heatless fires with old sailors, ageing ballet-teachers, retired french polishers. He had recorded the specialized lexes in their reminiscences, that served no purpose in their present environment. It was the speech of their grandchildren which had adapted to the general dereliction and the brutal frankness of concrete curtain-walling.

Sharon – high-cheeked, lithe, literate Sharon – had taken to the habit of accompanying Morse, her arm in his, steering him through the warren of refuse-strewn causeways that linked the dwellings. She knew which of them had been blocked off and the best places to hide. In fact, for a person who had never

been able to afford any schooling, she knew many things of which Morse was ignorant. In return he brought her coffee, fresh food, small pieces of news, and – what she craved for most – books, including several types of dictionary. Sets of printed sheets of paper bound together into volumes, something that yields up knowledge or understanding, were rare commodities on Sharon's estate, although she had, somehow, come by her own small, odd library. She had, too, come by a small child, a little girl of five. And from the same source.

While he dressed, Morse thought about shaving, then, dismissing the thought, poured hot water straight from the tap into a mug containing instant coffee. By this time he was able to read his watch: 5.17. He flipped the flashing playback-key of his phonebank and listened intently. The recording whirred but no human or computer's voice came out of it.

Morse timed the silence, which lasted exactly thirty-three seconds. It was a longish amount of time but short enough to tell him what he wanted to know, that Sharon was alive, safe. She was okay. Not long enough, anyway, to say that he had to drop everything, she wasn't desperate or in some kind of danger. Morse played the recording over again. He listened again to her listening to him listening to her. At times the absence of her voice was brief – three or four seconds, mere pauses. She had even omitted – forgotten, she said – to phone him at all, so if she wasn't dead she was fine. And there had been occasions when the length of her silence had almost broken his heart.

Morse rubbed his fingers against the bristly growth under his chin.

Thirty-three seconds. She was missing him. She had woken up in the night. Lonely. Wanting him to be with her.

Sharon could phone Morse but she couldn't speak to him – not, that is, without informing the Police security computer of what she had to say, with all the complications that would bring: arrest, interrogation, surveillance. Morse could not phone her at all for the simple reason that the vandalized semi-functional payphone she had access to could not accept calls, not ever having been programmed for such a communication facility. In order for Sharon to be able to get a message to Morse they had arranged a code – silence on a scale from one second to sixty – as a stratagem to keep their unusual liaison from molestation, to allow Sharon to let him know how she was doing.

But not what. Where. Or with whom.

Whom. Middle English *hwām*. Used as an object of a verb or preceding preposition, occasionally as a predicate nominative with a copulative verb.

The candle flame swayed in the still air as she turned the page, then gradually righted itself. She turned the page carefully with the weight of her whole hand, not between her fingers, in order not to crack the yellowed margin of the old cheap paper. Curled up in her bed – on the dry side – in the shape of the warmth the man had vacated some time before, Sharon consumed the print which he had brought for her, the price she had demanded for the loan of her body. She read each word of every sentence,

greedily, like a gourmand disposing of a rare wine.

It was a very dark evening; the clouds appeared inclined to thunder. Catherine kept wandering to and fro, from the gate to the door in a state of agitation which permitted no repose; at length she took up a position on one side of the wall, near the road, where, heedless of the growing thunder and the great drops of rain that began to splash around her, she remained calling at intervals, then listening, then crying outright...

Grey dawn light was beginning to enter the room, jimmying its way through the cracks in the boarded-up windows, but for the moment the candle-flame still cast its halo around Sharon and the open book. From her cot Lucy snuffled in her sleep.

After midnight while we sat up the storm came rattling over the Heights in full fury. There was a violent wind, as well as thunder, and either one or the other split a tree off at the corner of the building: a huge bough fell across the roof...

It had been quick and dull, what the man had come to do. He had come and done it and gone, taking off his parka, slipping into her and out of the bed and leaving her alone. She would never see him again because she made a point of never doing that kind of business with the same man twice. But the good condition orange-and-white paperback book in her hand would last for many years, perhaps even after her death, as it had lasted from before her birth: this 1956 reprint - Complete & Unabridged, price 2/6 - of the 1847 edition. And it was hers now. The quick excitement she had let the man have was nothing, nothing alongside the slow enduring pleasure she would derive from the book. It was a bargain!

...Cathy got thoroughly drenched for her obstinacy in refusing to take shelter and standing bonnetless and shawl-less to catch as much water as she could with her hair and clothes. She came in and lay down on the settle, turning her face to the back and putting her hands before it...

Immediately after the man had left she had felt emptied - she did not enjoy what she had to do to provide herself with pleasure. Shivering, she had slipped out of the condominium to the payphone terminal concealed under refuse and dialled the private number to the person at the Parkview whom she wanted to speak to, as she nearly always did immediately after the men left. Somehow the silence she listened to on the recording-machine did not feel so lonesome as the silence she had to endure throughout the rest of the night, as if it was not hers but belonged now to the person who owned the machine. Listening to his silence gave shape to her own, it occupied the emptiness. Defined it.

As he defined every damn thing he came near, right from their first encounter which she had initiated the way she always did: "D'you want to fuck me?" She had caught him unawares in a dark intersection.

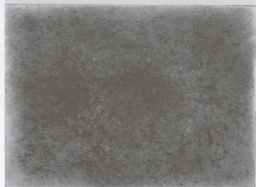
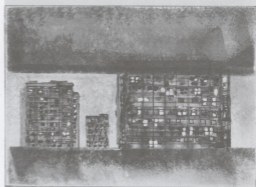
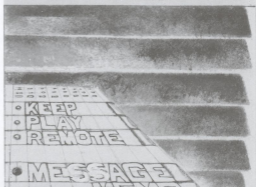
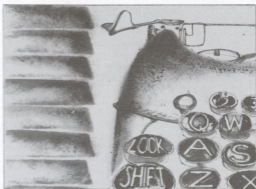
"What do you mean," he had said. "Exactly?"

"Sexual intercourse. D'you want it?"

"But they're not the same thing!"

"What are you talking about?" She hadn't known what he was talking about.

"Fucking is generally considered obscene. Sexual intercourse is a socially acceptable term. Which did you have in mind?"



"Whichever fucking term you like!"

"I don't know..." He had looked grave. He had rubbed his chin, which needed a shave. "Fucking is a bit crude and sexual intercourse, well, rather bland. And making love wouldn't seem appropriate at this stage, would it? I mean, we hardly know each other..." Then, still serious, without smiling: "Can't we start with a cup of tea?"

He made her laugh. He was the first man who ever had, and the first who didn't want to fuck her or just have sexual intercourse. He wanted to make love – at least the way he defined the term: to woo, court, engage in activities – such as necking; to kiss or pet – leading to mating. And he had not hurried over any of his definitions. The way he made love to her was neither obscene nor socially acceptable.

He made her laugh just to look at him. Ginger-haired, freckled and bespectacled, hardly ever shaved, plump and rumpled – not the kind of man she would have thought many women would have been attracted to, least of all herself.

"Well, you know what they used to say," he had said. "You don't want to judge a book by its cover!"

Sharon continued to read until her daughter, Lucy, still half-asleep, began tugging to be let into bed with her. She placed the old torn page that served as a bookmark between Chapters Five and Six, slid the book under her pillow and turned her attention towards her daughter, lifting her up into the bed. It was getting too late to read anyway. A grimy-grey light had penetrated every corner of the room, washing out the candle's small brightness. Sharon blew out the flame. Night had ended and the day had begun.

"The Manager wants to know what you're up to?" Rita said as soon as Roger Morse walked into his work-space on the fourth floor of the Library and when he declined to comment, added: "He wants to know what you're working on."

Morse looked at Rita. If his computer didn't know the answer to that question then who did? "You told him," he said. "I suppose?"

"Oh sure! I outlined the field from which the majority of your entries recently have been drawn."

Morse felt a shiver run down his spine, and it wasn't as a consequence of the infelicitously placed adverb – which was probably standard in Phoenix, Arizona, Rita's home town. Someone had just stepped on his grave. The person in possession of his copy of *Skeat's Etymology*, perhaps.

"They flit from flirt to uxorious," Rita reminded him. "And a whole lot inbetween. Mostly in C: clitoral...coition...copulate..."

"Sex!" Morse growled. "You told him that was the field I was working in?"

"I sure did, Roger," the computer said with irritating frankness. "The Manager didn't seem to welcome the news."

"Why not? It's very fertile ground."

Cock came between caress and cunt. It was a fact of life.

"He said our sponsors were having budget problems. They're finding it hard to justify spending money on a new dictionary and weren't looking to have their name on one that would be disadvantageous to the selling of their product."

Morse tried to recall the product which the Police Executive was trying to sell.

"You mean," he said eventually. "The truth!"

Rita, as usual, refused to be drawn.

"He wants to see you. Immediately."

Morse, heading in the direction of the Manager's office, strode across the hermetically sealed miniature rain forest that comprised the ground-level atrium of the Library, aggressively crunching the gravelled path underfoot. Cuneate-shaped palm leaves nodded up and down in the air he disturbed behind him. The canopy of evergreen fronds overhead pressed down on the air and occluded the light. Irritably he swatted away the giant azure and vermilion butterflies that sought to settle on his brow. They were like easy pleasant thoughts which at this moment he could not afford to entertain. Ahead he could make out the shadowy bulk of the Manager on the other side of the abraded glass walls of the cage that was his office, moving from side to side, restless, like a pupa in the throes of metamorphosis. Morse waited for the panelled door to slide open and then he stepped through it, entering the membrane of the chrysalis.

"Roger! Hi there! Come in!... Okay? How ya doing? Sit down. Sit down. Mmmm. Cigar?"

Morse shook his head.

The Manager, Doctor Artman, was a German-speaker who had acquired his American on West Coast campuses and he conditioned his speech with friendly phatics, sounds intended to establish an atmosphere of sociability rather than communicate ideas.

"Right. Now. Let's get down and, er, talk turkey, shall we, Mmm?" Artman laughed. When Morse was seated on the client's couch, he levered his own bulky person onto the opposite chair, using his powerful arms as a pair of davits.

"I want to inform you, Roger, how much your output is appreciated... Ah, by me."

"You like my work?"

"Oh sure! It's good!"

Morse made no effort to look pleasantly surprised.

He waited impassively, grit-teethed, while Doctor Artman, Manager of the lexical software library company, stumbled over his inappropriately formal and slangy choice of words. Morse mulled over his entry for *stuffed shirt*: a smug, conceited and usually pompous person often an inflexibly conservative attitude. It was good enough.

"Don't make any mistake about it. It's good stuff!" Doctor Artman laughed again. Was he nervous or had he said something funny? "Mmm. But, ah – I don't know how to put this – we're coming up against some pretty rigid parameters on this present assignment. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Do you mean outside pressure?"

"Yes. You got it! Absolutely!" Artman nodded. He tugged at the invisible goatee at the apex of his chin.

"Our sponsors are undergoing a budget-rethink."

"A what?" Morse said. "I mean in what respect, Doctor?"

"Fieldwork. They take the line that it's too difficult. Too laborious. And too, ah, expensive."

Morse said: "I thought the Police Executive was interested in building accurate language atlases for different status speech communities. How can you

do that without fieldwork?"

"They want to know why it has to be so laborious to provoke speech acts. Interviewing people, the way you do. In their opinion utterances can be gathered without, ah, having to spend time communicating."

"Fieldwork involves two people," Morse said. "An investigator and an informant."

"The Police Executive claim to have some experience in that department. They're not convinced your methods, particularly your excursions into access-restricted areas, are, ah, cost-effective."

Morse, uneasy that his activities had been a subject of Police interest, said: "How do they expect me to collect examples of local speech without examining the locality?"

"They suggest we make use of their security-gathering technology. They are putting their computers at our – your – disposal. Edited, of course. This data, as you know, consists of spontaneous utterances between citizens, gathered in situ from all sections of society."

"The Police Executive wants to plug me into their security computer?" Morse said. The idea filled him with repugnance, it was both alien to his principles and aroused in him a loathing too great to tolerate: odium. "But that's a record of people's personal plans, chit-chat. Gossip. Pillow talk. I couldn't possibly take part in such privacy invasion!"

Artman squirmed. His belly adjusted itself as if it were a cat trying to get comfortable. "I understand, Roger. I respect your...ah..."

"Qualms? Feelings of uneasiness about a point of conscience, honour or propriety?"

"Yes. Qualms. But you must admit that such an arrangement would, ah, remove the problem of you, the investigator, interacting with the subject's natural language. It would be more professional. More scientific."

"It would be less ethical! Less honest!"

Artman was a third-rate academic who thought in German and spoke in Californian, not well in either. Though he had edited several books on the subject of lexicography he had never composed a dictionary definition in his life. He was an expert on a subject he knew nothing about. His Doctorate was honorary. He was a sham, a counterfeiter purporting to be genuine. A toady, one who flatters in the hope of gaining favour. He didn't, in any sense, speak the same language as Morse.

"It's a step in the right direction," Artman said.

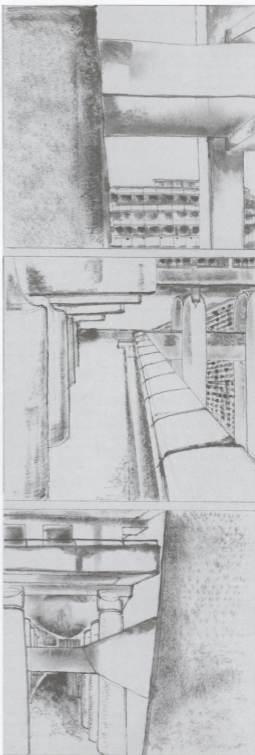
"I'm sorry...I don't understand."

"Look upon it as a promotion! You'll have to work in the Police Executive's headquarters. You'll be accountable directly to them!"

Appalled at the prospect, angry to find himself outmanoeuvred by the slyness of someone as stupid as Artman, Morse said: "This is out of the question!... You know I need to finish my work here!"

"Oh..." Artman heaved himself to his feet. "We'll always be here." He beamed at Morse. "Congratulations, Roger." He walked over to the console of his desk where he pressed some keys. "You have a Captain Cznetsov of the Protocol Section waiting to meet with you at the Police Executive. This afternoon. He's, ah, looking forward to knowing you."

Artman handed Morse a clutch of access numbers. The interview was over.



Camouflaged against the rubbish in the semi-darkness of the stairwell, Sharon gripped the metal rail and listened to the whine of the wind as it sliced across the open concrete space she was preparing to enter. She tuned her attention to the pitch of the frequencies inside the sound in order to pick out any static, fragments of violence, that might be clinging to it. She wondered whether the sound was similar to that which the wind made across a deserted moor – a geological feature she had never seen but which, according to her new dictionary, she knew to be an expanse of rolling unenclosed wasteland. Could it be more hair-raising than this? Would this ever be as romantic as that?

When Sharon had pushed her nose into the grey daylight and wedged herself into the angle between the walkway and the stairwell she was at a crucial point. She could see ahead as far as the bridge and, over the coping of the parapet, the flat landscaped desert below where the surface of the water in the puddles, calm out of the force of the wind, ruffled in irregular patches and huge once-famous football heroes climbed and volleyed on the faded mural. She watched a black mongrel dog – a bitch with three pups – emerge from below the opposite causeway, trot across the decayed play-area, look right and left, then lope towards the tunnel below where Sharon was installed. The pups scampered to keep up with her.

Distant thunder – or a helicopter? – rumbled. The wind tossed Sharon's hair across her face, into her mouth. A tear formed in her windward eye as she thought about the windswept moor in the book she had been reading. But it wasn't just the stormy weather or the remote landscape against which the book was set she thought about so much as the stormy remote heart of the heroine. It shook her, shocked her, to find such a fearless woman so completely portrayed. Sharon, herself, already understood the mechanics of a sexual affair that was illicit, secret and maybe also doomed.

It had been at this spot, just here, that she had encountered the man in the parka who had produced the book. Yesterday. She had surprised him, catching him from behind, when she saw he was alone, as he left the stairwell exit onto the causeway. Knowing that he was behind her, she had lain in wait for him, then: "You looking for a fuck, Mister?"

The man had not jumped out of his skin. On the contrary, he had surprised her, when she had named her price, by having about him the unorthodox currency she would accept it in. Usually she left them the find the scratch – a bundle of magazines, *Plain Truth*, *The Watchtower*, a collection of *Reader's Digests*. This one had said: "Well, if it's a read you want, try this," taking a paperback book from his parka pocket. "It's good. More where it came from," he had told her. "Let me know. What you want I can get."

"Sorry. With me," she had told him, "you only get one crack."

But here she was, back the very next day, on the look out for him. For his supply of printed fiction. Ready to pay for it. Her fix.

Directly below the parapet a pair of grey boys stole out of the surrounding greyness. They moved with

stealth from behind one of the abandoned earthbeds, children stalking an invisible prey. Tearfully Sharon observed them signal, watch each other, unaware that they were being watched. In their hands both boys were holding stubby home-made-looking wooden crossbows.

Was she expecting to meet the man in the parka again, to run into him in the same spot because she was there at the same time? To find out from him what, exactly, he was offering for sale? Well, it was possible. She couldn't help wondering whether the supply the man had hinted at would be of a similar nature: stories about people like herself, men and women incarcerated in their landscape, in a fate into which concrete had been poured and allowed to set. Or would Roger's altogether weightier reference books prove to be enough?

Sharon wiped the tear from her eye.

When the black mongrel bitch leapt back out into the open it was pursued by the sound of rattling metal and now she had only two of her pups with her. The exit she headed for was blocked; one of the grey boys stood between her and escape. The bitch swerved and circled the perimeter, bewildered, silent. The two boys and the pursuer – a girl, Sharon could tell, carrying an iron spear – patiently cornered her. The first bolt struck her in full flank and the thin howl that rose up from her pierced the heart of the wind which immediately carried it away. The second bolt silenced the animal. She lay on her side staring at the two pups which approached her, sniffing. Then the girl daubed her spear in the dog's blood, wrote three words on the wall across the faded pink calves of the leaping football players. Sharon could not decipher the words and she did not think she would find them in any of Roger's dictionaries.

After the taxi had driven off, a few gulls swooping desultorily after it, Morse stood at the side of the deserted thoroughfare, irritated, angry and afraid – and uncertain which of these unpleasant emotions he would eventually succumb to. Through the fine rain that immediately began to fleck the surface of his glasses he peered about him to find his bearings among the contours of the similarly angular landscape. A helicopter buzzed low overhead, vanished. Strange and half-familiar landmarks merged into each other. Thinking he recognized where he had been left, Morse picked up his nylon grip and headed for the tunnel into the nearest tower-block complex, still angry at the taxi-driver's effrontery and irritated at the amount he had been cozened into paying him, still afraid of the consequences of failing to bribe the man sufficiently to carry him this far off the more lucratively pliable routes.

At the end of the tunnel Morse cautiously emerged onto the paved concourse of the estate. His bearings – fixed points from which comprehension of his exact position in the environment could be calculated – were not immediately discernible. The approaching storm was darkening the sky, making it appear later in the day than it actually was.

Where was he? Where was he going?

"Forth!" had been the glib reply he had hurled at Rita when the computer had quizzed him on that very question as he gathered up his possessions before

leaving the Library: Away from a place of residence or sojourn. Onward in time or space. Out into notice or view.

His ejection of himself from the lucid closed world of the Library building into the semi-organized chaos beyond the steel perimeter-ring and the guard on the gate had not been planned. It was something that had just happened, made necessary by the chemistry inside the situation, like a stage in metamorphosis by which an organism is changed willynilly, without any say in the matter. With his scant luggage of fractured emotions, a used razor, a handful of old photographs, and the emptiness left by his missing copy of Skeat's *Etymology*, he was entering hostile territory where his access numbers would be useless to him and his RP accent a burden. His feelings of vulnerability, however, were caused less by the immediate danger he was in than the realization that for the first time in his life he was in the world without the map and compass of lexical reference.

Conscious of the proximity of the chiga-chiga-chiga of the unseen low-flying Police helicopter patrol, Morse hurried into the labyrinth of gravel-dashed walkways among whose confluences of tunnels and sloped spurs he would conceal himself. It would absorb him as the concrete walling blotted up the concrete-coloured rain. He welcomed the difficulties he faced finding a way through; the more completely he became lost the greater his chances were of eluding the swoop of the helicopter that would soon be programmed to seek him out as surely as the beak of a bird is designed to crack the backs of small creatures scampering to ground.

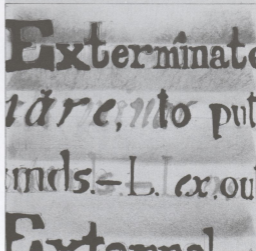
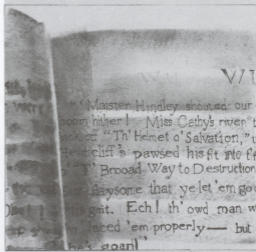
Through a crenel in a sloping parapet below, Morse caught a flash of movement – away from him. Swerving, he ducked behind a concrete support structure. Almost immediately three teenagers of indeterminate sex shot out from the elbow of the junction, loped silently towards him, a dog's carcass skewered on a pole that two of them were carrying. Morse watched, waited, grinned, then, when they had disappeared, shouldered his grip and plunged into the foul-smelling wake left by the entrails of the dead animal. He was acquiring the vocabulary of responses a man needed to make his way in this world.

Zig-zagging among the graffitied architecture, Morse jogged upwards towards the twenty-second floor K-block west condominium, home of the young prostitute who had befriended him. Her home – and now his, if not in the sense of usual domestic residence, then in that of the final objective in a game, one in which he was a human counter in the intricate life-and-death end-moves. The rubric of the game, the writing on the walls around him, if unintelligible was jagged with violence: the runes of sociolects belonging to isolated tribal groups abandoned by society, the letter-shapes primitively mimicking the outline of sexual parts, obscene acts, various methods of inflicting pain.

“Hey, you've lost weight!” she said.

Sharon stood arms akimbo, grinning, wearing a waisted blue and white-spotted silky dress, stolen from the past.

“Most of it...” Morse, collapsing onto the bed, said, panting for breath, “...in the last ten minutes!”



The final ascent had exhausted him. He grinned up at her, pleased to see her, to see that she was pleased to see him. Weary with fear and hunger, he allowed her to make him comfortable on the bed, spoon-feed him liquid baby-food, while his fingers, as if they possessed a will of their own, tried to help her out of her dress. Soon, uncertain how exactly his own clothes had been removed, he found himself naked inside the bed with the young woman he desired naked beside him. After his exhausting ascent of the tower-block, the baby-feeding and now the somnolent entry into the natal conduit of the woman, Morse had returned – in at least some sense of the word – home. He was safe, warm, soon falling into a light sleep: the natural periodic suspension of consciousness during which the powers of the body are restored.

Morse dreamed he was awake near a sea-shore at night. A Mediterranean breeze was carrying through the horizontal slats of a jalousie the sound of waves breaking in the near distance, a regular swishing sound, as of pages being turned.

Candles had been lit in the darkened room when Morse opened his eyes, wakened by soft voices – a mother whispering to a daughter across the room. He lay listening to her explanations, wondering whether he – like the little girl – would ever be able to get used to his presence in this world of theirs, of cheap food, violence, and the isolation that went with the absence of communication technology. He had crossed a divide, exchanged the familiar babble of librarians for a wary incommunicability. The silence by which he had once measured the intimacy of his relationship with Sharon now engulfed them both completely.

Level with his eyes a bright orange paperback book stared at Morse on the grey blanket, where it had been laid aside. Idly he took the book up. He had never seen it before.

"Where'd this come from?" he said, pretending to himself that he did not know.

Sharon – she looked up from her daughter and across the room to her lover – said simply: "A man gave it me."

"Why?" Morse said.

"Why?... Why? are you here? Why can't you go back?"

"It's a long story...I'll tell you whenever you want me to."

"So the reason why's a long story. I'll tell you whenever you want me to."

She looked at him and he looked at her. Neither spoke. Morse lowered his eyes. He opened the book and read:

I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. Mr Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up...

From within the bed Morse continued to read the book, steadily escaping into it. Outside the storm howled and banged. There was a sudden heavy crash at the front door which shook the condominium. Morse closed the book, automatically taking out the old torn page book-mark to keep his place. The moment he saw the book from which the page had

been torn, however, its quaint serified Clarendon type-face, Roger Morse saw everything, his whole life from beginning to end, from exist to extinguish – from having life and the functions of vitality to bringing something to an end, causing it to be void. He understood everything that had happened to him and everything that was going to happen. The page of Skeat's Etymology in his hand – page 176 – which he recognized from its pencilled notations to be from his own copy – Morse knew by heart: Exist. Exit. Expect. Experience. Expert. Expire. Exterminate. Extinguish. He knew all their meanings and etymologies, only now he experienced them exquisitely, expertly, as a whole, as if it was this moment that their meanings expressed and their etymologies explained.

Morse stood in the centre of the room, naked, the single page of Skeat in his hand. Sharon, in her blue dress, was at his side with Lucy in her arms. Morse felt calm, as if they, he and his new family, were merely modelling for a realist painting depicting Revolutionary Defiance. In front of them an officer from the Police Executive, a shabby rain-soaked parka over his smart uniform, stood holding a light automatic weapon in one hand and a faded-blue hardcover book in the other.

"Roger Morse..."

The officer handed Morse his own copy of Skeat's *Dictionary of Etymology*, almost ceremoniously, as it had first been handed to him many years before. The piece of official-looking paper protruding from between E and F, was clearly stamped: EXTERMINATION WARRANT. Morse glanced at it. It seemed to be in order.

"My name's Captain Cznetsov. You got an appointment with me," the Police Executive officer said mildly, with the open back vowels and the flapped alveolar consonants characteristic of the Mid-West. "As I believe you know." He raised the automatic weapon and pointed it in Morse's direction.

Morse watched the extreme or last part lengthwise of the thing, the point that marked the extent of it. The tip. It was, also, the point to which a particular course of action had led. The cessation of an undertaking. A boundary. The goal an agent would or should act towards. The object by virtue of or for the sake of which a chain of events had taken place. The ultimate state. Something that is extreme.

THE END

Neil Ferguson appears in *Interzone* for the third time with the above story. His previous pieces, "The Monroe Doctrine" (IZ 6) and "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw" (IZ 13) have received much praise (see, for example, the letter column in this issue) as well as a few brickbats. Neil, who lives in London, has published one book of fiction, *Bars of America* (Hamish Hamilton, 1986).

Gwyneth Jones

Interview by Paul Kincaid

How did you come to write *Divine Endurance* after the children's novels you'd written before?

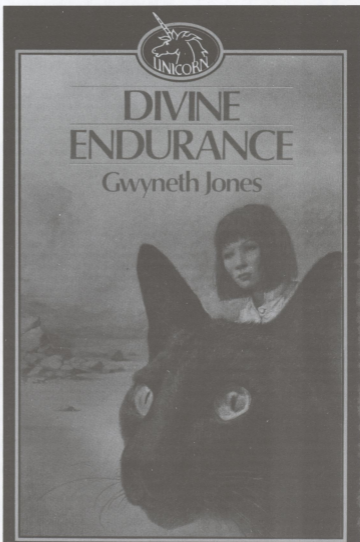
When I started writing *Divine Endurance* I'm not at all sure I knew what it was that I was doing, even to the extent of knowing whether it was children's fiction or adult fiction. The writing of *Divine Endurance* was a very long process during which I found out what I wanted to do about writing generally. There's a flow to writing when you first start. At that time I wondered what anybody thought was difficult about writing books because my experience was you sat down at 8 o'clock in the morning and scribbled, and at 1 o'clock in the afternoon you'd written two and a half thousand words and stacked it up, and when you had finished you typed it. I produced my first books very easily, it was almost a mechanical process, but that first rush was broken by *Divine Endurance* – by *Divine Endurance* growing and changing; and by my experiences living in Singapore which obviously had a great deal to do with it.

Were you still in Singapore when you started the novel?

Oh yes. I wrote the first two drafts of it there. I think it might be fair to say it started off as a fantasy, and became a political fantasy about what was going on in that part of South East Asia in 1978. A lot of it is instantly recognizable to me as the politics of that time and that area.

The political complexity of the novel is one of the things everyone comments on when they respond to it. How difficult was it to work out the detail?

Well, I didn't actually think of it as being a politically complex novel. I had a highly politicized childhood. For many years I would say if anybody asked me, "I am not a political person," because compared to my parents I was totally apathetic in that respect. I only realized that I never stop thinking politically when I eventually discovered there was some way you could think that wasn't political. This came as a curious revelation to me. So the political complexity of *Divine Endurance* did not appear to me while I was



Cover by Julek Heller for Gwyneth Jones's first adult novel, '*Divine Endurance*.' It was published by Allen and Unwin as a Unicorn paperback in 1985 (£2.95).

writing it – it only appeared to me when people asked me to explain it. **So when you moved on from *Divine Endurance* to *Escape Plans*, were you more conscious of the political elements of the book?**

I didn't think *Escape Plans* was politically complex at all. When they told me *Divine Endurance* had too many complications in it I thought okay, I'll have an empire with a revolution going on in it. Heavens, you can't get much simpler than that.

Well the complexity also lies in the structure of the books.

Yes. That's something people do keep saying. As I have pointed out, the fact that it's a very compressed, compacted sort of writing is not entirely my fault, it's something I was trained into by Rayner Unwin in the process of producing *Divine Endurance*. But also, I think that the things that I'm trying to say, the things I'm trying to work out, actually are hard and complicated, and that's an element that I can't get rid of, try as I might. I often feel impelled to say I'm sorry, I'll try to write something simpler next time.

Is that why you write the children's novels still, as something you can do more simply, as a break in the system?

Yes, that's one way of expressing why I still write for children.

Do you find that the children's novels have affected the adult, or the adult have affected the children's?

They come from the same background, obviously they both come from identical experience, it's mine, but I don't think there's much feeding in between them. Yes, there is in the sense that I will think of things, and I will think this is something I don't want to deal with in an adult book, I would rather deal with it in a children's book. The way you write for children is different, and in my opinion it has some real advantages.

What advantages?

They're hard to pin down in a few words. There's something that children's fiction, science fiction and fantasy have in common, a simplicity: a stripped-down sort of feeling, in terms of emotions and characterization. You're allowed to write with a directness that I really enjoy, and which doesn't seem to me possible in straight adult fiction. Or at least if it's possible not many people are interested in the possibility. Perhaps I like this because it makes room for my other complications.

How aware were you of sf when you sat down and wrote *Divine Endurance*?

I read a great deal of science fiction as a child. My mother has always been intensely interested in anything futuristic. Her dream is that "we" (the species "we") will get to Mars before she dies. That's my background. I was

fascinated by Stephen King's account in *Danse Macabre* of the news of Sputnik coming as a primal trauma to young Americans. I remember that day too. I was five at the time. We were overjoyed. We called our pet frogs Sputnik and Krushchev, and we thought it was absolutely wonderful. We also (this is the family "we") thought the Merlin project was wonderful. As long as it was for peaceful purposes, you know. I can remember Lake District holidays, looking at that giant creature at Windscale and thinking how magical to have harnessed such great power. One has to be careful, I think, not to edit out the awkward things. I try not to change the future I grew up with to suit this present. If you see what I mean.

But to get back to your question, about fifteen years ago I just stopped reading science fiction. That was my post-literate phase. I still read it more than adult straight fiction of the day, but no more than isolated famous books in the whole of the 70's and 80's. Which I admired fairly indiscriminately. I remember reading *Stranger*

in a *Strange Land* one night and being most impressed. Then I wrote *Divine Endurance* and people told me it was fantasy. I knew well a line of English adult fantasy – George MacDonald, Charles Williams, Lewis, Lindsay, Tolkien. I didn't think *Divine Endurance* belonged to that category. So then I read some of the trilogy stuff, which I had never touched, to find out what I was supposed to be doing. And yes, some bits of *Divine Endurance* seem to me now very naive, bland genre fantasy. I think: Argh, how embarrassing.

What's your reaction to the sort of response you had from the sf community?

The sf community has been very kind to a stranger. But my experience is of someone who's been writing books and getting them published for ten years. And for the first time I have paid off my advance before the hardback gets remaindered. But I'd be a fool if I told you I didn't think *Divine Endurance* was good. It's got terrible things wrong with it, but in lots of ways I think it's an exceptional book, and yes I did know that at the time.

Did you think you were correcting the terrible things wrong with *Divine Endurance* when you wrote *Escape Plans*?

No. There was one thing that I was changing between *Divine Endurance* and *Escape Plans* which I saw as a correction. Mostly it went like this: one of the most important things to me in life, the best high, is translating from one language of ideas into another. Now I don't know why that should be, but finding that you can move a pattern from, say, physics to fiction and match it all up really gives me immense plea-

sure. Now, in *Divine Endurance*, I had written about the desire things – including people – have for death, entropy, dissolution, nothingness. And that desire was neatly matched, it fitted in well, with themes of the East: Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, stories, poetry, images. I'd done that. So now, I thought, I will move westward. The move from "fantasy" to sf also seemed appropriate. *Escape Plans* is the same game (among other things) only this time with Judaism and Christianity as the material. Which gave me a lot of scope. The whole of Western Capitalism in fact is supposed to be based on the ultimate value of being human; finding redemption through identifying yourself with the oppressed and powerless... Funny how things turn out, isn't it.

Let's move on to discuss the feminism in your books. The feminist ideas seem to form the basis from which your stories spring, rather than the ideas being imposed upon the story.

Yes, although there's a danger there. I enjoy reading lesbian utopia stories. Where we're all going to go off and be campfire girls in the woods, while the

cities crumble. But I can't intellectually, and I don't ethically, take it seriously. For one thing I am fond of civilization. I would not find life without Tampax amusing. For another, as I have said before, I don't see that patriarchy is much different from patriarchy.

On the subject, I will tell you something about *Divine Endurance* that will give you an idea of what it's like to be writing as a feminist. In that story most male children are not allowed to become men. They stay boys all their lives, they don't develop sexually. As I thought I made clear, though some readers didn't notice it, this isn't generally managed with a pair of pinkish shears. It's all done with pheromones. The same way that colony insects, and some species of birds and small mammals, arrange things: where the presence of the breeding female or the breeding pair inhibits the production of sex hormones for the masses, and they just beaver away for the good of the firm. Duped by some story that they're looking after their genetic identity, I believe. Anyway, that's what I set up. And I still don't think that it's at all a bad idea. Ideologically unsound maybe, but not horrific. Why not, male sexuality, what is it? Doesn't seem to last long, and it doesn't seem like an awful lot of fun to me. Messy, soon over. What you've never had you never miss. I assumed that most boys led normal happy lives, in their own estimation at least. But the point is that this was not meant to be an extreme, violent, solution to the problem. When I found out that male readers considered it really shocking I thought: "Oh, that's what it feels like to oppress people and

ORION

O

Escape Plans

— Gwyneth Jones —

A stunning original new novel from the author of the critically acclaimed *DIVINE ENDURANCE*.

"So you're not dead after all, Pioneer Azeleyst."

I was surprised she recognised me so easily. I was surprised she could recognise anything at all. For Yolande was transfigured. The effect had been masked while she was sleeping. Now I could see her face was hollowed to the bones. She hadn't slept or eaten, obviously for several days. Her eyes were burning, the pupils dilated far too strongly even for this dull light. I realised with a stinking heart that this was not, as I assumed, a curiously transparent stratagem for infiltrating the enemy. That route accident had been real. Concussion, I guessed. The nasty kind, with little bits of grey matter sticking to the bone. An expression of irritation crossed the incandescent features. Yolande didn't appreciate my unspoken verdict...

This is the future of the earth, but not this earth. Yet something is happening here that may have happened to this earth once. No one can be sure, the evidence is contradictory. But if it is true it will change everything... everything...

Gwyneth Jones

ORION
LAWIN PAPERBACKS
SCIENCE FICTION

£4.50

not know it."

Seeing it from the side of the oppressor now.

Yes, and that is why, in *Escape Plans*, the veiled women in *Divine Endurance* who just knew what was best, no argument, became ordinary, as it were, men, and men became ordinary, as it were, women. And ALIC is totally unaware... She believes, she even states, that she is actually very liberal in these matters.

Why don't you write for *Interzone*?

I rarely write short stories, except to take to the Milford writers' workshop and have them savaged. I have submitted fiction to *Interzone* in the past. I might again, you never know. But it is true I am not happy about the venue. Not for my kind of music. The piece I wrote for the sex issue turned up right next to a Michael Blumlein story. I did

not like that. A good deal of *Interzone* material is still inimical to women, in spite of recent changes. Both in silly superficial ways; and quite profoundly, in the underlying assumptions of the text. I would not consider this even worthy of comment. I have been reading sf for many years. But I am told that *Interzone* wants to be an "anti-sexist" sf magazine. Which is something rather different from sometimes printing stories by women. Whether they can achieve this bizarre combination without finally going over the edge of financial suicide is another question. The voting on Lee Montgomerie's excellent nuclear story, in last year's popularity poll, should show them the exact nature of their problem.

Is the feminism then the most important thing to you, in your writing?

No, it is not. I dream of a day when I

can turn in my shock trooper uniform. Even the boots (sigh). But I don't expect to live to see it.

So what is it you think you're doing? What is important?

I'm trying to tell the truth. A little of it, my version of it. That's enough. And it's terrific fun.

Note: Gwyneth Jones's most recent novel, *King Death's Garden*, as by "Ann Halam," was reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 18.

WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letter column in each issue. Please send your comments, opinions, reactions, to the magazine's main editorial address. We may not be able to reply to all letters, but we do read them and may well be influenced by them.

Paul J. McAuley

A Dragon for Seyour Chan

Luiz D'Amalfi should have begun evasive manoeuvres as soon as Seyour Chan began to explain how easy the project would be. Nothing in this universe of discourse is obtained without effort, most especially not exotic fauna. D'Amalfi had retained several interesting scars to impress prospective bed-mates and had had a number of others removed because they were so bad they would have scared away the kind of woman he liked: so he should have known what he was letting himself in for. The trouble was that this particular project really did seem easy. And profitable. D'Amalfi, who had liens on two houses and a singleship, liked profit almost as much as he liked women.

So instead of backing as fast as he could out of the room, he fingered the impressive prow of his nose, took a long drag on the excellent cigar Seyour Chan had provided, and said, "These are real, fire-breathing dragons?"

"That's what the source said. And common, too."

On the other side of the huge desk – almost the size of a singleship lifesystem – Seyour Chan folded his hands on the hill of his belly and smiled slowly. It was as if dried leather had cracked. Seyour Chan had started longevity treatments late in life, and looked almost as old as he actually was. His voice was absurdly small for so fat a man, like the creaking of a cricket in the huge, softly curved room. "Think about it, D'Amalfi. Dragons are the most powerful symbols of myth. People look at the bioscapes when they are here, but they are drawn in the first place by the exotic, the singular, the strange. A dragon will bring them in their millions!"

"It sounds good," D'Amalfi admitted. "But what about your source?"

"A full transcript of the report of the singleship jockey who claimed Santa Maria. She thought she had discovered another Elysium, until she found out about the high metal content. After that she lost

interest and her report became somewhat cursory. But she mentioned seeing winged creatures that breathed fire, all over the place. What else could they be but dragons?"

"Picture?"

"Regretfully, no. And before I obtained her report she had gone out again. But it is genuine. The middleman is one of our best. Like you, D'Amalfi. I hardly think you'll have trouble finding me a dragon." Seyour Chan gestured towards the banked screens which showed a fragmented vision of the Circo: tourists jostling before bioscapes or individual vivariums, access corridors, the hangar-sized genetics laboratory, and, on the largest screen of all, a view of the whole thing transmitted from a drone a hundred clicks out, a fantastic conglomeration of bubbles and tubes, spined and finned like some improbable deep-sea creature, the black space around it alive with the lights of arriving and departing shuttles.

Seyour Chan chortled: a muffled stridulation. "This will make the Circo the greatest attraction in the Federation. That's why I'm sending you to Santa Maria, D'Amalfi, because you're the best collector I have, or at least the luckiest. Don't pretend to be modest, now. I know how you bribed that clerk so you could peek in your record."

D'Amalfi had the grace to blush. "No colonization problems?"

"The place is uninhabitable. Too many heavy metals; without canned air you wouldn't last a week. I understand there are plenty of interesting biological adaptations, but remember: I want a kilo of dragon-flesh before anything else. I know you'll do your best."

He didn't bother to add the rider, but D'Amalfi could guess that he'd be out on his can if he didn't bring back enough information for the gene lab. It hardly seemed a risk. How could he fail to spot a dragon?

Two weeks later, in orbit around Santa Maria, D'Amalfi ran into his first problem. Someone had beaten him to the planet.

He went around one more time to think it out. The trace was spang in the middle of the high plateau Santa Maria's discoverer had described, so it was likely that Seyour Chan's impeccable source had decided that in this case once was not enough. D'Amalfi could have landed elsewhere – he had an area the size of Africa to consider – but on the other hand there might not be dragons elsewhere. Some creatures are notoriously local. He stubbed out his cigar, confirmed coordinates for a spot half a dozen kilometres west of the intruder, and started down.

The landing was textbook, but he was certain that the intruder out to the east would know all about it: it's hard to mistake a series of sonic booms for anything else on an uninhabited planet. The best thing was to get on top of the other before the other got on top of him. D'Amalfi fixed up his airmask and went out to unship the little thopter.

The singleship sat in the centre of a broad black swathe D'Amalfi had cleared simply by feathering the manoeuvring jets just before touchdown. Threads of smoke still rose here and there; beyond, things like giant celeries sagged in misty sunlight. The place was still shocked into silence by his descent, and as he worked on the thopter D'Amalfi felt a crawling sensation between his shoulderblades, featherlight touch of the unknown. He started the thopter's electric motor. The double vane cupped air above the sling-seat and the machine leapt up and away.

Beyond the landing site the landscape began to take on the haunting appearance of the scenes depicted in the ancient Chinese screens Seyour Chan was so fond of collecting. Spiring towers of rock rose above valleys swathed in mist, and trees a little like warped pines edged sinuous ridges. D'Amalfi began to whistle inside his airmask, happy to be out of the can after two weeks, happier to be free and easy, the cares of civilization (especially the tangle of his finances) far away. There should be flocks of dragons cavorting here, he thought, and imagined great scaled beasts bronze and silver and gold twisting beneath the flexing membrane of the overcast sky.

Indeed, the air was as full of flying things as the waters of a coral reef are full of fish. Although there was nothing that resembled a dragon, D'Amalfi saw huge, oddly shaped birds rowing along with ludicrously tiny wings, and a hundred sorts of creature that glided with membranes spread between their legs. Some of these were quite large: things like gazelles; an animal like an elongated wolf; and once he glimpsed something like a cross between a bloated cow and a manta-ray drop from a grassy ledge and solemnly plane away.

Santa Maria was a small planet, about the size of Luna, and even with a superabundance of heavy metals the gravity was still only a shade under half Earth normal. It looked as if almost everything took to the air at some stage in its life. And somewhere out there were dragons. All D'Amalfi had to do was spot a flame and he was home.

The intruder had parked high above a misty winding valley, in the middle of a kind of alpine meadow. The ship was a standard affair little different from

D'Amalfi's own: a stubby delta wing with the forward bulge of the drive pod and the smaller lifestem blister behind it. D'Amalfi put out a cross-channel call, received no reply, shrugged, and let his thopter flutter down to the interlocked tendrils that passed for grass here.

He banged on the airlock hatch, then thumbed the inset lever just for luck. To his surprise the hatch angled back – but who would expect to be burgled when he fondly imagined he owned sole information to a ball of rock two dozen light years from any place that could be called civilized?

D'Amalfi stooped inside, pushed through the token resistance of a pressure curtain, and shucked his mask. The cabin was as small as his own, although considerably neater. It took less than a second to confirm that no one was there. He was about to retreat – he was pretty sure that his entry would have set off a remote alarm, for all that the hatch had not been secured – when he had a thought and took a key from his toolbelt. A moment later he'd pried up the panel of the thruster controls; a moment after that he had several irreplaceable doohickies in his hand. He stowed them away carefully, closed the panel, and went outside.

He didn't have long to wait. He was standing at the lip of the drop, watching a herd of what looked like aerial jellyfish scud over the wrinkling mist, when a high glittering mote caught his eye. A minute later the thopter buzzed overhead like an angry bee; then it circled somewhat erratically towards the singleship. D'Amalfi strolled towards it, then stopped as the pilot clambered out.

The coveralls were baggy, to be sure, and the airmask concealed most of the face, but he saw at once that the pilot was a woman.

She gestured towards the airlock and he followed her through. This was beginning to be interesting. She glanced around as if to ascertain that all was in place, then unhooked her mask: a wide-browed face, black skin glistening in the glotube's harsh glare, large eyes with pupils like beaten gold. She said, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

D'Amalfi unhooked his own mask. "I was going to ask something along the same line. I thought my boss had an exclusive."

"And I thought I had one. If I catch up with that daughter of a whore –"

"Don't worry. She'd better have a hiding place like in a black hole if she wants to save herself once my boss hears what's happened. May I ask what brings you here?"

"Now that," she said, "is a leading question." She ran a gloved hand over her short, tightly-curved black hair. Then she sighed. "Well, I'm representing Ngu Metal Recovery Systems."

"Can't say I've heard of your outfit."

"Maybe because I'm all there is to it. The name's Margaret Ngu."

"Luiz D'Amalfi. You plan to mine here?"

"Of course not. But there are all sorts of interesting creatures here that accumulate metals in all sorts of interesting ways. There's so much free metal around that anything living here has to either chelate the excess or excrete it in some way, and most choose the latter option. You should see what some of the critters

use for armour. But I'm chiefly interested in bacteria for refining marginal ores."

"Oh," D'Amalfi said. "It seems you and I aren't exactly in competition."

"We're not? What are you here for, Luiz D'Amalfi?"

"I'm a collector. If you saw all of that singleshp jockey's report, you might remember she mentioned seeing things like dragons here."

Margaret Ngu laughed, her knuckles pushing at her chin. "It's a long way to come, to chase down something as vague as that."

"I've been further for less. Seyour Chan wants the exotic: I go get it."

"The Circo?"

"Sure." He took out a cigar. "May I?"

"I don't think so, Seyour D'Amalfi. My scrubbers have enough problems with the dust."

"Dust?"

"For someone from such a big outfit, you don't seem to know much about this place."

"I'm a contracted freelance. I make out for myself. Besides, I've just arrived."

"I know. I went looking for you. Your ship burnt quite a hole in the landscape."

D'Amalfi shrugged, grateful that he, at least, had locked his ship.

"Well, let me give you a couple of free tips. Every time you re-enter your lysesystem you'll bring in dust, metal-rich dust. Eventually it screws up the scrubbers. I've only been here a week, and I figure I've about five days left. And if you're figuring on using native plants to replenish your food converter, forget it. The animals here mostly excrete metals, but the plants chelate them. You could go fruit picking with a magnet."

"I don't plan being here very long. Find a dragon, get enough genetic material, and I'm gone."

"Well, good luck, Seyour D'Amalfi."

It was worth a shot. "Have you found out where the dragons are?"

"I haven't really been looking." Which wasn't, really, an answer. She added, "I hope you don't mind leaving, now. I've work to do."

"Come on, we've just met. And a pretty singular meeting too. How far away would you say the next human being is?"

"Well, I'll tell you: I was happy enough to be the only inhabitant here."

D'Amalfi noted her slight shift in posture; now her hand was resting on the grip of a wicked-looking machete sheathed at her belt. He gave her his widest smile. There was plenty of time to work on her, more than she thought. "Then come around for dinner sometime. I'll let you in on a secret: I always carry genuine vintage brandy. A little weakness of mine."

"Maybe," she said. "One last tip. It's peaceful enough in the sky by day, but at night all truces end. And I'd say there's less than an hour to sunset."

"Think about my invitation." He let her have the benefit of his smile again, then fastened his airmask and left.

Whatever else, Margaret Ngu was right about the nights on Santa Maria. The hull pickups of D'Amalfi's ship let him hear the quiet daytime landscape detonate at sunset, resonant with squeals, growls and chattering, and high plaintive cries like the calls of lost

children. Perhaps some of these were dragon calls, or the sounds of creatures hunted by dragons, but D'Amalfi soon wearied of it and cut off the pickups. The nights on swift-turning Santa Maria were only six hours long, and he had a lot to do on the morrow.

He spent most of the next day setting lures on various likely crags and ledges, tethered carcasses of flying gazelles loaded with a sporific the computer had designed for Santa Marian biochemistry. Surely no dragon would find these prizes resistable, but D'Amalfi saw no trace of dragons at all, and it was hard work hauling limp, awkward bodies into position and tethering them with his piton gun, setting up the little electronic alarms.

The day was hot and close, the cloud deck broken into huge ranges between which the sun, a G7 a little smaller than Tau Ceti, occasionally peeked, its huge disc like a rotten orange. D'Amalfi sweated in the fitful sunlight, the eyepieces of his airmask misting, his coveralls chafing at the crotch and armpits. The membranous stuff stretched between the gazelles' long spindly legs kept snagging on thorny bushes or projecting rocks as he lugged them up, and all their weight was in the forequarters and head, making them particularly awkward to carry. "I'd like to see Chan do this," D'Amalfi said out loud, as he fiddled with an alarm and swatted at the little midges which were attracted by the blood on the muzzle of the carcass.

At least he was gaining an impression of the country as he flew hither and yon. He was in the middle of a great drainage system, a delta of narrow valleys all running roughly north-south, the edge of a shield system tipped towards the polar ocean. Once, tired of humping dead doped gazelles around, D'Amalfi descended below the canopy of a celery forest to examine the ecology there: dragons were all very well, but more ordinary creatures would bring in money too.

The blanched stalks of the giant celeries bulged out smoothly as they rose, breaking into huge fan-shaped leaves a dozen metres above D'Amalfi's head. They were as regularly spaced as an orchard, the ground beneath carpeted with something like moss, in which D'Amalfi's boots left prints filling with rusty water. Bright things like arm-long triple-vaned dragonflies flickered through the air, and there were ground dwellers too, all seemingly of one genus. From the size of his thumb to one the size of his singleshp (he tracked that one by the trail it had smashed through the ordered groves) all were of an identical design: a bowl-shaped shield armoured with overlapping plates, beneath which protruded many stumpy legs. They all had the same defensive reaction too: clamp to the ground and sit tight. Some were fringed with metallic-looking spikes, and D'Amalfi remembered what Margaret Ngu had told him about metals and metabolisms. And he wondered where she was at that moment, and what she was doing. Well, she'd have to come to him eventually; she couldn't leave until he let her.

He picked up one of the surprisingly heavy little creatures he'd been watching and sealed it in a collecting box. Already he had the nucleus of a Santa Marian bioscape. No doubt Seyour Chan's copywriters would label it the planet of living jewellery or some such

nonsense; but he would always have it, the spongy oozing mass and the way the bronze light clashed amongst the huge leaves above, the crags and the pines and the mists. He took a scraping from a celery trunk (the flimsy leaves quivering as if in pain) and headed back to the thopter. It had not been, on the whole, a very successful day, but there was always the next.

It rained the next day. Scarves of mist wound the many valleys; rock spires rose black and wet above. The pseudo-pines on the ridges were lashed by squalling gusts of rain, and rain drummed on the canopy of the little thopter, louder than the thrumming of its flexing vanes, and blew in around the slingseat and relentlessly penetrated his supposedly waterproof coveralls.

D'Amalfi was not in a good temper. He had spent a fruitless morning checking his lures, but they had yielded nothing larger than a flying wolf, and most of the alarms had shorted out besides. Now he was exploring the river cliffs more thoroughly, but there was no trace of anything dragonish on the bleak wet rock faces – not so much as a smoke-stain. Dragons wouldn't be out in this weather, he thought, and imagined a long scaly beast curled in a snug sandy cave, its slitted yellow eyes half-open, steam feathering from its flared nostrils as it watched rain drip outside. Although sunset was more than three hours off D'Amalfi abandoned his search and turned the thopter towards the ship.

Once he had changed out of his sodden coveralls and was relaxing with a snifter of good Pan-Canadian brandy, he felt a little more human. "Tell me about dragons," he ordered the computer, and listened to its explanation of how legends of firebreathing serpents had originated in China, becoming so widespread that the first explorers from the west had been convinced that such beasts actually existed. How dragons were a concretization of the belief that elemental fire, the reality behind the Platonic shadow of early man's campfires, could never be tamed...

The computer was programmed to disgorge information in a strung, semi-randomized mode which mimicked conversational speech, which was an advantage or disadvantage depending upon your outlook. At last, D'Amalfi interrupted it to ask, "With all the available data – including today's stuff – where would a large flying carnivore be found?"

The computer told him that there was a ninety per cent chance that such a beast would hunt the upper air, which is what it had told him the day before. It seemed plausible enough – surely a fire-breathing predator would stoop upon its prey from a great height, incinerating it with a swift blast of flame – but D'Amalfi distrusted that ten per cent chance of something else. He scratched the hooked blade of his nose and asked, "So why haven't I seen one?"

The computer regretted that it didn't have an answer, but if he gathered more information...?

"I've already given you enough to reconstruct this place from scratch," D'Amalfi grumbled. He poured himself another ration of brandy and nursed the fragrant glass against his belly, wondering if the single-pilot who'd discovered the planet hadn't been



off her beams after all. That kind of thing happened. Explorers were a weird, mistrustful, misanthropic breed to begin with, and the long, solitary voyages through the blankness of contraspace were a *tabula rasa* for delusion. Or perhaps it had been her idea of a joke. Then D'Amalfi wondered if maybe Margaret Ngu hadn't seen a dragon after all. She'd been here a lot longer than he or the singleness jockey had been.

He had planned to play a wait-and-see game with Seyoura Ngu, but the bleakness of the day and the warmth of the brandy conspired against his better intentions, and he pressed the general-alert frequency key. When Margaret Ngu answered, he smiled at her image and offered her dinner.

"Okay," she said after a fractional pause, "why not?"

When she had signed off, D'Amalfi drained his brandy and set about tidying up the cabin. He always let himself go when on a mission, but who was there to see? No one, until now. Still, when Margaret Ngu arrived, she wrinkled her flat nose as she looked around. "You should have seen it before I cleared it up," D'Amalfi said. "Brandy?"

"Before dinner? No thanks. And I won't have one of those awful things you smoke either. You cleared this place up? It must have been some mess."

D'Amalfi shrugged. She moved a broken remote sensor from the bunk and gingerly sat. If they had each moved forward half a metre, their heads would have bumped. The cabin was that small. "Well," D'Amalfi said. "How's it going?"

"Not too badly. I've a number of promising innocua. Of course, I have to genemap them still, and that'll have to wait until I get back to Elysium."

"Now, that's one place I've never been to," D'Amalfi said, to be polite, and as they ate (a cold seafood salad, then chicken and honey with black beans and rice on the side) he let her tell him about Elysium, watching her as if she were some rare and wonderful creature he'd captured. Which, in a way, she was.

As she talked, Margaret Ngu ate with a kind of ravenous inattention, scraping meat from chicken bones (D'Amalfi's expensive converter provided that kind of detail), shovelling away scoops of beans and sticky rice in between sentences. Afterwards, she accepted his offer of brandy but hardly drank, studying the amber puddle in the bottom of the balloon glass with a reflective pout. In the background the converter chugged over the plates and bones. At last she said, "That was good. Thanks."

D'Amalfi inclined his head.

"I talked a whole streak about myself, but I hardly know anything about you."

"There's not much to tell. Brought up in the wrong part of Rio, got out and up, fought in the Alea Campaigns, sold my story, set up this little business."

"I thought you worked for Seyoura Chan?"

"On specific contracts. Didn't I tell you I was freelance? Just like you."

Her eyebrows went up, but she said nothing.

"And in this instance," D'Amalfi went on, "I have to bring back a dragon." He shrugged, loosed his smile. "That's all."

"Where are you going to put it on the way home? Strap it to a wing?"

"I only need enough to be able to reconstruct the

genome. Seyoura Chan has quite a lab. A zygote would be nice, or an egg if dragons lay eggs, but at worst a few grammes of flesh will do nicely."

"Oh, I expect that they lay eggs. Everything else on Santa Maria does."

"But you haven't seen one."

"Oh, I doubt I've seen anything you're looking for."

"Stick around. I'll find them." He stopped himself from telling her that he had to.

"You'll have to be fast. I leave in two days. My ship's filters are beginning to give up, and besides, I have all I want."

"I wish I could say the same." He smiled and reached out. "I'm sorry to hear you're going."

She avoided his hand. "I'm sure you'll manage."

All right, D'Amalfi thought, she wants to play coy. He said, "You're selling your stuff on Elysium?"

"That's just where I rent lab facilities. I won't get a good price in the Federation; the cartels have it all sewn up. But the out-worlds will pay for my bugs; they don't have the technology to mine except by stoop labour. I have something that secretes copper: put it on a pile of ore and you can sweep up the pure granules afterwards."

"But the colonies don't have much to give you for it, I bet."

"Trade goods. What will Seyoura Chan give you for a piece of dragon?"

He told her, and again she raised her eyebrows. "Maybe you don't do so badly after all."

"I've a house in Sao Paulo. Another on the Tallman Scarp on Titan. This ship. Well, it's all on borrowed money, but the way inflation is I make a profit on the repayments, more or less. Not bad for a kid from the Norte, the wrong side of the Fallen Christ."

She asked softly, "You do it all for money?"

"No," D'Amalfi admitted, "I guess that's just a part of it." He laughed. "But money helps!"

"And you don't feel exploited?"

"Should I?"

She sipped brandy, watched him over the rim of her glass. A cool appraising stare that D'Amalfi looked away from. She said, "Your Seyoura Chan, now there is a real dragon. I'm not surprised he is so passionate about them."

"I don't—"

"I mean that he has all the characteristics of a mythic dragon. Long-lived — he's on agatherin, I bet. A compulsive hoarder — I hear half his profits go towards his private art collection. And he virtually runs Earth's entertainments industry... it follows that he's incredibly powerful, ancient, preternaturally wise..." She had ticked each point off on her fingers: now she picked up her glass again and laughed. "I guess he doesn't breathe fire though. Forgive me. I do go on."

"It's an interesting thought."

"That's why I like the out-worlds. I guess that's where I'll end up permanently, sooner or later. There are too many dragons in the Federation, too much is run by powerful, long-lived people. I think it's going to be in trouble because of that. I mean, how many worlds has it colonized? Not ones like Elysium, which were originally colonized by the old superpowers, but new, virgin worlds. Two, right? And how many by groups with private interests? Two dozen? Three?

And you can bet there are more on the way."

D'Amalfi smiled; well, her naive intensity was amusing. "I don't find politics particularly interesting."

"I guess you wouldn't. Look, I ought to be going. Thank you for the food and the brandy."

"It will be dark out there in a few minutes. Surely you don't—" As she rose from the bunk D'Amalfi reached to stay her: and she jerked her forearm into his face. Pain like a flash of light detonated in the bridge of his nose.

"Don't try it," Margaret Ngu said. "Just don't try—" her voice was muffled by her airmask — "anything." Then she was shouldering through the invisible embrace of the pressure curtain. The hatch whined.

D'Amalfi was too busy nursing the hot swollen agony in the centre of his face to try anything. Through a haze of tears he saw the hatch swing back. And then it slammed and he was alone.

He studied his nose in the mirror, prodding it gingerly. At least it wasn't broken or bleeding: he'd spent a lot of money to have that proud curve reconstructed after a particularly difficult mission. Damn her, he thought, I'm going to have a black eye tomorrow. He reached for the brandy bottle. Empty. Half his supply gone, and Margaret Ngu with it. It was not a perfect end to the day.

The next day, sure enough, his right eye was puffed and discoloured, but he went out anyway. And late in the afternoon, everything changed. He found what he was looking for.

He would have missed it if it hadn't been for the birds. At least, they looked like birds from a distance, a loose spiralling tower of black flakes floating above the green slash of a ravine. D'Amalfi had been trawling back and forth along the narrow valleys (nothing) for half a dozen hours, frustration growling in his belly. He turned his thopter towards the birds because he hadn't any better idea.

The black specks fled before he reached them. Below was a flat meadow bordered by celery forest on one side and a narrow gorge on the other. The carcass lay at the edge of the drop in a huge circle of charred grass.

D'Amalfi whooped inside his airmask and let the thopter fall out of the sky, stopping with an abrupt clap of the vanes beside the dead creature.

A little like a lion-sized kangaroo rat, collapsed membranes linking its long back legs with tiny forelimbs, it had been caught by a blast of fire that had charred most of the leathery skin of its head. Flesh showed white in deep cracks; one eye was gone. Its back legs had gouged the rich red earth deeply, a wonder its death spasms hadn't sent it over the edge into the mists.

"A dragon," D'Amalfi said, squatting beside it. "Goddamn, it has to be." He looked at the claws at the end of its back legs, long as his forearm, at the double row of serrated teeth bared where the muzzle had been shrivelled. The creature had been dead a day at least; hard-shelled insects were working everywhere in its greenish pelt.

"If a dragon killed it, it would have been eaten up, right? Goddamn. Maybe dragons are territorial, and this one lost out." D'Amalfi felt a tigh elation, and a

tempering caution. Any moment now something might stoop down from the sky with a blast of fire...

Nothing moved in the shadows amongst the stalks of the tree-sized celeries; nothing moved in the sky except a herd of football-shaped creatures scudding high above the waterfall on the other side of the gorge. D'Amalfi took out his kit and sliced away a piece of flesh; maybe it wasn't too far gone. And if muscle tissue was no good he could always hope this was a female; if it had eggs inside they'd probably be okay. And if this one was the loser of territorial fight, perhaps the victor was close by.

He moved the thopter under the canopy of the celery forest, activated the chameleon circuit of his jumpsuit, and settled down to wait. He was a patient man, provided he had some clear goal. Perhaps there would be a fat bonus, enough for a downpayment on a beach house on Serenity...

He waited a long time, growing hungrier and seeing nothing but the by-now almost familiar variety of small creatures flit above the clearing. The shadows of the forest stretched across the meadow and colours began to drain out of the air. Somewhere in the forest a plaintive cry sounded, making him jump. The beginning of the night's cacophony. Santa Maria's huge moon rose above the spray of the waterfall, its markings blurred by its tenuous atmosphere.

Something padded out of the celeries on the other side of the clearing, one of the flying wolves. It nosed the carcass then suddenly glanced up and ran towards the drop, planed away. D'Amalfi's pulse quickened. Something large was falling towards the clearing. He raised his rifle, wondering fleetingly if the tranquiliser would work as well on a dragon as it had on gazelles.

But the creature was only one of the big herbivores. It folded its great wings like a tent along its back and began to crop the sward, quite unconcerned by the carcass. Presently its mate glided out of the dusk and joined it. Their eating made a tearing sound, loud as the waterfall's endless roar. D'Amalfi watched for a few minutes, but it really was getting dark now. He quietly stood and walked through the forest to the little grove where the thopter sat, wondering if the herbivores fed at night because they feared dragonish predators.

At the ship, he fed the sample of flesh into the analyzer, gulped a hasty meal, then called Margaret Ngu. The screen cleared and she snapped, "Don't tell me you're still lonely, D'Amalfi."

"You're still mad. Look, I'm sorry. We got our signals crossed."

"You mean that you did. My mistake was taking up your invitation in the first place. What makes you want to conquer everyone you meet?"

"You tell me." He shifted his cigar in his mouth. "I don't have time to play psychological party games. If you called to apologize, fine. It's your last chance."

"I apologize. Okay?"

"Okay." But she didn't look mollified.

"I just wanted to ask something."

"You can ask."

He described the carcass he'd found that afternoon. "You ever see anything like that?"

"I just collect bacteria and fungi, right? I don't stop

and look at every critter that flies by. And they all fly here."

"You mean no." Something in his cabin pinged. The analyzer.

"So you've found a trace of your dragons," Margaret Ngu said.

"Either that or there's a hunter out there with a laser."

"Oh, there's nobody here but us two chickens."

"Unless that jockey sold Santa Maria more than twice."

"She told me she was heading out."

"She also told you that you were her only client."

"Well...yes. You're worried someone else might get a piece of dragon back to your Seyour Chan? You're giving me ideas, D'Amalfi."

"Oh, I trust you." After all, he could afford to.

She shrugged. "Well, happy hunting. I leave tomorrow; can't say I'm sorry." She reached out and then there was only the dance of white static and the hiss of the carrier wave.

D'Amalfi called up the analyzer's read-out: the muscle sample he'd collected had been degraded by a fierce battery of enzymes. Probably something the insects secreted. He'd have to dig deeper for something viable. But first he had to move. Margaret Ngu would be right after him when she found she had no thruster control.

He had already selected a site, the junction of two deep river valleys where a deposit of iron ore would hide him from any detectors. By fortunate coincidence it was only five clicks from the meadow and the scorched carcass. He took the ship up on minimal thrust, moving as low as he dared. The forward radar flickered with a myriad marginal traces, creatures of all sizes: it was like trying to navigate the rings of Saturn. Another screen showed a white-on-white infrared view of the land below, white rivers twisting through white vegetation, the exposed rock ridges between grainy and grey. There was the confluence! He settled the ship carefully, giant celeries scraping the hull. The proximity alarm bleeped and then the ship rocked and was still. D'Amalfi leaned back with a smile. Hidden.

But he wasn't finished yet. He still had his sample to collect. He put on his airmask and went out, unshipped the thopter and took off for the meadow, another mote in the congregation of creatures flapping and gliding through the night in fierce pursuit or desperate flight. The night resonated with their cries. Once, something like an unholy cross between devil, ape and flying hyena barrelled towards the thopter out of the moonlit sky; D'Amalfi barely managed to take it out with a dart before it hit the canopy, and heard the sounds of its body being torn apart even as it lazily fell out of the air.

The moon was at zenith when D'Amalfi reached the meadow: everything looked like a shadowless photographic negative of itself. As the thopter fluttered in the ungainly herbivores lumbered over the edge, dropping into the dark gorge. The carcass lay still in its burnt halo.

He walked around it nervously, listening to something scream its heart out in the black forest. He was just beginning to feel reaction from the devil-thing's

attack. He couldn't work here, he decided, and fired grapples into the carcass and went up in the thopter. The vanes thrummed a deep rapid note, the thopter creaked, and the carcass slowly left the ground. D'Amalfi's attention was taken up with trying to correct the pitch of the vanes when he drifted over the gorge. That was when the flame hit him.

It wrapped the thopter in a brief blue glare. D'Amalfi instinctively kicked the machine up, but the port vane fluttered impotently and the thopter slewed, losing height. He glimpsed the edge of the meadow and then he was falling into mist. The low gravity meant that he had plenty of time to worry before he hit bottom.

But he still hit hard.

The carcass slammed into the canopy rig and the thopter bounced crazily before flipping over. Then there was only the liquid rush of unseen water, and mist coiling into the canopy. D'Amalfi was hanging upside down, entangled in the safety straps; it took him a long time to free himself. He was bruised and shaken, but otherwise unharmed. The thopter had fallen on an uneven field of boulders that sloped down towards the sound of rushing water. Mist lazily billowed around him; a lambent glow above showed where the moon was. He had enough sense left to pull his rifle from the wreckage before he looked further.

He was caught between a high cliff and a fast-running river. The thopter was ruined, the canopy scorched and blistered, the control rods of the starboard vane snapped, the port vane partly melted. The carcass sprawled a little way off. It had sort of splattered.

"I don't think it was worth it," D'Amalfi muttered. He had a brief fantasy of climbing the cliff and capturing a big crawler, riding it the five clicks back to his ship. Except those five clicks were as whatever passed here for a crow flies, easily double that on foot. He reached into the canopy for the radio.

Margaret Ngu answered at once, as if she had been sitting over her receiver. "I never should have trusted you, you bastard."

"Ah. You've found out about your thrusters."

"What are you playing at, D'Amalfi?" Static spat and howled; he had to twist the volume all the way to make out her voice. "When I find you you're going to be sorry. I really will break your fucking nose!"

"I'm hoping that you can find me."

There was a strangled sound from the radio, as if she had attempted to swallow a mouthful of water and speak at the same time. Then she said, "Reception is lousy. Say again."

D'Amalfi started to explain about his accident. Halfway through, she said, "You found out about the dragons, huh?"

"Surely, but unfortunately one of them shot me down. That's why reception is so bad. I'm at the bottom of a ravine. It did quite a number on my thopter while I was carrying a dragon carcass back to my ship. I guess the one that attacked me thought the body was a live intruder into its territory."

"They're not – Well, never mind. If I get you back to your ship, I assume you'll give me back my thruster control. You hide far from your original site?"

"Far enough. It is a deal? I'll even fix your thrusters myself."

"That won't be necessary. Is your absolute grid working? Give me your coordinates." He gave them.

She said, "It'll take me maybe half an hour. Try not to get eaten by anything. At least, not until after my ship is working again."

"I look forward to seeing you too," D'Amalfi told her, and switched off the radio. Abruptly he was aware of the misty night, the rush of the river. He looked at the ruin of the carcass, then began to root in the thopter's locker for his dissection kit. He wouldn't have a chance to catch a live dragon now; his only hope was to find viable genetic material inside the one he had.

It was not a pleasant business. Even with the thopter's spotlight, it was difficult to see what he was doing, and he was continually buzzed by giant insects mesmerized by the light. D'Amalfi was half-way inside the belly of the beast, the stench terrible even through the filters of his airmask, when he heard the sound of a descending thopter. He looked up and saw a light glaring through the mist above, and went back to work.

All around him things acquired a second shadow; there was a transient breeze and then the thopter's motor cut. Footsteps grated on rock, and Margaret Ngu's muffled voice said, "Jesus Christ, D'Amalfi!"

He pushed aside loops of slimy intestine, traced the white swellings sheathed by membranes either side of the unjointed spine. Without looking around, he asked, "You know anything about the anatomy of these things?"

"Not at all."

"I suppose these are the eggs. This leads to the cloaca, I think. Let's hope so." He flensed away membrane with the laser-scalpel and plucked an ovoid like a bloody fruit.

Margaret Ngu stepped back hastily when he turned to her. "Sorry about the mess," he said, "but I need viable genetic information if Seyour Chan is to have his dragon. Eggs are —" He stopped, because she had begun to laugh.

"You think — You —" and then she was laughing again, clutching the top of a wet boulder. At last she was able to straighten; D'Amalfi could see her grin despite her airmask. She said, "You silly bastard. That isn't a dragon."

"Come on."

"Truly. Where did you find it?"

D'Amalfi pointed up. "In a meadow. It was lying in a circle of char. If it isn't a dragon then it must be prey, but it hasn't been eaten. So I guess it was the loser of a territorial fight. Like me."

"Dragons aren't —" she was laughing again.

"What aren't dragons?"

"For one thing, they aren't territorial. Listen, D'Amalfi, what do you think dragons are? Flying fire-breathing predators I suppose."

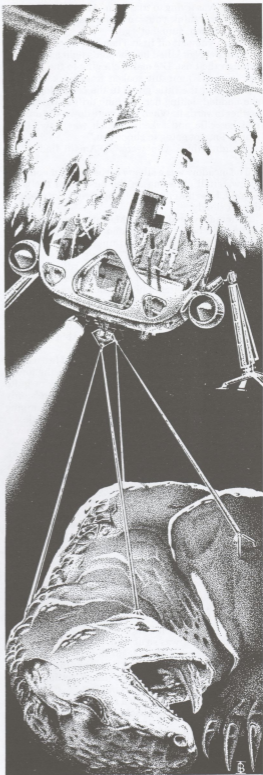
"Well, I don't think they're cute little things you can keep in your pocket. Excuse me." He crossed to his ruined thopter and put the egg in a cold-box.

"If I show you a dragon, will you do a deal? I get half your fee."

D'Amalfi hefted the cold-box. "This is a joke, right?"

"No, it isn't. No scam. I show you, I get half. If you don't believe me that's your own affair."

D'Amalfi thought for a moment, but he couldn't see



how she was trying to trick him. After all, he had his egg. "If you think you can show me a dragon, why not? Half each, sure. Let's go."

"Wash yourself off first. Then you'll see."

Margaret Ngu killed her thopter's light as they rose through the mist. D'Amalfi, clinging to the frame of her seat, his jumpsuit soaked from neck to waist, pointed out the little grove in the celery forest and she nodded, letting her machine drift as lightly as a feather towards it. When they were down she unshipped her rifle and asked, "Which way now? Don't worry, I'm not going to shoot you."

"I didn't think you were," D'Amalfi lied. "This way."

The meadow was a silvery carpet in the moonlight, the waterfall glittering on the far side of the gorge beyond. Near the edge of the drop, two bulky shadows moved slowly.

"There are your dragons," Margaret Ngu whispered.

D'Amalfi began to laugh, and she clamped a hand over his mouth. He reached up and took her hand away. "This is a joke, right?"

"Watch," she said, and aimed her rifle. It made a faint pop. A moment later one of the shadows jinked and exhaled a flutter of blue flame before collapsing. Its mate nosed it, then precipitately dived away.

"Goddamn," D'Amalfi said. He followed Margaret Ngu across the meadow. "Goddamn," he said again, and kicked the outstretched wing of the big herbivore. "How did you know?"

"You'd have known too, if you'd landed in a natural clearing instead of burning a great hole in the forest. These places are their grazing spots; they're quite unafraid and soon became used to me. There's only one predator that'll try and take them, that jumping thing you were burrowing into like a carrion beetle."

"But I've seen them flying all over the place, never a flame."

"They only need to use it at night, when they feed. In daytime I guess it wouldn't be as spectacular; they use it as a warning more than anything else. But they'll burn anything stupid enough to attack them."

"I suppose they thought they were under attack when they saw that carcass winging through the air under my thopter. Jesus Christ. Fire-breathing cows!"

Her look was scornful. "Didn't you ever stop to think how an animal could generate fire? These are real creatures, D'Amalfi, not myth."

"Go ahead, complete my humiliation."

"Herbivores produce methane when they digest plant material, even you must know that. These critters store it in sacs all along their spines. You ever wondered how so big a beast can fly, even in this light gravity? A lot of their bulk is just gas."

He laughed; it was so absurd. Like life.

"There are specialized teeth in back of their jaws which spark the flame, and their mouths are lined with something flaky, stops them getting burnt. Besides, that methane comes out fast."

"Okay, but I have to take a sample."

"Don't cut along the back; you'll blow us both to bits."

"Of course," D'Amalfi said, and flicked on his scalpel.

A day later, when they were both heading out of the system towards their respective breakout points, he thought to ask Margaret Ngu, "How do you know you can trust me?"

Her image grinned. She was sitting zazen in her own cabin, in mid-air. Singleships don't run to gravitic generators. "I've a little something that says you will. Here." She reached out, and he heard his own voice saying above a rush of water, "...why not? Half each, sure. Let's go."

She told him, "I have a sealed recorder for my contracts with the out-worlds; only a registered justice can open it without breaking the tell-tale."

After a moment, D'Amalfi laughed. "You really had me figured."

"It wasn't that difficult. No hard feelings?"

"I guess not. So I'll see you on Elysium."

"There's an out-world I have a contract with. That copper-excreting bacterium, remember? I'll be on Woden for a couple of months. There are only about ten thousand people; you'll be able to find me."

"I don't—"

"Don't tell me the unknown scares you, D'Amalfi."

"I like it, but yes, it scares me. I was in the Alea Campaigns. They only had sub-light capability, but it still took us six years to beat them. One day some singleship jockey is going to run into something more powerful than us. You want dragons, they're out there, and the out-worlds are on the edge of it."

Her large, golden-pupilled eyes regarded him calmly. How beautiful she was, he thought. She said, "All I want is a bit of one world to make my own. That's all anyone needs. No one owns anyone else on Woden, D'Amalfi."

"Who the hell owns me?"

"Your possessions. All your luxuries, your houses on Earth and Titan that you haven't paid for. That's how Seyour Chan pulls your strings."

"Let me think about it," he said, and cut contact. Later, he asked the computer, "What do you know about Woden?"

"The computer asked if they were changing course."

D'Amalfi sighed. "No, not just yet. Later. First we have to take a dragon to Seyour Chan."

Paul J. McAuley is fast making a name for himself as one of the best new British writers of traditional science fiction. His previous stories for us, "Little Ilya and Spider and Box" (IZ 12) and "The King of the Hill" (IZ 14), were much appreciated by the majority of our readers. He has also contributed a couple of pieces to the world's longest-established sf magazine, *Amazing*, has sold a novelette to *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and has recently completed his first novel. He lives near Oxford.

Kim Newman

The Next-But-One Man

His will to live survived his will to leave the house by five and a half weeks. For a while, he could pretend he was enjoying himself, besieged behind the net curtains. Trevor had never been imaginative, but he was able to make up concrete enemies and blame them for his situation. Bull-necked, blue-eyed Nazi stormtroopers; Mongoloid intellectuals, bent on spreading communist subversion throughout the democratic world; spiky-haired punk mutants, high on National Health prescription drugs, lusting unspeakably. He was not going to yield to the barbarians. The freezer had been understocked to begin with, and there hadn't been much in the fridge or the kitchen cupboards. But he made his food last. He remembered black and white films from the fifties, with British soldiers lost in the desert or suffering in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. He carefully rationed supplies, taking his small meals regularly. Towards the end of the food, he was forced to prepare bizarre meals. Stale potato crisps with salad cream and the last of the anchovy paste. Half a small tin of baked beans, followed by a teacup of muesli and water. Pal on Ryvita, with some hairy dates left over from Christmas.

After three weeks, he had to kill and eat the dog, a large alsatian kept to keep burglars and blacks away from his video and power tools. Ironically, he had to do his butchering with the Black-and-Decker circular saw. It made a mess, but he was careful not to waste anything. The canine cuts kept him going for days, although he was worried about the lack of fibre in his diet. A programme on Radio 4 said there was no fibre at all in meat. To supplement the stringy dog chops, he began to boil up and mash the rush matting from the hall. The dog had itself been losing weight. He couldn't spare it any of the canned food. At least it had been able to forage outside. His one night raid on the neighbours' dustbins had only turned up some used teabags and a tomato-sauce-smeared pizza carton.

Even after the dog was finished, its bones ground

in the robot-chef and drunk with warm water, it was surprising how much there was in the house to eat. As a kid, he had had the habit of chewing paper, and often been told off by the teachers for leaving gum-wads of papier maché on the underside of his desk. Now, he ate his way through the few newspapers left in the house, and started in on his shelf of Frederick Forsyths and Jeffrey Archers. He even ate the Woodrow Wyatt editorials from the *News of the World* that he had particularly admired and pinned up on the corkboard in the hall. Boiled and shredded, the houseplants were a little like expensive dishes he had had in Chinese restaurants. Once, a small bird – a thrush? – had knocked itself out against the kitchen window. A bird in the hand had turned out to be squishy and crunchy at the same time. He had eaten it whole and uncooked.

In one week, he ate a packet of chalk, some candles, his own finger- and toe-nail clippings, a tube of deliciously minted toothpaste, a pair of aged slippers, cakes of soap from the bathroom and kitchen, a roll of toilet paper including the cardboard tube, a bitterly dyed cardigan, his passport, a packet of Jay-cloths, the rest of his duty free cigarettes, and a fistful of chewy Blu-tak. He had an industrial size tin of Nescafé, enough to see him through to the Millennium, and – although he was forced to give up his milk and four sugars – the coffee added enough real taste to his diet to make it bearable, if not survivable. Trevor was disappointed that, even under these conditions and with many boring hours on his exercise bicycle, he was unable to lose the parcels of flab from his stomach, thighs and buttocks.

Then, the water was cut off. One morning, he got up to find the toilet dry and the taps useless. He knew how much good it would do, but he still felt obliged to telephone the water board. They were engaged. The police were engaged. His office was engaged. Marian was engaged. Even wrong numbers dialled at random were engaged. He could still reach the operator with

every tenth or twelfth call, but each time a different voice told him there were no faults detectable on the line or put him on hold forever. He had grown used to the strange half-sounds you get when the exchange plugs you into nowhere – satellites communicating with each other in deep space, hurried conversations between adulterers in North Korea, the pinging cardiograms of coma patients, automated nuclear submarines waiting for the Doomsday Signal.

With the water gone, there was nothing to drink outside of his own bodily fluids. They barely lasted him into the afternoon. He dutifully tried to spoon Nescafé into his mouth hoping to produce coffee paste with spittle. It was like eating the Sahara Desert.

Trevor didn't live in a particularly quiet part of the city. There was a VG shop next door, run by a family of chattering Pakistanis. Years ago, he had signed a petition to try and stop them moving in. He could still watch his videos of Penelope Keith sit-coms and pirated blue movies. He could look out onto the street and see people walking by. But he was, apart from the faces of his clocks, the only moving thing in the house. No one from the office came. He couldn't imagine what was going on there. The postman only brought bills and circulars – which he ate unopened – and then only at times when he was asleep or inattentive. This afternoon, he was due for the local free sheet – the paid-for papers had stopped coming, of course – but he didn't think he had enough spit left for it. There had been some rain a few days ago, but he hadn't caught much with his improvised bin-liner reservoir. He hadn't drunk since then.

Then, Death came for him. Death wore a smart but old-fashioned business suit, had a symbolic sickle in his dustproof attaché case, and carried a tome-sized spiral notebook. Death sat in the best armchair, and waited to hear Trevor's story. He hadn't spoken for days, and it was an ordeal. The inside of his mouth was tight, and dry as a drumskin. But he had to explain. He couldn't let Death have him before he had had a fair chance to explain. It was difficult to tell whether Death was interested, whether he was even listening, but Trevor needed to talk his way through it, to try to understand...

I hate queuing. I really do. That's the first thing you should know about me. I can put up with a lot of palaver about a lot of things, but I hate queuing. To me, it's a pastime typical of everything that has gone wrong with this country. It comes from dole queues and cafeterias and social services and the other things my tax money gets frittered away on. Countries that queue fall behind – look at Poland, every time you see Warsaw on the news, it's full of dingy people standing meekly in line queuing for something or bloody other. They don't have to line up like idiots in Texas or Tokyo. I know, I've done business with those places. To me, it seems obvious that the people with the most should get preference. Especially in banks. The Midland gets a fuck of a lot out of me – the business sometimes has hundreds and thousands rolling over in their vaults for them to play with – and I reckon that gives me priority over some scrounger who wants to cash his giro. If I have to wait more than three minutes for a public telephone, I open up the door and give the person ahead of me what for.

I'm important. A lot of people depend on me for employment. I bring in trade and pay out taxes. This country – people, institutions, whatever – owes me. You understand?

"It was the Midland Bank, right. That small branch at the Charing Cross Road corner of Shaftesbury Avenue. The one that's never finished. Always sections roped off and bare walls being knocked down or put up or painted or stripped. It's a few minutes away from the office so I use it a lot. I've got the cashiers trained. They know what I want. It was a Friday morning, early, and I had a fistful of cheques that had to go in. A pile of our customers had finally coughed up the lucre, and I don't like to keep paper in the place over the weekend. You never know who the cleaning firm is going to let loose on you. We had some West Indian knock off all our typewriters a few years back. That Ayatollah has got the right idea about thieves. Off with their hands, right? Any rate, I had a lot of stuff to do – it doesn't all go into the same account, see, for tax reasons – and I reckoned it would take a good twenty minutes for the goof-brained school-leaver behind the counter to sort it all out. What's more, I knew I'd have to queue.

"But I was lucky. There were only three of them in the bank, one at each of the two cashier's windows, and one loitering. This third one, the loiterer, wasn't up for either of the windows. He was looking dumbly at that rack of leaflets about insurance and student travel and savers' schemes. At the Midland, you can get money off for being bloody anything but a real customer. It was this loiterer. He did something to me. I don't know what it was, but it was something.

"I can remember all about him. If the police wanted a description to broadcast, I could give them a perfect one. His face, his clothes. The other two people, the cashiers, I don't know. I couldn't even tell you what sex they were, except the cashier I saw was Indian or Pakistani. But this was a man, young but not dressed young. He didn't have dubious hair colouring or a zippy leather jacket or any of that stuff. He was in sort of tropical get-out. It was Summer, okay, but he looked like he was off on safari to King Solomon's Mines. He had a high-buttoned waistcoat, with funny designs on it – Jewish designs, I should say – and a black dickey-bow. And he was carrying a hat like Charlie Chan would wear in Panama. He even had spats. I've never seen anyone wearing spats outside of an old film. I say he was young, but maybe he was old. Not older than you, but older than me.

"This man, White Hat, wasn't paying fourpence worth of attention. He had his chequebook out and was scribbling in it. I reckoned he had a withdrawal to make. Something penny-ante, to be sure. Twenty quid to pay off his bookie, a bunch of fivers to buy some drugs. You know the kind of thing. Simple. He could easily have used the cash-point outside, but no, he had to be in the bank, getting in the way, holding me up, interfering with my life. I wanted to get back to the office. I didn't have any appointments until the afternoon, but I wanted to keep an eye on Liz, the new girl. I didn't really trust her. I had sussed that she was cleverer than she pretended to be, and I didn't like that. She could have been a snooper from the tax people, or from some other firm. And this blooming White Hat was ahead of me. It made me sick. One of

the customers at the windows finished up and cleared out, and I was in there sharpish. I got to the front before White Hat even condescended to take notice.

"He got me by the shoulder from behind, like he was trying one of those stupid *Star Trek* grips. It was creepy. He said, 'Excuse me, but I think I am before you.' I took his hand off me and gave it back to him. 'Tough luck, mate,' I said, 'you should have been in the queue. You can't be in both queues.'

"Hah! Too late, of course. I'd dumped all my cheques and paying-in books and cards into the little valley, and the cashier was already working on them. White Hat wiped his hands together, as if trying to get me off them. He looked at me and said 'you are a very unpleasant person.' That cut me, not what he said, but the way he said it. He sounded like those Eastern Europeans who came over in the War and try to be more British than we are. I tried to laugh, but it died somewhere. Instead, I looked him dead in his fishy eyes and said 'I'm glad you said that, chum. I really am. You've made my fucking day.'

"Somehow, I felt better. It was a good start to the morning. I like winning battles, no matter how small. I think of myself as a winner. Take a look at my bank balances if you don't believe me. I look after myself first. You have to in this world. Everybody else bloody does, but I'm one of the few around who's willing to admit it. I don't claim that I'm trying to help people. I'm trying mainly to help me, and whatever else comes into it is just a side issue. I don't trust people who say they want to make things easy for you, give way to you for no reason. They know you'll get ahead of them anyway, and are trying to make out it doesn't matter, that they don't care. Deep down, they bloody care all right. I've seen what losing does to them. I'm always glad to get ahead of so-called polite people. It gives me a thrill in the head of my dick. Go and psychoanalyze that in a three-cornered hat if you can. There was nothing White Hat could do. I could see how furious he was, and how bloody frustrated. It was as if I had just walked off with his wife, or rubbed shit into his pristine white suit. He didn't just look like a loser, he looked crucified.

"But no one kills anyone for getting ahead of them in a queue.

"After a few minutes, the other window was free, and White Hat cashed his cheque in thirty seconds flat. Then he left the bank. I did laugh then, and made a crack to the cashier about the hat. It took a while to do all the business, and I got some cash for the weekend, and made a balance enquiry for the personal account. Nothing wrong there. I'd come at exactly the right moment. When I left, there were long queues for both windows.

"He was waiting for me outside. He didn't look real in the open air, like those old colour films that haven't aged properly. He was a bit creepy really. There are people you can't deal with – tramps after money, nancy boys after God knows what, Jehovah's Witnesses with smiles and leaflets, drunks in public places. White Hat wasn't like any of those pests. He was a damn sight too controlled for that, but there was something unnerving there, something that made me angry inside. I've not been in a scrap since I was a kid, but I wanted to fight him. Not just hit him a few times and



see blood on the ice cream suit, but to pick up something heavy and smash him into the pavement. I wanted to destroy him. We used to have to do some rough stuff in the business when I was starting out, but I'd stayed away from the sharp end of that. I still had the phone numbers, though. If I'd known who this shit was, I could have had him pummelled into meat by laying out one and a half long ones.

"He didn't do anything. He didn't touch me. He just pointed and said 'you've lost your place in the queue.'

"You know that feeling that's supposed to be like someone walking over your grave? This was like having my grave desecrated with a pneumatic drill. I felt as if my insides were having an epileptic fit. I thought I was going to upchuck on the pavement. It was only for a few seconds, but it was, well, nasty. When it was over, White Hat was gone. Good riddance to bad rubbish, said I to myself.

"Back at the office, I got heavily stuck into the books, sorting out some problem invoices. I couldn't see where the mistakes had been made, but I knew for a fact it wasn't at my end. I did the figures over, on the calculator and on paper. The same answers kept coming up, the same wrong answers. I even had to dig out the real books we keep, as opposed to the for-the-taxman books, to see if any of those figures had crept in. No use. Liz was supposed to bring the coffee in at eleven on the dot. I didn't notice when she didn't, but I twigged at twenty-five past. I buzzed her and complained, and she said sorry without meaning it. There was no excuse. She implied she would be up soon, but she never came. I still haven't had that cup of coffee. Then, it finally came apart. The Leatherhead contract. It was just a touch dodgy, and some of the monies had filtered through in bundles of fifties in envelopes. Click. I dug out the cashbands, and put the numbers pencilled on them into the sums, and it all came out square. I forgot about the coffee.

"Now, I realize what was so odd about that morning, that day. Nobody phoned me up. I'm a busy man. I have Liz to weed out a lot of the pestering calls. There are journalists in this world who think I sit down to a bowlful of lightly-grilled babies in the morning, and spend most of my day clubbing seals and investing in South Africa. You know what - ha ha - they're right. Even those pinko crazies didn't bother me that day. There were business calls I should have taken, but they didn't come. When I called Leatherhead, they were engaged. And when I called back, they were engaged. After twenty minutes, I dialled the operator and reported a fault on the line, but they claimed Leatherhead really was engaged. The whole fucking town was engaged. Jabbering away nine to the dozen to local radio phone-ins about knitting and underage sex, I'll be bound. I had to call our our man in Birmingham too, and he was on the other line. His secretary said she'd have him get back to me as soon as he was free, but he didn't. I sat there like a prannock twiddling my thumbs for a quarter of an hour and phoned back. Both lines were busy. Then it was time for lunch.

"I was due for a lunch with Ariane. Ariane isn't her real name. Since me and Marian split, I've had no time to cultivate women. It's boring and expensive, apart from anything else. I've got into the habit of

paying for them. I know it sounds sordid, but it's a damn sight simpler and, in the end, cheaper, than wining and dining some tight-skirted office flirt who turns out to be engaged to a Hells' Angel. I've got several Arianes lined up. Working in the city, near Soho, makes it all easy. I'd booked a table at a quiet restaurant near her place. I have to eat too, you know.

"Someone screwed up. My false name wasn't down in the headwaiter's book, and he couldn't find out who had taken down my reservation. The place was full, according to him. It looked half empty to me, but they had a lot of little cards out for no-show diners on all the best tables. Ariane was late, so I waited. I could have sworn they seated a couple who turned up on spec, passing me over. I didn't make a fuss, probably because I was angrier with Ariane for being late than with the restaurant for being criminally inefficient. The headwaiter apologized a couple of times, but nothing actually happened. Ariane kept me waiting for a quarter of an hour, half an hour, forty-five sodding minutes. Late, late, late. I hate late women.

"I got fed up with standing around like a complete erection, and went round to her walk-up flat. It's quite classy. She doesn't have one of those come-on cards up by the street door, just a metal plaque with her name. It's a lot like a luxury dentist's office. Not the National Health deathpits, the private ones. Ritzy waiting room, with glossy magazines and posters. Just then, there was someone in it, waiting, and someone in with her, not waiting. I was as pissed off as a dickless goat rapist at the Horse of the Year Show.

"I don't know about you, but I sell a service. I have a reputation. It depends on meeting commitments, doing what I say I'll do when I say I'll do it. If you want vibrators in Wimbledon on Thursday, I don't send dildoes to Peckham Rye by the middle of next week. That's my business. I wholesale marital aids. I'd be in line for a Queen's Award for Industry if people weren't prejudiced. I was going to barge in on Ariane, and tell her what I thought of her business practices and how I'd be taking my valuable custom elsewhere in future. Let's face it, it's a buyer's market. I had my hand on the door when the waiting man touched me on the shoulder and said 'Excuse me, but I'm before you.' I didn't like him. He was big and young and he had no teeth and marks on his face. His hand was big, with scabs on the knuckles. A right bruiser. I left. There were some letters for Ariane on the stairs. I tore them up.

"By now, I'd only about ten minutes before my two-thirty appointment and I was still famished. I pushed into one of those MacDonald's burger troughs, but it was too full of people - mostly coloured and on roller-skates. I got into one of the queues, but it stopped moving. Someone down the line was ordering a five-course meal to take away, and I was bled in this Sargasso Sea of fast food fiends. No hope of getting near the Asiatic subnormals they have at the counters in those places, so I had to go hungry.

"Back at the office, it turned out that the two-thirty man had cancelled out on me. At least, I assume that's what the incomprehensible squiggle on my desk pad meant. He never showed up. Liz was in a record of her long lunches with a boy who works in a record shop. The place was like the *Marie Celeste*, abandoned and drifting.

"I sat around all afternoon, reading the *Standard*. Nothing to do, no one to phone up, no one to see. It could have been Sunday. I'm sure Liz skipped the afternoon. I thought then I'd sent her off to Balham, but I realize now that that was supposed to be the next Monday. I could hear typing downstairs and phones ringing, but I didn't see anyone. The buzzer wasn't working. There was no post.

"**I** left early because I hate travelling in the rush hour. The traffic is all snarl-ups, and cocky cyclists scraping the sides of the car. Also, there was a council election on up here, and I wanted to lodge my vote against those spendthrifts who give all my rates money to lesbian crèches and inter-racial graffiti seminars. They declared the borough a nuclear-free zone last year. Most of the municipal funds get channelled into posters and street carnivals and immigrants.

"So I spent about an hour on a garage forecourt waiting for petrol and watching the traffic build up. I didn't understand it. I was next in line, I am sure of that, but there was always a car in front of me. There'd be a driver at the self-service pump dawdling away. Then, he'd be gone and someone else would be there. I stared at rear bumpers changing into different ones for ages. I just couldn't get in. I was too tired to argue, and there was no one from the garage there except some shadowy face behind a glass window taking money. Finally, I pulled out and risked the drive home, even though the needle said I was empty. Next time someone says you can drive a good thirty miles with the petrol left in the tank when the needle is on empty, you tell them from me that he's talking out of his arsehole. The car is a couple of post-codes away now. I couldn't find a proper parking place, so it might have been towed off, or stripped down by teenagers. I tried to get a taxi, but the few empty cabs I saw just whizzed past me. The drivers didn't even turn and shake their heads at me. I waved my arms like a spastic windmill, but I could have been invisible. There was no tube near, so I tried for a bloody bus, but the queues were impossible at that time of the evening, so I ended up having to walk. I don't want to do that again in a hurry, I'll tell you.

"Of course, the polling station closed just as I got to it. I was just in time to see the last voter – a girl with pink hair and a Ken Livingstone T-shirt – come out of the booth. It was supposed to be a close contest, and all the polls predicted different results. I had been going to tactical vote for the Alliance, but the pundits in the *Standard* seemed to think that the true blue candidate – an ex-army chaplain – had a better chance since the SDP had put up some bloody woman teacher. Every vote counted, and mine didn't get in. After a couple of recounts, the bloody Trots won.

"It was a quiet weekend, without incident. I tried to get a garage to go for the car, but they were all busy if I called in person or engaged if I used the phone. Christ, you'd think I'd suddenly gone see-through by the way people developed this knack of ignoring me. The milk didn't turn up in the morning, and I had to spend hours in the VG trying to get served. The owner has hundreds of friends and relations who got in before me. They were instantly promoted to the head of the queue, as if born to it. Now I know what was



going on, more or less, I can see how weird it was, but at the time it just felt annoying and stupid. All I remember doing in the evening was watching the Eurovision Song Contest highlights repeated. I hate bloody Norwegians. Every time I cross the Channel, the ferry is clogged up with Norwegians in those astronaut boots, with backpacks full of samples of moon rock.

"Half the week, I get by working from home. There's a micro upstairs, though the modem is shot down at the moment. So I didn't have to go into the office on Monday. With the car still out of commission, that was a good thing. I hate public transport, and I know now I'd not be able to use it. Later, I gave the buses another try, and stood at the stop down the road for hours while empty 43s and 134s sailed by.

"I gave up on the Pakkis, and decided to get in a load of food from Sainsbury's. Without the car, that's a hassle, but I reckoned they'd lend me the use of one of those trolleys. First, I needed some cash. I'd stupidly left almost all mine back at the office. On Tuesday evening, I went round to the local Midland branch to use the cashpoint. The machine ate my card. I'd made a mistake and put in my Access card not my cheque card. That'll probably take months to sort out. I put in my cheque card, and the bank ate that as well. Bastards.

"I went back next day when they were open, but the queues were impossible. I left a letter in their box, but I've heard nothing from them.

"People in shops sometimes notice me now, ask if they can help, if I want anything. But I've no money and no cards. The chequebook on its own is no use at all. Nobody round here knows me that well. Even in the shops I use regularly they've forgotten my face.

"Food is the big thing, of course. The hardest to do without. But I can't use the dry cleaners or the laundrette either. I hand-washed a few shirts and some underwear, but then the water gave out. I can't get a haircut, so I've had to hack my fringe to keep it out of my eyes. I've lost one contact lens and I can't get a replacement. Half the world is fuzzy. Naturally, I can't pay my bills. They'd take cheques, but I've got no stamps to send them in with. Even my standing orders have been cocked up. Eventually, the electricity will go off. And the phone, for what that's worth.

"I tried stealing from the market stalls, some grapefruit and a water-melon. They caught me. I waited a whole morning in the police station, but the officers who brought me in forgot me. They were busy with some drug pushers, and my papers got dropped into some tray where they burrowed to the bottom of the pile and went into hibernation. The drug pushers got cups of coffee while they were being interrogated, but I was just ignored. After a while, I got up and walked out. If I get a summons, my case will never come up. It'll always be on the books. It might even get quite high up, but it'll never be current. I can understand that now. I'm important, but not important enough to do anything about.

"Why hasn't the office sent someone? The business can't run without me. Has Liz taken over? Do they still remember me? A lot of people don't. I saw Marian in the street a few weeks ago, and she walked by like a zombie. The neighbours treat this house as if it were empty. Some of the windows at the back have been

broken by kids throwing stones. I schemed for days to lure in next door's cat, but what could I use to sucker it? I'm empty now. I've stopped sleeping. I'm not interested any more. That's why you're here, I think. I've been waiting for you, wanting you to come. You're very probably the only service I can still get..."

Death opened his case and took out the silver sickle. Trevor didn't know if his story had been heard and noted down, or ignored as an irrelevance to the business at hand. He didn't care. He had been able to get worked up about it all before relieving himself of the details, but now he was listless again, purged of his narrative, ready to call it a day and cash in his coupons. He knelt before Death, forehead against the carpet, uncut hair parted away from the hollow in the back of his neck. The sickle rose in a sparkling arc... Then Death paused, furrowed his bony brow, and put his instrument away. He flicked through his book with a long finger, looking down his neverending list. So many names, so many calls, so many stories. Finally, he found the place.

"I'm sorry," said Death, "but there seems to be someone ahead of you."

Kim Newman has written two previous stories for *Interzone*: "Dreamers" (IZ 8) and "Patricia's Profession" (IZ 14). He is becoming well known as a film critic for *City Limits* and other publications. Born in 1959, he lives in London.

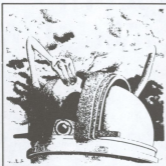
SUBSCRIBE TO INTERZONE

In financial terms, each subscriber is worth two bookshop buyers to a magazine such as this. Please help us by placing a subscription now. To subscribe directly is the best way to ensure you do not miss an issue.

Please specify which issue you want your subscription to commence with.

Why not take out a year's subscription to *Interzone* as a gift to a friend? Just send us your friend's name and address along with the money, and we'll mail them the latest issue together with a slip saying who has paid.

SCIENCE FICTION: An inside view



Keep informed of the latest NEWS, VIEWS and OPINIONS in the changing world of Science Fiction.

Membership of the BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION offers to you in its bi-monthly publications REVIEWS - ARTICLES - INTERVIEWS by the foremost writers of the Science Fiction Genre.

Recent magazines have featured:
Barrington Bayley, Gregory Benford, Michael Bishop, Arthur C. Clarke, Michael Coney, Richard Cowper, Frank Herbert, Chris Priest, John Sladek, Robert Silverberg, Ian Watson, Gene Wolfe, and many more major contemporary writers.

Please enrol me as a member of the BSFA. I enclose postal order/cheque (payable to 'BSFA Ltd') for £7.00 (\$14.00).

NAME: ADDRESS:

.....

.....

Post to: S. Brown, 18 Gordon Terrace, Blantyre, Lanarkshire, Scotland G72 9NA or
in the US: C. Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit, Michigan, 48213, USA.

New Pathways

INTO SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

Join the Expanding Alternative.



IN RECENT AND FUTURE ISSUES:
Brian Aldiss, Gary Biggs, Paul Di Filippo,
Robert Frazier, Czu K. Goetz, David Memmott,
Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Don Webb,
Peter Lamborn Wilson, and many more!!

*A bi-monthly magazine
of visionary science fiction!*

SEND \$15 (\$22 Europe)
for a SIX-ISSUE SUBSCRIPTION to:

New Pathways
c/o MGA Services

P.O. Box 863994 ■ Plano, Tx 75086-3994

Single copies: \$3.50 (postage included).

Please make check or money order
payable to MGA Services in U.S. funds.

Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

Some gloomy omens as the year turned over. The ever-expanding London Film Festival, usually a tasty hors-d'oeuvre of treats from the year ahead, this year was limited for its of material to previewing the season's major US studio releases (*Labyrinth*, *The Fly*, *Vamp*, qq. v. infra; John Badham's droid escapade *Short Circuit*, and a surprise glimpse of Francis Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married*, more of which another time). In itself, there's nothing exceptional about this: all of the above are interesting films, and one trembles on the verge of greatness, but it's disappointing that the low-budget, independent, UK and European sectors seem to have so little to offer at the moment. One partial exception: Granada's TV adaptation of Angela Carter's **The Magic Toyshop**, scripted by the author, was a well-received borderline fantasy opulently designed and directed, and by some way the most successful screen translation of Carter so far (though I'm perversely fond of the 1982 short of *The Bloody Chamber*, hammed to the hilt by Terence Stamp, Suzanna Hamilton, and then-newcomer Rupert Everett). The main limitation is simply the material: the *Toyshop*, as its author has been the first to admit, simply isn't top-grade Carter, even of its period, and it's high time instead for someone to reanimate long-interred crackers like *Several Perceptions* and (especially) *Love*.

Meanwhile, the winter releases were dominated by a trio of costly flops that died with the American public but picked up some unexpected small change this side of the water. Joe Dante's strange **Explorers** made straight for the plughole on its US release a year ago, and languished for a while on video before (unusually for a big-budget effects movie) being picked up by an independent distributor for art-house release. Whether by design or serendipity, it transfers rather well to a dedicated adult audience. It's not hard to see why its intended market treated it like dogshit. No kiddie matinee could be reasonably expected to put up with *Explorers'* narrative warps, zig-zags and longeurs, the mawkish sub-Spielberg goshing, and a rambling, corny and fatally anticlimactic finale. But in a curious way

these eccentricities of pace and tone can add to the film's attractions for the movie-soaked yupster sophisticate who's likely to bring in most of the earnings on this round. Take the kids and you'll probably have to shell out for a pizza on the way home to quell their disappointment; but grown-ups susceptible to drily sentimental evocations of the horrors and fantasies of boyhood, and appreciative of the manic surrealist psychobabel that enlivened, for instance, the Dante segment of *Twilight Zone*, could well find it a slice above.

But the mogul with the biggest mortgage problem this season had to be George Lucas, whose Christmas babies *Labyrinth* and *Howard the Duck* came down with rapid cases of cinematic leprosy that aren't likely to be much alleviated by their unexpectedly good Cisatlantic performance. I can't but feel *Labyrinth* frankly deserved its fate; despite the often inventive puppetry and design, death was too good for Terry Jones's ghastly script, full of those witless shaggy-dog dialogue sketches that seemed so hilarious in 1972, and numbly oblivious to the rampant Freudian dubieties of image and circumstance at every turn of thrustingly virginal Jennifer Connelly's initiation into the labyrinth. (And what was going on between her and Bowie in that dream sequence, and what did Mr B have jammed down the front of his tights?) I'm not surprised it drew the provincial teenties in their packs. American youth has turned its back on a precocious leap in its education.

Still, it's nothing to the doom that settled on fallen seventies icon **Howard**, who by the time of his UK release had the duck references astonishingly deleted from title and publicity, a measure of desperation hard to match except in imagination ("Sure, Sly, I mean it's a great script, but we'll have to lose the boxing angle"). I find all this rather mystifying, because despite all the numbskull turkey gibes from the critics, *Howard* really isn't that bad a movie. The duck gags are pretty brainless stuff, and much of the script has all the wit and finesse of a drunk let loose in a darkened men's room, but there are some likeable performances (notably Lea Thompson's scatty Bev-

erly) and a few moments of genuinely sublime idiocy, as the scene with the Dark Overlord of the Universe in the truckstop diner. ("You are about to be engulfed by an evil beyond your power to imagine!" "Don't be silly, Professor, you haven't even tasted it yet.") At heart it's just an old-fashioned soundstage movie of the kind that was fashionable two or three years ago, where the nugatory plotline is all geared towards a lengthy effects showdown in a large and expensive interior setting. As such, it stirs warmly nostalgic echoes of the simple pleasures of stuff like *Superman III*, *Supergirl* and *Conan the Destroyer*; goes on a bit, but not seriously beyond its welcome; strives hard for warmth, and sometimes scores.

Still, for genuine daffiness among the season's releases you need to look to something like *Vamp*, latest blow in the ongoing slugout between Empire and the reinvigorated post-Corman New World for mastery of the low-budget genre spoof youth picture. *Vamp* is the one where a pair of go-for-it freshmen at a zero provincial campus go in quest of a stripper for the frat party, and wind up in the clutches of a seedy nightclub run by Grace Jones and her vampire kith. Funny, suspenseful, deftly scripted and directed with an artful look of tackiness in the garish bruise-coloured lighting, it's a happy celebration of the death of genre horror and the necrogenesis of meta-generic camp from its remains. Empire strike back in the spring with *From Beyond*, Stuart Gordon's new Lovecraft mutant with the glorious Jeffrey Combs again stealing the mad scientist lead and Barbara Crampton targeted for more kinky creature abuse.

In fact, mad genius has been something of a seasonal obsession this winter. Leading the field, of course, is Cronenberg's astonishing remake of **The Fly**, with the seriously wonderful Jeff Goldblum subjected to his finest performance in a decade, as the old master of sentient tumours and vampire armpits annihilates his hero's humanity graphically and painfully from the inside out. Back in December there was *Real Genius*, a bizarre teenpic set in a secret government school for hi-Q brats, which blitzed the capital

for one week only and vanished on to video without a whisper, and of course there was Hugh Whitmore's West End play **Breaking the Code**.

I wish there were more commercial theatre to review in these pages, and the only way I can show why there isn't is to try. *Breaking the Code* (Theatre Royal, Haymarket, to February) stars Derek Jacobi and his st, his st, his inter-nationally lauded speech impediment in the tale of Alan Turing, mathematician, codebuster, AI pioneer, and roaring son of Sodom who ended his life in 1954 with a bite from a cyanide apple. Why did he do it? What lay behind the extraordinary sexual scandal that forced Turing's outré personal life so spectacularly into the open? Was there a link between Turing's unique scientific imagination and his fiercely wayward private morality? How far were his intellectual achievements fired and driven by personal trauma? Is it possible to make sense of genius in the interplay of human and scientific truth? These and other absorbing questions raised by Turing's life and work are answered rather well in Andrew Hodges' 1985 biography, and glibly deflected by Whitmore's play into a web of pat absurdities. Thanks to Godel's incompleteness theorem, we learn, moral axioms are necessarily indeterminate, so it's okay to work for the MoD and pick up sloe-eyed local wide boys from the pub for consenting adult mischief. Munching a poison apple is a crafty experiment to resolve the mind-body problem and perpetrate a witty Disney allusion in the process. Nature, human and otherwise, is just a code waiting to be broken; a fourth-form definition of Fibonacci series and you're basically there. *Breaking the Code* is the first West End play about science since Howard Brenton's *The Genius* three years ago, and I just wish there was a single redeeming feature to repay this modest but significant investment of good intentions, beyond the cheeky charms of our hero's mouthwatering succession of well-set-up boyfriends. After all, except for the patronising of the audience's intelligence and the insult to the memory of a great and complex man, there's nothing wrong with *Breaking the Code* that isn't wrong with every other serious West End play: creaky acting, geriatric dialogue, and all the pulse-cracking theatrical excitement of watching paint peel. I suppose it's just one of those Philistine cultural blind spots we all have to own up to, but I sincerely feel it would be an act of mercy to flush this desperate genre down the U-bend of history after Romantic opera, Chinese cooking, and films not starring Harvey Keitel. There, at least it's in the open.



Grace Jones in 'Vamp'

On the abused subject of *Real Genius*, however, a memo of genuine sorrow. This issue was in press when the death was announced of **Andrei Tarkovsky**, after a long and horrifying struggle with cancer. A lugubrious visionary in the great Russian tradition, Tarkovsky became championed by the west in the seventies as incomparably the greatest post-war Soviet filmmaker, though his reception in his own country was never easy and his final years spent in unhappy self-elected exile as his health declined. His importance as one of the very few figures of permanent stature in the sf cinema is assured by his two novel adaptations, *Solaris* and *Stalker*: more or less the only art films in the genre to have won worldwide acclaim, quite apart from their uniqueness as the sole works of Soviet sf cinema to be widely seen in the west, and the only major screen versions of East European sf writers. (Significantly, they were also their director's only feature-length films to be granted wide distribution at home.) But it

makes small sense to hive Tarkovsky's genre films off from his other work when their themes and vision are so characteristic. In many ways, Tarkovsky was something of a renegade in the postwar Soviet cinema: unfashionably auteuristic and introspective, fiercely assertive of the spiritual sanctity of the artist, and steeping his art in religious emotions and themes of dour Russian transcendence. All six full-length films narrate a glum spiritual quest, in the later films increasingly drawn from personal experience, through a largely paceless montage of luminously beautiful images, with surface meanings often of stupendous apparent banality – particularly in *Stalker* and the early short *The Steamroller and the Violin*. The animating force, and the visionary heart of Tarkovsky's work, is his imaginative fascination with the private mythology of the individual: a concern that pervades his whole oeuvre and especially the intensely autobiographical films of exile *Nostalgia* and *The Sacrifice*. Even his adaptations of Lem and

FOUNDATION

THE REVIEW OF SCIENCE FICTION

"BEST PROFESSIONAL EUROPEAN SF MAGAZINE"

(European Science Fiction Society Awards, Brighton, 1984)

If you enjoy reading criticism and reviews of science fiction, plus interviews with writers and autobiographical essays, you should not miss out on FOUNDATION.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In past years FOUNDATION has published articles and reviews by:

Brian Aldiss, J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Michael Bishop, Richard Cowper, Thomas M. Disch, Phyllis Eisenstein, Harry Harrison, Garry Kilworth, David Langford, Robert A.W. Lowndes, Robert Meadley, Peter Nicholls, Christopher Priest, Rudy Rucker, Pamela Sargent, John Sladek, Brian Stableford, George Turner, Lisa Tuttle, Ian Watson, Cherry Wilder, Jack Williamson, George Zebrowski and many others

"Continues to be far and away the best in the field"

—Ursula K. Le Guin

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Foundation is published three times a year and each issue contains over a hundred well-filled pages. Subscribe now. (Special cheap back-issue offer for new subscribers.)

Send £7 for three issues to *The SF Foundation*, N.E. London Polytechnic, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, RM8 2AS, England. Please make cheques or postal orders payable to "The SF Foundation". American subscribers send \$14 (plus a dollar to cover bank handling charges if paying by dollar cheque).

Strugatsky are more in the way of idiosyncratic personal meditations on the novels, focussing particularly on the way a contrasting group of characters are drawn into a spiritual quest requiring the agonizing publication of their private, haunted universes of symbols. It's too soon to guess which of the films will prove the most permanent, though I suspect the sf pieces may lose out to Andrei Roublev and the two made in the west, particularly *The Sacrifice*. But for me the most satisfying will always be *Solaris*, with even its ropey special effects charged with a mysterious poetry, and (perhaps a more eccentric choice) the impenetrably baffling *Mirror*. I did speak to Tarkovsky once, before his exile, if that's the right way to describe standing up in a lecture hall and getting a question mangled by an interpreter. He came over as an intensely private, rather melancholic and uncomfortable figure, clearly ill at ease with his situation ("Mr Tarkovsky says, what distribution troubles? He is not aware of any distribution troubles") and painfully guarded about his own work. I don't know why I expected anything else. All the same, he was a god, one of the real gods. In the seventies, there used to be a lot of people who would fall asleep three times during *Solaris* (not in itself a culpable offence) and think it made them wise and interesting to tell you about it afterwards. Well, lads, you won't have to do it again.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

We continue the celebration of *Interzone's* fifth anniversary, with a bumper issue which will contain brand-new science fiction stories by Iain Banks, Geoff Ryman, Brian Stableford and Michael Swanwick. Don't miss this!

Christina Lake Assyria

“They’re all different!” she thought, noticing the other passengers for the first time. Different? She caught the word, perplexed. No, surely that wasn’t it. The problem was, they were all the same. Drab, depressed, tired. Snoozing over newspapers, wearily rearranging the contents of identical brief-cases, closing faded eyes in loose-skinned faces.

She felt strangely disoriented. Had she been sleeping too? What had she been thinking before she noticed the passengers? It had been something important, something that had filled her with a glow of excitement and anticipation. But what? No, it had gone, slipped away like a shadow merging into the darkness. Assyria.

The train came to a stop on the bridge and she looked out, automatically, unwarily. The view from the window hit her like a physical blow. She had never seen anything remotely like it before. The river curved away, silver in the evening sunlight, a wide and sparkling ribbon crowded with barges, floating restaurants and pleasure boats. On the far bank stood buildings out of a dream, huge, square giants, flaunting their geometry, decorated for power not pleasure.

The air caught in her throat as for a moment she rejected her surroundings, her very body. Already the train was moving again, jerking forwards into the station. She took in a deep breath, held it determinedly, and let it out again, fighting the panic reactions.

The train stopped. She lurched to her feet and followed the other passengers out of the carriage. Pushed her way through the single-minded creatures who clustered round the doorways, straining to get into the vacated carriages. Jostled past the man collecting tickets. Battled against resistant human flesh: men staring devotedly at the large, clicking notice boards above their heads; women, dead-eyed, guarding their space. She found herself, at last, in the kiosk, staring at the books. They didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense. She picked one up, as thin and floppy as a

piece of cloth, and flicked through the pages. Alien, impenetrable script, meaningless pictures. She dropped it back, refusing to admit she could read the words splashed across the cover: *Theatre, Cinema, Concerts*.

A pair of hands fell on her shoulders, and a voice sounded in her ears.

“I thought you said you’d wait outside. Come on, we’re late.”

Her head swung up. He was very tall, hair slightly greasy, eyes which did not see her. Her mind supplied a name, but she rejected it. She didn’t know this man. She didn’t know any of them.

“Come on, Sam,” he said, pushing her forwards. “We’ll eat at the Stock Pot, ok? It starts at quarter past seven.”

Code words. He must be the person sent to meet her. That’s why she knew his name. Marcus.

They went outside to a frightening world where black cars lumbered over cobble-stones towards them, and her senses were attacked by signs, noise and the never-ending flow of people. It surprised her slightly to look up and still see sky. “Sold the Honda,” her guide told her laconically as they plunged into the middle of the traffic. She found herself in front of a braking car, dodged another, then panicked as she saw a third coming at her from the opposite direction. She bolted blindly to the shelter of a building on the far side.

“Jay-walking again,” said Marcus, catching up with her. “No, not that way. What’s wrong with you today?”

They went into a little crowded room and she ate hot, soggy vegetables and spongy meat tasting vaguely of boiled tea-towels. Marcus wafted smoke across it all, as if it were some kind of sacrifice. She left most of the meat.

“Should have had the lasagne. What’d you order burgers for, you know you don’t like them.”

“You’re right, they’re not healthy. Marcus, where’s your...” she struggled to find the word. “Where’s your

twin?"

"My twin." Marcus stubbed out his cigarette vigorously. "Who told you about that?"

She had a sudden intuition. "Dead. Oh no, I'm so sorry!"

Marcus stood up explosively in the confined space. "Let's pay the bill and go."

He drew some coins from his pockets and selected a few to put on the table, then looked at her, obviously expecting her to do the same. She tried, but all she could find was three parts of a disintegrating tissue and the ticket she should have handed in at the station.

"You've lost your purse again," said Marcus impatiently. "Are you sure it's not in your bag?"

She looked obediently inside the soft white shoulder bag she had been carrying all the time. Yes, that was a purse of course. She opened it and took out some of the coins. "How many?"

"Yours was £1.45. Oh, never mind, I'll pay!"

They hurried through the darkening streets, Marcus holding onto one of her hands and pulling her through the people. She would have liked to pause to look at the coloured lights on the buildings, but he dragged her on. Assyria, she thought helplessly. Assyria. But there was no answer. And she was being pulled through the streets of a strange city with a twinless man.

They went in to a darkened room. A theatre she thought, looking around. No, she corrected herself, a cinema. The word slipped into her mind so easily she almost failed to notice how alien the concept was. Copies of actors moving on a blank, white wall. Creepy.

The pictures they showed her formed a strong reality. Yet, when she stopped to think about them, they simply did not make sense. It was easier to let the images pass in front of her eyes in a pretty but mindless series than to tackle their implications. It's not real, she reminded herself.

Marcus put an arm on her shoulder. She wriggled uncomfortably, but he left it there until he had to move it to light another cigarette. She wondered if he were trying to use her as a substitute for his dead brother, but that didn't seem quite right. Surely he would pick a man.

"Come back with me tonight," he said after the film. "I'll make sure you get up in time for work."

She felt more disoriented than ever. "Work? But what is my work? You must tell me."

"Sam..." He stopped walking. He stopped holding her hand. He looked at her intently. "You're not Sam. Who are you?"

"Assyria," she said, but the word sounded wrong. "Assyria, what've you done with Sam?"

"I thought that was my...code-name."

"Code name!" He laughed and his eyes gleamed. "Secret agents is it? You most certainly will come back with me."

He grasped hold of her hand, more tightly this time, and they began to walk again.

"If you're not Sam," he mused, "why are you wearing her clothes and carrying her bag? Here, give me that!" he added, stretching out for the shoulder bag. He began rummaging through it, her hand tucked

firmly under his upper arm. "Sam's cheque book, her Access card, that stupid book she was reading. Did you rob her?"

"I don't know who you mean. Those are all my things, except... I don't think I ever saw them till today." They were like everything else, familiar but strange.

"Sam, you're not just acting, are you? No, you wouldn't. I know you're not Sam. She doesn't stand that way. She doesn't stare back at me the way you do."

"I'm tired. Confused. There's so many things I don't remember."

Something stirred in Marcus's mud brown eyes, something hungry, full of fierce and greedy hope.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll look after you. I'll make sure you're all right."

He took her back with him on the train. The underground train this time; or tube, as the borrowed database in Sam's head called the system of dark subterranean tunnels they rattled through. He tried to question her, throwing suggestions, suppositions, theories and facts at her in a bewildering profusion, till tiring of the lack of response, he let her be and sat, chewing thoughtfully on his finger nails, watching and waiting.

Alone at last on the sofa where Marcus had left her for the night, Assyria tried to remember. She lay a long time on her back, seeing scenes from the film, scenes from the brightly lit streets, scenes from a life she did not remember living. But nothing real, nothing belonging to her. It was no good. Give up, said a voice in her head, let the thoughts drift, let sleep come.

And then, just as she was slipping away from consciousness, then she saw her at last: the sister whose name she shared. Assyria. Standing by a fountain, with her hair flowing behind her as it did when she was troubled. The familiar voice melodious, worried, sounding in her ears: "We haven't found Twelve yet."

That was all. A brief, bright image, flashing across the dark unreality of the stranger's brain. But it was enough. There was the life she had lost. There, at last, in full, etched into her head by the heat of its passage. But did it have any reality outside of herself? She thought not. She was in a world, which for all its sophistication, had never even heard of her world, let alone reached out to find it.

Never mind. She would remember. She would follow the golden thread back. She would return.

She would return, the woman vowed, looking out the window of her carriage, and marvelling at the sheer spaciousness of it all. The flat land stretched to the horizon, green and nearly treeless. The houses were small brown hats against the skyline. She had never seen anything so...so empty. It was quite awesome.

And odd. Shouldn't they be near the city by now? She looked down at her lap, as if expecting to find something. "My bag!" she thought, panicking. It had gone. No, she calmed herself, there had been no bag. Why should she need a bag? She leaned back, still vaguely confused, and found herself caught in the intense gaze of the passenger opposite.

"Is everything all right?" he asked, smiling from

rich green eyes.

"Yes," she said, "but..."

But the houses looked so strange. The city had sprung up suddenly from the heart of the grassland, a tangle of bright, variform shapes, haphazardly placed on wide, meandering streets.

"London," he said, but the word didn't sound right. He had to distort his lips to say it.

Twelve, she thought. This man is Twelve. She laughed to herself, then couldn't think why. A picture of a boy with a catapult superimposed itself on the man.

"Let me help you remember," the man offered, stretching out a hand. The gloved finger-tips pressed down painfully onto her forehead, pulling her head apart.

Assyria. Two of them, both called Assyria. But not me. I'm not Assyria, I'm...

"Sam," she said. "Sam. Oh God."

Twelve leaned back, a look of triumph on the dark, startling face. "You'll never be Assyria now."

"Do you think I care? Do you think it matters? You must send me back now, as soon as possible, straight away!" She raved on, not really believing the situation, not really believing herself.

"You will never go back."

I'm not even human, she thought. My body's all wrong and my words are like bubbles. They aren't just foreign like German or Swahili, they're nothing but round, transparent spheres, trickling out of an open mouth, gleaming and iridescent. Then they burst.

"She's had a great loss," Twelve said from far away.

"Her sister?"

"No, her sister is here to fetch her. She ran away."

"She is mad."

"She may be."

Sam closed her mouth. The carriage had stopped and a group of people were looking in at her: two silk-covered stick-men, a Greek goddess and a pair of identical midgets.

"Assyria!" cried the goddess, starting to greet her. Then she strangled a soft scream and turned furiously on Twelve. "That is not my sister."

"All the world will say she is."

"She is, she is," confirmed the stick-men.

"You know nothing," raged the goddess, the other Assyria. "Nothing." She stretched out her hands and tried to strangle Twelve, her black gloves squeezing in on his throat in a rapidly tightening circle. But the stick-men pulled her off him before anything could happen. Twelve simply stood there, unconcerned, distant.

"She must be mad too," he said, when he had recovered his breath.

"Our mother is perfectly well," said one of the midgets.

"You are mad," said the other.

"He is their father," explained Assyria calmly. She no longer needed restraining. "I have not seen him since last Dreaming Day. Nor his brother. This is a family matter. We will settle it alone."

The stick-men bowed and moved away. "Very well, but we shall tell Shilling. They will want to know."

Assyria came forward and scrutinized Sam closely.

"Will you come with us?" she asked at last.

"Why not, I have nothing else to do." That at least was familiar. It was what she would have said, if she had dared, the first time Marcus had asked her out. For most of her life she had had nothing else to do.

"She is from London," said Twelve as they walked outside. The air was fresh and invigorating. "She will tell us everything we need for the project."

"You have bereaved me for KNOWLEDGE?"

"For balance. On their world there is only one of them. Halves seeking a whole. They do not look to their sisters or brothers but to their sexual partner. The basic unit is the mating couple, the father and the mother. That is their nature."

"But not ours."

"Assyria, have you not guessed? My brother is dead. I want, I need, a wife."

"Then have her!" replied Assyria imperiously.

"Take her away, I want none of her, this mockery of my sister. She can be your wife!"

"No, you. She is for the project. You are the mother of my children."

Sam shrank back against the stone-work of an arch. Assyria and Twelve were attracting attention again, but the two children ran around imploring people not to listen. "It's a private mating matter. Don't listen! Don't listen!" they cried pathetically.

Assyria stood very upright, deadly serious. "Twelve, how long has your brother been dead?"

"Three years," he said at last, very quietly. "Three years, Assyria, and I can't stand it any longer."

"I can't stand it any longer," she thought, lying awake on Marcus's sofa as the memories came flooding back, leaving her lonely and bereft. Noises of traffic rose from the street and a clock ticked loudly on the mantelpiece. "I don't belong here," she thought. "I can name all these things, but I don't belong. I am not Sam. I am Assyria."

The door creaked open and in walked Marcus in an old dressing gown which failed to cover most of his long, white legs.

"I've phoned your office," he announced. "I said you were sick, suspected glandular fever. That should hold them for a while."

"I have to get back!"

Assyria struggled, half-naked, out of the sleeping bag.

"Back where, mystery girl?"

"Home," she said, searching through the meagre heap of her possessions for something that wasn't there. "To my sister. She will be afraid that I am dead." Giving up, she pulled on the jumper, ignoring the bra.

"Perhaps you are," suggested Marcus, absent-mindedly staring at the exposed flesh. "You died in one dimension and took over Sam's body in this."

"This is not death," she dismissed, climbing into the skirt. "If I were dead, I'd be haunting my sister's house, harrying her to join me. Just as your brother does."

"My brother. What are you talking about? I haven't got a brother."

"Your twin."

His face changed. "You said about her before. What business of yours is Elissa?"

"Your twin was a girl? I don't understand. How can you be the same if she is a woman and you a man?"

Marcus loomed over her, his face fierce. "Elissa always knew. Always. It didn't matter that she was a girl." He wiped his hand across his forehead, looking suddenly confused. "Why've you got this thing about twins?"

She sat back down on the crumpled sleeping bag and tried to explain. It was all so basic, yet the gulf was so deep.

"When we're born, there's always two of us, identical parts of the same person."

"Always?"

"Always. Unless one dies at birth, but then normally the other will not live either. We're very lucky," she reflected. "We're born with our help-mate, our other self. You must be very alone."

"We get by." He sat down opposite her, reaching for the cigarette pack on the table. "So you do everything together, you and your sister?" His voice expressed a mixture of contempt and envy.

"No. What would be the point of that? We complement each other. She does something, or I do it, but we don't have to both be there to share the experience."

"A kind of telepathy?"

"I suppose so."

"Elissa always knew what I was thinking."

"What was there to know? It's not often I have a thought that my sister hasn't thought."

"Even now?" he asked mockingly. The eyes above the sharp nose were narrow and sceptical. "Some of you must grow apart, get fed up with each other. It happens with the closest friends, the happiest marriages. By now Elissa and I would only be sending each other Christmas cards!"

"You don't understand. We could hate each other, but what would be the point? We are one person. It isn't productive to hate one's self."

"Here we do it all the time," remarked Marcus, leaning back and smiling. "People think I love myself, but really I hate myself. But I don't suppose you're interested."

Assyria reached for her bag and began stuffing things back into it. "We could talk about differences all day, but there isn't time. I have to get back. I shall start straight away, at the station where we met."

Marcus banged his cigarette violently on the ash-tray. "They don't run trains to where you come from, darling. No-one does."

"I can get back the way I came. I'm sure of it."

"Maybe you can." Marcus shrugged dismissively, then jumped to his feet. "But I'm coming with you. Every step of the way."

They bought tickets and sat silently opposite each other in the carriage. Assyria stared eagerly out of the window, trying to recognize where she had come in to this world. Trying to remember her own landscape and tune herself back to its resonances. Nothing happened. The scenery remained solid and fantastical.

"We'll get off at London Bridge and go back again," decided Marcus. "If there were a lot of business-men on the train, it must have happened after London Bridge."

They tried. She strained further, harder, but felt reality floating away from her. The city was too big for her, too strong.

"I'll take you home," said Marcus. She had expected

him to gloat. Marcus might almost be real. Real enough to dislike.

"Sam's home," he added. "You could live there. It'd be more comfortable than my flat. But you'd have to work occasionally. Probably every day."

He was trying to be humorous, she realized.

"I don't understand," she said, at last. "Why are work and life such different things to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are they so separate? Where I come from work isn't a place, it's the sum total of what we do. We could no more not work than not live. For us, life and work are the same."

"It would drive me mad."

Sam would have said the same. But the presence of Sam was fading. Soon it would just be her, alone in this alien world, "going to work" to "get money," forgetting the details of her old life, aching for Assyria.

No, Assyria would find her. Some break-through in the project had brought her here. Hadn't that been what Twelve had been talking about just before he sent her? They would get her back. Somehow.

"**S**omehow we can't seem to do it," explained Twelve, unperturbed to a group of his disciples. "He won't let her go. I've tried to make the switch a dozen times, but we need his co-operation, the strength of his will, and at the moment we're not getting it."

Sam sat at the back of the room, reading. There wasn't much to read. It was a doing society, not a thinking one. But she tried.

"My sister will fight her way free," Assyria replied confidently.

It was curious, Sam thought. Assyria still talked to Twelve. She had walked off without him after the scene in the square, but they had all ended up in the one place, anyhow. A kind of college. It wasn't the same, but it was the closest comparison Sam could come up with.

There they had labelled her with a red band round her head.

"So we can tell the difference between you and Assyria."

"But how am I to tell the difference between you and you?"

"We're the same, so it doesn't matter."

That seemed to be true. At least, they had the same name and no one cared which of each pair they spoke to. They might just as well have been one. It all seemed prodigiously redundant to her.

But she watched them with a slight touch of envy. "*Mon frère, mon semblable...*" She too had longed for a mirror twin when she was younger. These people had one. They were happy. She, as usual, was left out.

"Sam, you must know a way!" appealed Assyria.

"Why? You're the scientists. I'm just the innocent victim."

"It's your world. Tell us more about it."

She thought of the pub Friday lunch-time, East-Enders, the new, unplayed tape for her Walkman and late-night shopping in Safeway. Probably no one had ever cried for Safeway before.

"I'll talk to Twelve," she told them. She felt sorry for Twelve. He reminded her a bit of Marcus.

So up they went to the little tower room with the

white balcony overlooking the Artists' Square and the Climbing Steps. Her new home.

"You obviously don't want Assyria back. The Assyria you sent away," she said. "Why do they trust you?"

"They've no choice. Genius is the product of the single mind. Your society's full of geniuses."

"My society's full of maladjusted fools," she replied acerbically.

It didn't deter Twelve from his eulogy. "You have machines to sing, to fly, to save peoples' lives. You can do almost anything."

"Not really. But, come on, how do you know so much about us? We know nothing about you."

"The amplifier. My thoughts touched those of someone there. He has told me a lot."

"Marcus?" It wasn't really a question. She knew the "he" they talked of was him. It fitted.

"He was my anchor in your world." Twelve leaned on the balcony rail, the wind blowing through his hair. "I thought he would take me there. I was sure, through him, I could go there and come back with all your secrets. But it was a woman he wanted. So I sent Assyria and received you."

"And I know none of the secrets." It amused her at times. They wanted to know so much about her science and they'd picked a technological illiterate. An ignorant consumer who couldn't even load Space Invaders onto a home computer.

"You have them locked in your head somewhere. We will find them. You need only talk."

She talked, beginning with Hiroshima and working forward. Twelve wasn't a good listener, he kept getting up to shout at people from the balcony or playing with the device in his glove. She went on regardless. What she had forgotten she invented. It was fun.

"Your world isn't much like I thought," said Twelve at last. "I wonder if it's the same one."

"If you told me about yours, it'd be different too from the one I see. I wish you would," she added wistfully. The city was all colour and no depth. It had myths not history, intrigue not politics, personalities not laws.

"Not now." Twelve was already half-way to the door. "I've an idea," he said, swirling out.

Poor Twelve, she thought. In a society where job-sharing was the norm he had to work for two. Sam could well imagine his years of pretending to be both himself and his brother, leaping around with frenetic energy and a guileless deceitfulness which could only have worked in this naive society.

Sam followed him downstairs more slowly, looking around, finding him at last in the old counting room. He was talking to Assyria and the others in the group and the room bubbled with excited voices. Twelve's rose above the rest: "It will work, I tell you. He won't let her go alone, but he will come with her."

"No. You must not go. It would be suicide. The will of Assyria will be enough."

"My machine is attuned only to him. It was the work of years. I don't know if I could repeat it."

"You will. Together we will."

"No, I must go. I must take Sam back and exchange her for Assyria. I am in exile already."

Twelve was clearly revelling in the nobility of his proposals. Then he glanced out to the verandah where

the children were playing. "You'd forgotten them, hadn't you?" Assyria said deridingly.

He turned slightly white. "It can't be helped. You wouldn't let us be a family."

"There's no place here for the type of family you talk of. They are themselves. Soon they start training and will belong to none of us."

"That is good, because I am going," declared Twelve, "and I will not see them again."

"He may be going," thought Sam, "but will I?" He had said she would never go back, and for all the fluency of his subsequent plans for them both, she still believed he had meant it.

He had meant it, Marcus had, when he told her she would have to go to work. Sam's work. Mandatory unless certified ill by a doctor, she discovered. "You'd probably do all right with a psychiatrist, baby," Marcus had added, somewhat nastily.

At the office, no-one seemed to recognize that she wasn't Sam, though some of them commented that she still looked ill. She had seen herself in the mirror, and could only agree with them.

She sat down at the desk she vaguely recognized as Sam's and looked at the papers on it. There was something she was meant to do with them, but she couldn't quite remember what. Sam's memories were fading, disappearing like half-forgotten dreams. She started folding some of the paper into shapes while she was waiting, absent-mindedly making little models like the ones she and her sister used to invent when they were young.

"That's good. What is it?" A long-haired woman in pale pink leant over her shoulder.

"A..." She couldn't think of the word, looked up despairingly, and saw the woman draw back. "It's nothing in particular," she said, hastily. "Can you tell me, please, what I'm meant to be doing?"

"Um...well, start on that I should think. It's quite urgent." She pointed at one of the batches of paper. "And you'd better ring Dave Morris. That's what I came over to say..."

Ring Dave Morris. It sounded like a good idea, if only she could remember who or what Dave Morris was. But seeing as she couldn't, she spent the morning playing with the big pile of papers on her desk, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. The hours dragged by, one by one. She experimented with writing. If she wrote Samantha Williams, her hand moved very fast and the letters were all small and squiggly. She tried to put her own name, Assyria into writing, but couldn't decide whether it should have one "s" or two. Neither looked right. She was just in the middle of painting her finger nails with blue tipex when a fat gentleman with hair on his face and freckles on his head invited her to come along with him to his office.

"We think it might be better if you have a few more days rest. You're obviously not quite up to things today," he said nervously, making her sit down and patting her on the shoulder.

"But I do want to work," said Assyria earnestly. "I'm just not sure what to do."

The man talked a lot, but she lost track of it after the third sentence. It was full of words like "person-

nel," "productivity" and "company loyalty." The only thing which emerged with any clarity at all was that she must definitely go home.

"If only I could," Assyria thought, trudging up the hill past the rows of identical houses. People lived in all of them, she had been told. It was hard to believe. Each house contained a separate set of people, each bit of London a separate set of such houses, and beyond London, hundreds of towns and cities, containing similar houses in similar roads. How could these people ever hope to know each other? What was the point of so many people?

She took the train into town, still looking for some sign of where she had arrived. Perhaps if she could get out and walk very slowly along the track. Or perhaps it had to be the exact same train. She closed her eyes as they pulled into the terminus. When she opened them she would be home. But the noises around her gave the game away. She was still in Charing Cross. Eventually she opened her eyes and got out.

Marcus was waiting for her at the ticket barrier. "I rang your office and your flat. I figured you'd turn up here."

"Why do you keep following me? Shouldn't you be at work?" She pronounced the words "at work" with a hint of scorn.

"Oh, I do what I like," he said nonchalantly. "The work system's not the same for everyone. There's winners and losers. I'm a winner, and you, I mean Sam, are a loser. But don't let's worry about that. I've a feeling we'll do it today."

"Do what?" she said angrily. "You're just humouring me. Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I'm trying to help, Assyria. My help's been useful so far, and it'll be even more useful in the future when you run out of money. You ought to be grateful."

"Why?" she asked, head thrown back, eyes fierce. "You're only doing it for your own entertainment. I'm a new toy, a better, more exciting version of Sam. I don't owe you anything. I didn't ask to come here, and I'm not staying!"

Marcus stepped forward, straightening up threateningly to his full height. "You're not going anywhere without me. I brought you here, and I can get you back."

"You're just making that up."

"No, I'm not. I wished for you, I mean Sam, to be different and you were."

It was too much. She turned away and walked back through the ticket barrier hoping he wouldn't follow. But he did. She heard the creak of his shoes, and then suddenly he caught hold of her from behind, covering her eyes with his hands so that she couldn't see.

"You silly girl," his voice growled in her ear, "of course I can do it!" His breath on her neck was wet and hot. He started to shove her into the waiting train, but she wrenched herself free.

Free at last. Free of Marcus, free of the station, free of the unfamiliar flesh which had trapped her.

She was in limbo, struggling towards the distant figure of Assyria who was herself.

"Elissa, wait, don't go without me," screamed a voice from behind her.

Then she was there, home in the beautiful old counting room, running towards her sister.

But...she stopped and shook her head confusedly.

She was always happy to see her sister, but why so happy today? And what was wrong with Assyria? Why was she wearing that strange red head-band?

"Welcome home," the woman in the head-band said, very quietly. She stood completely still and there were tears in her eyes. "Welcome home, sister. I am Sam, not Assyria, but all the same, I think we must be sisters of a sort."

Then horribly, she began to remember. Assyria.

Christina Lake lives in Bristol, and has been active in the science-fiction fan world for some time. The above is her first professionally published short story.

AN EASTERCON IN MANCHESTER

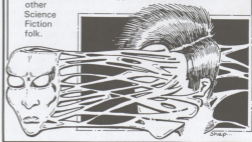
A bid for the 1988 British Easter Science Fiction Convention — April 1st - 4th

If you're a keen convention goer, or just simply want a chance to come along to one, why not support our bid to bring the 1988 Eastercon to Manchester, the first bid in the North West for over twelve years.

We can promise you an exciting, stimulating and varied programme of events should we win the bid, so if you're interested, drop a line to:

NORWESCON '88
16 Ambleside Close, Walton-Le-dale,
PRESTON, Lancs PR5 4RS
for further details.

There'll be something for all tastes, with plenty of special guests and opportunities to meet with other Science Fiction folk.



NEWS

Iain Banks gains an "M": at the suggestion of his editor at Macmillan London Ltd, all of Banks's forthcoming science fiction will appear under the subtly different name of Iain M. Banks. The man who has been described by Fay Weldon as "the great white hope of British literature" is being given a new, brasher presentation for his fourth novel, *Consider Phlebus* – to be published by Macmillan in April 1987. (See the jacket art reproduced here.) In the words of the publisher's blurb, the story concerns "a galactic war of staggering scale and ferocity, waged with awesomely destructive weaponry and a numbing ruthlessness, [when] billions died, the great starships burned like clouds of moths, and whole habitats, moons and planets were turned to dust." To coincide with the novel, *Interzone* will be publishing Banks's first short story in its next issue. This is a completely independent piece which is set against the same background as *Consider Phlebus*.

Michael Moorcock is finishing work on a major new novel which has the ultimate Moorcockian title. It's called *Mother London* [yes, of course!], and its author describes it as having "an

extremely ambitious structure... It's going to be perhaps the most satisfying thing for me that I've ever written when it's finished. If I pull it off." This quotation comes from an excellent long interview with the man which appears in the latest issue of *Back Brain Recluse*, an amateur magazine published by Chris Reed (see our Small Ads section for further details).

Geoff Ryman, author of *The Warrior Who Carried Life* and *The Unconquered Country*, has written a new, long story (over 30,000 words) which *Interzone* will be publishing in two parts. "Love Sickness," set in a bizarre bioengineered society of the near future, will be the magazine's first serial, and we hope to present it in two issues which should appear in relatively swift succession.

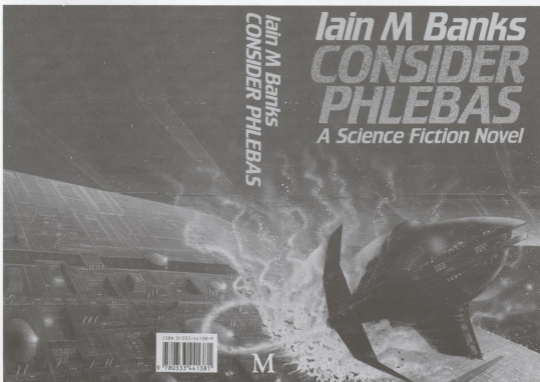
Judith Hanna has resigned as Associate Editor of *Interzone*, due to the pressure of her full-time work as an officer of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. However, she will remain on the masthead as one of the magazine's advisory editors. She is replaced as Associate Editor by **Lee Montgomerie**, who has written two stories and several book-review col-

umns for IZ. Writers please note: send no more manuscripts to Judith's address – send them instead to Lee Montgomerie's address in Leeds (see page 3).

This year's **World Fantasy Award** winners are: Avram Davidson (*Life Achievement*); *Song of Kali* by Dan Simmons (Best Novel); "Nadelman's God" by T.E.D. Klein (Best Novella); "Paper Dragons" by James Blaylock (Best Short Story); *Imaginary Lands* ed. Robin McKinley (Best Anthology); and Jeff Jones and Thomas Canty (joint Best Artists). The awards were presented at the World Fantasy Convention, which was held in November 1986, in Providence, Rhode Island.

A new award has been announced. The **Arthur C. Clarke Award**, for the best science-fiction novel published for the first time in Britain, is to be administered jointly by the Science Fiction Foundation, the British Science Fiction Association, and the International Science Policy Foundation. Arthur Clarke is very generously donating the prize of £1,000 per annum. The award committee

Concluded on p.56



Cover illustration by Richard Hopkinson

Richard Kadrey

Goodbye Houston Street, Goodbye

It was guaranteed to be the art event of the year, Dix was saying. The phone call had awakened Parnell from his nap; he listened quietly, twirling a short length of copper tubing he had earlier that day liberated from an abandoned refrigerator. A new Surrealist show, Dix continued, at his gallery in Soho. The Levy Gallery shows in the Thirties had dealt with the artists' perceptions of the world at the beginning of the twentieth century. How, Dix asked, would the heirs to the movement see life at the close of the century that gave them birth? "I'm calling the show 'Funde-Siecle.' Clever, n'est-ce pas?" Then, as if answering his own question, Dix added, "You interested?"

Parnell blinked twice, set down the copper tubing next to a collection of transistors, some animal bones and a lawn-mower engine. "Yeah, it sounds great," he said.

"Good, then you'll contribute something?" Dix asked.

Parnell tossed a set of knuckle dusters onto the tubing. "As a matter of fact, I've been working on a rather large piece for several weeks now. Ever since Jessie left..."

"Right on!" said Dix. "Jessie said you guys living together was stifling your artistic growth and her need for individuation. Now I'm not saying that the move was easy for her and I'm not saying that it hasn't done her a world of good, but I am saying that she's settled in nicely and says 'Hi'."

"Oh," Parnell replied evenly. "Tell her 'Hi' for me, too." Over the phone, Parnell could hear Dix sigh.

"I've gotta tell you, Parnell...for a while there I was sure that this moving in business between Jessie and me was going to cause a rift, communication-wise, between yourself and moi. And, well... I just want to say I'm damned glad we were both mature enough not to let that happen. Damned glad."

Parnell smiled. "People should be happy," he said, adding a stuffed owl to the wobbling pile of detritus.

"How right you are, mon ami. And right now Jessie's

as happy as I've ever seen her and I guess that's what we all want. Right? By the way, the show opens on February eighteenth, André Breton's birthday. Will you be ready by then?"

"The eighteenth? I suppose..."

"Terrif," said Dix. "I can't tell you how good I feel about our little talk, Parnell. I feel really close to you right now, bro. Can I call you 'bro'? I'll see you on the eighteenth. Ciao."

"Goodbye," said Parnell, setting down the phone. He removed the stuffed owl from the pile, tossing it into a far corner of the room, and replaced it with a box of false teeth and star charts. From another box, he removed a 1908 American Eagle Luger, pressed the barrel to his temple and pulled the trigger. The rusty mechanism leaked iron oxide down his shirt sleeve and the trigger froze. Parnell sighed and tossed the gun back in the box.

Parnell hadn't thought of Jessie much since she'd left. When he did think of her, it just left him feeling numb and thick-headed. He would begin to form thoughts, opinions about her sudden desertion, but inevitably they would log jam in some neural backwater where he couldn't get at them. Constipation of the brain, he thought. Jessie, you were the Ex-lax of my soul. The mineral oil of my heart. The plumber's helper of my - of fuck it...

Rather than languish in slow-witted self-pity he had, instead, become obsessed with his work, with the result that his largest, most elaborate and, unquestionably, most successful piece was nearly complete. Keeping this in mind, he resolved not to think of Jessie now. There was simply no time if he was going to finish the piece by the eighteenth.

With his part-time job on the garbage truck, (a revealing choice, one critic had quipped) Parnell had managed to gather most of what he needed to complete the new, still untitled, piece. Truck springs, flattened basketballs, a collection of cracked sunglasses, varnished frogs, stuffed and mounted as if playing

tiny musical instruments; prosthetic legs. Still, the piece lacked its single most important element. Parnell plucked a two day old New York Post from under his bed. PAPAN MOM TORCHES KIDS, SELF read the headline. Scanning the Classifieds, Parnell wondered what you would look under to find plutonium.

In the end, he had to settle for uranium. And he didn't even get that until the sixteenth. By then, Parnell was getting very nervous.

He had almost missed the "Unskilled Labourers" ad in the Help Wanted section. He found it in a little box at the bottom of the page, tucked between much larger ads for a weapons microbiologist and a bouncer for a very exclusive leather bar on Canal Street. The Yonkers Nuclear Power Facility was looking for people to work in the "hottest" parts of the plant. In thirty minutes, Parnell and a dozen or so illegal Mexican apple pickers would be subjected to the same amount of radiation that regular employees encountered in a month. However, it was a way in. And, Parnell saw, security was pretty lax in the hot parts of the plant. The beefy rent-a-cops seemed to spend most of their time taking pot shots at the pigeons they lured into the parking lot with piles of bread crumbs.

Because of this, no one saw Parnell happily pull the forklift bearing the new uranium rod behind a wall of leaking waste drums. Nobody was aware of him unscrewing the top of the dull lead cannister, prying casing away from the rod housing and removing what looked to him like an enormous sky-blue popsicle.

From the pocket of his radiation suit, Parnell removed his thermos bottle and Swiss Army Knife, which he used vigorously to chip chunks off the rod's faintly glowing surface. When he had what he thought to be enough, Parnell replaced the lid on the thermos, put the knife back in his pocket, resealed the rod and carefully stowed the uranium in its proper place.

Parnell ate his lunch alone that day, carefully slipping the thermos from his protective suit and into his Spider-Man lunchbox. He took the company bus home at five with the rest of his shift. The guards grinned and shouted "Immigracion!" at them.

In the morning, Parnell found more than the usual amount of hair on his pillow. His gums bled and his joints ached as he brushed his teeth. He was glad the show was opening the next day.

Three sweating men were lowering a stuffed lime-green and pink polar bear from the back of a weathered panel truck. Nearby, a heavy-set woman wearing a necklace made from old IUD's stood with arms crossed, the fingers of her right hand lightly covering her lips. "Please be careful," she repeated, her fingers muffling her words.

Parnell squeezed past the woman into the gallery. Inside, he found the single high-ceilinged room sliced into an elaborate maze by ten-foot tall sheets of white plaster board. The walls of the maze were decorated with elaborate rhymes and puns which were supposed to eventually lead the reader to the centre of the room. Parnell had never been one for word games, lumping things like crossword puzzles into the same category as the My Lai massacre and brain cancer. He was lost



Illustrations by Russ Tudor

almost immediately. For a moment, he panicked, a sudden attack of claustrophobia pushing the air from his lungs. He thought of Minotaurs and virgin sacrifices, of rats trained to carry out clever tricks and then sold off to some government lab for dissection. He thought of the Donner Party.

Eventually, he stumbled into an open area at the centre of the maze. Parnell found a thin man in mirrored Saigon shades testily supervising the placement of a black leather rocking chair studded with short silver spikes. Two women Parnell had met at some opening or other were planting razor blade roses in a cope of broken glass. A machine hummed in the corner, continually dismantling and re-assembling itself in ever changing patterns: now a seamless tetrahedron, now an apple, now a strand of double helix, now a Louis the XIV boudoir and on and on. Parnell wandered among the exhibits looking for his place.

"You do not look great," said Dix emerging from the corner of a Cadillac-sized condom festooned with blinking Christmas lights. He held out a small vial of white powder. "Have a tootski. Do you a world of good."

Parnell shook his head. "No thanks. I've just been up late, putting the finishing touches on the piece." He was just about to ask where he should set up when he turned his head and she caught his eye. "Hello Jessie," he said.

From Dix's side, Jessie gave him a little smile. "Hiya Parnell: how you been?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess." Half of his face readily complied with his instructions to smile, while the other half stubbornly refused to get involved. Rather than stand there looking completely deranged, Parnell said, "What happened to your eyes?"

Jessie brightened. "You like them? Tinted contact lenses. It was Dix's idea."

"Brown is not a power colour," explained Dix. He took Jessie's hand in his. "I think we," said Dix (meaning Jessie), "are going to be a very hot property after this show. Heavy artistic merit and beaucoup bucks. Ones followed by zeroes; many, many zeroes."

Parnell smiled at them. He was beginning to feel a little warm. "I'm very happy for you. Where do I set up?"

Dix pointed to a spot near what looked like a washing machine giving birth to a very large and unpleasant insect. Parnell nodded; Dix gave him a "thumbs-up" salute and went off to confer with the caterers who had just arrived, laden with cases of wine and crab legs on ice. Jessie gave Parnell a little wave and mouthed something he couldn't make out, before trailing off behind Dix.

Parnell had borrowed a four-wheeled pallet mover from Mister Saigon Shades and went out the back to a rented U HAUL pickup. He pulled the canvas cover away from the large mound in the flatbed and gently lowered his contraption onto the mover; the piece wheezed like a tubercular buffalo as it settled. The prosthetic legs kicked the air with little metallic clicks as he wheeled the construction into place inside. Parnell returned the pallet mover to Mister Saigon Shades and was just adjusting the piece to get the right light when he heard Jessie's voice behind him. "I like it. What's it called?"

Parnell looked up. "It doesn't have a title yet. I

thought I'd name it tonight."

Jessie nodded, keeping her hands clasped in front of her pelvis. "I got some new stuff up front. Did you see the Dalai Lama kit? That's one of mine. One hundred and twenty found objects. Choose any forty and declare yourself the Dalai Lama. Instant enlightenment."

"You misspelled 'desperate'," said Parnell quietly.

"What?"

"You misspelled 'desperate' in that little note you left me."

"Oh," said Jessie. She looked away. "Sorry. Grammar was never my strong point."

"This isn't a question of grammar; it's spelling. It's a completely different subject. I would think you could at least take the time to get my kiss-off letter correct."

"A little louder, Parnell, I don't think they heard you in Jersey," Jessie said. She waved to Dix, who was staring at them amidst a pile of eviscerated shell fish. "I thought we could be civilized about this. I thought we could be friends."

"I am being civilized. I haven't stuck any sharp, crippling objects into anybody, have I?" said Parnell in a whisper you could hear for a block. "Jessie, why are you with this jerk?"

Jessie shook her head sadly. "I like Dix. He's a little over-anxious sometimes, but he's very nice. And if you insist on talking this way, I don't see how we can continue to be friends."

Parnell opened his eyes innocently. "Talking what way? I'm merely attempting to engage in some honest and open banter concerning my recent fucking over," he said.

Jessie took a swing at him, but Parnell danced back and she clipped a glass eye dangling from his construction by a coaxial cable. "Eat shit," he heard Jessie say as she turned and stomped back to Dix's office, slamming the door hard enough to dislodge a set of papier mache genitals from the ceiling. "I'm sorry," Parnell called. Dix was coming toward him, frowning.

"Trouble, kemo sabe? Everything okay here?"

"No trouble at all," said Parnell, draping his arm around Dix's shoulders. "You like the piece? I had you in mind while I was working on it."

Dix beamed as if Parnell had just offered him one of his kidneys. "Well, I'm flattered all to hell, old man," he said.

Parnell took Dix's hand and shook it. He said: "Well, I've gotta run. Gotta pick up a monkey suit I rented for the opening. By the way, your ensemble is really smashing. Dix, old weed. It's the cuff links. Always dress to your cuff links, I say. You can't go wrong. Well, au revoir."

Before Dix could say a word, Parnell was out the back way, in the alley and barfing up what felt like everything he had ever eaten. A policeman on foot patrol came wandering up the alley as Parnell was rising shakily to his feet. "Just trying to charm a lady, officer. Think I picked up a touch of radiation poisoning instead. Sorry about the mess." The policeman advised Parnell to go home and sleep it off. Parnell thanked him and headed back to his apartment.

When he arrived home, however, he found the street blocked off and full of men in what looked like long white pyjamas wearing feedbags over their faces

— protective gear similar to the suit Parnell had worn at the power plant. He thought, for a minute, that some perverse new gang might have moved into the neighbourhood, until he saw the truck from the Nuclear Regulatory Agency. The white suited men were sweeping the whole block with geiger counters.

Parnell threw the rented truck into reverse and gunned it down an alley that opened onto First Avenue. He picked up his tuxedo from DUDS 'R US and purchased several hand sized sections of welder's glass from a hardware store before heading out for Long Island. It was obvious by the presence of the men in the white suits, that they had discovered his treachery in Yonkers. It wouldn't be long, he knew, before most of the police in the state would be after him. Parnell was glad he had thought to stash the radio transmitter in the truck.

On the northern tip of Long Island was a decayed, but expensive beachfront development called "Saint Thomas," consisting of a single long and ill-constructed boardwalk, gourmet "Boucherie," pharmacy, full-service Shell station, video arcade and sixty refurbished waterfront homes newly painted to disguise more wood-rot per square inch than the entire Amazon Basin.

The original owner of the development had lured residents to the remote stretch of sand with promises of a new suspension bridge that would link their community directly to the heart of Manhattan. When the City Council rejected the bridge plan, the developer started building a blimp port. This too, he abandoned. Parnell's parents had taken him to Saint Thomas often as a child to visit his father's alcoholic brother. The residents of the island, he recalled, had never quite forgiven the developer or Manhattan for their isolation.

Parnell purchased two gallons of gas at the Shell station and changed into his tuxedo in the rest room. He then abandoned the truck behind the video arcade and hurried to the beach, carrying a small nylon suitcase.

Evening was coming on fast, softening the colours and contours of the beach until it resembled one of Yves Tanguy's biomorphic landscapes. Parnell set the suitcase in the sand, unzipped it and pulled the cheap plastic alligator that activated the radio transmitter. A police car rolled by slowly beyond the boardwalk. Parnell wondered idly if it was one of the patrol cars that had been tailing since he left Brooklyn. Parnell did not think the police were art patrons and that bothered him. Public servants, he mused, should have wide-ranging interests, especially where the arts were concerned. He made a mental note to write somebody about that.

Parnell pulled the "arming" switch (actually, a pop-top from a decade-old Budweiser can) with fingers that were dark and swollen. He thought of Jacques Rigaut, a young surrealist who had declared he would commit suicide in ten years and went about snipping the buttons from policemen's coats. Parnell thought of André Breton, exhorting the authorities to throw open the doors of the asylums, of Dali claiming, "The only difference between me and a madman is that I'm not mad."

Parnell watch read 8:30; the reception would be in



full swing by now. He pushed a button on the transmitter and a tiny toy train rattled forward on about four inches of plastic track. With its nose, it tripped the final switch. Parnell held his breath.

Nothing happened.

He kicked the transmitter. Something rattled inside. Manhattan continued to glitter maddeningly.

So much for the cover of *Art in America*, he thought. "Parnell?"

He turned at the sound of the voice. "Jessie?" She came running awkwardly through the sand, waving to him. As she reached his side, he felt her arms around him; she kissed his neck.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Parnell said.

She nodded. "Me too. You looked so sad back at the gallery, I just had to talk to you. I've been following you for miles."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Jessie said. Her smile turned to an expression of incomprehension. "Parnell, what the hell are you doing out here?"

"Naming the piece."

"Out here?"

Parnell raised his hand toward Manhattan. "Remember, Breton once said that being based on the irrational and spontaneous, the ultimate surrealist act might be to shoot a gun at random into a crowd?"

"My god, Parnell; you didn't shoot anybody, did you?"

"No, of course not. What do you think, I'm crazy?"

Behind them, a dozen NYPD cars, sirens and lights ablaze, screamed to a halt. Dark uniformed figures rushed towards them, weapons drawn.

"Parnell, what the hell is this?" asked Jessie.

Parnell sighed. "The critics have arrived," he said. Again, he kicked the transmitter and realized that he had forgotten to turn the "safety" switch off. He sidestepped it with the edge of one shoe.

The police surrounded the artists while, a few miles to the north, twin blasting caps detonated, forcing bits of fissionable material together fast enough to cause a chain reaction. Manhattan silently disappeared like a two-ton flashbulb going off.

From the shore of Long Island, it looked as if a second sun had suddenly appeared in the east. Some of the policemen dropped their guns, others cursed and shielded their eyes from the ever-widening mushroom cloud. Parnell happily watched the whole thing through a sheet of welder's glass; he handed an extra sheet to Jessie.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Thanks, I..."

The sound of the blast reached them, drowning out his words. Perhaps a second after that, a wind like the cow catcher on a Bullet Train slammed into them, knocking artists, police, shore birds and rubbernecking locals ass-over-teakettle across the clean golden sands.

Parnell just lay there, half buried in sand. Jessie was the first up; the shell-shocked police followed slowly, one by one. Down the length of the boardwalk, the well-dressed residents of Saint Thomas were gathering to point and stare. Many, Parnell noticed, were pointing at him. In the lowering light, he could not see their faces, so he was not sure if they were preparing to string him up.

As he pulled himself from the sand, Jessie began to applaud. Someone in the back of the crowd picked it up, as did one dazed policeman. Then another. Soon the entire beach was reverberating with the sound of tumultuous applause. It rang in Parnell's ears, the wave of sound pushing him forward, drowning out all other sounds. He smiled at Jessie.

As the police led him to a squad car, he fainted and danced through the crowd like a prize fighter after winning the championship. Men shook his hand; women darted forward to kiss him.

Someone yelled "Speech!" Parnell turned and raised his hands above his head. A hush fell over the crowd. "I call it," Parnell announced, pointing to the smouldering remains to the north, "'Goodbye Houston Street'."

The crowd went wild.

Not surprisingly, Parnell's trial was held out of state, in Youngstown, Ohio. By that time, all of his hair and teeth had fallen out. With the help of Jessie's testimony and his pathetic appearance, Parnell did not receive the death penalty. However, he was sentenced to 900,000 consecutive life sentences, a number corresponding roughly to the population of Manhattan at the time of the blast.

A month after he entered a special lead-lined cell at Sing Sing in upstate New York, a package arrived for Parnell. His fingers now were so badly swollen that he had hard time getting the package open. Inside, there was a short note from Jessie. She was leaving to open her first show at a very important gallery in London. She enclosed a copy of *Art in America* with her picture on the cover. She was a very hot property.

At the bottom of the package, Parnell found a lacquered plaque from the New York State Art Commission. It read: "Awarded to GOODBYE HOUSTON STREET - Fun-de-Sicle Show 1987 - Second Place."

He never did find out who took first place.

Richard Kadrey has a science-fiction novel forthcoming from Ace Books in the near future. He has published one previous story in *Interzone*, "The Fire Catcher" (IZ 12) - which has since been reprinted in *Omni*. He was born in 1957, and lives in San Francisco.

S.M. Baxter

The Xeelee Flower

I still get tourists out here, you know. Even though it's been so long since I was a hero. But then, I'm told, these days the hyperdrive flits will get you from Earth to Miranda in an hour.

An hour. What a miracle. Not that these tourist types appreciate it. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind the company. It just bugs me that every last one, after he's finished looking over my villa built into the five-mile cliffs of Miranda, turns his face up to the ghostly blue depths of Uranus, and asks the same dumb question:

"Say, buddy, how come you use a fish tank for a toilet?"

But I'm a good host, and so I merely smile and snap my fingers. After a while, my battered old bubblebot limps in with a bottle of valley bottom wine, and I settle back and begin:

"Well, my friend, I use the fish tank for a toilet for the same reason you would. Because my boss used to live in it."

And that's how I got where I am today.

By working for a bunch of fish, I mean, not piddling in the tank. Although I don't know what stopped me from doing just that by the time we reached Goober's Star, eight months out from Earth.

"The resolution, Jones, the resolution!" The shoal of Squeem darted anxiously around their tank, gripping at me (as usual) from the voicebox taped to one glass wall.

I put down the spare tank I'd been busy scraping out, and blinked across the cluttered little cabin. The bubblebot – yes, the same one, squeaky-clean in those days – scuttled past, humming happily in its chores.

"Allright, allright." I wiped sweat from my eyes, and left algae on my forehead.

"The resolution, if you please, with haste."

"If you please yourself, you bunch of kippers." I grumbled as I picked my way to the control panel.

I got out my adjustable spanner and gingerly tweaked the fiddly little enhancement vernier. Like most Xeelee-based technology it was too fine for human fingers. The secretive Xeelee evidently have great brains but tiny hands. Then again, some people haven't managed to evolve hands at all, I reflected, as the Squeem flipped around in their greenish murk.

"Ah," enthused the Squeem as the monitors sharpened up. "Our timing is perfect."

I gloomily considered a myriad beautiful images of two things I didn't much want to be close to:

Goober's Star – about G-type, about two Earth orbits away, and about to nova; and a planet full of nervous Xeelee.

And the most remarkable feature of the whole situation was that we weren't running for our lives. In fact, we were going to get closer – a lot closer – drawn mothlike by the greed of the Squeem for stolen Xeelee treasure.

The bubblebot squeezed past my leg, extended a few pseudopodia, and began pushing buttons with depressing enthusiasm. (It was of course another Xeelee copy.) I sighed and turned back to my fish tank. At least I had one up on that pig-iron creep, I reflected; at least I was getting paid. Although, like most of the rest of humanity at that time, I hadn't exactly had a free choice in the nature of my employment –

The Squeem's rasp broke into my thoughts. "Jones, our planetfall is imminent. Please prepare the lander for your descent."

Your descent. Had they said "your" descent? I nearly dropped the fish tank.

Carefully, I got up from my knees. "The hell with that." I defiantly straightened my rubber gloves. "No way. The Xeelee wouldn't let me past the orbit of the moons –"

"The Xeelee will be fully occupied with their flight from the imminent nova. And your descent will be timed to minimize your risk."

"That's a lot of 'you' and 'yours'," I observed wither-

ingly. "Show me where my contract says I've got to do this."

Can fish be said to be dry? The Squeem said drily: "That will be difficult as you haven't got a contract at all."

They had a point. I reluctantly took off my pinafore and began to tug at the fingers of my rubber gloves. The bubblebot smugly opened up the suit locker. "You ought to send that little tin cretin," I said, and the Squeem replied, "We are!"

I swear to this day that bubblebot jumped.

And so the bubblebot and I found ourselves drifting through a low orbit over the spectacular Xeelee landscape. We watched morosely as the main ship pulled away from the tiny lander, and wafed our employer off to the comparative safety of the farside of one of the planet's two moons.

My work for the Squeem, roughly speaking, was to service the hyperdrive and dish out the ants' eggs. I was there to do any fiddly, dirty, dangerous jobs the bubblebot wasn't equipped for, such as clean out fish-tanks and land on hostile alien planets. And me, a college graduate. Of course, the role of humanity in the Galaxy at that time was roughly equivalent, and had been ever since the first ships had hyperdriven through the solar system, pausing only to scrape off New York and a couple of other places. This had encouraged us to do business, on terms not advantageous to ourselves.

It wasn't that the Squeem, or any of the other races out there, were any brighter than we were, or better, or even much older. But they had something we didn't and had no way of getting our hands on.

And that was stolen Xeelee technology. For instance the hyperdrive, scavenged by the Squeem from a derelict Xeelee ship centuries earlier, had been making that fishy race's fortune ever since. There was the hypernet, a few fairly startling weapons, and tools and gadgets of all kinds, on which a Galactic civilization had been based. And all pilfered, over a period of millions of years, from the Xeelee.

I use the word civilization loosely, of course. Can it be used to describe what existed at that time – a ramshackle construct based on avarice, theft and the subjugation of junior races like ourselves?

We began our descent. The dark side of the Xeelee world grew into a diamond-studded carpet: fantastic cities glittered on the horizon. The Xeelee – so far ahead, they made the rest of us look like tree-dwellers. Secretive, xenophobic. Not truly hostile to the rest of us; merely indifferent. Get in their way and you would be rubbed aside like a mote in the eye of a god.

And I was as close to them as any sentient being had ever got, probably. Nice thought.

Yes, like gods. But very occasionally careless. And that was the basis of the Squeem's plan that day.

We dropped slowly. The conversation left a lot to be desired. And the surface of the planet blew off.

I recoiled from the sudden light at the port, and the bubblebot jerked us down through the incredible traffic. It looked as if whole cities had detached from the ground and were fleeing upwards, light as bubbles. The lander was swept with shifting colour; we were in the down elevator from Heaven.

Abruptly as it had risen, the Xeelee fleet was past.

It hovered over the doomed planet for a moment, as if in farewell; and then it squirted without fuss into infinity. Evidently, we hadn't been noticed. I deduced this from the fact that I was still breathing. The lander moved in closer arcs now towards the surface. From behind the darkened planet's twin moons, the valiant Squeem poked their collective nose.

"Warning!" the hypernet crackled. "My monitors show much activity at the surface."

"Thank you so much. Invaluable advice." I took over from the bubblebot and began to seek out a likely landing place. We skimmed over a scoured landscape.

The Squeem nagged on: "The nova is imminent; please make haste with your planetfall."

"Cheers. Now get back in your tin and let me concentrate." I wrestled with the lander's awkward controls; we lurched towards the ground. I cursed the Xeelee under my breath; I thought of fish fingers; I didn't even much like the bubblebot. The last thing I needed at a time like that was a reminder that what I was doing was about as clever as looting a house on fire. Get in after the owners have fled; get out before the roof caves in. The schedule was kind of tight.

Finally, we thumped down. Reproachfully, the bubblebot uncoiled its pseudopodia from around a chair leg, let down the hatch and scuttled out. Already suited up, I grabbed an analysis kit and flashlight laser, and staggered after it. That descent hadn't done me a lot of good either, but in the circumstances I preferred not to hang around.

I emerged into a bone-like landscape. The noise of my breath jarred in the complete absence of life. I imagined the planet trembling as its bloated sun prepared to burst. It wasn't a happy place to be.

I'd put us down in the middle of a village-sized clump of buildings, evidently too small or remote to lift with the rest of the cities. In a place like this we had our best chance of coming across something overlooked by the Xeelee in their haste, some toy that could revolutionize the economies of a dozen worlds.

Listen, I'm serious. It had happened before. Although any piece of junk that would satisfy the Squeem and let me get out of there would do for me.

The low buildings gaped in the double shadows of the moonlight. The bubblebot scurried into dark places. I ran my hand over the edge of a doorway, and came away with a fine groove in a glove finger. The famous Xeelee construction sheeting: one molecule thick, about as dense as glass wool, and as strong as hell. And no-one had a clue how to make or cut it. Nothing new; a useless miracle.

The bubblebot buzzed past excitedly, empty-handed. The vacant place was soul-less; there was nothing to evoke the people who so recently had lived here. The thorough Xeelee had even evacuated their ghosts.

"Squeem, this is a waste of time."

"I estimate some minutes before you should ascend. Please proceed; I am monitoring the star."

"I feel so secure knowing that." I tried a few more doorways. The flashlight laser probed emptiness. – Until, in the fourth or fifth building, I found something.

The artifact, dropped in a corner, was a little like a flower. Six angular petals, which looked as if they were made of the mono-thickness Xeelee sheeting,

were fixed to a small cylindrical base; the whole thing was about the size of my open hand. An ornament? The readings from my portable analyzer – physical dimensions, internal structure – didn't change as I played with the toy in the light of the flashlight laser. Half the base clicked off in my hand. Nothing exciting happened. Well, whatever it was, maybe it would make the Squeem happy and I could get the hell out.

I took it out into the moonlight. "Squeem, are you copying?" I held it in the laser beam, and twisted the base on and off.

The Squeem jabbered excitedly. "Jones! Please repeat the actions performed by your opposable thumb, and observe the analysis unit. This may be significant."

"Really." I clicked the base on and off, and inspected the exposed underside in the laser light. No features. But a readout trembled on the analysis unit; the mass was changing.

I experimented. I took away the torch: the change in mass, a slow rise, stopped. Shine the torch, and the mass crept up. And when I replaced the base, no change with or without the torch. "Hey, Squeem," I said slowly, "are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Jones, this may be a major find."

I watched the mass of the little flower creep up in the light of the torch. It wasn't much – about ten to the minus twelve of a gram per second, to be exact – but it was there. "Energy to mass, right? Direct conversion of the radiant energy of the beam." And the damn thing wasn't even warm in my hand.

I clicked the base back into place; the flower's growth stopped. Evidently, the base was a key; remove it to make the flower work. The Squeem didn't remark on this; for some reason, I didn't point it out. Well I wasn't asked.

"Jones, return to the lander at once. Take no further risks in the return of the artifact."

That was what I wanted to hear. "Great." I ran through the skull-like town, clutching the flower. The bubblebot scurried ahead. I gasped out: "Hey, this must be what they use to manufacture their micro-thickness sheeting. Just stick it out in the sun, and let it grow." Presumably the petals, as well as being the end product, were the main receptors of the radiant energy. In which case, the area growth would be exponential. The more area you grow, the more energy you receive; and the more energy you receive, the more area you grow, and...

I thought of experiments to check this out. Listen, I had in my hand a genuine piece of Xeelee magic; it caught my imagination. Of course, the Squeem would be taking the profits. I considered ways to steal the flower...

My feet itched; they were too close to a nova. I had other priorities at that point. I stopped thinking and ran.

We bundled into the lander; I let the bubblebot lift us off, and stored the Xeelee flower carefully in a locker.

The lift was bumpy: high winds in the stratosphere. A spectacular aurora shivered over us. "Squeem, are you sure you've done your sums right?"

"There is an inherent uncertainty in the behaviour of novae," the Squeem replied reassuringly. We reached orbit; the main ship swam towards us. "After

all," the Squeem lectured on, "a nova is by definition an instability. However I am confident we have at least five minutes before –"

At once, three events.

The moons blazed with light.

The Squeem shut up.

The main ship turned from a nearby cylinder into an arrow of light, pointing to the safety of the stars.

"Five minutes? You dumb fish." The bubblebot worked the controls frantically, unable to comprehend the abrupt departure of the Squeem. The nova had come ahead of schedule; the twin moons reflected its sick glory. We were still over the dark side of the planet, over which screamed a wind that came straight from the furnaces of hell. On the day side, half the atmosphere must already have been blasted away.

The lander was a flimsy toy. I estimated we had about ten minutes to sunrise.

My recollection of the first five of those minutes is not clear. I do not pretend to be a strong man. I remember an image of the walls of the lander peeling back like burnt flesh, the soft interior scoured out...

Leaving one object, one remnant, spinning in a cloud of metal droplets.

I realized I had an idea.

I grabbed the Xeelee flower from its locker, and wasted a few more seconds staring at it. The only substance within a million miles capable – maybe – of resisting the nova, and it was the size of a cream cracker. I had to grow it, and fast. But how?

My brain chugged on. Right. One way. But would there be time? The flower's activating base came off, and went into a suit pocket.

The bubblebot was still at the controls, trying to complete its rendezvous with a vanished ship. If there'd been time, I might have found this touching; as things were, I knocked it aside and began entering an emergency sequence. My thinking was fuzzy, my gloved fingers clumsy, and it took three tries to get it right. You can imagine the effect on my composure.

Now I had about a minute to get to the back of the vessel. I snapped close my visor and de-cycled the airlock. I failed to observe the mandatory safety routines, thus voiding the manufacturer's guarantee. The bubblebot clucked nervously about the cabin.

Clutching the Xeelee flower, I pulled into space and set off one-handed. I couldn't help looking down at the stricken planet. Around the curve of the world, the air rushing from the day side was gathering into a cyclone to end all cyclones; clouds swarmed like maggots, fleeing the boiling oceans. A vicious light spread over the horizon.

Followed by the confused bubblebot, I made it to the reactor dump hatch. In about thirty seconds, the safety procedure I had set up should funnel all the lander's residual fusion energy out through the hatch into space, in one mighty squirt. Except, the energy pulse wasn't going to reach free space; it would all hit the Xeelee flower, which I was going to fix into place over the hatch.

Right. Fix it. With what? I fumbled in my suit pockets for tape. A piece of string. Chewing gum. My mind emptied. The bubblebot scuttled past, intent on some vital task.

I grabbed it, and wrapped the flower in one of its

pseudopodia. "Listen," I screamed at it, "stay right there. Got it? Hold it for five seconds, please, that's all I ask."

No more time. I scabbled to the far side of the lander.

Five seconds isn't long. But that five seconds was long enough to notice the brightening of the encroaching horizon. Long enough to note that I was gambling my life on a few more or less unfounded assumptions about the Xeelee flower.

It had to be a hundred per cent efficient; if it couldn't absorb all that was about to be thrown at it, then it would evaporate like dew. It had to grow exponentially, with the rate of growth of area increasing with the area grown already. Otherwise it couldn't grow fast enough to save me as I planned.

I also had plenty of time to wonder if the bubblebot had got bored -

There was a flash. I peered around the lander's flank.

It had worked. The flower had blossomed in the fusion light into an umbrella-sized dish, maybe just big enough for the hard rain that was going to fall.

The flower tumbled slowly away from the now-derelict lander, as did the bubblebot, sadly waving the melted stump of one pseudopod. I kicked it out of the way, and pushed into space. The heat at my back was knife-sharp.

I reached the flower and curled into a ball behind it. The light flooded closer, bending the edge of my improvised shield. I imagined the nova's lethal energy thudding into the material, condensing into harmless sheets of Xeelee building material. My suit ought to protect me from the nasty heavy particles which would follow. It was well made, based on a Xeelee design, naturally...I began to think I might live through this.

I waited for dawn. The bubblebot tumbled by, head over heels. It squirmed helplessly, highlights dazzling in the nova rise.

At the last moment I reached out and pulled it in with me. It was the stupidest thing I have ever done.

The nova blazed.

The lander burst into a shower of metal rain. The skin of the planet below wrinkled, like a tomato in steam.

And that bubblebot and I rode our Xeelee flower, like surfers on a wave.

It took about twelve hours. At the end of that time, I found I could relax without dying.

I slept.

I woke briefly, dry-mouthed, muscles like wood. The bubblebot clung to my leg like a child to a doll.

We drifted through space. The flower rotated slowly, half filling my field of view. Its petalled shadow swept over the wasted planet. It must already have been a kilometre across, and still growing.

A hell of a thing. I slept some more.

The recycling system of my suit was designed for a couple of eight-hour EVA shifts. The Squeem did not return from their haven, light years distant, for four days.

I did a lot of thinking in that time. For instance, about the interesting bodily functions I could perform into the Squeem's tank. And also about the flower.

It grew almost visibly, drinking in the sunlight. Its growth was exponential; the more it grew, the more capacity it had for further growth - I did some woolly arithmetic. How big could it grow?

Start with, say, a square kilometre of material. It's a molecule thick. Suppose it gets from the nova and surrounding stars about what the Earth receives from the Sun - something over a thousand watts a square metre. Assume total efficiency of conversion: mass equals energy over cee squared.

That gave it a doubling time of about fifteen years. I dreamed of numbers: one, two, four, eight, sixteen... It was already too big to handle. It would be the size of earth after a couple of centuries, the size of Sol a little later.

Give it a thousand years and it could wrap up the Galaxy like Christmas paper. Doubling series grow fast. And no-one knew how to cut Xeelee sheeting.

The universe waltzed around me; I stroked the placid bubblebot. My tongue was like leather; the failing recycling system of my suit left a taste I didn't want to think about.

I went over my figures. Of course, the growing flower's power supply would actually be patchy, and before long the edge could be spreading at something close to the speed of light. But it would still reach a hell of a size. And the Xeelee hadn't shown much interest in natural laws in the past. We drifted into its already monstrous eclipse; the bubblebot snuggled closer.

This was the sort of reason the Xeelee didn't leave their toys lying around, I supposed. The flower would be a hazard to shipping, to say the least. The rest of the Galaxy wasn't going to be too pleased with the Squeem...

These thoughts sifted to the bottom of my mind, and after a while began to coalesce.

The secret of the hyperdrive: yes, that would be a fitting ransom. I imagined presenting it to a grateful humanity. Things would be different for us from now on.

And a little something for myself, of course. Well, I'd be a hero. Perhaps a villa, overlooking the cliffs of Miranda. I'd always liked that bust-up little moon. I thought about the interior design.

It was a sweet taste, the heady flavour of power. The Squeem would have to find a way to turn off the Xeelee flower. But there was only one way. And that was in my suit pocket.

Oh, how they'd pay. I smiled through cracked lips.

Well, you know the rest. I even got to keep the bubblebot.

We drifted through space, dreaming of Uranian vineyards, waiting for the Squeem to return.

Stephen Baxter grew up in Liverpool and now works as a computer programmer near London. "The Xeelee Flower" is his first published story; if we had not accepted it, he says it would have been his "482nd unpublished work of fiction."

Joanna, Jody, Josephine and Jane. The authors of the latest quartet from Women's Press sound like the truculent alter-egos from Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*: a gang of female guerrillas struggling against the repressive conventions of the sf tradition; the tyranny of plot, the subjugation of the writer's personality, even the assumption that sf should include science and remain fiction. There is bravery and heroism here, moments of victory, but also desertion, dereliction of duty and crushing defeats in which sense and style are massacred. Joanna Russ's own *The Two of Them* (Women's Press, £2.25, a first British publication of a 1978 book) is one such daring assault that goes ruinously wrong.

The Two of Them begins with Irene, a transepolar interplanetary agent, sent to rescue a pre-pubescent poetess from a life of purdah on Ka'abah, a place right out of the Arabian Nights, carved into the claustrophobic bowels of some backward planet. The spectacle of a society in which women are forced to get by on drugs, emotional TV dramas, expensive gifts and their own good looks shocks Irene into a prolonged flashback to life in mid-Fifties Middle America in the midst of a mid-adolescent identity crisis. The story never recovers, collapsing into an extended, nitpicking, ultimately fatal argument between Irene and her male partner, while the abduction of the brat (a petulant nymphet in shimmering veils and tinkling bangles) takes place almost as background. It ends in an act of self-sabotage, with Joanna Russ rampaging onto the pages to announce that she has made it all up. She pulls the rug out from under the reader, repossesses all the generic furniture, and leaves Irene (or possibly me, since the author has defected to the second person) a middle-aged, divorced single parent stranded on the road to Albuquerque; hardly an improvement on being one of the hidden movers of the Galaxy.

If Joanna Russ sounds deranged, Jody Scott seems positively demented. *I, Vampire* (Women's Press, £2.50) makes no sense whatever; changing tense, person, time, place and protagonist at random, leaving cliffhangers stranded, veering off down innumerable blind alleys and throwing in more than enough gratuitous violence to make Rambo blench.

But then everything in this book is gratuitous; the bad aliens who are slave-traders, the good aliens who are anthropologists, the time machine which is just an excuse for a gargle with jargon, the Sperm-of-the-Month club which only goes to show that some people will buy anything. Even Sterling O'Blivion's famous blood habit (since age thirteen, she has needed a few ounces each month, and gets nervous

when she's overdue) plays no active part in the story, despite the title.

What kept me reading, as the narrative disintegrated and the plot signals fizzled out, were the hyperactive delivery, the sardonic one-liners, and the devastating expositions of the mechanics of advertising and salespersonship: an insider's confession of the tortures inflicted on innocent punters to enslave them into a lifetime consumer bondage. The immense, bloodsucking organism of Capitalism, far older and more dangerous than any vampire, stalks the subconscious of the book, leaving a trail of walking corpses bled dry by its insatiable appetite for every last drop of integrity, creativity, humanity and hope. In the end, O'Blivion, oscillating into consciousness to assume that it was all a dream dreamed up under anaesthetic for major surgery, resigns herself to its exsanguinating kiss because—aaarrghh!—nothing else exists.

It is alarming to come fresh from these two encounters with incoherence in the service of untrammelled passion, charged with fury, frenzy, fist-fights, bursts of literary criticism and the names of famous women (Skłodowska, Kopernik and Lovelace in Russ, Virginia Woolf in Scott) invoked like battle cries, to Josephine Saxton's *The Travails of Jane Saint and Other Stories* (Women's Press, £2.50, described as an original publication but actually a reprint of a 1980 novel with five short stories tacked on). No sooner does the book fall open than the heroine is convicted of revolution, sentenced to reprogramming and immediately plunged into a sensory deprivation tank. Within two pages, she is manifestly dreaming, totally amnesiac and at large in the Collective Unconscious with nothing but a wet nightgown and an intuition of Unfulfilled Quest; though she is shortly to be joined, if the blurb is to be believed, by a canine phenomenologist, Simone de Beauvoir, Joan of Arc, an amiable griffin and a bottle of Guinness. An ominous prospect.

Actually, *The Travails of Jane Saint and Other Stories* is by far the most lucid, coherent and good-natured of the trio. Jane Saint pooh-poohs and

punches her way through a shifting, surreal landscape studded with Symbols, confronting the male archetypes (Sage, Shaman, Nazi, Hippie, Husband, etc), falling off cliffs, out of helicopters, into the Freudian Tide, even into the Womb of the Great Earth Mother, but triumphantly avoiding both the abysses of the author's own ego and the exit to the downbeat and disqualifying ending. If the book is shorter on florid sf imagery and contrapuntal slices of real life than the other two, this is remedied in the sharply witty short stories which follow, all different and each a gem of its type. Proof that it is possible to swig that potent cocktail of feminist conviction, literary adventure, imaginative anarchy and freedom to joke, wash it down with a draught of pragmatic Guinness, and become neither belligerent nor delirious, but elated, perceptive and still in control.

Jane Palmer might sound like another character from *The Female Man*, but she is certainly neither a regular nor an imbiber of the house brew, despite the Women's Press imprint and the assertions on the jacket that *The Watcher* (Women's Press, £2.50) is satirical, subversive and a send-up. Come off it. After the last three, it must have zipped through their editorial offices like a fresh sea breeze, blowing away the lingering clouds of intellectual fog, emotional steam and the smoke from the verbal pyrotechnics; but it reads not so much like a parody, more like a naive reproduction of what passes in the public mind for sf. It is stocked with cardboard eccentrics, rubber aliens and cranky plot coupons from the prop-room of *Doctor Who*, and has an Asian (but British to the core) school-leaver heroine whose emotions run the entire gamut from cheerful resignation to plucky resolve.

Gabrielle, awaiting her exam results in a seaside cottage, is approached by the disembodied psyche of the village recluse, the uncannily youthful survivor of a Victorian shipwreck who has been implanted by a time-travelling alien robot with a transmitter designed to attract the mysterious energetic being which is threatening a community of flying hermaphrodites half a galaxy away. Also in the picture: three

Book Reviews, 1 Lee Montgomerie

scheming co-survivors of aforementioned shipwreck, a policeman who is more than he seems, and the enigmatic entities who guide and govern the Galaxy.

And that's not half of it. No shortage of plot, most of it resolved by cosmic corner-cutting via the psychic waveband, a certain breathless giggly charm, but it would not subvert the world picture of an immature nine-year-old; she and the jaded and exasperated reader of angst-ridden feminist diatribes with a spurious science-fictional gloss being the two people who might enjoy this book. By comparison, Clare Bell's *Clan Ground* (Gollancz, £7.95), openly marketed as a juvenile, seems a sophisticated read, suitable for eleven-year-olds at least: the second in a potentially endless series set in a paleolithic community of talking cats who in this volume accomplish, *inter alia*, the domestication of primates as pets, an enticingly ironic reversal and the lone sentimental element in an otherwise unflinchingly tough, territorial and carnivorous saga.

The aim of Women's Press, asserted inside every copy, is to publish sf by and about women, to present exciting and provocative feminist images of the future, to offer an alternative vision of science and technology, to challenge male domination of the sf tradition itself. Without them, sf might not be dominated entirely by men, but by masculine publishers' requirements such as structural soundness and scientific plausibility. Women might still be writing books like Kate Wilhelm's *Huysman's Pets* (Gollancz, £9.95), a near-mainstream near-thriller featuring a sympathetic male biographer-hero, a dead male Nobel Laureate with a dark past, a male secret-serviceman in pursuit of male counterfeiter, a sinister male doctor, a plot that brings them all together in a veritable pyramid of neatly-stacked and ultimately-justified synchronicities and, as "feminine" trademarks, a whole hospital full of maltreated, psychic, experimental children and a glutinous romance between the protagonist and his socially-superior ex-wife. *Huysman's Pets* is an orderly, sensible, sober and adult novel that makes the frequent confusion, incoherence, intoxication and infantilism of the Women's Press offerings look radical and attractive again. It peddles boring and predictable images of the present that conform to orthodox perceptions of science and technology and challenge nothing.

But then, women might also be writing books like *Brightness Falls from the Air* (Sphere, £3.50) by James Tipple Jr (Alice Sheldon in real life) which uses rigorously traditional sf materials and charges them with

resplendent visionary imagery.

Never mind the characters; there are enough of them, all sharply differentiated, to justify the cast-list in the appendix: the endangered winged aboriginals, their three conscientious human guardians, the thirteen tourists, not all bona fide, who arrive for a night of conspiracy, cruelty and conflict. Never mind the plot, which piles agony upon anguish upon desperation in a strangulating spiral. The centrepiece of the novel is the interaction between the explosion front from the core of a star long since destroyed in a guilty act of war, and the atmosphere of Damiem, a planet of past atrocities. The narrative is irradiated by stroboscopic aurorae, storms of sifting jewels, transient temporal disturbances and glittering rains that leave after-images long after the excruciating climax has been transcended and the book closes under clearer, bleaker skies; a cathartic reaffirmation of the power of science fiction to generate awesome cosmic spectacles independent of metaphor or manifesto.

BOOK REVIEWS, 2

John Clute

The map tells us that Michael Bishop lives deep in the heart of what can only be described as nether Georgia, Pine Mountain being far from Atlanta, far from the Art Deco Gulf, close to Alabama. A spur of the paralyzing Interstate grid can be reached with some effort. Here in Pine Mountain, in what the map tells us must be some degree of isolation, Michael Bishop lives and writes tales of the urban interstice heatdeath, of the multiplex moral quandaries of late 20th century life as laundered into suburbias, and continues to construct a kind of anthropology of God. The tone of voice he adopts in his more recent work more and more aspires to the amused urbanity of a man of letters whose love for things human may be vexed with hints that we are all fellow passengers on the Narrenschiff, but which reads in the end as unstinting. It is a tone somewhere between Montaigne and Huxley. If there is sometimes stress in that voice, dis-ease, untoward jocosity, a slightly mealy-mouthed disinclination to utter truths as harshly as they may deserve, then it might be kept in mind that it is a terribly hard thing to be a man of letters in a land as suburban as America, and that for reasons of geography as well as culture Mr Bishop seems much of the time to be speaking not only for himself but by himself.

In the less successful stories col-

lected in *Close Encounters with the Deity* (Peacree Publishers, 1986, \$15.95), this solitude voices itself in a peculiar slur of slangy loquacity, as though the implied author of the text were protesting too much that he was one of "us," perhaps out of some insecurity as to what degree of rhetorical side were necessary to point the register he was attempting to establish: the title story, "Voices" and "The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis" are all overtold just sufficiently to muffle the reader's access to the tales within the text. It may be that the trouble with register in these tales lies in the fact that they, like most of the contents of the volume, aspire to be read both as naive narratives (in the ideal sense that pure narrative, having no teller, can tell only itself) and, at the same time, as discourses. It is precisely when Mr Bishop inserts comments on his own telling, draws "wry" homiletic periphrases out of the Ocean of Story he has trawled, that altogether too much is said, too loudly, as though there were no one to answer, as though he were alone in the deeps.

No such caveat applies to "A Gift from the Graylanders," a tale that seems to well up from the deep sf repertory of Apocalypse topoi and to rewrite it from within. Family romance and nuclear catastrophe are married in the tale of the psychic torture of a young boy who is, as in much of Bishop's work, a kind of orphan. When the Bomb falls, the excruciating prison he inhabits becomes the entire world. Nor does any sort of humane loquacity scumble the effects of "Alien Graffiti," or "And the Marlin Spoke." And in the quizzing metaphysical context of this volume, "The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software and Satori Support Services Consortium Ltd" (originally published in *Interzone*) makes a virtue of a narrative dis-ease which for some damaged that tale when it stood alone. In any case, after the book has been read in its entirety, even the more conspicuous moments of wrongly-tuned discourse do somehow settle into the larger harmonic of Bishop's abiding need to write stories about the need for meaning in a world of solitude and accide. If there is no security of outcome in any of the more serious stories in *Close Encounters*, there is a powerful sense of the human value of attempting time and again to create that complex multi-dimensional map of discourse necessary to encompass a fiction of metaphysical search.

At first glance, *The Hercules Text* by Jack McDevitt (Ace Books, 1986, \$3.50) might seem an odd choice for Terry Carr to begin his next instalment of *Specials* with. The best of the 1984-85 lot – the first novels of William Gibson, Lucius Shepard, Kim Stanley

Robinson and Howard Waldrop – did after all share in varying degrees a rhetoric of novelty, cutting edge, formal innovation, while McDevitt's book seems at first to do little more than tell a James P. Hogan story in English. Like most hard sf about the near future, *The Hercules Text* is set in Festung America, and it is very difficult for someone who spends relatively little time there to come to any easy understanding of some of the doctrines espoused about the rest of the world in its pages. Unlike parochial novels written in (say) England, hard sf parochial novels about America command so numbingly comprehensive a world-view and own so convincingly (as Brian W. Aldiss has said) the terms of sf discourse they operate, that it is (I think) actually impossible to know where in these books the doubleness of vision (the irony of the text) inherent in fiction fades away and mere unilateral truth takes stupefyingly over. On page 179 of McDevitt's book, for instance, we are allowed into the private thoughts of a Republican President, a man we are clearly meant to think of as *compos mentis*. President Hurley is reflecting on his predecessors in office, thinking that they too must have come "to hate their antagonists in Moscow":

The frightened, angry men of the Kremlin had never responded to reason. During his own administration, he'd watched his chances and, when the moment seemed right, had made his offers. The Soviets had reacted by increasing pressure in Central America and the Philippines. Reagan had been right, of course; the Soviet rulers were bastards, but it was no longer politic to point that out in public.

And so on. Because McDevitt does nothing with this utterance, either to distance or to defend it, the American reader will perhaps take it as value-neutral, as though the author had been describing a sofa. The reader less immersed in the imperial solipsism of the American media will of course find President Hurley's musings anything but value-neutral, and will find *The Hercules Text*, to the extent that these musings contaminate its pattern of meaning, suffocatingly difficult to parse. It is not simply a question of their rightness or wrongness, wisdom or stupidity. It is that, in terms of a fictional text, they are insensate.

The story itself is moderate in tone, and, where its implications seem understandable at all, ambiguous in implication. A government agency has been monitoring a quasar, which begins to pulse a mathematical code. Excitement mounts, and soon the source issues a long complex radio signal in which is contained, as computer specialists and others begin to understand, the wisdom and science of an entire culture. The government

immediately extracts data that enable it to begin to mount a genuinely effective Star Wars "defense" programme, to which the Soviets respond by threatening war unless their own security can be maintained. As the American government has no intention of disseminating any of the data it has received, tensions mount. Back at the agency, however, different tensions have also been building. The physicists there have discovered that some of the data will make nuclear weapons look like childplay, and a conspiracy is shaped to destroy the Text before it can harm more. Certain sillinesses vitiate the tale at this point – we are meant to believe that the government will have left the two sole copies of the Text in the hands of a bunch of excited intellectuals; we are meant not to ask why, if the far distant race has sent one signal, it is inconceivable that it send off a second, thus nullifying any attempts to destroy the first; we are meant to take the Keystone Cops manoeuvres of those members of the cast trying either to destroy or to save the Text as plausible hi-jinks in an establishment now taken over by security forces. But some of the Keystone Cops are attractively conceived; the ethical/intellectual problems posed by the Text are bravely debated; a wise old Russian bear comes to an uneasy detente with President Hurley; and the closing pages of the novel touchingly awaken thoughts of *A Canticle for Liebowitz*.

As it is unlikely to be available to many Interzone readers, I'll be reviewing Fred Pfeil's superb first novel, from Indiana University Press, in *Foundation*. Anyone who sees a copy of *Goodman 2020* (1986, \$15.00) should buy it on the spot. Then read it.

REVIEWS IN BRIEF

The Others by Alison Prince (Methuen, £7.95)

Written for children, this goes over some of the basic elements of sf, in particular the idea that the protagonist (and, by identification, the reader) is "different," alienated from society, an observer rather than an actor. It concerns a city in two parts: one industrial, oppressed, inhabited by genetically-engineered people most of whom don't even know they are slaves; the other leisured, decadent, given to the pursuit of money, living off the goods manufactured by the underpeople. Each group calls the other "The Others." The teenage hero, whose body is altered to make him a gardener, is (how did you guess?) one of those who realizes his oppression. Inevitably, he falls in love with a girl from the "upper" city, faces many dangers (all overcome), and both gets the girl and comes to terms with his own modified body. Any 11-year-old who reads this with half an eye-open should see the parallels with the condition of our own society.

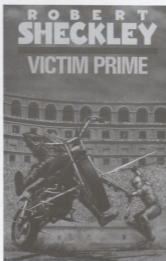
Silverthorn by Raymond E. Feist (Frafton, £2.95)

Ladies of Mandrigyn by Barbara Hamby (Unwin, £2.95)

Wandering Fire by Guy Gavriel Kay (Unwin, £10.95)

Three similar, and similarly flawed, fantasies in the sub-Tolkien mode. Silverthorn makes me cross: it lacks not only inspiration (you hardly expect that from this type of book) but also the detailed invention which makes a fantasy world live. These characters who drink "Chochoa" and play a game called "Shah" and give each other directions like "Follow that trail for two days until you come to a small valley" reveal an author who hasn't done his homework. Nothing exists in the gaps, there is no background to the action; Raymond E. Feist has stolen Tolkien's dots and not even bothered to join them.

Ladies of Mandrigyn is by contrast a workperson-like book, paced slow at first, better towards the end, but little more original. The story turns on the interaction between a greedy, cruel, but deep-down decent warrior and women from a patriarchal city-state, brought up to purdah, who must have his help to fight for their city's freedom, their husbands having been carried off to slavery in the mines. The descriptions of the various societies and cultures fall rather flat – there are weirder and weightier ones in any



Cover by Peter Elson for Robert Sheckley's new novel (Methuen, £9.95)

first-year anthropology textbook – and even here there is a Dark Lord of Evil, almost straight out of you-know-who.

Like Silverthorn, Guy Gavriel Kay's *Wandering Fire* is the second part of a trilogy. It borrows indiscriminately from Celtic legend in a way that will remind many readers of Alan Garner, except that the this-world humans thrown into the soup are five Canadian yuppies, each of whom feels that they are in some way useless compared with the other four. They all turn out to have an individual Destiny. The novel is also reminiscent of John Crowley's *The Deep*, with the feel of a small manufactured world whose people are the pawns in a game played for terrible stakes. Unfortunately, the author doesn't have anything like Garner's or Crowley's facility with narrative. Things get confusing for the reader as incident piles on incident, and it is all too frequently necessary to refer to the "Dramatis Personae" and the synopsis of the previous volume. But it's a better book than *Silverthorn* or *Mandrigny* – which isn't saying much.

I wish I knew why all these books have a Dark Lord of seemingly overwhelming might whose attempt to take the world makes our otherwise humble heroes fight against hopeless odds. What is the purpose of such a well-worn and unlikely situation? Is it meant to stiffen our will to resist the "Evil Empire" in the east? I think we should be told.

(Ken Brown)

The Silver Metal Lover by Tanith Lee (Unwin, £2.50)

Tanith Lee is often perceived as an author of fantasy, but some of her best work is a relatively hard form of science fiction. This novel is an outstanding example. Progress, especially in cybernetics, has done little to resolve poverty or other social problems. The narrator rebels against her background of the spoiled, charming, careless rich – a class who have always been with us, but have seldom received a more devastating portrayal. This is a very human story (even though it is partly about robots), featuring an intense eroticism which has very little to say about screwing but plenty about making love. Unreservedly recommended.

The Copper Crown by Patricia Kennealy (Grafton, £2.50)

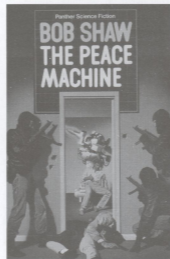
The first of a blockbuster series called "The Keltiad," this deals with the adventures of pagan Irish refugees from persecution by St Patrick, whose descendants have built a highly sophisticated civilization in another part of the galaxy without sacrificing any part of their idealized Iron Age culture. It is as full of improbabilities as a Charlie Haughey election address (starting with the unexplained conduct of people who are capable of

building starships but who feel obliged to flee from oppressors armed only with swords and Holy Water). Nevertheless, like so many Celtic fibs, it is a good read. For all lovers of Edmond Hamilton, *The Mabinogion* and Lionel Fanthorpe.

The Masters of Solitude by Marvin Kaye and Parke Godwin (Futura, £2.95)

Here is another idealized Celtic culture, albeit set in a future more realistically grim than is often the case with this sort of thing. There is a good feel of mystery, allowing that some points known to the characters are never clearly explained to the reader. The geography is impenetrable. While not comparable to Godwin's magnificent *Firelord*, it is well written and well characterized. However, it has some inconsistencies and shows a lack of knowledge of ecology – the "menace" element seemed to me highly improbable. Also, there is a fundamentalist Christian community which is even more repellent than its real-life equivalents, and I doubt that this is possible.

(Peter Garratt)



Cover by Tim White for Shaw's 'The Peace Machine' (formerly 'Ground Zero Man'); Grafton, £2.50.

ALSO RECEIVED

Forms of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Third International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film ed. Jan Hokenson and Howard Pearce (Greenwood Press, £45). Essays on Dr Caligari, bleeding nuns, Stanley Kubrick, Hawthorne, C.S. Lewis, Chip Delany, Spenser, Shakespeare, Marc Chagall, Le Guin,

werewolves and unicorns, the Brothers Grimm, Hesse, Tom Stoppard, and (believe it or not) much, much more.

A Closer Look by Patrick Woodroffe (Dragon's World, £12.95 hc, £7.95 pb). A study of "the art techniques" of this superb painter. This is a beautiful book – if you like your fantasy illustration on the fly side.

The Hungry Moon by Ramsey Campbell (Century Hutchinson, £9.95). New novel from a major British talent: we hope to review this properly next issue.

Tourmalin's Time Cheques by F. Anstey and **Planetoid 127** by Edgar Wallace (Greenhill, £8.95 each). Two more hoary reprints from this worthy publisher. The Anstey (from 1885) is the more interesting and substantial; the Wallace (from 1929) is really just a long short story.

The Vampire Lestat by Anne Rice (Futura, £3.50). 600-page sequel to the highly-praised *Interview with the Vampire*.

Robots and Empire by Isaac Asimov (Grafton, £2.95). Interminable sci-fi "epic" in which Asimov ties together all his previous series.

Adventures in the Space Trade: A Memoir by Richard Wilson, bound back-to-back with **A Richard Wilson Checklist** by Chris Drumm (available from Chris Drumm Books, PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226, USA, price \$2 plus postage). Amazingly cheap biobibliographical booklet, number 23 in an ongoing series. Recommended for collectors.

Like Nothing on Earth by Eric Frank Russell (Methuen, £1.95). Good collection of old stories by the wise-cracking Russell.

Dimension of Miracles and Options by Robert Sheckley (Grafton, £2.50 each). More funny stuff: the first (from 1968) prefigures Douglas Adams; the latter title (from 1975) is less effective.

Skinner by Richard S. McEnroe (Futura, £2.50). "No. 3 in the epic saga *Far Stars and Future Times*."

Star Surgeon by James White (Futura, £1.95). One of a series of reprints (originally Corgi Books) by this workmanlike author from Northern Ireland.

Behold the Man by Michael Moorcock (Grafton, £2.50). A minor classic, appearing from this publisher for the first time.

Short Circuit by Colin Wedglock (Sphere, £2.50). Novelization of a science-fiction movie screenplay (by Steve Wilson).

Sovereign by R.M. Meluch (Futura, £2.50). Appearing in the UK for the first time, an early (1979) novel by the author of *Jerusalem Fire*.

Incubus by Ray Russell (Sphere, £2.50). Reprint of "the ultimate nightmare" horror novel.

Swords Against Wizardry and Swords and Ice Magic by Fritz Leiber (Grafton, £2.50 each). Humorous sword and sorcery about Fahrd and the Gray Mouser. Good old stuff.

The Third Book of Swords by Fred Saberhagen (Futura, £2.50). Some things seem to go on forever. Yawn.

LETTERS

Dear Editors:

Science fiction is largely hostile to women. Women are seen as aliens or outsiders, our views misunderstood and denigrated. I am constantly depressed by walking into my local bookshop and reading synopses of the plots of new sf novels. "Streetwise" sf is obviously the buzzword; the nastier the breakdown of all things human in the story, the better. Simon Ounsley said in his editorial to *IZ* 14 that he wondered if some women readers were turned away from the genre because they find the horrific aspects of some *IZ* stories unacceptable. Yes, such stories have turned me away from sf in the past, but that's only part of the story.

Science fiction gives us the opportunity to present alternative viewpoints. Why is it then (it seems to me) that the vast majority of sf presents only views of total bankruptcy? Worlds devastated by plagues, or post-nuclear societies, or societies with no purpose. I'm not saying that these possibilities shouldn't be explored by sf – any day now we could all cease to exist simply at the push of a button. No; what depresses me is that all too often the post-holocaust scenario, for example, is no more than a plot device – a way of throwing together a handful of desperate and violent characters so that the author can chart their total degeneration.

(For every story of moral bankruptcy in the "real" world, a story of equally powerful "goodness" can be found. Live Aid showed that people still care about what happens on this planet.)

The insidious increase in the "realistic" reporting of news (i.e. better TV coverage of more and more violence) has been influential in shaping this attitude. Every day one expects to see footage of a war somewhere on the daily news programme. Science fiction is mirroring this increase in violence and is becoming uncaring with its emphasis on streetwise sf. It's a trend which does little to attract me, and if I was not already a fan of sf, might serve to turn me away from the genre.

I want to see if which acknowledges that problems may be capable of a solution without resorting to violence and war, that there are some instances when the gentle touch is far more effective. Trust is a very valuable commodity; on a starship in trouble, or between the inhabitants of a remote colony, it could make the difference between living and dying. Sf rarely acknowledges this possibility, and when it does, more often than not the author of such a story is female. A classic example is Ursula Le Guin's "The Word for World is Forest" – macho man is exposed in all his bigoted vanity.

I'm well aware that a certain amount of aggression is necessary to get on in this world. As a professional woman, greatly outnumbered in a male environment, that is an issue I have to face every day. But there are often times when things can be better achieved by tact and sensitivity than by thumping the table. Sf seems generally unable to cope with emotions such as love; unable to acknowledge that Real Men and Women have doubts about things; unable to say that often a crucial decision is only reached after a great deal of soul-searching.

The advent of a larger percentage of sf works written by women – and the advent of publishing ventures such as the Women's Press – have certainly served to increase my interest in the genre. Whether it is obvious or not, this greater number of women authors is influencing sf. Could this be another reason for the rise of streetwise sf? It used to be "hard" sf that was the exclusive preserve of men. Then women became engineers and scientists, and unlocked the knowledge to write such works. So a new campaign was planned – writing in streetwise terms. The idea being that life in these worlds is so harsh that no mere woman could write about it. However, the harshness of the worlds envisaged doesn't seem to stem the flow of "available" females through such stories.

Science fiction needs to break out of its myopic rut. It needs to explore the inner world of psyche and emotions as well as the outer world of the physical cosmos.

Wendy Metcalfe
Havant

Dear Editors:

Interzone has a flavour and style of its own that I find most appealing and intriguing. About a year ago I was able to get copies of *Concrete Island* and *Crush* by J.G. Ballard. I had seen Ballard's name mentioned for many years in reviews as an avant-garde writer usually synonymous with William Burroughs, though many considered Ballard the better of the two. None of it prepared me for *Concrete Island*. The book haunted me for weeks. His ability to go beyond the conscious to the subconscious human condition – almost primeval motivation in our disciplined and regimented society; well to say the least it floored me and gave me a healthy respect for Ballard and his work. I have obtained a book of his short stories since then and *Interzone* 13 with "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" and the respect grows. *IZ* publishes other authors who have become favourites of mine, Ian Watson (who is more published this side of the Atlantic than Ballard), Thomas M. Disch, B.J. Bayley, and Gene Wolfe.

I cannot pass up this moment to mention how much I loved and appreciated the story, "If the Driver Vanishes..." by Peter T. Garratt. Texas is not exactly in the heart of the Bible Belt but it is a hot-bed of bible thumping fundamentalists. The nightly news rarely passes without their mention: the fight to get creationism taught in Texas schools as science; creationist textbooks for sex education that don't explain conception; the three million dollar creationist museum across the road from the Dinosaur Tracks Texas State Park in Glenrose, they hawk tourists away from the park since the state refused their demand to have park rangers tell a creationist version of geologic history. In the creationist museum are falsified plaster casts of human footprints between those of dinosaurs. They are allowed to show these even though Smithsonian archaeologists have refuted them repeatedly. Meanwhile a Texas fundamentalist reverend and owner of a boys' home refuses state inspection and defies authorities saying his congregation will fire on anyone trying to close the home. He flees the state and appears on fundamentalist talk shows across the nation to raise funds for his war against the "depraved degenerates" who are in control of his state. There have been reports of Southern Baptist Fundamentalists urging their congregations to vote for Pat Robertson for president in '88 because he is God's tool and will start the Rapture by initiating global thermonuclear war. And so it goes... I think many of the fundamentalists would misinterpret the ending of "If the Driver Vanishes...", but that's the beauty of the story. I cheer you on for publishing the

story, I don't think any American magazine would have had the guts to take the chance.

David L. Smelley
Texas

Dear Editors:

As a new reader of *Interzone*, I feel I must write and congratulate you on a superb publication. Specifically, I refer to issue 18. I enjoyed all the stories, articles, reviews, etc., but may I express a particular admiration for the comic strip by SMS, "Screaming of the Beetle"? I'd thought, until I'd read the strip, that I was long past the "comic" stage (I'm 36), but SMS's story had me spellbound.

It's been many a long year since a story has been able to conjure up such an atmosphere for me as did SMS's strip, and I heartily congratulate him for a magnificent piece of work. If possible, could you please let me know how I can get hold of more examples of his craftsmanship? Also; will *Interzone* be publishing more of his work? If not - why not?!

Philip J. Backers
Barrow-in-Furness

Dear Editors:

As a struggling writer in his early twenties I see *Interzone* perhaps as the catalyst that sparks a revolution in print, albeit a somewhat clandestine one. To quote a phrase from Benford's "Freeze-frame," (IZ 17), it has started my "inculcated growth pattern," helping me to develop my own creative efforts; a small literary edification which demonstrates, for the most part, how to write accessibly and still be staggeringly innovative.

Aiding this development which is both entertaining and frustrating is the willingness of you as editors to afford your comments on unsolicited manuscripts from the likes of me, that further reinforce this process of literary enlightenment.

As a reader, I agree with your most recent editorial when you reflect that short stories are not easy to handle. However, what we get in *Interzone* is invariably worth a challenge.

An apology in the form of Sue Thomason's "Finn" baffled me a little, showing, perhaps by conciliation rather than sound judgement, your sympathies can be tapped on odd occasions. Take it or leave it. Watson's "Jingling Geordie's Hole," (IZ 17), is disgustingly accessible and maybe intended, at least partially, as an allegory on the insidiousness of AIDS. Whatever the point the story showed amazing "guts." Is this why we don't see IZ on the newstands at W.H. Smiths? Then there are stories of the more traditional ilk, with interesting permutations of old themes like "Spi-

ral Winds," (IZ 9), and "The King of the Hill," (IZ 14), to name two of the best in my book. Thumbs down I'm afraid for "A Multiplication of Lives," (IZ 15), a story that suggested a profundity I couldn't grasp. Of the women writers Rachel Pollack is probably the best with "The Protector," (IZ 16).

Assembling the magazine's various issues in my mind there is a reaction both cumulative and non-cumulative in effect. Surely these contradictions indicate, as perhaps they do in others, that it is both brilliant and disappointing at the same time (say I, risking ambiguity).

In the beginning I must confess to a vague paranoia in imagining a derisive look on the postman's face as he delivered the latest copy of IZ, saying, "Science fiction! - someone here hasn't grown up!" Fortunately the myth gathers no momentum with a magazine as powerful as this, for you have only to turn the pages to see its mature outlook on the genre.

Dave Berthelot
Chelmsford

Dear Editors:

I was astonished and disappointed to find that the readers of *Interzone* are apparently growing more conservative. I'm referring of course to the results of the readers' poll published in issue 18. The fact that a flat fable (which would slip into F & SF's pages as unnoticeably as that synthetic wood you can buy in a tube like toothpaste) came first, while three of the most interesting, risky and unusual pieces of imaginative fiction came very near the bottom leads me to suppose that these people are voting for the names of the authors rather than for the content of the stories. Ian Watson is a great sf man, and I enjoy and admire his novels very much, but to call "The People on the Precipice" the best piece in IZ over the last 12 months is an insult to all concerned. I was bored by the story: as a reader of sf I was bored, as a writer of poetry and imaginative fiction I was bored, as a supporter of *Interzone* I was disappointed.

Whilst the Ballard and the Gibson would have come near the top of my list, I now suspect that these pieces were voted in by Ballard and Gibson fans, rather than by a peer-wave of appreciative readers. Otherwise, how could the same people have failed to vote for the masterful blend of humour and plotting and modernity-motifs, cooked up and seasoned with a little spicy ambiguity, by Neil Ferguson in "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw"? Or Barrington Bayley's piece "Escapist Literature," which couldn't have been published in any other sf mag that I know of, and which dealt with reality and real feelings? The same goes for the all-too-relevant "If the Driver Van-

ishes..." which serves to remind us smug sf fans that a lot of people in this world are too preoccupied with life-and-death issues to entertain new thoughts of any kind...

Admittedly, the quality of the fiction in the past year has been very high, if you consider the mastery of English prose and even the techniques of traditional story-telling used by the authors. When virtually every story demands to be included on the list, it becomes difficult to draw up a useful ranking; all the same, surely it becomes essential to look for further criteria, such as human sensitivity (as in the Ballard piece or the Bayley) or lateral thinking (Saxton and Widdowson) or poetry (Zindell), or simply to look for where your assumptions have been challenged!

P.S. I wrote this letter in knee-jerk fashion before having read any of the fiction in issue 18. Having just now read Watson's "microlite fable" in this issue, I have to say that I found it excellent - full of that lateral draught of ideas which tilt the world-as-we-know-it askew, just enough to compel and fascinate. And so concise! All in all, more like a poem really! And more like the kind of "fable" I want to read in the pages of IZ.

Syd Foster
West Glamorgan

Continued from p.41

includes John Clute (advisory editor of *Interzone*), Edward James (new editor of *Foundation*) and Paul Kincaid (BSFA officer). The announcement of the first winner will take place at the British Easter SF Convention in Birmingham ("Beacon 87" - see the advert on page 50 of IZ 18 for details).

Finally, we have been asked by readers to publish more information about the forthcoming **World SF Convention** (the big one), to be held in Brighton, England, on 27th August-1st September 1987. *Interzone* is not directly involved in the organization of this, even though it is going to be taking place a scant two miles from the magazine's main address. However, one of our advisory editors, Malcolm Edwards, is Chairman of the convention, and we all intend to be present (there should be an IZ stand in the book room - watch out for it). The Guests of Honour include Doris Lessing, Alfred Bester, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Ray Harryhausen and Jim Burns. Attending membership costs £25 (\$50 USA) - this looks expensive at first glance, but the event should in fact be good value for the money - and the address to write to is: Conspiracy '87, PO Box 43, Cambridge CB1 3JJ, UK.

WORLDS APART

ALGIS BUDRYS

Some Will Not Die

The legend is growing...Berendtsen Lives! From the author of *Michaelmas* £2.50

C. J. CHERRYH

Cuckoo's Egg

On one man hangs the future of two worlds...and he must fight to justify his very existence
February £2.50

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Cemetery World

Ten thousand years in the future - and Earth has become the graveyard for a galaxy
March £2.50

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

The Goblin Reservation

'The finest novel... that Simak has yet given us' Fritz Leiber
March £2.50

METHUEN

SCIENCE FICTION

SMALL ADS

Small Ads in *Interzone* reach over 6,000 people. If you wish to advertise please send your copy, *together with payment*, to 124 Osborne Road, Brighton BN1 6LU. Rates: 25 pence a word, minimum of ten words, discount of 10% for insertions repeated in three issues.

Riverside Quarterly: the critical magazine of SF and Fantasy. Essays on Ballard, Delany, Farmer, Lafferty, Lem, Lovecraft, Tolkien and others in recent and future issues. Back issues #23 through #28 still available at \$2 each. \$12 order brings a free copy of *H.P. Lovecraft: A Symposium*. Subscriptions \$6 (four issues) from PO Box 833-044, Richardson, Texas 75083, USA

Official NASA books, prints and posters for sale. SAE for details to: R.A. Coleman, Dept. IZ, 55 Wyndham Rd., London W13 9TE.

ANNECY offers high-quality second-hand paperbacks by Aldiss, Dick, Harrison, Moorcock, Watson and hundreds more. Prices average 55p *including* p&p. For list send SAE to ANNECY, 19 Cowper Rd., Mexborough, S. Yorkshire.

Nerve Gardens: illustrated small-press SFF mag. 75p cheque payable to Keith Jones, 3 Elgin Drive, Wallasey, Merseyside L45 7PP.

Paraphysics Journal (Russian translations), established 1965: psychotronics, time machines, kirlianography, heli-phonics music, CETI, telekinetics (as seen on TV world-wide), skin-vision, computer software, etc. SAE 4 x 9": Paralab, Downton, Wilts, UK.

Back Brain Recluse issue 7 out now: Moorcock Special with exclusive interview, lyrics and more. 60p post paid in UK, from Chris Reed, Dyers Field, Smallfield, Surrey RH6 9NJ. US readers please contact The Strange Company, PO Box 864, Madison, WI 53701 for details.

Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. Regular catalogues issued. New and second-hand. Prompt, friendly service. Mark Zeising Books, PO Box 806, 762 Main St., Willimantic CT 06226, USA.

Andy Richards also issues regular large catalogues of second-hand SF, Fantasy and Horror. Most new titles (hardcover) and many o/p for collectors. Just as prompt and friendly as Mark. 175 Northumberland Crescent, Bedford, Middx. TW14 9SR.

BACK ISSUES

All back issues except No. 5 are still available from 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR, UK. They are £1.75 each, but readers who buy three or more issues may have them at £1.50 each. (£2.00 each overseas, or £1.75 each for three.) Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to Interzone. Contents of back issues:

- 1: "The New Rays" by M. John Harrison; "Kitemaster" by Keith Roberts; "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" by Angela Carter; "Guesting" by John Sladek; "The Brothel in Rosenstrasse" by Michael Moorcock.
- 2: "Memories of the Space Age" by J.G. Ballard; "Seasons Out of Time" by Alex Stewart; "The Third Test" by Andrew Weiner; "Angel Baby" by Rachel Pollack; "Cantata '82" by Tom Disch.
- 3: "The Dissemblers" by Garry Kilworth; "Overture for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'" by Angela Carter; "No Coward Soul" by Josephine Saxton; "Cheek to Cheek" by Nicholas Allan; "Saving the Universe" by David Garnett.
- 4: "Calling All Gumdrops" by John Sladek; "The Caulder Requiem" by Alex Stewart; "On the Deck of the Flying Bomb" by David Redd; "After-Images" by Malcolm Edwards; "The Quiet King of the Green South-West" by Andy Soutter; "The Ur-Plant" by Barrington J. Bayley.
- 5: "The Flash! Kid" by Scott Bradfield; "The Tithonian Factor" by Richard Cowper; "Vitamin Memories of B-12" by Edwin Dorff (art feature); "Novelty" by John Crowley; "What Cindy Saw" by John Shirley; "Strange Great Sins" by M. John Harrison. **OUT OF PRINT**
- 6: "Something Coming Through" by Cherry Wilder; "The Monroe Doctrine" by Neil Ferguson; "The Views of Mohammed El Hassif" by John Hendry; "Radical Architecture" by Roger Dean (art feature); "Angela's Father" by L. Hluchan Sintetos; "Kitecadet" by Keith Roberts.
- 7: "The Unconquered Country" by Geoff Ryman; "Kept Women" by Margaret Welbank (art feature); "Life in the Mechanist/Shaper Era" by Bruce Sterling; "Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration" by Michael Blumlein.
- 8: "Unmistakably the Finest" by Scott Bradfield; "The Electric Zoo" by Chris Jones (art feature); "Dreamers" by Kim Newman; "Strange Memories of Death" by Philip K. Dick; "Experiment with Time" by M.J. Fitzgerald; "McGonagall's Lear" by Andy Soutter; "What I Believe" by J.G. Ballard.
- 9: "The Object of the Attack" by J.G. Ballard; "The Gods in Flight" by Brian Aldiss; "Canned Goods" by Thomas M. Disch; "Synaptic Intrigue" by Richard Kadrey; "The Luck in the Head" by M. John Harrison; "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" by William Gibson; "Spiral Winds" by Garry Kilworth.
- 10: "John's Return to Liverpool" by Christopher Burns; "Green Hearts" by Lee Montgomerie; "Soulmates" by Alex Stewart; Photographs by Ian Sanderson; "Love, Among the Corridors" by Gene Wolfe; "The Malignant One" by Rachel Pollack; "The Dream of the Wolf" by Scott Bradfield.
- 11: "War and/or Peace" by Lee Montgomerie; "Cube Root" by David Langford; "Fogged Plates" by Christopher Burns; "Rain, Tunnel and Bombfire" by Pete Lyon (art feature); "The Unfolding" by John Shirley & Bruce Sterling; "Kitemistress" by Keith Roberts.
- 12: "The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software . . ." by Michael Bishop; "Little Ilya and Spider and Box" by Paul J. McAuley; "The Fire Catcher" by Richard Kadrey; "Laser Smith's Space Academy" by George Parkin (comic strip); "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" by M. John Harrison; "Instructions for Exiting This Building . . ." by Pamela Zoline.
- 13: "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" by J.G. Ballard; "The People on the Precipice" by Ian Watson; Interview with William Gibson; "If the Driver Vanishes . . ." by Peter T. Garratt; "Escapist Literature" by Barrington J. Bayley; "Rhinstone Manifesto" by Don Webb; "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw" by Neil Ferguson.
- 14: "When the Timegate Failed" by Ian Watson; Interview with Clive Barker; "The Compassionate, the Digital" by Bruce Sterling; "Finn" by Sue Thomason; "Patricia's Profession" by Kim Newman; "The King of the Hill" by Paul J. McAuley; "The New SF" by Vincent Omniaveritas; "Caverns" by David Zindell.
- 15: "The Winter Market" by William Gibson; Interview with Bruce Sterling; "The One and Only Tale . . ." by John Brosnan; "The Vivarium" by Garry Kilworth; "A Multiplication of Lives" by Diana Reed; "Goodbye - and Thanks for the SF" by Allen A. Lucas; "The Ibis Experiment" by S.W. Widdowson.
- 16: "And He Not Busy Being Born . . ." by Brian Stableford; art feature by Jim Burns; "The Protector" by Rachel Pollack; "Sex Change Operation Shock" by Gwyneth Jones; "The Brains of Rats" by Michael Blumlein; "His Vegetable Wife" by Pat Murphy; "The Cup is the Wine" by Josephine Saxton; Interview with Iain Banks; "The Final Episode" by Shirley Weinland.
- 17: "Freeze-frame" by Gregory Benford; "Jingling Geordie's Hole" by Ian Watson; Interview with John Shirley; "Soundspinner" by D.C. Haynes; "Hard Work" by Thomas M. Disch; Interview with Gene Wolfe; "Future Fish" by Barbara Hills; "Adam Found" by Simon Ounsley.
- 18: "As Big as the Ritz" by Gregory Benford; "Screaming of the Beetle" by SMS; "Boiled Alive" by Ramsey Campbell; Interview with M. John Harrison; "Paths of Dying" by Simon Ounsley; "Fountain of Time" by Peter Lamborn Wilson; "Mind Vampires" by Greg Egan; "When Jesus Comes Down the Chimney" by Ian Watson.

NEW TITLES FROM ORBIT

THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

GOLEM IN THE GEARS

PIERS ANTHONY

The ninth book in the sensational Xanth series – now including a lexography of Xanth! **£2.50**



SOVEREIGN

R M MELLUCH

From the author of *Jerusalem Fire* Arana is a small, backward planet, a refracting point in the galactic war between Earth and the Ueltons. Yet Arana was developing a new race of Ulan, with some very special powers – the Royalists. This is the story of one Royalist, a key figure in the fate of humankind... **£2.50**

CARDS OF GRIEF

JANE YOLEN

An extraordinary book, 'a piece of dream unmoored and drifting through daylight' Roger Zelazny, 'a lovely compelling fantasy' Marion Zimmer Bradley **£2.50**

THE SEEDBEARERS

PETER TIMLETT

An occult fantasy of men and supernatural powers – the first volume in a trilogy of epic scope **£2.50**

GODS OF THE GREATAWAY

MICHAEL CONEY

Volume Two in the epic series *The Song of the Earth* 'A daring dazzling storytelling feat – absolutely not to be missed' *Kirkus Reviews* **£2.50**



THE MASTERS OF SOLITUDE

MARVIN KAYE AND PARKE GODWIN

The stunning science fantasy which blends adventure, human warmth and a profound philosophy **£2.95**

THE DOOR IN THE HEDGE

ROBIN MCKINLEY

The Door in the Hedge opens onto a world of magic that is both muscular and enchanting. Robin McKinley obviously loves the music of the old tales but she adds melodies all her own; and that is what makes these stories so very very special and so very very unforgettable! *Jane Yolen* **£2.50**



FLIGHT OF HONOUR

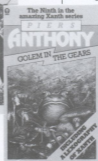
RICHARD S MCENROE

The second exciting instalment of the epic new *Future History Series*, *Far Stars and Future Times*, the story of three characters trapped in a tangled web of loyalties, forced to barter their freedom, their honour, perhaps their lives, in a struggle to control the galaxy... **£1.95**

PHOENIX IN THE ASHES

JOAN D VINCE

A dazzling collection of six spellbinding tales ranging from the brink of destruction to the pinnacle of power **£2.50**



Futura

a division of Macdonald, a BPCC PLC company

interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY



- 'The best new science fiction magazine in 20 years'* — Washington Post
- 'Fiction so powerful it will make the hair stand on end'* — Locus
- 'No other magazine in this country is publishing science fiction at all, let alone fiction of this quality'* — Times Literary Supplement

- *Interzone* is the only British magazine specializing in new science fiction and fantasy stories. We have published:

BRIAN ALDISS	GARRY KILWORTH
J.G. BALLARD	DAVID LANGFORD
BARRINGTON BAYLEY	MICHAEL MOORCOCK
GREGORY BENFORD	RACHEL POLLACK
MICHAEL BISHOP	KEITH ROBERTS
RAMSEY CAMPBELL	GEOFFRYMAN
ANGELA CARTER	JOSEPHINE SAXTON
RICHARD COWPER	JOHN SHIRLEY
JOHN CROWLEY	JOHN SLADEK
PHILIP K. DICK	BRIAN STABLEFORD
THOMAS M. DISCH	BRUCE STERLING
MARY GENTLE	IAN WATSON
WILLIAM GIBSON	CHERRY WILDER
M. JOHN HARRISON	GENE WOLFE

- We have also introduced many excellent new writers, published the British Science Fiction Association Award-winning story several years running, and featured graphics by artists like **JIM BURNS, ROGER DEAN, PETE LYON, IAN MILLER** and **SMS**.
- With all this plus book reviews, film reviews, interviews, and news, *Interzone* is published four times a year at just £1.50 an issue.
- *Interzone* is available from specialist SF shops, a few other high quality bookshops or direct by subscription. For four issues, send £6 (outside UK, £7; US, \$10 surface or \$14 airmail) to: **124 Osborne Road, Brighton BN1 6LU, UK**. Please make cheques payable to *Interzone*. Single copies: £1.75 inc p&p.